

COLE COMMUNITY CHURCH

POSITION PAPER ON MARRIAGE AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

Introduction

Based on our understanding of Scripture, Cole Community Church affirms that marriage is intended to be a lifetime union of one man and one woman, and that sex is reserved for marriage. This paper provides a brief overview of what God has revealed to us in Scripture about marriage and the practices that harm it, followed by a summary of how this understanding impacts the church's policies. Note: at no time should this paper's focus on marriage be construed as belittling or condemning those who live a life of chaste singleness, for that is also a lifestyle held in honor by the Scriptures.

Modern Western culture, the entertainment industry, the news media, government officials, and activists constantly bombard us with their vision of what is fair and right in regard to marriage and human sexuality. Their arguments may sometimes seem convincing. However, biology, scientific studies and Scripture point to the truth that faithful monogamous lifetime marriage of one man and one woman is the best of the lifestyle alternatives for the welfare of children and for society in general. While arguments from biology and scientific studies are helpful when talking to culture at large, as Christians our primary guide when formulating a stance on a cultural issue is Scripture. The Cole Community Church doctrinal position statement asserts, "The Old and New Testaments, inerrant as originally given ... constitute the divine and only rule of Christian faith and practice."¹

Marriage and Human Sexuality

The Bible has much to say about marriage and human sexuality. It discloses God's design for marriage and for sex, it reveals the importance and meaning of marriage, and it explains how married people are to treat one another. This section focuses on a few key principles found in Genesis.

Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis provide the foundational text for a Christian understanding of human sexuality and marriage. These chapters contain the record of the creation of the first man and the first woman and the origin of the institution of marriage. We believe that the text provides an accurate representation of God's intent for marriage. We have good reason for our belief – Jesus himself understood the text that way. During His argument with the Pharisees about divorce (Matt. 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-9), Jesus quoted from Genesis 1:27b, "... male and female He created them,"² and Genesis 2:24, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh," to show that God intended marriage to be a permanent bond between one man and one woman. Jesus further emphasized the expectation of permanence with His statement, "What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate" (Matt. 19:6 and Mark 10:9). If Jesus considered the Genesis account to be authoritative, so should those of us who claim to be Christ's followers.

Examination of the Genesis account, illuminated by Christ's commentary as recorded in Matthew and Mark, and supplemented with other passages throughout Scripture, reveals several foundational principles.

- Men and women have equivalent intrinsic worth because both are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27).
- Men and women were created for each other. God stated that it was not good for the man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). The partner that God provided for Adam was the woman, Eve, fashioned from Adam's side.
- Marriage is to be between one man and one woman (Gen. 2:18-25).
- Husband and wife are to be a team. Adam and Eve were to tend the garden together. Eve is described as a suitable helper (Gen. 2:18). The Hebrew words translated "suitable helper" are *ezer kenegdo*. *Ezer*, which means "helper," is a word of strength, often used in Scripture to refer to God as a help. So when Genesis refers to Eve as a helper, it is using a term that signifies strength and capability. *Kenegdo* means "as that which corresponds to."³ Together, the two words *ezer kenegdo* imply that the woman is to be Adam's counterpart, different in gender but neither superior nor inferior as a person.

¹ The Doctrine Position of Cole Community Church is found in *The Constitution of Cole Community Church*, Article III.

² Scripture quotes are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

³ Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 550.

- Marriage is intended to be a blessing, provided by God for our benefit (Gen. 2:18 plus 2:21-24). Proverbs 18:22 declares that “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord.”
- Within marriage, the man and the woman are intended to have a relationship of trust and transparency (Gen. 2:25).
- Sex was designed by God and is good within marriage. Before Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, God had commanded them to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28). Other passages of Scripture also address the concept of delighting in sex within marriage, of which Proverbs 5:15-19 is one example.

The marriage relationship is intended to take precedence over other relationships and is intended to be for life. Genesis 2:24 states, “For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.” The word “leave” indicates that the husband’s obligation to his wife takes precedence over his obligation to his parents. The word “cleave” indicates the permanence of the relationship. In the Greek text of Matthew 19:5, where Jesus quotes Genesis 2:24, the word used for “cleave” is *kollao*. *Kollao* means to glue together, to join oneself unto.⁴ *Kollao* indicates permanence. To make sure that we have no misunderstanding, Jesus adds in Matthew 19:6, “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.”

Frequently the Bible pictures marriage as a permanent covenant of loyal love. For example, in Malachi 2:14-15, the husband is to be loyal to his wife. The Bible also points to a greater reality of which marriage is just a picture. In the Old Testament, God frequently uses the metaphor of the relationship of a husband to his wife to illustrate His permanent covenantal love for Israel. In the New Testament, the relationship of husband to wife is used as a picture of Christ’s relationship with the Church.

In summary, the Bible clearly portrays marriage between one man and one woman as God’s good and holy gift; a gift which is to be held in honor.

In contrast to the high status of marriage embodied in the creation account and in the words of Jesus, human culture has from the earliest days engaged in sexual practices that devalue marriage. Those practices include (but are not limited to): adultery, fornication, prostitution, divorce, polygamy, homosexuality, and pornography. This paper will briefly examine each in turn in the light of Scripture.

Sexual Practices that Adversely Impact Marriage

Discussions about marriage, sexual practices, the Bible, and sin, are often emotionally charged in our culture. The Bible teaches that sex outside of heterosexual lifelong marriage is destructive. However our approach to those who disagree must be informed by the fact that the Bible also asserts that God loves all people. It is because of His great love for us that He places boundaries on human sexuality. And it is because of His great love for us that He offers forgiveness to those who repent of sexual practices that adversely impact marriage. Thus it must be borne in mind that all of the offenses listed below are forgivable.

ADULTERY – voluntary sexual relations between a married person and someone not his or her spouse. Adultery is uniformly condemned throughout Scripture as a sin. It is not merely sexual unfaithfulness; it also represents breaking of a covenant and betrayal of trust. Thus, when condemning the nation of Israel for their worship of other gods, God often describes their attitudes as adultery. So strong is God’s distaste for adultery, He included “You shall not commit adultery” as the seventh of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18). In Leviticus the penalty for adultery was death (Lev. 20:10). The antipathy toward adultery did not diminish in the New Testament. Jesus quotes the seventh commandment in his Sermon on the Mount, and expands upon it (Matt. 5:27-28). He includes adultery in the list of evils in men’s hearts (Matt. 15:19). Paul quotes the seventh commandment in Romans 13:9, and includes adulterers among those who will not inherit the kingdom of heaven (1 Cor. 6:9-10). While adultery is a sin, Christ came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). Thus Paul can say regarding the list of sins, including adultery, in 1 Cor. 6:9-10, “And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of Our God” (1 Cor. 6:11).

FORNICATION – consensual sex between unmarried people. Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary, in the entry on “Fornication,” has the following explanation. “The technical distinction between fornication and adultery is that

⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, The Complete Word Study Dictionary (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1992, revised 1993), 875.

adultery involves married persons while fornication involves at least one person who is unmarried. But the New Testament often uses the term in a general sense for any unchastity.”⁵ Because of the high value placed on marriage, the Bible takes a dim view of sex outside marriage. In addition to its harmful effect on marriage, the New Testament reveals another reason such activity is detrimental – our bodies are members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit. Thus we are to flee sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:15-20). Paul includes fornicators with adulterers in the list of those who will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Hebrews 13:4 notes that fornicators and adulterers will be judged by God. But, as with adultery, fornication is a sin that can be forgiven (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

PROSTITUTION – sex for pay. In the Old Testament, God frequently refers to Israel disparagingly as a harlot because they have gone after other gods (e.g. Is. 1:21; Jer. 2:20; Ezek. 16). In Leviticus 19:29 fathers are commanded “Do not profane your daughter by making her a harlot,” referring to a practice that apparently was common among the pagans. In the New Testament, in 1 Cor. 6:15-16, Paul condemns involvement with prostitution by Christians based on the fact that we are now part of Christ’s body. As part of the argument, he quotes from the foundational marriage passage, Genesis 2:24. The Bible makes it clear that involvement in prostitution is a sin, and just as clearly reveals that it can be forgiven. In Matthew 21:31 Jesus was arguing with the religious leaders. Because of their hard hearts, Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you that the tax gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you.”

DIVORCE – legal termination of a marriage. Malachi 2:16 clearly reveals God’s attitude toward divorce – “I hate divorce.” Jesus said, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matt. 19:6). Divorce is man’s way of separating those whom God has joined together. God hates the causes of divorce and the devastation that results when divorce is implemented. It is important to note that God does not say that He hates divorced people. Nor does God say that divorce is completely forbidden without any exception. As Jesus notes in Matthew 19:8, God permits divorce under certain circumstances because of the hardness of people’s hearts. However, divorce for reasons other than those few exceptions permitted in Scripture is sin. For more information on divorce, see Cole Community Church’s paper, Guidelines for Separation, Divorce, and Remarriage.

POLYGAMY – marriage to more than one spouse at the same time. Polygamous relationships, specifically, men with multiple wives, appear with regularity in the Old Testament (e.g., Jacob with Rachel and Leah), leading some observers to assume that God approved of polygamy in Old Testament times. It is worth returning to Genesis 2:24 to review God’s intent for marriage. “For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Note that the wording reveals the expectation that the man would have one wife, not multiple wives. The first recorded instance of polygamy is Lamech (Gen. 4:19-24) of Cain’s ungodly line. He not only took two wives, but boasted that he would execute his own violent vengeance. He is not held up as a good example. Subsequent pages of the Old Testament contain no explicit condemnation of polygamy. However, a review of the experiences of polygamous families as recorded in the Old Testament reveals that almost every family suffered because of the polygamy. Examples include Abraham, Sarah and Hagar; and Jacob, Leah and Rachel. Furthermore, kings were commanded to not multiply wives (Deut. 17:14-17). In the New Testament era it was assumed that marriages of one man and one woman were the norm. Jesus indicates that marriage is between one man and one woman by the way He explains Genesis 2:24 in his argument with the Pharisees. After quoting Genesis 2:24 He continues, “Consequently they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” (Matt. 19:6) In another example, the wording of Ephesians 5:33 implies that a man has one wife. Furthermore, the New Testament places restrictions on church leaders. In his description of character qualities for leaders in 1 Tim. 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6, Paul states that a leader⁶ must be a one woman man. While he might not have been referring specifically to polygamy, that practice is certainly excluded by this requirement.

The Bible does not explicitly condemn polygamy as a sin; neither does it encourage polygamy. However, based on an understanding of God’s design for marriage, the histories of polygamist families in the Old Testament, the New Testament’s assumption of monogamy, and the prohibition of multiple wives for church leaders we believe that polygamy is not acceptable for believers.

HOMOSEXUALITY – sexual attraction or behavior between persons of the same sex. Some in our culture believe that homosexuality is a genetic trait, while others believe that it is a learned behavior. Whatever the cause, the Bible makes it clear that we are not to act on homosexual urges. Genesis 1 and 2 reveal the foundational principle that man and woman were made for each other. Jesus reiterated that principle in Matthew 19:4-6 and Mark 10:6-9. The Old Testament

⁵ Ronald F. Youngblood, general editor, New Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 462.

⁶ The passage is specifically about elders and deacons. However, the principle can be extended to male leaders in general.

condemns homosexual practice in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:20-21) were condemned for their homosexual practices. In the New Testament, homosexual practice is included in lists with other sins, such as adultery and lying (1 Cor. 6:9-10 and 1 Tim. 1:9-10). There are also some passages that specifically condemn homosexual practice (Romans 1:26-27 and Jude 7).

What about homosexual temptation as opposed to homosexual practice and advocacy? Scripture teaches that temptation is not sin. Jesus was tempted, yet was without sin. “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Thus we cannot condemn those who are tempted by homosexual urges but do not act upon them. Instead, we are to come alongside to encourage and strengthen them (see Romans 12:9-16, for example). However, if the temptation is acted upon, then that is sin. But it too is a sin that can be forgiven (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

PORNOGRAPHY – writings, pictures, etc. intended primarily to arouse sexual desire (Webster’s). Our culture has a tremendous amount of experience with pornography. It is found just about everywhere. Television commercials and highway billboards publicly display images that would have been classified as pornography in earlier eras. Based on our culture’s vast experience, we know that pornography can be addictive, that it is harmful to the user, and even harms family and friends of those involved. While the Bible does not specifically address the topic of pornography, it does have a lot to say about sexual purity. Jesus, in Matthew 5:28, declares, “... I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.” So in this sense, pornography is a form of adultery.⁷ 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 commands us to flee from sexual immorality. In Galatians 5:19-21 Paul warns us that those who practice immorality, impurity, sensuality, etc. “shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” In Romans 13:13-14, Paul encourages us to “behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.” It is quite clear, in view of Scripture’s consistent insistence upon sexual purity, that using or participating in pornography is a sin. In fact, pornography is associated with adultery, a sin condemned vigorously and frequently in the Bible. However, Scripture does not just condemn sin, it also provides a proactive and positive alternative: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.” (Philippians 4:8).

Summary

Consistent with the command in Hebrews 13:4a, “Let marriage be held in honor among all,” our desire is to encourage and uphold monogamous, heterosexual, life-long marriage. We also honor those who choose to live lives of chaste singleness. Alternatives such as adultery, fornication, prostitution, non-biblical divorce, polygamy, homosexuality and pornography are considered sin. We deal with these sins in the same way we deal with any other sin, beginning with an acknowledgement that we are all sinners saved by grace (Eph. 2:8), remembering that Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), and that He died for us even though we are sinners (Rom. 5:8). Thus our desire for those engaged in a sinful lifestyle is that they would repent and trust the Lord Jesus, and be more and more conformed to Christ’s likeness (Rom. 8:2).

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⁷ Caution is required regarding the extent to which this equivalence may be taken. If the use of pornography is considered a form of adultery, and adultery is one of the few offenses for which divorce is permitted, then should pornography be considered a biblical ground for divorce? Note that the context of Matthew 5:28 is the Sermon on the Mount, and refers to God’s perspective of our attitudes. Just six verses earlier Jesus compares name calling with murder. While our angry attitudes are considered serious sins in God’s eyes, we would not put someone on Death Row for name calling. Similarly we would not want to codify lust in the heart as a biblical ground for divorce.