

# Leading in a Complex Moral Environment - Updated

## Guidelines for Cru Staff Members and Partners

Today we encounter a wide variety of questions related to sexuality. These questions are complex, personal and can be volatile. What does it mean to follow Christ faithfully if I experience same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria? What does faithfulness look like within our families and communities? How do we address these questions with others in evangelism or discipleship in a way that honors others and honors the Lordship of Christ? How can we express the goodness of God's design, as well as warn about the dangers of sin? Is it possible to warmly invite people in the LGBT+ community to consider Christ, while remaining faithful to the teaching of Scripture on sexuality? Is what God says about our bodies actually good news? These and many others are important questions.

The purpose of this document, as a reflection of our commitment to Scripture as expressed in the [Cru Statement of Faith](#), is to provide Cru staff, volunteers and partners with a biblical and theological framework for our engagement with LGBT+ questions. (Note: The Cru HR Handbook summarizes the ethical commitments to which all Cru staff are bound as missionaries. Section II builds on what is communicated in the Handbook regarding sexuality.)

While this document addresses posture and theology, you will find answers to practical ministry questions (evangelism, discipleship, spokesperson, movement leadership) in the [LGBT+ resource pages on the staff web](#).

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## **Loving our Neighbors: Six Postures**

As followers of Christ, we want to navigate LGBT+ questions in a way that is compassionate toward people (our posture) and faithful to Scripture (our position). The first section will focus on our posture. We want to treat all people in ways that honor Christ, reflect the teaching of Scripture and commend the gospel. To that end, we commend the following six postures.

### **1. Treating Image-Bearers with Dignity, Honor and Worth**

Scripture teaches that every human being is made in the image of God: “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Gen 1:26-27).

As image-bearers, human beings possess God-given dignity, honor and worth. We need to remember that questions about sexuality and gender are being asked by people who bear God’s image and who deserve to be treated with dignity, no matter their beliefs about sexuality.

Sadly, many LGBT+ people expect to be treated poorly by Christians because they have experienced poor treatment by Christians in the past or have heard of this behavior towards others. We do not need to agree with someone’s view of sexuality and gender in order to treat them with dignity, honor and worth. Christians should reject stereotypes, inappropriate humor, bullying, violence toward LGBT+ people<sup>1</sup> and hold each other accountable to treating all people with honor and respect. For example, we are to stand up for those who are mistreated on the basis of their sexuality, because they bear the image of the God we serve. This posture is embodied in our interactions as individuals as well as our corporate expressions as a ministry.

### **2. Sharing a Common Need for a Savior**

The cross has a leveling effect on humanity: all stand equally in need of redemption and redemption is available to all on the same basis (faith in Christ alone). This is why “no one can boast” (Eph. 2:9).

Yet sometimes we forget this.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite recent political and cultural changes, many LGBT+ people, particularly youth, remain vulnerable in America. This is especially true for people who identify as transgender. They experience high levels of suicide, homelessness, psychiatric conditions, and discrimination. Although things are generally better for lesbian, gay and bisexual people, “a gay person is more than thirty-five times as likely to be the victim of a violent hate crime than a straight person.” (Nate Collins, *All But Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender and Sexuality* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017], 264. Bullying, harassment, and suspicion are still a normal part of life for many people who identify as part of the LGBT+ community, to greater or lesser extents depending on a variety of factors, such as where they live.

In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus tells a story about two men who went to the temple to pray. One was a respected religious leader, “confident of [his] own righteousness” (v.9). The other was a tax collector (someone every respectable Jew despised). The religious leader prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.” The tax collector, on the other hand, stood at a distance from the other worshippers and would not even lift his head. He simply prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” In a shocking reversal, Jesus explains that it was the despised, ashamed tax collector--not the respected, “honorable” religious leader--who went home “justified.” Luke does not leave us guessing about the meaning of this parable: “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (v. 9).

We are each sinful and deserve condemnation. We yearn for genuine relationships and even honor, yet the shame we each carry within ourselves distances us from other, especially God. Our universal need for mercy, grace, honor and reconciliation makes us each equal before the Lord. In our conversations, we want to embody the humility of the tax collector rather than the self-righteousness and self-honoring of the religious leader.

### **3. Loving our Neighbors in Grace and Truth**

Jesus explained that the Law could be summarized in two commands: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matt. 22:37-39). When asked to define who our “neighbor” is, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Ultimately, he demonstrated the love of God on the cross (Rom 5:8). As believers, we are called to exemplify the radical love Jesus modeled (John 10:34-35).

Unfortunately, even sincere attempts to show the love of Christ to people in the LGBT+ community do not occur on a clean slate. As pastor Bruce Miller writes, “gay people are crystal clear on our church’s teaching that gay sex is wrong. In fact, they go much further and imagine that we think being gay is the worst sin imaginable and that we hate them. Therefore, we have to go to great lengths to share what they do not know: that we love them and welcome them just as they are, as Jesus does.”<sup>2</sup> We have an opportunity to bring healing and give people a different experience when we follow the example of Jesus.

How did Jesus demonstrate love? He embodied grace and truth (John 1:17b). We’ve tried to reflect these two characteristics in our organizational growth model. When Jesus called the rich young ruler to abandon his wealth and follow him, Mark reveals the motive behind his difficult words: “Jesus looked at him *and loved him*” (Mark 10:21a). Jesus confronted the hypocrisy of respected religious leaders, calling them “whitewashed tombs” (Matt 23:27-28) yet “sinners” enjoyed his company and friendship (Mark 2:15-17). Jesus was not ashamed to spend time with them, nor did he shame them.

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Miller, *Leading a Church in a Time of Sexual Questioning: Grace Filled Wisdom for Day-to-Day Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2019), 120.

When a woman caught in adultery was brought to Jesus, He said “neither do I condemn you.” At the same time, he also called her to repent: “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11).

As followers of Jesus, we want our relationships as well as our ministry culture to be marked by grace and truth (Eph 4:15), free from both condemnation of one another and condoning one another’s sins. Our ability to extend grace flows from experiencing the grace God has extended to us (Eph 3:14-19; 4:32-5:2) as well as the empowerment of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; 4:31).

#### **4. Making Christ the Central Issue**

In seeking to share Christ, we may encounter questions about our position on biblical sexuality and gender. We should validate these as worthy questions, and seek to understand why they are important to the person asking, as well as take the time to understand what they believe regarding sexual ethics. It is helpful to remember that for many people, sexuality is a source of identity, and is not merely about behavior or feelings. We can also take the opportunity to explain that biblical sexual ethics only makes sense in a broader Christian worldview, asking permission to explain who Christ is first so that our position on sexuality can be accurately understood.

Writing to Christians in the Roman empire who are experiencing pressure for their faith, Peter explains the priorities of followers of Jesus in a shifting culture: “Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Peter 3:13-16). Peter calls us to be a community, under the Lordship of Christ, that bears witness to the “hope” that is found in Christ alone. This witness involves actions, attitudes, and words.

As we build relationships and trust with people who identify as LGBT+, remember that we want to make Jesus Christ--not sexuality--the central focus in our conversations. Expect that this may take time as we build trust. Some may presume that all we want to talk about is sexuality (especially if this is what they experienced from Christians in the past). But we want to point to Christ.

#### **5. Recognizing Everyone in your Audience**

Anytime you enter conversations about sexuality and gender in Christian spaces, remember there are many faithful disciples of Christ who experience same-sex attraction, as well as faithful disciples who experience gender dysphoria. For example, in a room of one hundred people, three to six people might experience same-sex attraction.<sup>3</sup> This rate likely increases if the people in your room are younger.

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<sup>3</sup> "Since 2012, [Gallup research](#) has shown that the proportion of U.S. adults identifying as LGBT has increased from 3.5% in 2012 to 4.5% in 2017. The overall uptick is related to an increase in young people who identify as LGBT."

Warmly acknowledging that some in your audience may experience same-sex attraction or some kind of incongruence between their sex and gender not only helps them feel welcomed and included but also models to everyone in the room how to honor and “see” each other. For example, if you were giving a talk on sexual purity, you could say something like “No matter what kind of sexual attractions you may experience, God desires to empower us to live lives of joyful obedience.” This kind of practice also encourages us as ministry leaders to be mindful of other ways we can be welcoming in our language, activities and other interactions.

## **6. Speaking Wisely, Winsomely and with Integrity**

“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col. 4:2-6).

As we communicate individually and collectively, Paul underscores the importance of clarity, wisdom and a welcoming posture (“full of grace”) as we consider how to answer everyone. While Paul is focusing on gospel communication, these principles also apply to conversations about sexuality in the context of gospel ministry.

Remember that anytime you say something, whether it is through social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook), your prayer letters, teaching in a local church, or public presentations in your ministry context, you represent Christ as well as Cru. Keep the following in mind:

- We want to be known for what we are for, not merely what we are against.
- We believe that the good news of the gospel reaches into every community of people that we encounter in our ministry.
- Our ultimate aim is to communicate the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ available to all without minimizing people’s concerns about sexuality, or engaging in “us vs. them” or quarrelsome types of behavior (2 Tim 2:24).
- We want to address LGBT+ questions in a way that is faithful to Scripture and points people to Christ, as well as in ways that acknowledge our context around these questions.

In the [FAQ pages posted on the staff web](#), you will find additional suggestions on navigating questions wisely, winsomely and with integrity. You will also find answers to many practical ministry questions there as well, such as: what to do when someone comes out to you, thinking through language and terminology such as “gay Christian,” using someone’s preferred or chosen pronouns, and other topics related to evangelism, discipleship, and leadership.

## **Biblical Teaching about Human Sexuality**

As followers of Christ, we want to grow in navigating LGBT+ questions in a way that is compassionate toward people and faithful to Scripture. The purpose of this section is to explore biblical teaching about human sexuality and gender through the categories of creation, fall, redemption and new creation.

### **Creation: God’s Good Design**

“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen 1:31). This represents the seventh time the goodness of God’s creative work is celebrated in Genesis 1. We will examine several important “goods” in the creation account.

#### Made in the Image of God

Whereas God formed living creatures “according to their kinds” (Gen. 1:25), human beings were fashioned in the “image” and “likeness” of God: “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground’” (Gen. 1:26).

While theologians have wrestled to understand the full significance of this phrase, we know that “image” involves representation at its most basic level. Human beings are more like God than anything else in creation. That every human being is made in the image of God implies that each person possesses great dignity and worth (cf. Psalm 8:5-6).

#### Male and Female

The image of God is reflected in the creation of two sexes, male and female:

So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them (Gen 1:27).

The third line of the poem is central to our understanding of human sexuality. Parallel to the second line (“in the image of God he created them”), the third line states, “male and female he created them.” That is, the creation of humanity into sexed categories of male and female is an integral way we bear God’s image in the world. Genesis does not speak about gender identity or gender expression, but in terms of biological sex, giving it priority.<sup>4</sup>

As image-bearers, both sexes--male and female--possess equal dignity and worth before God. As scholar Preston Sprinkle notes, “Genesis 1:27 is one of the most powerful, provocative, and even progressive statements in all of Scripture. To a world where women are often viewed as lesser beings, God declares that his image is borne not only by males but also by females. The claim is radical

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<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew terms used in Gen 1:27c are *zakar* and *neqe-bah*, male and female respectively, the same terms used for the animals brought onto the ark for reproductive purposes after the flood (Gen 6:19; 7:9). These are distinct from the terms for man (‘adam and ‘ish) and woman (‘ishah), for example.

precisely because it is a claim about the nature of our sexed embodiment. If sex differentiation is irrelevant here, then the profound elevation of females as distinct from males loses its significance.”<sup>5</sup>

The male/female distinction is also part of the “good” of creation, and reflects God’s image in the way they represent unity in diversity. Humanity with only males, or only females, would be incomplete. Both sexes are needed for wholeness.

Just as God created vegetation and animals “according to their kinds” for the sake of fruitful reproduction (cf. Gen. 1:11,21-22,24), so male and female are good because they create the possibility of reproduction, without which humanity would be unable to carry out its mandate to fill and subdue the earth (Gen. 1:28a).

### Embodiment

Another “good” of creation is embodiment. We are not souls trapped in a body; we are embodied souls. To be physically embodied is a crucial aspect of what it means to be human.<sup>6</sup> Even in the resurrection, we will have bodies. It is not merely that we “have” bodies, but we “are” bodies, and they are good. God created a physical world and physical vice-regents to rule it under his authority (Gen. 1:28b).

### Made for Relationships

In the context of the seven-fold goodness of creation (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), we are surprised to discover something that is “not good.” “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’” (Gen. 2:18). While the primary focus of this text is marriage, Genesis 2:18 bears witness to a broader truth--namely, that all human beings--whether single or married--are designed to live in loving relationships with others. Indeed, four relationships are fundamental to human flourishing: right relationship with God, right relationship with self, right relationship with others (emphasized in v. 18) and right relationship with the created world.

### Christian Marriage

After Eve is introduced to Adam, we are told, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (Gen 2:24-25). In Genesis 1, we learn that the one-flesh union of marriage was God’s intentional design--yet another “good” of creation.

The purpose of Christian marriage is to display God’s relationship with his people, a grand metaphor (Eph. 5:31-32). Each element of marriage is designed so that it serves that purpose. We see this throughout Scripture, beginning in Genesis 1 and 2.

The element of faithfulness (Gen. 2:24) demonstrates God’s faithfulness to his people, and that their response should be faithfulness to him. The element of procreation (Gen. 1:28) demonstrates that

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<sup>5</sup> Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* (David C. Cook, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of embodiment, see Preston Sprinkle, *Embodied* (ibid.).

God's relationship with his people is meant to be fruitful, bringing and sustaining new life. The element of differently sexed partners becoming one flesh (Gen. 1:27, 2:24) demonstrates unity in diversity, the coming together of two non-interchangeable parties: God and his people. This is especially clear in Ephesians 5:22-33, where Paul teaches that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church and wives are to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. The covenant between two sexually different persons is essential to what marriage *is*.

In sum, Scripture presents Christian marriage as a faithful, fruitful covenant between one man and one woman.<sup>7</sup>

### Sex and Gender in the Creation Story

As it relates to male and female, the main category of Genesis 1-2 is biological sex. The creation account doesn't directly address gender--the social and cultural ways in which we live out our maleness or femaleness in the world. We should affirm the goodness of the sexual difference God created by living clearly as male and female, while showing appropriate flexibility in line with the Bible in what it may look like to express being male or female in our various cultural settings.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Fall: The Corruption of God's Good Design**

We don't have to look far to see that the world in which we live is not the good world God originally created. We live in a world marked by racial injustice, poverty, famine, exploitation of people and the earth, war, slavery, disease, extreme weather events, terrorism and other difficulties. The Christian explanation is that it wasn't always this way. God's good creation was corrupted by the rebellion of our first parents as narrated in Genesis 3:1-24. All four of the relationships we identified above--God, self, others and creation--were affected by the entrance of sin.

Not only did the Fall bring every human being under divine judgment (Rom 5:16-18) but it also resulted in the corruption of human nature (Ps. 51:5; Eph. 2:1-3; Rom. 3:9-18; 7:18; Jer. 17:9; Matt. 7:11;

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<sup>7</sup> Cru's HR Handbook explains: "We believe that God's design for marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman (and never two individuals of the same sex) in covenant commitment before God for a lifetime (Gen. 2:18-25; Matt. 19:4-6; Mark 10:6-8; 1 Peter 3:1-7)."

<sup>8</sup> Sex is biological (e.g., the presence or absence of Y chromosome) and is manifested in the physical body (e.g., genitalia, endocrine systems, and secondary sex characteristics). Gender is often viewed in terms of identity and expression. Gender identity relates to one's self-understanding regarding gender. Gender expression has to do with the ways human beings express or live out being "male" or "female." For example, in some cultures male friends hold hands (with no sexual connotations) while in others they do not. There are two opposite ways of missing the biblical mark on the relationship between sex and gender. On the one hand, some assert that sex and gender have no real relationship to each other, such that a normally sexed body carries no automatic gender. Consequently, one may embrace a "gender identity" that has no relation to one's biological sex, or express one's gender in a way that obscures or challenges biological sex. This view is becoming increasingly prevalent. On the other hand, some fail to distinguish sex and gender, such that some culture-specific gender distinctions (such as women being household cooks, and not men) are falsely equated with what is biblically required (the bible nowhere designates women as solely responsible for cooking).



John 8:44).<sup>9</sup> Theologians use terms like “inherited corruption,” “original sin,” “hereditary depravity,” “indwelling sin” and “sin nature/flesh,” to speak about the corruption of humanity in the Fall. Apart from Christ, we are all “slaves to sin” (Rom. 6).<sup>10</sup> Every aspect of our human constitution has been corrupted by sin.

### Human Sexuality, Gender, and the Fall

Like every other area of life, human sexuality has been marred by the devastating effects of sin. These effects are both corporate (such as cultural forces which promote the sexualization of children, or how the entire town of Sodom sought to rape the visiting angels [Gen 19]) and individual (such as when an individual child is sexually sinned against, or when an individual sexually sins against a child). Any sexual activity outside of marriage between one man and one woman is sinful (1 Cor 7:2; 1 Thess 4:3-8; Heb 13:4, and see above under “Christian Marriage”). Sexual brokenness takes many forms:

- [Pornography](#) (12% of internet sites are pornographic; 35% of all downloads are pornographic)
- Sexual addiction
- Sexual objectification (exotification and hypersexualization)
- Sexual violence (rape, incest, sexual assault, sexual harassment)
- Sex trafficking and sex slavery (a global industry)
- Prostitution
- Polyamory (multiple ongoing consensual sexual relationships)
- Adultery (extra-marital sex)
- Pre-marital or casual sex (sexual intimacy outside marriage)
- Sexual neglect of a spouse, or sexual apathy in marriage
- Sexual self-centeredness within marriage
- Use of sexual relations in marriage to punish or control
- Same-sex sexual relations
- Sexism
- Other forms of sexual immorality
- Lust and sexual fantasy

Although all sexual sin violates God’s good design, not all sexual sin is equal in consequences, either for an individual or their community. It is also important to distinguish sins committed against us (e.g., sexual violence) and sins we commit (e.g. pre-marital sex). No matter what has occurred, there is always the invitation to experience God's forgiveness and/or restoration (1 John 1:8,9).

While the specific effects of the Fall vary from person to person and culture to culture, we are all broken (Rom 3:10-12). As a result, we experience and express sexuality in ways that are outside God's original intent. We can make an idol out of sex (making it more important than it should be) or we can

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<sup>9</sup> According to the Cru Statement of Faith, “Adam and Eve were originally created in the image of God. They sinned by disobeying God; thus, they were alienated from their Creator. That historic fall brought all people under divine condemnation. Human nature is corrupted. As a result, all people are totally unable to please God. Everyone is in need of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>10</sup> We sin (in thought, word or deed) because we are sinners (by nature). As Jesus explained, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matt. 15:19; see also Matt. 7:11)

disparage sex (making it less important than it should be). Regardless, all sexual sin is rooted in the disordering of our desires resulting from the Fall (Rom. 1:24-25; James 1:14-15).

Before we discuss the impact of the Fall on one's sexuality, it is important to remind ourselves that those of us who experience same-sex attraction and/or gender dysphoria are image-bearers who possess great dignity and worth in God's sight. We are friends, co-workers and family members. Faithfulness to Scripture involves embracing not only the Bible's sexual ethic but also the command "to love our neighbor as ourselves" (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39). Our posture is one of compassion and humility. It is also important to acknowledge that the conversation around sexuality is emotionally charged and can be painful.

### Same-Sex Sexual Relationships

Because God's design for sexual intimacy is a life-long covenant between one man and one woman (Gen. 2:23-24), same-sex sexual relationships violate God's good design. Marriage is always represented throughout Scripture as a male/female union. Moreover, same-sex sexual expression is explicitly prohibited both in the Old Testament (Lev. 18:22; 20:13) and the New Testament (Rom 1:26-28; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; and 1 Tim. 1:10).<sup>11</sup>

### What about Same-Sex Attraction?

In light of what Scripture says about the devastating effects of sin (Gen 3; Rom 1:18-32; 3:23; 5:12-21; 8:20-22; Eph. 2:1-3), how should we think about the experience of same-sex attraction? On the one hand, we must recognize that same-sex attraction is contrary to God's design for human sexuality. It represents a disordering of sexual desire in our fallen condition. On the other hand, from a pastoral perspective, it is also important to distinguish the experience of same-sex attraction from acting on it in thought, word or deed. Simply having such desires should not be a cause for condemnation or shame. Some of us have spent hundreds of hours praying for God to remove these attractions to no avail, and some of us have experienced such animosity from other Christians that it has felt like we were not welcome in God's family. Compassion must go hand in hand with theological clarity.

Although we can affirm, generally, that the disordering of our sexual desires is rooted in the Fall, the ways in which various factors (biological, psychological and social) may contribute to same-sex attraction are complex and vary from person to person. While some of us express that there were specific factors which led to our same-sex attraction, others of us attest that our experience of same-sex attraction arose spontaneously and without choice, similar to the pattern experienced by people in opposite sex attraction.

Regardless of how or why a person has come to experience same-sex attraction, the most important thing is to pursue joyful obedience to our God, secure in his love for us. Everyone faces some degree of sexual temptation, no matter who they are attracted to. Dwelling on immoral sexual thoughts or acting on immoral sexual impulses is sin. Intentionally seeking out situations which are likely to be

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<sup>11</sup> Some scholars argue that these biblical texts do not address committed monogamous same-sex relationships but only prohibit cultic prostitution or pederasty (i.e., sex between men and boys). For responses to these arguments, see Preston Sprinkle, "[15 Reasons for Affirming Same-Sex Relations — And 15 Responses](#)," Center for Faith, Gender and Sexuality and Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay? And Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible, and Same-Sex Attraction* (The Good Book Company, 2013).

tempting is also inappropriate for the Christian.

### Intersex and the Fall

When it comes to biological sex, the Fall touches both our bodies and our relationship to our bodies. This is true for each of us in some way. Theologically, we can understand the condition of being intersex<sup>12</sup> as one of the many results of brokenness created by the Fall that can manifest in our bodies. Bodies don't always function precisely as they were (originally) designed. Although this is ultimately the result of the sin of Adam and Eve, congenital defects of the body are not caused by the specific sinful choices of a child's parents or the child, and do not in any way mean that those of us who experience brokenness in our bodies are more sinful or more fallen than others (see how Jesus interacts with his disciples over the man blind from birth in John 9). A person could sin in response to their intersex condition--for example, by nursing unrighteous anger or accusations toward God--but the condition itself is not sin.

Intersex people are almost always identifiable as male or female, but with disorders of sexual development. In only an extremely small percentage of cases is the sex of an individual ambiguous or difficult to discern.<sup>13</sup> Intersex individuals do not constitute a third sex, but simply the failure of a body to develop as it should. Intersex people can experience turmoil in processing how to express gender (i.e., how to live as men or women) when their maleness or femaleness is not straightforward. This turmoil is understandable. We who experience disorders of sexual development should be treated with care, grace and truth.

### Transgender and the Fall

Transgender and intersex people are often lumped together, but these experiences are not the same. They are *similar* in that they both do not have a straightforward experience of the relationship between sex and gender. But they are *dissimilar* because the person who identifies as transgender has a normal, healthy body in terms of physical sexual development.

Some people identify as transgender because of the experience of 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."<sup>14</sup> This incongruence is often deeply painful, and is experienced as a type of alienation from one's own body. Like many who experience same-sex attraction, this deep and abiding feeling of alienation is unchosen.<sup>15</sup>

God designed us, female and male, to experience wholeness and integrity rather than alienation from ourselves. This alienation should be understood as a result of the brokenness that came from the Fall.

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<sup>12</sup> According to Interact, a prominent advocacy group for intersex individuals, "Intersex is an umbrella term for differences in sex traits or reproductive anatomy. Intersex people are born with these differences or develop them in childhood. There are many possible differences in genitalia, hormones, internal anatomy, or chromosomes, compared to the usual two ways that human bodies develop" (<https://interactadvocates.org/faq/>).

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Preston Sprinkle, "What About Intersex?" in *Embodied*.

<sup>14</sup> Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Vaughn Roberts, *Transgender* (Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2016), 19.

Pastorally, it is important to distinguish gender dysphoria from one's response to it. If a trans person does not know God, it makes sense that they would seek to relieve this distressing alienation without reference to God's purposes. But what about those of us who are seeking to follow Jesus? How can we hold in tension the acknowledgement of our experience of gender dysphoria, while also not letting that experience have the final say in how we live in the world? How can we in the community of the Body of Christ seek to submit our lives to God, who gave us our physical bodies and also understands and has compassion for the deep pain we experience? We are morally responsible for how we respond to the experience of gender dysphoria. Just as importantly, how will we who do not experience gender dysphoria come around and alongside our siblings in Christ to love them, care for them, learn from them, and empower them?

Furthermore, not all people who identify as transgender experience gender dysphoria. Some people find the idea of only two sexes or genders problematic or offensive and seek to undermine or abolish the sex binary. Some come to this position for ideological reasons. Others arrive in response to sexism. People adopt labels such as "non-binary" or "genderqueer" for a widening variety of reasons. While the original gift of humanity as male and female is a creational good, we should take seriously ways that humans may have abused or distorted sex and/or gender. We should not confuse the results of the Fall with a design of creation, and should take both equally seriously.

Because people can identify as transgender for various reasons, it is best to never assume you know why someone has adopted that identity. It is crucial to recognize there are many different reasons, and many different paths, for people who identify as transgender. We should never jump to conclusions about what is motivating someone but be humble listeners. This posture goes a long way in showing honor.

### **Redemption: Beginning to Recover God's Good Design**

God's redemptive work begins with a promise that a descendent of Eve would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). God chose Abram to form a people (Israel) to be a blessing to the nations (Gen 12:1-3). Redeemed from slavery in Egypt, Israel was called to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" with a distinct religious and moral life demonstrating the wisdom, nearness and greatness of God to the surrounding nations (Exod. 19:5-6; 20:1-21; Deut. 4:7-8; Lev. 19:1-18). This witness included the stewardship of their sexuality (Lev 18:6-23).

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" (John 3:16a). The incarnation--God the Son taking on human flesh (Phil. 2:6-7; Gal 4:4-5)--represents the fulfillment of the redemption first promised in Gen. 3:15. Jesus Christ was the incarnate expression of the Father's love. He consistently treated people, male and female, with dignity and honor, especially those on the margins (e.g, Mark 1:40-45; John 4:1-26; 8:1-11). Through his incarnation, teachings, miracles, crucifixion, resurrection and enthronement, Jesus Christ fulfilled the story of Israel and redeemed people from every nation (Luke 24:44-49; 1 Cor. 15:1-8; Mark 10:44-45; Rev. 5:9-10).

### The Sexuality of Jesus Christ

When we want to understand what the Bible teaches about sexuality, we (rightly) look to the teachings of Jesus but often fail to consider his life.<sup>16</sup> Jesus became like us not merely in his humanity but also in his sexuality. He was born male. The incarnation affirms the goodness of being biologically sexed and embodiment. Moreover, in the resurrection, Jesus will continue to be sexed throughout eternity.

It is important to remember that Jesus was single and celibate, yet he experienced the fullness of life. He also experienced temptation--just as we do--yet without sin (Heb. 4:15). The life of Jesus challenges a powerful cultural myth: namely, that we can only find true fulfillment if we are sexually “active.” Jesus teaches us that while being sexed is essential to humanity, being sexually active is not. Our culture has reversed this. It teaches that biological sex is secondary while sexual activity is primary.<sup>17</sup> Jesus’s singleness also challenged his social and religious context, which taught that divine blessing resided especially in marriage and begetting children. Indeed, in the move from the Old Covenant to the New, there is a seismic shift in the place of singleness in the kingdom of God.<sup>18</sup>

### A New Community under the Lordship of Christ

Through his redemptive work, Jesus Christ created a multiethnic community without national borders--the church--which now includes people from every nation alongside descendents of Abraham (Eph 2:11-22; 3:1-12). The church is represented as a new family made up of all who trust in Jesus (Matt 12:49-50; Rom 8:15-17; 1 Tim 5:1-2; Heb 2:11-16). Once alienated, excluded, and seeking glory in things that ultimately bring shame and destruction, we are - and are becoming - children reconciled to our heavenly Father to united to a diverse family of believers, whose shame has been covered by Christ’s honor (2 Cor. 4:1-6, Eph. 2:12-22, 1 Pet. 2:4-10). Christ commissioned his church to be his witnesses in their words and their unique moral and religious lives (Matt 28:18-20; Eph 4:17-32; Phil. 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9-12). As a community, the church is called to live under the lordship of Christ exemplifying the fruit of the Spirit in her relationships, holiness and goodness among her neighbors, and love that goes beyond her natural tendencies, extending even to enemies (Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 5:1-2; Gal 6:10; Rom. 12:9-21).

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<sup>16</sup> This section draws extensively from Todd Wilson, *Mere Sexuality: Rediscovering the Christian Vision of Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), chapter 2.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, *Mere Sexuality*, p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> “The essence of this paradigm shift represented by the very core of the Christian gospel has profound implications for all areas of life, including how we as Christians understand marriage and procreation. For whereas marriage and physical procreation were the necessary means of building the physical nation of Israel, the spiritual people of God are built through the process of spiritual regeneration. Moreover, whereas marriage and physical procreation were necessary for maintaining one’s physical inheritance for the next generation, they are not necessary for preserving one’s spiritual inheritance within the eternal kingdom of God. . . . In the new covenant we find no mention of the familial blessings of offspring and marriage or of a fruitful and prosperous land so prominent as markers of God’s blessing in the Sinai covenant. Rather, the fullness of God’s blessing comes to us through Christ and his sacrificial death on the cross whereby he has fully reconciled us to God and made us co-heirs in the inheritance of his kingdom. Thus Paul, a single man, devoid of wife, children, house, home, land, possessions, and financial prosperity, nevertheless recognized that he, even as a simple itinerant missionary on this earth, possessed ‘the fullness of the blessing of Christ’ (Rom. 15:29).” Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), pp. 126 and 135.

In God's redemptive work throughout the history of Israel and the church, God calls his people to honor him by living holy, God-honoring lives, individually and corporately (Lev. 19:1-2; 1 Pet. 1:16). In a New Covenant context, Paul explains, we are to put off our old manner of life and be renewed in "true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24). This renewal includes our sexuality (Eph. 5:3-14). No sexual immorality should exist among God's holy people (Eph. 5:3-5). Although we once lived in "darkness," now we are "light in the Lord." Thus, we should "walk as children of light" (Eph. 5:8) and seek to "please the Lord" (Eph. 5:10).<sup>19</sup>

### Already but Not Yet

It is important to recognize the "already" and "not yet" nature of our faith in the chapter of God's story in which we presently live. On the one hand, we have been made new. As Paul explains, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). At the same time, we still live in a fallen world in which we struggle with sin and temptation. We don't yet possess all that God has promised. The fullness of salvation awaits us in the future when Christ returns. One day our bodies will be transformed and the whole creation will be renewed (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 15:35-58; 2 Cor. 5:2-4; Tit. 2:11-14; Rom. 8:20-24; Rev. 20-21). In the present, we still hurt each other, and we still experience temptation, sin, suffering and death as we await the return of our savior, Jesus Christ (Tit. 2:11-14). Nonetheless, we can confidently expect growth in joyful obedience as we walk humbly with Christ. Additionally, as a community we can support and encourage each other in this growth with grace and truth, seeking repentance and forgiveness when we wrong or are wronged by each other, especially those who find themselves on the margins.

### Redeeming Sexuality

The "already/not yet" dynamic of our faith has significant implications for our sexuality. Some of us who experience same-sex attraction for example, through coming to faith in Christ, may experience varying levels of opposite-sex attraction as we grow in Christ. Most of us, however, will continue to experience same-sex attraction throughout our lives, while still experiencing growth and joy as we steward our sexuality in holy and healthy ways.<sup>20</sup>

For those of us who experience gender dysphoria, coming to Christ may, over time, provide some change and healing in that experience. However, for other faithful saints, the experience of gender dysphoria will persist throughout life. A faithful walk with Jesus can exist alongside this experience.

Some Christians report significant changes in their experience of sexuality. Nonetheless, we must be careful not to promise that faith in Christ will change a person's attraction to individuals of the same sex or the experience of gender dysphoria in this life. A relationship with Christ will change the way a person lives but it may not change the nature of their temptation or their experience of sexual brokenness. Every disciple can expect growth as God's grace and truth work over time, but this growth will look different for each of us.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> It is instructive to note that when Paul addresses Gentile converts, the Lordship of Christ over sexuality represents one of his key topics (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:1-8; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; Eph. 5:3-14).

<sup>20</sup> Alan Chambers, the former President of "Exodus International," a prominent ex-gay ministry, noted "The majority of people whom I have met, and I would say the majority meaning 99.9 percent of them, have not experienced a change in their orientation or have gotten to a place where they can say that they could never be tempted or are not tempted in some way, or experience some level of same-sex attraction. The vast majority of people that I know do still experience some level of same-sex attraction."

<sup>21</sup> For further discussion, see Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Forthcoming July 2021).

### Honoring God with our Bodies

“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Cor. 6:19-20; cf. Rom. 12:1-2). All Christians (regardless of attractional patterns) have the same two options for “honoring God with their bodies” when it comes to sexual expression: chaste singleness or faithful marriage to someone of the opposite sex.

In both states - married or unmarried - the Christian will face temptations. We are to “flee from sexual immorality (1Cor. 6:18) and to “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires (Romans 13:14). Though the experience of sexual brokenness and temptation may endure throughout the entirety of a Christian’s life, this does not limit one’s access to the Spirit to fight temptation (1 Cor. 10:13), or one’s ability to confess sins to Jesus Christ, our Advocate with the Father (1 John 1:8-2:2). Neither does it inhibit the Spirit’s guidance and empowerment when we repent and seek forgiveness of those we’ve dishonored or hurt as a result of our sexual brokenness. Grace and truth over time is the growth model for us all. Involvement with supportive Christian community is crucial to fighting and growing through temptation and alleviating loneliness. We all need relationships where we experience grace and truth. Those who are single out of obedience to Christ especially note how being welcomed into families ministers to them powerfully.

Because the male/female binary reflects God’s good creational design, Christians should also “honor God in their bodies” by seeking to align our gender expression with our biological sex.<sup>22</sup>

That is, we embrace the goodness of the sexual difference God created by living clearly as male and female, while showing appropriate flexibility (in line with Scripture) in what it may look like to express being male or female in various settings. Nonetheless, for those of us who experience gender dysphoria, reconciliation with God’s gift of a male or female body will require grace and truth over time, and the experience of gender dysphoria may never cease during this lifetime.

### **New Creation: The Completion of God’s Good Design**

Thankfully, this fallen world is not the end of the story. The New Testament celebrates the eschatological hope of the return of Jesus Christ and the inauguration of his perfect kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth (1 Cor 15:20-28; 1 Thess 4:13-18; Heb. 12:22-29; 1 Pet. 1:3-5; Rev. 20-21).

One chief hope of the resurrection is the promise of a new body and a redeemed community (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 15:35-58; 2 Cor. 5:2-4; Tit. 2:11-14; Rom. 8:20-24, Rev. 21:3). While we don’t know precisely what our new bodies will be like, we know that they will be beautiful, honorable, powerful, spiritual, and whole. We also know that we will be presented to Christ as one body, “a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:27; see also Rev. 19:6-8).

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<sup>22</sup> As one theologian who has researched this topic deeply notes, “there is no scientific evidence that your internal sense of self or your personal identity defines who you ‘really’ are while your biology got it wrong.” Preston Sprinkle, *Grace//Truth 2.0: Five More Conversations Every Thoughtful Christian Should Have About Faith, Sexuality & Gender* (The Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender, 2018), 113.

These truths should bring great comfort to each of us, as we experience the ravages of aging, injury, and weakness, and the continuing struggle against sin and temptation.

### Sex and Gender in the New Creation

It is especially comforting to our siblings in Christ who identify as trans and intersex, that every one of their tears will be wiped away by a God who cares profoundly for them. They will receive a glorious body and the effects of the Fall will be obliterated.

What will happen to sex and gender in the New Creation? Jesus taught that humans will not marry or be given in marriage in his future kingdom (Matt. 22:30).

Why no human marriage?

Marriage among human beings will no longer exist because it is merely a signpost pointing to the true marriage of Jesus Christ and his Bride the church. Once this reality is fully manifested, the sign will no longer be necessary. The reality will have come. Similarly, without marriage, and with the full count of humans being brought into the kingdom, procreation will no longer be necessary.

It is important to recognize, however, that absence of marriage does not mean absence of being sexed. When Jesus made his post-resurrection appearances, he was recognizably still male (John 20:15,16). This suggests that sex and gender will continue to exist in the new creation. Similarly, apart from marriage and procreation, the goodness of male and female are still a key aspect of humanity bearing God's image. Though we will still be sexed beings, we will no longer experience or express brokenness or sin in regards to our sexuality or gender. We will all relate in holiness to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

If progress is slow and painful here, let us take heart. "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:50-53).