



SEXUALITY

THE APPROACH OF MARINERS CHURCH

SEPTEMBER 2022

At Mariners Church, we believe God has a grand and glorious vision for human flourishing. God intends for human beings, created male and female, to experience and reflect His glory through relationship, as indicated by the two greatest commandments (“Love God” and “Love others”). We see the importance of relationship in God’s gifts of community, friendship, the Church, and the institution of marriage.

Through these everyday, relational contexts, we are called to live according to God’s design. But too often, because of humanity’s fall into sin, we are prone to misuse these gifts and live out of sync with God’s plan. The good news is, we believe God’s original intention for us can be restored through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and this restoration is evident when we follow the Bible’s teaching on sexuality and marriage, within the context of a local church.

WHY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SEXUALITY HAVE BECOME CHALLENGING

1. Sexuality has become a higher identity marker for individuals.

In today’s Western cultural context, human flourishing is achieved not primarily through community relationships (looking to others), but through the discovery and celebration of the individual (looking to oneself). Expressive individualism “holds that each person has a unique core of feelings and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized.”¹

This cultural framework serves as the “broad backdrop to these aspects of what is commonly called the sexual revolution.”² This explains why the popular phrase “Hate the sin, but love the sinner” makes little sense to someone who identifies as LGBTQ+. To hate the sin is equal to hating the sinner because sexual attraction is a key component of how people identify themselves today. This individualistic outlook on life has made conversations about sexuality more difficult.

2. The sexuality conversation is now perceived as a human rights issue.

In the last few decades, the cultural conversation has shifted from personal preference to human rights.³ The argument perceives “sexual minorities” as the rightful heir of the Civil Rights Movement for black equality in the 1950s and 60s. To reject same-sex marriage because of what the Bible says is to be seen as backwards, antiquated, and on “the wrong side of history.” For many, opposing gay marriage is akin to the actions of segregationists who opposed interracial marriage.

3. Christian subcultures have been inconsistent in their interpretation and application of a biblical sexual ethic.

In some cases, Christian subcultures have adopted an idealized view of marriage and thus created the expectation that the ideal follower of Jesus will be married. As a result, the Church has often been a lonely place for single people and those who have chosen to embrace celibacy. In other churches, an over-emphasis on sexual sin can create a negative vision of sex, which suppresses the generous, glorious, and comprehensive biblical vision of sexuality, singleness, and marriage.

In some Christian subcultures, certain sins are treated as more respectable than others: the sin of a cohabiting, unmarried couple, for example, may be treated differently than someone addicted to pornography, or someone who experiences same-sex attraction. Although unintentional, the message communicated is that some sexual sins deserve attention while others do not.

COMMON POSITIONS

1. “Non-Affirming and Unclear”

In response to these cultural trends, some churches claim to hold to the historic teachings of the Church, but fail to offer clarity on these matters to those inside or outside the Church. This lack of clarity shows up in different forms, one pertaining to truth and the other to grace.

Lack of clarity pertaining to truth is when a church adopts an invitational posture without honest articulation of its biblical convictions, which can lead some to believe the Church affirms same-sex sexual relationships only to discover later this was not the case. The result is hurt and pain.

Lack of clarity pertaining to grace is when a church articulates a clear position on the issue, but without a posture of love and concern toward those who might disagree. The result is an inability to show compassion and care across the lines of disagreement.

2. “Open and Affirming”

Another approach has been a growing number of “open and affirming churches.” These churches have deviated from the unchanging witness of the Christian church through two thousand years of church history.⁴ Many of these churches believe it is morally permissible for a follower of Jesus to enter a monogamous, loving same-sex relationship, while others believe other forms of extramarital or polyamorous sexual activity should be celebrated as well. This approach requires a re-interpretation of Bible passages related to same-sex sexual behavior, so that a monogamous, consensual relationship between members of the same sex becomes compatible with orthodox Christianity.

MARINERS POSITION

Mariners Church believes in being invitational and clear.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the most inclusive invitation in human history. No other faith tradition or worldview has opened its arms to those of every color, culture, tradition, gender, and struggle. The Church of Jesus Christ is a glorious conglomerate of struggling saints who worship the living God—from the seeking, to the skeptic, and to everyone else, wherever they are on the faith spectrum. With the outstretched arms of Jesus, Mariners Church adopts an intentional posture of invitation.

At the same time, Mariners Church affirms the biblical and historical view of marriage as a covenanted, lifelong, monogamous relationship between a biological man and woman. Sex is a gift to be enjoyed only within the bounds of the marriage covenant. We believe this prescription comes from a good and loving Father who is perfect in wisdom and overflowing with compassion for the flourishing of humanity.

At Mariners Church, our desire is to be invitational with sincerity and love, and clear with confidence and compassion.

THEOLOGICAL/BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Sex is a gift from God designed to be enjoyed in marriage.

While many in today's culture view Christianity as sexually repressive, the Bible presents sex as a good gift from God to be enjoyed in the context of marriage between a man and a woman. Adam and Eve were "naked and were not ashamed" (Gen 2:25). Sex was a part of the created order, even before the fall. The Garden of Eden was a place of uninhibited intimacy between a woman and her husband.

While affected by the fall, sex is still viewed throughout redemptive history as something worthy of celebration. An entire book of the Old Testament focuses on the love of a husband and wife (Song of Solomon). The New Testament esteems marriage and the marriage bed (Heb 13:4).

2. Marriage is a divine institution given for the benefit of the world.

For many in our society, marriage is viewed through an individualistic lens—a relationship that promotes happiness and personal fulfillment. But according to the Scriptures, while marriage certainly provides benefits for a couple,⁵ the institution exists to also serve society and the world.

Marriage is what enables a society to be held together. As a woman and man "leave... and become one flesh" (Gen 2:24) they "create a unique social union not based on blood relations or common descent..."⁶ In other words, they become "one flesh" in a way that creates societal together-ness. For this reason, marriage has been called "the primordial institution of human society," and Martin Luther called it the "first estate," preceding the church and civil government.

Furthermore, the complementarity of man and woman in marriage is ordered toward the perpetuation of society through childbearing. "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28) was an early command in Genesis. "[T]he union of male and female...

organized around the procreative potential of that union...”⁷ has been recognized throughout history and across all cultures. The complementarity of male and female has been called “the original diversity” since there is a creative power made possible across this difference.⁸

Looking at marriage from a biblical worldview helps us see sex as so much bigger than just the satisfaction or fulfillment of two individuals. It concerns the flourishing of the family, society, and civilization. Marriage—the bringing together of the two halves of humanity in beautiful complementarity—perpetuates the creation of image bearers, “fills the earth,” and serves to hold together the fabric of society.⁹

3. Marriage is a divine signpost for God’s redemptive purposes.

Of all the benefits marriage provides for society, the most important one is its revelatory power. Marriage was designed by God to paint a picture of God’s purposes for creation and God’s plan of redemption.

MARRIAGE IS A SIGNPOST OF GOD’S PURPOSE FOR CREATION.

The story of the Bible begins and ends with Heaven and Earth, the whole of creation, coming together in unity, demonstrating God’s purpose for creation. In Gen 1, there is a complementarity of Heaven and Earth interlocking together in unity. This culminates in a complementarian union between a man and a woman with the marriage covenant serving as a mirror to reflect the unity of the created order.

In Rev 21, at the end of the biblical narrative, the reader witnesses an interlocking of the new Heavens and the new Earth which also features a union between the complementarity of Jesus and His bride, the Church.¹⁰ The union of man and woman therefore, reveals God’s purposes for unity in the whole of creation “both things in heaven and things on earth in him” (Eph 1:10). “Marriage is a sign of all things in heaven and on earth coming together in Christ.”¹¹

MARRIAGE IS A SIGNPOST OF GOD’S PLAN OF REDEMPTION.

The story in the Bible extends beyond the whole of creation to God’s specific plan for image bearers. God intends to restore and reconcile fallen humanity back into relationship with Himself. Marriage, therefore, “serves as a redemptive sign that the great chasm separating creature from Creation has been bridged, and the original unity intended by God has been restored, both among us and between humanity and its Creator.”¹² This is why the Apostle Paul connects the first marriage verse in the Bible to his most recognized marriage verse.¹³ This is also why the final picture of the relationship between God and his people is through the imagery of a wedding (Rev 21). Human marriage is designed to demonstrate the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Marriage is a portrait of the way God loves us.

According to this framework, we see a view of a generous God who has a glorious plan for humanity. Marriage was not designed by God to be restrictive but revelatory and responsible for the welfare of individuals and the collective world.¹⁴

With this backdrop, we turn to a few common questions and issues:

“WHY CAN’T TWO PEOPLE OF THE SAME GENDER MARRY AND EXPRESS THEIR LOVE IF THEY LOVE ONE ANOTHER?”

According to biblical teaching, there are many ways in which people of the same gender can express love for one another in a non-sexual way: through friendship, community, and family. The reason why the church has opposed same-sex sexual behavior is because it runs counter to the intention for individual and societal flourishing and violates God’s purposes of unity in complementarity in creation and redemption. Romantic love and the institution of marriage exist for something far beyond the expression of human love.

“WHAT IS TRULY WRONG WITH A SPOUSE PRESSURING HIS OR HER PARTNER INTO SEXUAL ACTIVITY THAT MAKES THE OTHER SPOUSE UNCOMFORTABLE?”

This practice violates the sacrificial nature of marriage exemplified by Christ’s love for the Church. Christ loves the Church with humility, gentleness, putting her first for her flourishing. A spouse who places him or herself first is not living out the truest reality of what marriage is meant to demonstrate. The marriage bed is meant for mutual enjoyment, not selfish gain. Therefore, freedom and pleasure within marriage, characterized by mutual respect, honor, and communication, are celebrated. Pressure, manipulation, and coercion are to be rejected.

“WHAT’S SO WRONG WITH PREMARITAL SEX OR A COHABITING COUPLE TRYING TO FIGURE OUT THEIR CHEMISTRY?”

The primary issue is not sexual chemistry but covenant commitment. Sexual intimacy was designed to occur in the context of covenant commitment. This is how Christ loves the Church. He covenanted with the Church through His life, death, and resurrection. Intimacy is the overflow of commitment. Therefore, when a couple chooses to cohabit, they are out of step with the gospel order of commitment leading to intimacy. Additionally, cohabitation is not as advertised. There is mounting evidence that cohabitation hurts relationships, family, and overall relationship satisfaction.¹⁵

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH PORNOGRAPHY WHEN IT’S NOT HURTING ANYONE ELSE?”

The porn industry does an incredible amount of harm. The industry perpetuates the dehumanization of people and is deeply connected to sex trafficking. Porn also harms the viewer. It devastates mental health (depression), creates social anxiety, and rewires the brain as a powerful drug.¹⁶

On top of these reasons, the problem with pornography is that it gives an illusion of intimacy in isolation. But the gospel is a message of union, not isolation. The gospel does not proclaim a message of self-pleasure, but self-denial in satisfying union with Jesus.

4. Disordered desires result from the fall of humanity into sin.

According to the Bible, there was no sin or corruption prior to the Fall. However, at the Fall (Gen 3), sin entered and corrupted the world, including our nature. Disordered desires (i.e., extramarital attraction, same-sex sexual attraction) and

distorted motivations (i.e., dominance and control) are the results of our fall into sin.

Some scholars have recently raised objections to the church's historic view and now claim the Bible does not reject same-sex relationships. Here are several of the arguments recently made.

LOOKING BACKWARD: AN ARGUMENT OF CULTURAL DISTANCE

This argument says that the same-sex sexual relationships rejected by the Bible (specifically in Gen 19:1-19, Lev 18:11, 20:13, Rom 1:26-17, 1 Cor 6:9, and 1 Tim 1:01) do not refer to loving, committed, monogamous unions, but non-consensual and oppressive sexual behaviors.¹⁷ The reason God rejected these relationships throughout the Bible was because of the deforming nature of these activities in ancient times. If the loving, consensual relationships we know today would have been in view, the Bible would have said something different.

This proposal runs into several problems. First, it assumes that all same-sex relationships mentioned in the Bible were demeaning and harmful. Though this may have been the case in some situations, it cannot be substantiated in every case. The Bible does not limit its rejection of same-sex sexual relationships to those that were exploitive or harmful. The Old and New Testaments speak uniformly against same-sex sexual activity in general.¹⁸

LOOKING FORWARD: AN ARGUMENT OF ETHICAL TRAJECTORY

This argument, otherwise known as “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” or “trajectory” or “redemptive” hermeneutic, claims that if a teaching of the Bible took a stance on an issue more progressive than the commonplace thought of the time, or if we find progression from the Old to New Testament on an ethical issue, then the “redemptive spirit” becomes an ethical trajectory that should be continued on until realized and practiced today.¹⁹ If we can spot this kind of trajectory on an issue like slavery, or the treatment of women, surely we can expand our hermeneutic of inclusivity to a different view of sexuality.

This proposal also runs into problems. First, it requires the reader of Scripture to go outside of Scripture to discover the intended ethic of the Bible. In other words, the Scriptures are insufficient, incomplete, and can be outrightly contradicted in favor of a debatable “trajectory.” Furthermore, when it comes to the theology of marriage, the New Testament writers do not reason by way of loosening restrictions through a trajectory, but by going back to God's original design for the created order.²⁰ The Bible speaks on marriage through the constraint and parameters laid out by itself.

5. The Gospel promises we will be made complete, and all our unfulfilled desires will be overcome by our soul's eternal satisfaction in Jesus.

Every human being lives with unfulfilled desires. The power and hope for the Christian is not the promise that our attractions will be altered (though God is able to do so), but that we hear Jesus' invitation to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow Him (Luke 9:23), trusting that His grace is sufficient for us (2 Cor 12:9).

If a married man is tempted to commit adultery with a woman other than his wife, the Bible says he must reject that temptation, even if it means he returns home with unfulfilled desires. Jesus is able to satisfy his deepest longings. If a single person longs to be married, he or she may live with an unfulfilled desire. But Jesus satisfies the soul as He invites the single person to a wellspring of connection and friendship in and beyond the local church. Whether we are attracted to people of the opposite or the same

sex, we are all invited to drink deeply from the satisfying well of Jesus' presence, live a life of repentance in the pursuit of sanctification, and step into the connection spaces that exist around us.

Jesus was a single man who did not engage in sexual behavior, and yet He was fully human, complete, and satisfied in union with God the Father and in His fellowship with His disciples. Jesus demonstrates that it is possible to live as one who is tempted yet be a complete human being who brings God glory.

WHAT THIS MEANS (AND DOESN'T MEAN) FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

1. The church repents of cold-hearted indifference, not theology.

The church must be eager to shed imbalanced views and unhealthy postures toward the LGBTQ+ community in order to view all peoples for what they are: miraculously fashioned human beings made in God's image. But the Church is also called to wholeheartedly agree with God's glorious vision for human flourishing. We can agree to reject any and every kind of sexual sin because of the Word of God, which the Spirit applies to bring life, healing, and transformation.

2. The goal is clarity, not condemnation.

Clarity is important because it presents a clear path forward for individuals. Clarity lovingly promotes a livable word. Our church's attempt to be clear is not intended to keep anyone out, but to present truthfulness upfront so that individuals do not feel stuck in ambiguity or feel misled.

3. The Gospel produces a denial of self, not necessarily a death of attractions

The hope of the gospel is that the penalty of sin has been removed, the power of sin has been disabled, and the presence of sin will one day be no more. But the last benefit will be realized in the next life. The Christian, therefore, will wrestle and struggle with temptations on this earth till the day he or she meets the Lord. It is the very struggle itself that reveals the vitality of spiritual life.

Therefore, Christians can affirm that same-sex attracted individuals who love Jesus may very well wrestle with this attraction for the rest of their lives. Like the married man who wrestles with being attracted to other women or the individual who wrestles with gossiping, pride, or greed, this individual will join the same fight for sanctification and holiness.

This means that the invitation by Jesus to "deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me" (Matt 16:24) is the same for all Christians who wrestle with various temptations and struggles. A Christian individual's highest call is not to have ordered attractions, but a self-denying posture in the pursuit of Christ. Sanctification is "Christlikeness, not heterosexuality."²¹

4. The Church's leadership standards should be applied equally, not unevenly.

Some have pointed out that the Church is "strict on gay sin, but lax on straight sin." For example, while there may be suspicion when two individuals of the same gender want to join a church, a cohabiting couple is greeted with warmth and compassion.

As the grace of God meets all, a church's leadership expectations should also meet all. Therefore, if an individual cannot affirm a key theological distinctive and live in accord with the Church's teaching with a clear conscience, it would be of greater benefit for the individual (and the Church) to not serve in a leadership role.

5. The Church's ultimate discipleship ideal is Jesus, not Christian marriage.

One of the errors of modern discipleship errors has been to assume marriage is the ultimate Christian ideal. While marriage is good, making it the ideal ignores the teachings and life of Jesus and the Apostle Paul, who were single and fully satisfied in God. This can unintentionally marginalize unmarried people as if they are second-class citizens of the Kingdom.

To be sure, marriage is a beautiful thing, but it is not the ultimate thing. Marriage and singleness both demonstrate the beauty of God's purposes. "If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency."²² Therefore, a church can celebrate the beauty of marriage while creating strategic discipleship spaces for those who are not married.

TO THOSE WHO DISAGREE

To those who disagree with the biblical, traditional view of marriage, we offer our position in good faith, confident that God's design is intended to adorn the most important truth in the world: the good news of the gospel. We believe it is more powerful for the world to see in us a Jesus who satisfies our deepest longings rather than to alter and upend an unbroken line of Christians, spanning two thousand years, who hold fast to what God says about sexuality. We believe this approach best reflects the all-satisfying Jesus, who is full of grace and truth. God's design is not to stifle humanity, but to release humanity into His intended potential.

For those who may doubt whether someone who is same-sex attracted can be a Christian, we must ask what is the ultimate hope and power of the gospel in the present: Is the hope that we receive instant change? Or is it that we can cling to Jesus as we await future glory? Does our world need to only see miraculous moments in which our temptations immediately disappear? Or does our world need miraculous lives in which people with unfulfilled desires live in the joy, peace, and hope of Christ? Every Christian lives with unfulfilled desires. The test of genuine faith is not necessarily the cessation of temptation but continued resistance and repentance.

CONCLUSION

Mariners Church believes in a coming day when temptation and unfulfilled desires will be no more. Until then, we walk with our all-satisfying Jesus who entered our world and made Himself available to us through the cross. He is our hope and joy in trials and despair. He is our strength and comforter in temptation. He is our advocate and Savior in our sins and failures.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Bellah, Robert N. Madsen, Richard. Sullivan, William M. Swidler, Ann. Tipton, Steven M. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 333-334.
- 2 Trueman, Carl R. *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 24.
- 3 British Theologian John Stott claims this recent trend is wrongheaded, as the category of “justice” is inappropriate, “since human beings may not claim as a “right” what God has not given them.” Stott, John. *Issues Facing Christians Today. 4th Edition.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 469. More recently, Rebecca McLaughlin decouples “sexuality” from “human rights” because (1) the very concept of human rights come from the Bible, (2) the very beneficiaries of the Civil Rights Movement do not believe in equating the two, and (3) ethnicity and sexuality are categorically different since the prior is fixed and the latter is fluid. *The Secular Creed*, (The Gospel Coalition, 2021), 45-54.
- 4 For an overview of the church’s teaching on this matter, see Fortson, S. Donald, Grams, Rollin G. *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scripture and Tradition* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016)
- 5 Keller, Timothy with Kathy Keller. *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2013). See especially the section entitled “The Surprising Goodness of Marriage,” 16-19.
- 6 “The Two Shall Become One Flesh” by Evangelical and Catholics Together, published in *First Things*, March 2015
- 7 “The Two Shall Become One Flesh.”
- 8 McLaughlin, Rebecca M. *The Secular Creed: Engaging Five Contemporary Claims* (The Gospel Coalition, 2021), 26.
- 9 Humanum Series - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AhBdElcDhs/ See also the Manhattan Declaration: A Call of Christian Conscience, drafted October 20, 2009, which describes marriage as “the institution on which all other human institutions have their foundation.”
- 10 Wright, N.T. *What is Marriage For? Tracing God’s Plan from Genesis to Revelation.* (2017)
<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/marriage/what-is-marriage-for>
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 “The Two Shall Become One Flesh”
- 13 Genesis 2:24 (“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”) and Ephesians 5:32-33) “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband” (Ephesians 5:32-33)
- 14 “Without a wholesome positive teaching of the Bible on sex and marriage, our perspective on the homosexual question is bound to be skewed.” John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 454.
- 15 David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions: 2002 - Why Men Won’t Commit* (National Marriage Project), 11. Up to 33% more likely. Stanley, Scott. *Premarital Cohabitation Is Still Associated With Greater Odds of Divorce.* <https://ifstudies.org/blog/premarital-cohabitation-is-still-associated-with-greater-odds-of-divorce>
- Carter, Joe. *9 Things You Should Know About Cohabitation in America.*
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-you-should-know-about-cohabitation-in-america/>
- 16 Joe Carter, “4 Reasons Christians Should Support Banning Pornography,”
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-reasons-christians-ban-porn/>
- 17 Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014).
- 18 Even scholars who believe the church should revise its teaching recognize the Bible’s unequivocal condemnation of these relationships. See, for example, Pim Pronk, *Against Nature? Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) ,279. Pronk is a gay scholar who concluded “wherever homosexual intercourse is mentioned in Scripture, it is condemned. With reference to it the New Testament adds no new arguments to those of the Old. Rejection is a foregone conclusion; the assessment of it nowhere constitutes a problem.”

- 19 William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Webb believes we see such progression on the issue of slavery and the treatment of women, but that no such trajectory exists in the Bible regarding homosexuality. See also Brownson, James V. *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*. (Eerdmans, 2013).
- 20 See Jesus' response to the Pharisees when asked about divorce in Matthew 19. Thomas R. Schreiner, "Review of *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*," *JBMW*7 (2002): 48.
- 21 Forty-Seventh General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality (2020, Pg. 26, Line 1)
- 22 Allberry, Sam. How Celibacy Can Fulfill Your Sexuality (TGC, August 26, 2016).
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-celibacy-can-fulfill-your-sexuality/>