

HNW and Human Sexuality¹

Human beings are sexual creatures, having been designed as such. While many Christians have mistakenly believed that sex is dirty or evil, the Bible is clear that God created the human body to be sexual, that God created the pleasure that accompanies sex, and that God even commands sex (“Be fruitful and multiply.” — Genesis 1:28). Since God created sex, it stands to reason that His guidelines for sex are intended to allow us to flourish as sexual being, to experience pleasure in that which He created. So what are those guidelines?

Genesis 2: The First Family

The first family described in the book of Genesis is presented as an archetype for familial design and sex. While this family certainly had its issues, there was a period before the Fall we can observe how God intended male/female relationships to operate and how that relationship played out with regards to sex. The Bible says that all humans are made in God’s image—both male and female (Genesis 1:28). This means that there are characteristics present in both men and women that show us the character of God. One of (not the only, but one of the) pictures given in Scripture to show God’s love and complexity is given when a man and woman come together and form a family. After the creation of Eve in Genesis 2, they are united as husband and wife, become a family unit, and then have a sexual relationship. Genesis 2:24, sometimes called the “leave and cleave” verse, describes this as the pattern for human sexuality: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

The model of human sexuality given in Genesis 2 is one man and one woman having sex in the confines of an exclusive covenant relationship, whereby they choose to only have sex with one another until that relationship ends through the death of one of the members. This model of human sexuality demonstrates the faithful love given in Jesus (who, like a faithful spouse, stays for life), and complementary aspects of God’s character (male and female He created them), and flourishing (the possibility of children, the earth being filled with the glory of God and future worshippers).

Jesus and Paul on Marriage and Sex

Marriage is the relationship God designed for sex, but marriage is not required for all Christians—only Christians who engage in sex. Jesus was not married. Paul lived a single life as an apostle. In fact, Paul exhorts those who can live without marriage to do so, in order that he/she might give greater attention to serving Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, he writes, “*To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is*

¹ Much of this argument is based on Richard Hays’s excellent approach to this topic in his magnum opus, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, HarperOne, 1996.

better to marry than to burn with passion.” Later, in verses 32-35, he goes further. “I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.”

Jesus, too, celebrates singleness and celibacy. In Matthew 19:1, Jesus is questioned about divorce. He replies that divorce and remarriage apart from sexual unfaithfulness is adultery. His disciples are shocked. They had been taught that a man could divorce easily and regularly. Then this conversation takes place beginning in 19:10:

The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” But he said to them, “Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it.”

A few chapters later, Jesus would teach that marriage will not exist in eternity when he states in Matthew 22:30, *“For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage.”*

Sex is good, but it is not ultimate. Marriage is good, but it is not ultimate—except for the marriage of Jesus to His Bride, the church. There are those who have forsaken their sexual desires for the Kingdom, and they are commended for choosing the ultimate over the temporary. The ultimate good for Christians is to be devoted to Jesus and his Kingdom—growing in devotion and love for him so that our lives and loves begin to look like his life, look like his loves.

If Jesus is the ultimate good, that means that just as marriage is celebrated, so then also faithful celibacy is also celebrated. This means that, contrary to the message of much of contemporary culture, our identities are not found in sexual preference or performance, but rather in Jesus.

This biblical sexual ethic, monogamous marriage or celibacy, is quite narrow compared to the sexual ethic most prevalent in our culture about sexual desires outside of this covenant. Why is that?

Leviticus 18: The Sexual Ethic of the New Testament

In the Old Testament, in Leviticus 18, we read the sexual ethic given to the nation of Israel by the Lord. It further clarifies any questions regarding the sexual ethic given in Genesis, outlawing sexual practices such as incest, rape, and bestiality. Additionally,

Leviticus 18:22 forbids homosexuality: “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman” (this admonition is repeated in Leviticus 20:13). Leviticus 18 and its corresponding texts were considered to be the sexual boundaries for Israel in order to differentiate Israel from the pagan nations who engaged in sexual promiscuity, licentiousness, debauchery, and fertility worship. Any behavior outside the limits of Leviticus 18 was considered “sexual immorality” by the Jewish people. The Greek term for “sexual immorality” in the New Testament is “*porneia*,” the term from which we derive our word, “pornography.” This term, mentioned in Acts 15:29, appears to refer to the regulations laid out in Leviticus 18.

When the earliest Gentile Christians were coming to faith in Jesus, the New Testament records a council that was held to consider whether such Gentile converts should be required to uphold the old Jewish laws and rituals—things like circumcision and sacrifice and festivals. The apostles decide the new Gentile believers are not required to uphold these things. In spite of not being required to uphold Jewish rituals, they *are* to avoid *porneia* (Acts 15:29). From the very beginning of the Christian church, sexual peculiarity and purity have been among her hallmarks. Just as the Leviticus 18 sexual ethic distinguished Israel from the surrounding pagan nations in the Old Testament, the sexual ethic of the New Testament is designed to distinguish Christians from surrounding religions.

When the New Testament teaches on “sexual immorality” after the council recorded in Acts 15 (in verses such as Romans 13:13, 1 Corinthians 5:1, 1 Corinthians 5:11, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Corinthians 6:18, 1 Corinthians 10:8, Galatians 5:19, Ephesians 5:3, Colossians 3:5, 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Hebrews 13:4, and Revelation 21:8) it uses the word “*porneia*.” This was a continued reference to the Jewish Scriptures and Leviticus 18 sexual ethic, since the writers of the New Testament were Jews. They used *porneia* as an overarching category, communicating a connection between the sexual ethic of Israel and the sexual ethic of the church.

This means we can deduce with a high degree of certainty that all sexual behavior outside of monogamous heterosexual marriage—fornication, pedophilia, pornography, homosexuality, bestiality, incest, polyamory, etc.—is *porneia*, according to Leviticus 18, and, therefore, the teachings of Jesus (Jesus uses the term when teaching in Matthew 15:19), Paul, and the rest of the New Testament.

What About Homosexuality, Specifically?

Leviticus 18 continues to be critical in our treatment of sexuality, as it clarifies our understanding of homosexual behavior, as well. As the world was Hellenized and Greek became the language of the day, the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek so that Hellenized Jews could understand their Scriptures more easily. This translation was completed about 130 years before Jesus was born, and 170-200 years before much of the New Testament was written. When the verse forbidding homosexuality in Leviticus 18 and Leviticus 20 is translated into Greek in 132 BC, a word was apparently created in order to translate “sex with a man as with a woman.” That word

was *arsenokoitai*. Importantly, Paul uses the same term—*arsenokoitai*—when referring to male same-sex activity in his writings (1 Corinthians 6:9–11, 1 Timothy 1:10). This indicates that Paul’s understanding of homosexual activity is directly tied to Leviticus 18 and its forbidding of homosexual acts.

Some have argued that Paul knew nothing of monogamous, committed same-sex relationships, and therefore was arguing against pederasty or pedophilia in his use of the term *arsenokoitai*, not committed same-sex relationships. This, however, is unlikely. Ancient Greek culture has a number of documents enumerating consensual same-sex relationships. Paul, being well-versed in Greek culture (as he clearly demonstrated in Acts 17:16–ff.), is likely holding the Christian sexual ethic in stark contrast to the prevailing ancient (and contemporary) sexual ethic of sexual libertinism. Paul, additionally, does in fact condemn pederasty in a separate category when he condemns *malakoi* in his list of activities that are not permissible in the Kingdom in 1 Corinthians 6:9. *Malakoi* was a term commonly used referring to the passive or “soft” partners in ancient male homosexual activity, as evidenced, for example, in Plato’s “Symposium,” in which each primary character attends a drinking party with his *malakoi* to discuss the nature of love.

As a student of ancient culture and its texts, there can be little doubt that by choosing to use the terms *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi*, Paul was referring to consensual adult homosexual activity, along with the rape of young boys for sexual pleasure. All of these sorts of activities are outside the Christian sexual ethic, according to the New Testament.

Furthermore, in Romans 1:16–ff., Paul explains how homosexual activity is an exchange of the design of God, this time including women in the discussion. He explains that such behavior is a rejection of God’s human design, using language designed to compare homosexual sexuality with the God-designed sexuality described in Genesis 1 and 2. One is God’s design for flourishing, while the other will bring wrath—not necessarily fire and brimstone alone, Paul argues—but rather consequences for engaging in homosexual activity (the due penalty within themselves to which he refers).

Some have wondered why the New Testament does not record Jesus ever teaching explicitly on homosexuality. The likely answer: he was affirming the sexual ethic given Israel in Leviticus 18, as did every Jew in Jesus’ time. When, in Matthew 5, Jesus teaches on lust, adultery, and divorce, he is taking the concepts from the sexual ethic given Israel and expounding upon them. When, in Matthew 15, Jesus refers to “sexual immorality,” he, like Paul, refers to “*porneia*,” the concept of sexual immorality that traces back to Leviticus 18. Jesus’ teaching on celibacy in Matthew 19 seems to be his answer to same-sex sexual desires.

What Does This Mean?

Many Christians have wondered how to approach the topic if an individual was born with these proclivities or, at the very least, has had same-sex attraction and desires as

long as he/she can remember. The question is poignant. Are such believers to be denied life-long companionship? Are they to be denied sexual fulfillment?

We must first recognize that such desires are not “manufactured” or “created.” If Christians believe in the doctrine of sin, they believe that every aspect of creation has been affected. This means that all Christians have had sinful desires for as long as they can remember that they should not act upon. This particular issue is not a place for Christians to cast aspersions on their brothers and sisters who are attracted to the same sex. This is instead a place to recognize that we are the same; we each have desires we must master through the help of the Holy Spirit. This is why, in Romans 2, Paul condemns a host of behaviors *immediately after* condemning homosexual behavior and idolatry. He puts greed and disobeying parents in the *same category as homosexuality and idolatry*. Our brothers and sisters who are attracted to members of the same sex are not our enemies. They are not to be cast out. They are to be seen as fellow members of the body who, too, need restoration and transformation. Have they had these desires as long as they can remember? Most likely. And we would do well to empathize, to invite them into our own areas of brokenness—our own fallen desires—and to hope that, together, we could grow towards wholeness and purity through the transformative power of Jesus Christ and to work towards that end in the faithful and diligent work of discipling.

In conclusion, human sexuality is a great gift given in order to fulfill the divine mandate to fill the world with Image Bearers, but it is not—nor was it ever—intended to be an ultimate expression of human identity. That ultimate identity rests in Jesus alone and his ability to fulfill our deepest desires through the gift of relationship with him. To paraphrase Augustine, our hearts find deep rest not in sex or human relationship—as good as those gifts are—but ultimately in Him. At HNW our hope is to produce an environment where all people are accepted regardless of sexual preference, but are simultaneously taught the traditional sexual biblical ethic so they might know that their deepest heart desires can be fulfilled in Jesus. Our hope is that this truth will not only be taught to those who struggle with a particular sexual preference, but instead that all those who are part of HNW will strive to find their deepest longings fulfilled in Christ.