

March 22, 2023

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). This humbling and exalting mystery of God’s Son in human flesh echoes Genesis 1’s constant refrain that God’s creation is good, indeed even very good. Before the fall into sin, God told Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). God created humans as embodied creatures, and sexuality is an inherent and good aspect of that creation. Sin, of course, perverted sexuality and subjected our bodies to death and its prevenient effects.

God’s Word is clear. Christians honor God with their bodies (1 Cor. 6:20). Each Christian is to serve God with his or her body as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1). Yet our sinful minds erupt with lusts of the eyes and the desires of the flesh (1 John 2:16), as we serve ourselves and our wicked sin with our bodies. But God calls us to live a “chaste and decent life in what we say and do.”

This extensive update from the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) on its own commendable statement on human sexuality from 1981 will assist the church to navigate the difficult current challenges to both chastity and decency. *A Chaste and Decent Life* guides the church through the turbulent waters of sexual identity issues and rampant sexual permissiveness. Yet this wonderful document also encourages each reader to consider his or her vocation and to serve God accordingly.

“Chaste and decent” applies to all of us as we live under the grace and mercy of God. Whether you are single or married, God has given you your body and your sexuality. As all good gifts, this gift comes from our heavenly Father out of His divine fatherly goodness and mercy. And as all good things, this gift is best and most fully seen in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

*A Chaste and Decent Life* is worthy of study by every Bible class in the Synod. This report contains the latest statistics and the best Christian thinking on these issues, including pertinent texts. The questions are fundamental: Do I believe the Gospel? Do I recognize the Triune God as my Creator? Do I believe His blessed desire for me and my life is expressed in His precious Word? Is my sexuality (male or female) His great gift to me, or shall I be my own god? Will the church preach Law and Gospel in the middle of and precisely to the wholesale rejection of God and His Word? Or shall the Gospel be silenced?

As the report concludes, “Perceptions of human sexuality may change, but God’s design for it does not. Christians, however, bear witness to the truth of God’s revelation about how this sovereign Creator God has made us, redeemed us, and sanctifies us. God has given us our bodies. He has redeemed us from the sin that has complicated how we view our bodies.”

As millions sink into confusion and often deep depression, self-destruction and hopelessness, the church’s task is to love in the name of Jesus. This wonderful document will equip us to speak of Christ into the darkness where so many are hurting.

(over, please)

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We preach Christ crucified. He died in the flesh to sanctify us body and soul. Now, we rejoice and seek to serve Him and honor our Creator according to His blessed will for our bodies. Christ died to sanctify and purify His church, that she might be a holy and spotless bride. “You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:20). Let it be so. Amen.

In Christ crucified,

Pastor Matthew C. Harrison  
President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

# *A Chaste and Decent Life:*

AN UPDATE TO HUMAN SEXUALITY 1981



A REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS  
THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD | DECEMBER 2022

Abbreviations used:

AC	Augsburg Confession
Ap	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
CCM	Commission on Constitutional Matters
ConcC	Concordia Commentary
CTCR	Commission on Theology and Church Relations
FC SD	Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration
KW	Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. <i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church</i> (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).
LC	Large Catechism
LSB	<i>Lutheran Service Book</i> (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).
LSCwE	<i>Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation</i> (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).
LW	<i>Luther's Works, American Edition</i> , ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann and Christopher Boyd Brown, 75 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Augsburg and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–).
SA	Smalcald Articles
SC	Small Catechism

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# *A Chaste and Decent Life:*

## AN UPDATE TO HUMAN SEXUALITY 1981

### COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS

#### PREFACE

[T]he Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. . . . Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” . . . So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Genesis 2:7, 18, 21–25 (ESV<sup>1</sup>)

Do you not know that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:19–20 (CSB<sup>2</sup>)

“You are not your own.” One can hardly overstate the radical implications of such a claim. It seems to fly in the face of every human instinct and desire for self-determination. How dare anyone say or think such a thing?

Christians dare to say that very thing every time we confess our creeds: “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” Or, as we also say it, “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.” Lest there be any doubt, “heaven and earth” includes everything and everyone. Genesis 2 says that explicitly. In making our first parents and giving them the ability to procreate, God has made all of humanity. Because we are God’s creatures — His creation — *we are not our own*.

Our rebellious heart, which continually longs for autonomy, hears that and feels threatened. But faith hears more clearly, knowing that since we are not our own, we belong, we have no less than life in God — we matter.

This emphatic truth is foundational for all Christian theology and, therefore, for this report on human sexuality and for its predecessor report on the same topic. In 1981 the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) adopted *Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective (HS 1981)*.<sup>3</sup> The 1981 report began where Scripture begins — with the creation of man and woman by God. It thereby also assumed that we are not our own. It gave particular attention to the understanding of marriage according to biblical and traditional Christian teaching, considered particular challenges to that understanding, and concluded with seven affirmations.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The ESV Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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<sup>3</sup> Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1981). Referenced hereafter as *HS 1981*.

*HS 1981* has been a valuable resource for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) and the CTCR recognizes its continuing validity. Many years have passed since the report’s adoption, however, and many current assumptions about sexuality and marriage are markedly different than they were four decades ago.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, Resolution 14–03A from the 2016 LCMS Convention resolved “That the CTCR be directed to update the document Human Sexuality (1981) in order to address current challenges to the estate of marriage” as part of an overall call “To Respond Compassionately to Challenges to the Biblical View of Marriage and Human Sexuality.”<sup>5</sup> In 2019 Resolution 11–03A, the LCMS convention noted questions about sexual orientation and gender identity as specific challenges to biblical teaching in the realm of human sexuality. It expressed recognition of the significant work the CTCR has done in the area of marriage and human sexuality since 1981, but also urged the Commission “to prioritize the updating of the 1981 study.”<sup>6</sup>

Part of the ongoing value of *HS 1981* is its attention to profound truths that are implied in the biblical narratives regarding human creation. In that regard we note this insight in the report’s reflection on Genesis 1:27:

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created *him*; male and female he created them” (GEN. 1:27; italics added). The suggestion here is that it is impossible to come to know the significance of our humanity without reference to the sexual differentiation between male and female. To be human simply is to exist in this male-female duality. Consequently, it will be insufficient to say that God has created two kinds of human beings, male and female. Rather, we should say that God has created human beings for fellowship and that the male-female polarity is a basic form of this fellowship. To stress that human beings are created for community as male and female necessarily involves an equally firm insistence that they are male or female. We are created not for life in isolation but for community, a community which binds those who are different. We are not simply “persons,” however important that claim may on occasion be as a protest against inequities.<sup>7</sup>

The CTCR recognizes the continuing validity of these words. It is essential for the reader to understand that this report is not a “revision” of *HS 1981*, as if our teachings have changed. The Commission wholeheartedly affirms the 1981 report as a biblically faithful, confessionally orthodox consideration of our creation as male and female, particularly regarding the gift of holy marriage.

Rather than a revision, this is an update, expansion and defense of the previous report. It assumes the content of *HS 1981* and does not unnecessarily duplicate that material here. In a sense, the two should be read alongside each other. Of special note for this update are the concluding affirmations from the 1981 report, which admirably summarize the central teachings of Holy Scripture about human sexuality. Despite the many changes over the past four decades in attitudes about sexuality, Scripture’s teachings are consistent.

The present report will update *HS 1981* in several ways. First, this report will reaffirm the “Affirmations” about human sexuality that close the 1981 report, while also calling attention to the new challenges that have complicated how we understand and apply those insights in a cultural climate that shares little in common with the assumptions made in 1981. Second, the report will take a detour from these pressing cultural challenges to reestablish the basic theological foundations for human sexuality that arise from a creedal, Trinitarian account of creation, fall, redemption, and sanctification. Apart from this theological framework, any specific attempt at addressing contemporary sexual ethics will simply engage in current socio-political commentary, not distinctly Christian moral theology. Third, the report will apply Martin Luther’s catechetical insights of a “chaste and decent life” to the new cultural challenges raised

<sup>4</sup> For a recent Lutheran treatment of sexual ethics that addresses these contemporary challenges from a biblically faithful standpoint, see the essays in Gifford A. Grobien, ed., *Ethics of Sex: From Taboo to Delight* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Convention Proceedings 2016* (July 9–14, 2016), Res. 14-03A, pages 242–43.

<sup>6</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Convention Proceedings 2019* (July 20–25, 2019), pages 215–16. The following documents, produced by the CTCR since *HS 1981*, were named in the resolution: *Response to Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2012) <https://files.lcms.org/dl/f/097FB019-A398-4AA5-A6DE-FC611BFA06C6>; *The Creator’s Tapestry: Scriptural Perspectives on Man-Woman Relationships in Marriage and the Church* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2009) <https://files.lcms.org/dl/f/5E4302F9-322E-4924-BA3D-5BC2AEB94476>; and *Gender Identity Disorder or Gender Dysphoria in Christian Perspective* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2014), <https://files.lcms.org/dl/f/53E2B773-CD82-4B0D-96F4-D3FB56B17952>; as well as the treatment of these matters in *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (produced by the CTCR in cooperation with the Office of the President and published by Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> *HS 1981*, 6–7.

in the first section of the report in order to lay out Christian sexual ethics for understanding sexual identity, the consequences of sin for sexual desires and behaviors, and the necessity of moral integrity in all sexual activities.

## I. HS 1981: REAFFIRMATIONS, NEW CHALLENGES

*HS 1981* takes seriously the *embodiment* of humanity. Although the report gives full attention to marriage, it does not begin there, but with humans as male and female.<sup>8</sup> The same attention to men and women as embodied beings, whether or not they are married, is evident in the report's concluding affirmations.

We may summarize the chief points of our discussion of human sexuality articulated in this report in the following propositions. We honor God and the neighbor rightly when we:

- [1] delight in our creation as male and female and affirm our identity as male or female;
- [2] see in our creation as sexual beings an intimation of our creation for fellowship and give thanks for the healing which God offers in marriage;
- [3] regard marriage as a divine, lifelong institution, ordained by God for the good of man and woman;
- [4] respect marriage as the typical, though not necessary, expression of our creation as male and female;
- [5] affirm God's will that sexual intercourse be engaged in only between a man and woman committed to a complete and lifelong sharing of their lives with one another in a marriage covenant not to be broken;
- [6] affirm that the mutual love of husband and wife, while possessing God-given meaning in and of itself, is by divine blessing ordered toward the birth of a child; and
- [7] affirm that this union of mutual love is the only proper context for human procreation.<sup>9</sup>

We reaffirm these seven propositions and consider them a helpful starting point for this update.<sup>10</sup> The CTCR recognized the limitations of its 1981 report, but also offered this hope: "While the Commission recognizes that not all problems in the area of human sexuality are addressed in this report, it is hoped that the affirmations stated at the end of the study will provide guidance for Christians as they seek to order their lives as sexual beings in ways which will honor both God and their neighbor."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, we believe the affirmations do "provide guidance" for us today as we consider some challenges of the present time.

*HS 1981* was prepared with a threefold purpose: "(1) to place the order of marriage within the larger framework of human *sexuality* as God's creation; (2) to discuss the purposes or ends which marriage serves, as these are taught in the Scriptures and understood in the history of the church; and (3) to discuss, in the light of these purposes, certain problems or 'issues' which must inevitably engage the attention of those who think about human sexuality."<sup>12</sup>

The CTCR's work on each of these three matters continues to offer much needed instruction and guidance. At the same time, however, new challenges have emerged that require additional consideration in each area. While the first purpose speaks of a "framework of human *sexuality*" (our emphasis), we note that the concept of sexuality has largely been replaced by imprecise and often agenda-driven "gender" terminology. The understanding of humanity as male and female is rejected by many.<sup>13</sup> And while marriage had been universally understood to be between a man

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<sup>8</sup> *HS 1981*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> *HS 1981*, 40. These Affirmations remain not only expressions of the CTCR, but have been endorsed by the Synod in convention. 1983 Res. 3-14 "To Commend Statement on Human Sexuality for Study" resolved that the 1981 report "be commended to the Synod for study and guidance, calling special attention to the concluding 'Affirmations.'" The affirmations were then quoted in full as part of the resolution.

<sup>10</sup> While the affirmations are not numbered in *HS 1981*, we have added numbers for ease of reference.

<sup>11</sup> *HS 1981*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *HS 1981*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> See comments on the first affirmation below.

and a woman throughout history, that is no longer true.<sup>14</sup> Marriage has now been legally redefined in North America, throughout most of the West, and in many parts of Latin America and Asia. Although it is now widely affirmed, the current legal understanding of marriage in the United States is incompatible with biblical teaching and, for that matter, is a novum in human history. Since 2015, legal understanding holds that the right to marry is a fundamental right protected by the Fourteenth Amendment and that a State must “license a marriage between two people of the same sex.”<sup>15</sup> As a result of this change in how marriage is understood, the threefold ends of marriage assumed by the Commission in 1981 would be unconvincing not only to those of a secular mind,<sup>16</sup> but also to many professing Christians today. For these reasons, the “issues” of the present go well beyond those faced in 1981 and require this update.

The seven affirmations from 1981 stand on their own and continue to reflect the stated beliefs of our Synod in its life together as a biblical and confessional church body. Nevertheless, already in 1981 the propositions would have faced significant opposition from those outside the Christian church, and today that opposition is virulent. Significant voices regularly condemn groups or organizations that promulgate or defend traditional Christian doctrines about marriage and human sexuality with a charge of hate speech.<sup>17</sup> Simply by stating the belief that the legitimate realm for sexual activity is in male-female marriage would lead many secular American voices to charge the LCMS with hate speech against LGBT people.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, even some within the LCMS might share that perspective and would seemingly question, if not oppose, parts of each of the seven affirmations.<sup>19</sup>

## A. HS 1981: FIRST AFFIRMATION

*Delight in our creation as male and female and affirm our identity as male or female*

The first affirmation of *HS 1981* urges us to “delight in our creation as male and female and affirm our identity as male or female.” The report adds that the male-female creation of humanity teaches us that “To be human simply is to exist in this male-female duality.”<sup>20</sup> There is no way to be a human being other than as male or female.

Delight in our male-female sexuality could be commended in 1981 without any expectation of serious objection. Of course, many at that time would have disputed that there is a God or that He is the creator of all that exists. What was not present then, however, was any significant objection to the idea that humanity is male and female or that the sexual distinction of man and woman is cause for delight.

That is no longer the case. Today much of Western culture is greatly troubled by the assertion of Genesis — “male and female he created them” (GEN. 1:27). Many decry this “binary” view. The arguments against it are to some small degree based on scientific observation, namely, the reality that a small percentage of children are born with genital

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<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005). Coontz’s detailed history of marriage is from beginning to end a story of marriage between a man and woman, even though she certainly favors same-sex marriage and is dissatisfied with specific anthropological definitions of marriage (see 24–32).

<sup>15</sup> See *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576 U.S. 644 (2015). On this, also note the Commission on Theology and Church Relations’ 2006 opinion, “Legislation Regarding Same-Sex Civil Unions.” <https://files.lcms.org/f/768CB35B-7D1F-4643-89A3-4FD4289017B2>.

<sup>16</sup> For simplicity, this report uses the adjective “secular” (e.g., secular mind, secular perspective, secular thinking, etc.) as a modifier that contrasts with religious and, especially, specifically biblical thinking, values, and beliefs.

<sup>17</sup> One example is the Southern Poverty Legal Center (SPLC), which classifies Alliance Defending Freedom as a “hate group.” The SPLC provides a list of ADF statements as rationale for declaring it a hate group. In virtually every case, the statements from ADF spokespersons reflect the kinds of concerns any biblically-committed Christian may have. See <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/alliance-defending-freedom>.

<sup>18</sup> This report will use LGBT as a shorthand reference for those who classify themselves as non-heterosexual. We are aware that it is now common to add additional letters to this acronym. The additional letters are imprecise in their meaning. As the University of California-Davis LGBTQIA Resource Center states on its website, the acronym LGBTQIA+ cannot be defined precisely. It has its roots in the older acronym LGB (Lesbian Gay Bisexual), but evolved, first becoming LGBT as Transgender persons were added. Q means either Queer or Questioning and I means Intersex, while A could mean Allosexual, Androgyne, Aromantic, or Asexual. See <https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary>.

<sup>19</sup> Already in 2015, Pew Research results indicated that over half of the membership of LCMS churches thought homosexuality should be accepted, and nearly half of the same respondents supported same-sex marriage. While this does not necessarily imply belief that Christian teaching on homosexuality or on same-sex marriage is wrong, it certainly indicates changing attitudes. Pew Research Center, “Members of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” Religious Landscape Study, Washington, DC, May 12, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/lutheran-church-missouri-synod>.

<sup>20</sup> *HS 1981*, 6.

abnormalities.<sup>21</sup> Far more common, however, are those who argue that the categorization of “male and female” is a form of socio-cultural oppression that forces individuals to fit into stereotypes and demeans individuality.<sup>22</sup>

## B. HS 1981: SECOND AFFIRMATION

*See in our creation as sexual beings an intimation of our creation for fellowship and give thanks for the healing which God offers in marriage*

The second 1981 affirmation reminds us that we “see in our creation as sexual beings an intimation of our creation for fellowship and give thanks for the healing which God offers in marriage.” In this regard the report states: “We are created *not for life in isolation but for community, a community which binds those who are different.*”<sup>23</sup> This profound conclusion follows from our embodiment as *either* male or female. “Thus we do not find in the other simply an image of ourselves, an alter ego; rather, the fellowship for which we are created is a fellowship of those who are different and who yet are joined in a personal community of love.”<sup>24</sup>

However, the secular appreciation for diversity is largely grounded in current intellectual and social trends, not in the Christian doctrine of creation. A Christian appreciation for diverse community has a much stronger foundation, since Christians confess that all humanity comes from a common ancestry in our first parents and that the redemptive work of Christ is emphatically promised to all people — to every tribe and nation (see GEN. 1-2; ACTS 17:26; MATT. 28:19; ROM. 1:21-24).<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the secular perspective on diversity differs in nature and scope from the Christian affirmation of the “fellowship of those who are different” as developed in *HS 1981*. The secular mind affirms not only the value of diverse races and ethnicities, but also that different forms of religiosity, a wide spectrum of moral views and virtually all “sexual orientations” are of equal value. Yet, while its view of diversity theoretically allows great moral leeway in many areas, the secular mind generally rejects moral judgments against specific sexual acts or orientations, especially when those judgments are associated with religious convictions.

When secular support for “diversity” touches such areas — for instance, judging that all religious beliefs are essentially equal or that popular standards are adequate to determine whether behavior is right or wrong — no biblical Christian or confessional Lutheran can agree. The Word of God must have authority in such matters as religious beliefs, sexual practices or the attempt to alter the sexuality God has given to us. The secular view in these matters departs dramatically from the Bible’s teaching about the dignity and commonality of humanity. Human dignity flows from our common creation “from one man” (ACTS 17:26) and from the atoning work of Christ for all those fatally infected by Adam’s sin (ROM. 5:12). When diverse *beliefs and behavior* are affirmed and encouraged without regard to our Creator’s judgment about them, such a view is rebellion against God and an encouragement to sin with impunity.

We also note that in this affirmation *HS 1981* adds a thanksgiving “for the healing which God offers in marriage.” Unlike its emphasis on community, the healing that *HS 1981* speaks of in this statement is not widely affirmed, however, because the healing God offers in marriage is healing for sin and its effects, specifically for sexual sin.<sup>26</sup> This perspective is impossible for the secular mind to accept since its worldview often sees sex as little more than play — a healthy outlet between consenting persons.

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<sup>21</sup> For an article by a biologist who tries to make a case against binary sexuality on the basis of intersex and other genetic and hormonal abnormalities, see Liza Brusman, “Sex Isn’t Binary, and We Should Stop Acting Like It Is,” *Massive Science* (June 14, 2019), <https://massivesci.com/articles/sex-gender-intersex-transgender-identity-discrimination-title-ix/>. The CTCR addressed sexual ambiguity briefly as an excursus in its 2014 report, *Gender Identity Disorder or Gender Dysphoria*.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Bergner writes about an individual who wants to be neither male nor female and the counselor who encourages this. See “The Struggles of Rejecting the Gender Binary,” *New York Times* (June 4, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/magazine/gender-nonbinary.html>. See also Penelope Eckert, “The Problem with Binaries: Coding for Gender and Sexuality,” <https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12113>.

<sup>23</sup> *HS 1981*, 7; emphasis added.

<sup>24</sup> *HS 1981*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Biblically speaking, we are all “of one blood” as descendants of Adam. In Adam all have sinned and all are justified in the same way — through Christ. See 2019 Res. 11–04A, *Proceedings of the 2019 LCMS Convention*, 216–17.

<sup>26</sup> On the healing dimension of marriage, see Gilbert Meilaender, “The Sixth Commandment: Marriage as the First of Institutions,” *Luther’s Large Catechism with Annotations and Contemporary Applications*, ed. John T. Pless and Larry M. Vogel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2022), 236–40.

### C. HS 1981: THIRD AFFIRMATION

*Regard marriage as a divine, lifelong institution, ordained by God for the good of man and woman*

The third 1981 affirmation is plainly out-of-favor if not bluntly rejected both in popular opinion and legal decisions, for several reasons. The notion that marriage is lifelong is given lip-service, but few would disagree with a widely held, yet unspoken caveat: marriage is lifelong unless a couple agrees to divorce. There is widespread acceptance of a moral standard for divorce akin to no-fault divorce laws. The idea that *God* gives marriage is still held by many religious people, but even they may not agree that it is for man and woman, but now accept it is for any two adults.

*Christians must confess a certain complicity with current attitudes about divorce. As divorce became more widely accepted in western society, significant numbers of Christians also chose to end their marriages.*<sup>27</sup> Congregations, in turn, have increasingly included greater numbers of divorced and remarried members. Pastors are confronted with the challenge of how to minister compassionately to the divorced without ignoring biblical teaching on the permanence of marriage.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, the West has seen dramatic growth in the acceptance of homosexual acts and same-sex marriage.<sup>29</sup> Traditional biblical teaching about homosexual acts is doubted or denied by many self-identified Christians, just as it is among the wider public.<sup>30</sup>

### D. HS 1981: FOURTH AFFIRMATION

*Respect marriage as the typical, though not necessary, expression of our creation as male and female*

In recent decades western society has not only redefined marriage but has in large measure forsaken it. The percentage of married adults in the U.S. population, for example, has declined significantly over the decades. In 2010, the University of Virginia's National Marriage Project stated that unlike the best-educated, and generally wealthiest third of the US population, the remaining two-thirds of US adults were engaged in a dramatic "retreat from marriage." The retreat, most evident among the poor and also the moderately educated economic middle group of Americans, was marked by increasing numbers of adults who did not marry, who postponed marriage, who divorced or who were deeply dissatisfied with their marriages.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, in 2011, Pew Research published data indicating a precipitous drop in the percentage of married adults from 1960 to 2010.<sup>32</sup> In 2019, Pew followed with an extensive report on "Marriage and Cohabitation in the US," providing further data that shows a weakening of marriage in American society. More Americans have cohabited than those who have married and nearly 70% of Americans view cohabitation as morally acceptable, *whether or*

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<sup>27</sup> Institute for Family Studies, *World Family Map 2019: Mapping Family Change and Child Well-Being Outcomes*, <https://ifstudies.org/ifs-admin/resources/reports/world-family-map-2019-051819final.pdf>. Also, Bradley E. Wright, "What God Has Joined Together: Religion and the Risk of Divorce," Institute for Family Studies, August 20, 2015, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/what-god-has-joined-together-religion-and-the-risk-of-divorce>. See also Ed Stetzer, "Marriage, Divorce, and the Church: What Do the Stats Say, and Can Marriage Be Happy?" *Christianity Today* blog (February 14, 2014), at <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/297689-marriage-divorce-church-stats-say-can-marriage-happy.html>.

<sup>28</sup> The CTCR recognizes that there are certain regrettable circumstances in which divorce is biblically permissible. See Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Divorce and Remarriage* (St. Louis: Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1987).

<sup>29</sup> It is important to distinguish homosexual desire from homosexual behavior. The first, while a result of original sin in an individual, is not inherently a willful sin (yet must be resisted nonetheless as contradictory to God's will). Homosexual acts are sins of the will. See also "Homosexual Rebellion" on page 24.

<sup>30</sup> Pew Research Center, "Most Christian Groups Grow More Accepting of Homosexuality," Caryle Murphy, FactTank, December 18, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/18/most-u-s-christian-groups-grow-more-accepting-of-homosexuality/>.

<sup>31</sup> W. Bradford Wilcox, ed., *When Marriage Disappears: The New Middle America* (Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project and Institute on American Values, 2010), ix-xi.

<sup>32</sup> See Pew Research Center, "Barely Half of U.S. Adults Are Married—A Record Low," D'Vera Cohn, Jeffrey S. Passel, Wendy Wang, and Gretchen Livingston, *Social Trends*, Washington, DC, December 14, 2011, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/14/barely-half-of-u-s-adults-are-married-a-record-low/>. See also, Pew Research Center, "8 Facts about Love and Marriage in America," A. W. Geiger and Gretchen Livingston, FactTank, Washington, DC, February 13, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/13/8-facts-about-love-and-marriage/>. Note the decline, especially, of married young adults (aged 18–34), which dropped from 59% in 1978 to 29% in 2018: US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, US Census Bureau, "Percent Married Among 18- to 34-Year-Olds: 1978 and 2018," <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2018/comm/percent-married.html>.

*not a couple plans to marry.*<sup>33</sup> This decline of marriage is most certainly not the result of any commitment to forego marriage in order to live celibately for the sake of the kingdom (MATT. 19:12).

As with divorce, society's devaluation of marriage has impacted the church. While the percentage of Christians who cohabit before marriage is not readily available, many pastors find that the majority of young couples planning marriage in the church are already living together. In addition, pastors regularly encounter older, retired couples who choose to live together without marriage in order to avoid loss of spousal benefits from the pensions and Social Security of previous spouses. The obvious implication of the phenomenon of cohabitation in the church is that, even among those who confess the faith, many no longer hold marriage in high regard as "the typical ... expression of our creation as male and female."<sup>34</sup>

## E. HS 1981: FIFTH AFFIRMATION

*Affirm God's will that sexual intercourse be engaged in only between a man and woman committed to a complete and lifelong sharing of their lives with one another in a marriage covenant not to be broken*

Decline in the percentage of married adults does not mean that people do not hope to be married. A growing segment of the US population has rejected marriage, yet marriage remains a popular wish among far more people even though it is postponed by many and never achieved by many others who hoped for it.<sup>35</sup> This affects Christian churches both in the case of individual Christians whose sense of personal morality is guided by social trends rather than Scripture, and also for those unmarried Christians who are faithfully committed to living a chaste life despite societal views. "The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (1COR. 6:13). The apostle's teaching against sexual immorality (*porneia*) is a prohibition against all sexual activity outside of marriage (see also MATT. 5:28; COL. 3:5; 1THESS. 4:3-5; HEB. 13:4). This affirmation does no more than to affirm that biblical teaching. Strikingly, however, this affirmation out of the seven is most widely rejected today, since nearly 90% of American adults have had sexual intercourse prior to marriage.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the fifth affirmation flies in the face of pervasive sexual behaviors and societal assumptions. Most Americans view restricting sexual acts to marriage as an outdated moral standard and contrary to human nature.<sup>37</sup> This evidently includes the majority of self-identified Christians, including unmarried Christians who attend church on a weekly basis or more.<sup>38</sup>

## F. HS 1981: SIXTH AFFIRMATION

*Affirm that the mutual love of husband and wife, while possessing God-given meaning in and of itself, is by divine blessing ordered toward the birth of a child*

To some extent, this affirmation is still widely accepted. First, mutual love between a husband and wife is assumed in contemporary society (although a confused, overly-romanticized understanding of love is also apparent). Second,

<sup>33</sup> Pew Research Center, "Marriage and Cohabitation in the US," Juliana Horowitz, Nikki Graf, and Gretchen Livingston, Social Trends, Washington, DC, November 6, 2019, [https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/11/PSDT\\_11.06.19\\_marriage\\_cohabitation\\_FULL\\_final\\_.pdf](https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2019/11/PSDT_11.06.19_marriage_cohabitation_FULL_final_.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Evidence from the social sciences indicates that cohabiting couples who later married "reported lower marital satisfaction, dedication, and confidence as well as more negative communication and greater proneness for divorce" than those who did not. Galena K. Rhoades, Scott M. Stanley, and Howard J. Markman, "The Pre-engagement Cohabitation Effect: A Replication and Extension of Previous Findings," *Journal of Family Psychology* 23, no. 1 (Feb. 2009), doi: 10.1037/a0014358. The CTCR briefly discusses cohabitation among older adults in *Marriage Between Church and State* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2021).

<sup>35</sup> Wilcox, *When Marriage Disappears*, 27.

<sup>36</sup> About 90% of Americans have had sexual intercourse prior to marriage. In "Key Statistics from the National Survey of Family Growth," a survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the results indicate that between 2002 and 2015, the percentage of women ages 15-44 who had premarital intercourse rose from 84.9% to 88.8% while the percentage of men the same age who had premarital intercourse declined slightly from 91.3% to 89.9%. See [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key\\_statistics/p.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key_statistics/p.htm).

<sup>37</sup> Roper compared attitudes about sex outside of marriage between the years 1972 and 2014, finding that while 49% of respondents thought that it was only sometimes or never wrong in 1972, by 2014 73% felt it was only sometimes or never wrong. Roper Center, "Going All the Way: Public Opinion and Premarital Sex," Cornell University, July 7, 2017, <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/blog/going-all-way-public-opinion-and-premarital-sex>.

<sup>38</sup> David J. Ayers notes that Evangelicals, for example, have consistently taught the importance of chastity and the importance that sexual activity should be reserved for marriage. "Yet most self-identified Evangelicals engage in premarital sex. And doing so has become increasingly morally acceptable among them, regardless of what their churches teach." He shows that, although Evangelicals are slightly less likely to engage in premarital sex than other Christian groups, such as Mainline or Black Protestants or Roman Catholics, a clear majority of Evangelicals is not sexually chaste. See "Sex and the Single Evangelical," Institute for Family Studies, August 14, 2019, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/sex-and-the-single-evangelical>.

most people of child-bearing age desire children and marriage is still generally preferred as a better setting for child-bearing than cohabitation.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, the biblical foundation expressed in the sixth affirmation has been undermined by popular opinion. Of course, the decline of marriage in the West, as noted earlier, means that a widely held societal perspective sees no necessary correlation between marriage and child birth, especially among working class and impoverished Americans.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the desire for children is itself in question. On the one hand, some feminist perspectives view the idea that any woman should want to be a mother as “unhealthy” because they see it leading to “a loss of self, the terrifying reality that their lives had been subsumed into the needs of their child.”<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, some couples (married or not, man-woman, or same-sex) have a strong desire to produce a child — too often viewed as project rather than as a gift of God.<sup>42</sup>

## G. HS 1981: SEVENTH AFFIRMATION

*Affirm that this union of mutual love is the only proper context for human procreation*

This affirmation follows directly from the fifth affirmation and builds on the sixth. The preceding comments on the level of disagreement with those affirmations mean that this final affirmation is also widely rejected today. Indeed, the percentage of children born outside of marriage is increasing in much of the developed world.<sup>43</sup> This phenomenon is marked, especially in secular society. Given the prevalence of unmarried sexual activity among Christian adherents, as noted above, it follows that many of them could not honestly affirm the final 1981 assertion.<sup>44</sup>

To state it clearly again: the 1981 version of *Human Sexuality*, which has been commended repeatedly by the Synod in convention over the years, provides a biblically faithful, theologically clear, confessionally Lutheran, and ethically robust treatment of this crucial topic that concerns every human life. The present report wholeheartedly acknowledges its significance and affirms its premises and conclusions. At the same time, the culture addressed in 1981 is significantly different in terms of sexual ethics from the culture of the present. That in turn means how the 1981 report is read and applied — let alone misunderstood and responded to — will invariably be different. The new challenges that have emerged in the last four decades necessitate a different, yet ultimately complementary approach. In what follows, the present report shall establish an understanding of human sexuality founded upon a fundamentally theological basis of creation, fall, redemption and sanctification. For Lutherans, this approach revolves around our creedal understanding of the Holy Trinity as the God who creates, redeems and sanctifies. In light of that Trinitarian foundation, this report will then propose an ethic for human sexuality in the twenty-first century that finds its starting point in the Small Catechism’s call for a “chaste and decent life” — a life that affirms what God has made, how we are to live chastely and decently in accordance with that creation, and how this chastity and decency apply to all Christians, married and single alike.

## II. HS 2023 FOUNDATIONS: CREATURELY LIFE, EMBODIED LOVE

Chastity is the dignity of the body, the ornament of morality, the sacredness of the sexes, the bond of modesty, the source of purity, the peacefulness of home, the crown of concord. . . . But chastity maintains the first rank in

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<sup>39</sup> See Pew Research Center, “Birth Rates Lag in Europe and the U.S., but the Desire for Kids Does Not,” Gretchen Livingston, FactTank, Washington, DC, April 11, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/11/birth-rates-lag-in-europe-and-the-u-s-but-the-desire-for-kids-does-not/>. See also Richard V. Reeves and Eleanor Krause, “Cohabiting Parents Differ from Married Ones in Three Big Ways,” Brookings Institute Report, April 5:2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/cohabiting-parents-differ-from-married-ones-in-three-big-ways/> and Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Wilcox, *When Marriage Disappears* and Reeves and Krause, *Cohabiting Parents Differ*.

<sup>41</sup> Jessica Valenti, “Not Wanting Kids Is Entirely Normal: Why the Ingrained Expectation that Women Should Desire to Become Parents Is Unhealthy,” *The Atlantic* (September 19, 2012), <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/09/not-wanting-kids-is-entirely-normal/262367/>.

<sup>42</sup> See Meilaender, “The Child as a Gift of God,” <https://resources.lcms.org/reading-study/ctcr-paper-the-child-as-a-gift-of-god>.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Chamie, “Out-of-Wedlock Births Rise Worldwide,” *YaleGlobal Online*, Yale University, March 16, 2017, <https://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/out-wedlock-births-rise-worldwide>. See also Elizabeth Wildsmith, Jennifer Manlove, Elizabeth Cook, “Dramatic Increase in the Proportion of Births Outside of Marriage in the United States from 1990 to 2016,” *Child Trends*, August 8, 2018, <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/dramatic-increase-in-percentage-of-births-outside-marriage-among-whites-hispanics-and-women-with-higher-education-levels>

<sup>44</sup> Sadly, it is also possible that there are Christians who find childbirth outside of marriage to be unacceptable, but avoid it by means of abortion, not chastity.

virgins, the second in those who are continent, the third in the case of wedlock. Yet in all it is glorious, with all its degrees.<sup>45</sup>

If a report from 1981 often sounds somewhat quaint to our ears today, how much more peculiar, if not bizarre, are the foregoing words from Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200–258) about chastity. The word chastity and its adjectival form, chaste, have become largely foreign even to Christians. At the risk of obscuring our report, however, we will employ the terms, since we believe it is important to recover the concept of chastity for the church to communicate an authentically biblical approach to human sexuality. Chastity has a depth of meaning that goes beyond a narrowly conceived application to sexual moral codes. As Cyprian’s words indicate, chastity, within the Christian tradition, is not a grim, sour-faced propriety or Victorian attitude. Rather, it is a particular sort of tranquil beauty and glorious purity.

In this updated report we intend to uplift the first part of Luther’s explanation of the Sixth Commandment. There we read, according to an earlier translation of Luther: “We should fear and love God so that we lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed. . . .”<sup>46</sup> It is noteworthy that among Luther’s explanations of the Second through Tenth Commandments, the explanation to the Sixth is unique. Every other explanation lists certain sins, behavior that we should *not* do according to that commandment, then continues with positive good works that are in keeping with the commandment. The Sixth Commandment’s explanation omits any list of sins but focuses instead on leading a chaste life and then on love and honor between husband and wife.

We understand this call to a “chaste and decent” (or, “sexually pure and decent”) life to be for every one of the baptized. The chaste life enjoined by the Sixth Commandment is not an alternative to marriage, as if one is *either* chaste *or* married, but it *is* distinct from loving and honoring one’s spouse in marriage. In the whole course of a Christian life, whether or not one ever marries, he or she is called to ongoing chastity.<sup>47</sup>

Chastity is God’s gracious will and intention for us because, in a profound way, it is simply a matter of holiness — of sanctification — of the new life that is ours in Christ as it pertains to our embodiment as male and female.<sup>48</sup> It is in this sense that it is used in the Lutheran Confessions. Note, for example Luther’s words from the Large Catechism on the Sixth Commandment:

But inasmuch as there is such a shameless mess and cesspool of all sorts of immorality and indecency among us, this commandment is also directed against every form of unchastity, no matter what it is called. Not only is the outward act forbidden, but also every kind of cause, provocation, and means, so that your heart, your lips, and your entire body may be chaste and afford no occasion, aid, or encouragement to unchastity.<sup>49</sup>

Christian chastity of heart, lips and body is unthinkable apart from the Holy Spirit who alone can sanctify. What may well be unthinkable for fallen man or woman is the very thing that God would have us, His new creatures, to consider and strive for: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (ROM. 12:1).

Life as a living sacrifice is an embodied life in Christ Jesus, the true Man. The sanctifying work of the Spirit takes

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<sup>45</sup> Cyprian of Carthage, “Of the Discipline and Advantage of Chastity,” § 3, 4, ANF 5:587–92; online at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.html>.

<sup>46</sup> Explaining “You shall not commit adultery,” Luther’s original German reads: “Wir sollen Gott fürchten und lieben, dass wir keusch und züchtig leben in Worten und Werken, und ein jeglicher sein Gemahl lieben und ehren.” The language of “chaste and decent” comes from the translation of Luther’s explanation to the Sixth Commandment first authorized by the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America in its 1912 handbook, *A Short Exposition of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House) and then again in *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943). In two subsequent editions of the Small Catechism with additional explanations, a 1986 translation of Luther has used the term “sexually pure” in place of “chaste.” The LCMS continues to use the term “sexually pure” rather than “chaste” in its catechetics, for understandable reasons. See *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991) and *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

<sup>47</sup> For a more detailed discussion of chastity, see section III.C on page 28.

<sup>48</sup> Like marriage, chastity is a “good” for all people, whether or not they are Christian. Outward adherence to a “chaste and decent” way of life brings real blessings to unbelievers and to society as a whole simply because it reflects the good and gracious will of our Creator as expressed in His “moral law.” We do not discount or dispute such “civil righteousness,” which is “subject to reason” and “somehow within our ability” even among unredeemed people (Ap II 12; KW 114). However, within the scope of this report, such issues are not directly relevant because our discussion herein is limited to marriage and chastity from a Christian point of view. So, while it is an outward good wherever it appears, chastity for the Christian flows out of the “clean heart” and “right spirit” which is the work of the Holy Spirit alone (PSALM 51:10–12).

<sup>49</sup> LC Ten Commandments, 202; KW 414. See also Ap IV 132, KW 141; Ap VII–VIII 31, KW 179; VII–VIII 36, KW 181; XX 15, KW 237; and LC Ten Commandments, 211–16, KW 415; 313, KW 428.

place as He joins us to the Son and through the Son to the Father in the experience of redemption. Thus, to speak of chastity within the context of our sanctification as Christians, we are bound to begin on the foundation of trinitarian theology — that is, with the Triune God “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (COL. 1:14).

Whereas the culture around us is increasingly secularized, non-religious, and hostile toward the traditional Christian understanding of sexuality, Christians by contrast view sexuality from a decidedly theological perspective. We are not permitted to treat marriage and sexuality as merely capricious human choices subject to our individual whims, to our emotional or physical gratification, or to social expectations. On the contrary, our sexuality is determined by the will of the God who made us, who saves us, and who sets us apart in His church for loving service to Him and neighbor.

In the present section, then, we will see that how we are created, redeemed and sanctified has implications for how we live spiritually, mentally, physically, even sexually. We cannot separate our sexual identity, views or ethics from who God has made us in creation, what Christ has promised to redeem from sin through His suffering, death, and resurrection, and how the Holy Spirit sanctifies us to live chaste and decent lives in our thoughts and behavior. Reflection upon the theology of the First Article of the Creed reveals that God has made us and everything that belongs to us physically with divine intent and purpose. Reflection upon the theology of the Second Article shows how that pristine creation of God has been damaged by sin yet redeemed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Reflection upon the theology of the Third Article, finally, underscores how the Christian life, by the power of the Holy Spirit, seeks to conform itself to the image of Jesus Christ in word and deed, and that entails the pursuit of sexual purity through chastity and decency.

## A. THE FIRST ARTICLE

Cursed is the person who trusts in mankind.  
He makes human flesh his strength,  
and his heart turns from the Lord.  
He will be like a juniper in the Arabah;  
he cannot see when good comes  
but dwells in the parched places in the wilderness,  
in a salt land where no one lives.

Jeremiah 17:5–6 (CSB)

The foundation for any authentically Christian understanding of human sexuality must begin with the First Article. As we confess the one God who created all things, we confess our own creation. “I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them.”<sup>50</sup> A Christian cannot speak of humanity or any aspect of human life — including human sexuality — apart from God. To know ourselves, we have to know God.

Although we have hints of God’s existence and nature in creation, our comprehension is muddled at best (ROM. 1:19–32; 2:13–16). Human reason can never discover God’s true being and attributes.<sup>51</sup> Rather, for us to know God He must reveal Himself to us. Only then can we confess the faith that saves and only then do we know what it means to be His creature or to understand any aspect of human personhood, including our sexuality. The creeds echo God’s self-revelation, as Luther says:

For in all three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure, unutterable love. For this very purpose he created us, so that he might redeem us and make us holy, and, moreover, having granted and bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has also given us his

<sup>50</sup> LSCwE, 16.

<sup>51</sup> FC SD 5, 22; KW 585. See also Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *The Natural Knowledge of God in Christian Confession and Christian Witness* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2013).

Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. For, as explained above, we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart.<sup>52</sup>

In both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds we talk about "the nature, will, acts, and work of God the Father."<sup>53</sup> This is personal: "I hold and believe that I am God's creature."<sup>54</sup> To speak as a creature is to see ourselves against the spectacle of God's creative work that surrounds and sustains us in the magnitude of heaven and the microcosm of earth's tiniest organism.

To be a creature is to be part of, not the master of God's created world. To confess God's creation is inevitably also to confess our sin against Him and His creation, including the hubris that sees creation as ours to do with as we will and our tyranny over other creatures, turning everything and everyone into objects and commodities.<sup>55</sup> As creatures, we therefore stand under God and His judgment in "the fear of the Lord."

Yet, the creedal confession bids us not only to humble fear, but also to grateful wonder and praise. The Psalter abounds in the Creator's praise as it marvels at God's glory (PSALM 8), at heaven's beauty and splendor (PSALM 19), and then, even more, that God deigns to reveal Himself in words. So David teaches that the Lord's ownership of creation should lead us to seek to know Him personally, to "seek the face of the God of Jacob" (PSALM 24:6).

In such humble awe we also confess "one God" (Nicene Creed). The early church faced explicit denials of the unity of the Godhead both from the pagan religions that dominated their world and from heretical dualistic movements claiming a place within the church. Heresies such as the so-called Gnostic movement denied both the biblical teaching about God (in its tendency to see both a good God and an evil creator force or demiurge) and its teachings about humanity.<sup>56</sup>

A more contemporary overt denial of the First Article's confession of God the Father and His creating work is atheism.<sup>57</sup> But a more common denial is somewhat more subtle. With the unfortunate rupture between science and theology that is increasingly dominant in the West, a form of "naturalism" has developed that either consigns God to the margins of science or denies His work altogether. It features a world view that may be called "scientism."<sup>58</sup> Based on the great strides in external well-being that science and technology have provided, this perspective draws the false conclusion that human endeavor is the ultimate hope for all humanity and, indeed, for Earth itself. Human reason is viewed as the magisterial lord and arbiter of all truth, of right and wrong, and of life's meaning.

There is little room for one Creator God in this view of the world. Yet, such a worldview certainly has a god — something "to which we ... look for all good and in which we ... find refuge in all need."<sup>59</sup> It trusts science and technology for protection, longevity and happiness. It is oblivious to nature's testimony to the true God's orderly work and blind to His beauty. As it does so, it not only worships as a supreme entity the sum of human creativity and intellect, it effectively also makes each person into a little god who is lord of his own values and "truth." Like all idolatry, it is

<sup>52</sup> LC Creed, 63; KW 439.

<sup>53</sup> LC Creed, 10; KW 432.

<sup>54</sup> LC Creed, 13; KW 432.

<sup>55</sup> Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Together with All Creatures: Caring for God's Living Earth* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2010), 50–51.

<sup>56</sup> The Greek word *gnosis*, Gnosticism's root, is innocuous, and simply refers to knowledge. The term Gnosticism envelopes numerous individual teachers and systems and cannot be easily traced to any one source, and scholars debate its origins. Some scholars show connections between Gnosticism and earlier Babylonian religion, others connections to Egyptian teachings. However, it is certain that Gnosticism has significant Greek influences, although it would be an oversimplification to say that Gnosticism is derived from Platonism. See Volker Henning Drecoll, "Martin Hengel and the Origins of Gnosticism" in *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World: Essays in Honour of John D. Turner*, ed. Tuomas Rasimus, Kevin Corrigan, and John Douglas Turner, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 139–65, and also Jay Bregman, "Neoplatonizing Gnosticism and Gnosticizing Neoplatonism in the 'American Baroque,'" 609–29, in the same work.

<sup>57</sup> Contemporary denials of the one God and His creation may be crass or subtle. Atheism is one of the fastest growing "religious" perspectives in the US today, with the number of people claiming atheism more than doubling as a percentage of the American population since 2009 (Pew Research Center, "10 Facts About Atheists," Michael Lipka, FactTank, December 6, 2019, <http://pewrsr.ch/1VwtROY>). The so-called "new atheists" are overtly hostile toward every religion, but especially toward Christianity. While the more recent "newer atheism" sees some pragmatic value in religion, all atheism denies any supreme Being and, of course, any notion of one God as Creator and Lord. The reader may be interested in the brief, but cogent evaluations of "New Atheism" and "Newer Atheists" available on CTCR's website at <https://www.lcms.org/about/leadership/commission-on-theology-and-church-relations/documents/religious-organizations-and-movements>.

<sup>58</sup> Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *In Christ All Things Hold Together: The Intersection of Science and Christian Theology* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2015), esp. 1–12.

<sup>59</sup> LC Ten Commandments, 2; KW 386.

blind to its error. “Like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, modern man has attempted to sever one of God’s greatest gifts, human reason, from its root in the divine reason. The result is a lack of humility, an overreaching pride that supposes humans can solve their various problems by themselves.”<sup>60</sup>

In all of this, the Creator God of Scripture is denied in favor of no god or some amorphous god of human imagination. And, since in every case the resulting belief is self-defined, the result is a god of self. It is a claim that in some manner our entire life — from inner being to our bodies — belongs to us and we are accountable to no one. This hubristic elevation of self may feed one’s ego, but the irony is that with the loss of the God of Scripture comes the loss of any true sense of oneself and life in God’s creation — of “me and all creatures.”<sup>61</sup>

The creedal confession of faith in God is not mere theism, a belief in some sort of creator. We *name* the one Creator God in the Creed. We speak first of the *Father Almighty*. To speak of almighty power follows directly from acknowledging God as creator. But we also call God Father, which acknowledges a personal bond and love — indeed, a tender love both for the Son and for all His adopted children. He is the Almighty and He is the Father.

We do not confess God as father in some metaphorical sense, but that God is “the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 PETER 1:3). This confession is no less than an echo of our Savior’s own language (JOHN 5:18). To confess the Son is to confess the Father and, in so doing, to refuse a vague spirituality or insipid theism in favor of a bold sense that the same God who is Spirit must also be confessed as Father, despite every gnostic objection, ancient or modern. Such a confession flows directly from the genealogical origin of the Son in the Father by the Spirit.<sup>62</sup> God is *Father* because He eternally begets the Son by the Spirit.

The First Article of the Creed reflects what Christians have long held as the theological significance of the creation narrative and what Luther time and again identified in his catechisms: God made us — our minds, our bodies, our very sexuality — with design and purpose. He thus intends that it is honorable and good for all people that they use their minds, their bodies, and their sexuality in accordance with that design and purpose. We receive our lives — body and soul — from God alone. Every attempt to claim that we are “in charge” — that our lives are our own to do with them what we wish — founders on the firm confession that we are God’s creatures. Therefore, to misuse, marginalize, belittle, or rationalize away the bodies, sexual identities and unions God has created is to raise doubts about the God who has given us our physicality in the first place. And to misuse what God has made is little more than to deny His work in creation.

The truth of God is not adequately confessed, however, if we stop at the First Article of the Creed. God is indeed our Father but He is more. “I believe in God the Father Almighty ... and in *Jesus Christ*, His only Son, our Lord.” There we broach the tension and mystery of the catholic faith and its “one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity.”<sup>63</sup>

## B. THE SECOND ARTICLE

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1:15–20

The creating work of the Triune God is very good (GEN. 1:31). God *sees* the goodness of His work. The man and woman also see goodness at first. They see that their bodies are naked and they are unashamed, fully exposed in a

<sup>60</sup> CTCR, *In Christ All Things Hold Together*, 61.

<sup>61</sup> LSCwE, 16.

<sup>62</sup> See James Bushur, “The Holy Trinity: The Genealogical Identity of the Church,” in *Luther’s Large Catechism with Annotations*, 307–11.

<sup>63</sup> Athanasian Creed, *LSB*, 319–20, emphasis added.

pure innocence (GEN. 2:25).

Then God's good work is spoiled (GEN. 3). Even as God "saw" what was good, so the fall from goodness into sin and disobedience starts with *seeing* and it is *seen* immediately. Just as God said, with disobedience the eyes of man and woman are opened (GEN. 3:5). From hearts that turn away from the Word comes a corrupted vision that delights in the sight of food that has been forbidden (GEN. 3:6). Our first parents' visual longing leads them into sin. And, immediately, their eyes are opened to what is not good. With their eyes they see themselves, even their very bodies, to be shameful in their exposure (GEN. 3:7).

They see their nakedness and must hide it. They immediately seek to cover their nakedness *in the presence of one another*. Why this relational shame of a husband and his wife? We need not wait long for an answer. They seek to hide their nakedness, because that physical exposure indicates a far deeper vulnerability — vulnerability before their Creator. Their eyes are now opened to see "like God" sees (GEN. 3:5). They see their shame. They are not only naked and ashamed, but also afraid: "I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid myself" (GEN. 3:10). The shame in one another's presence reveals a sin at work in them that will persist in all their descendants. They objectify one another sexually, whereas, before they had sinned, their nakedness simply reflected the goodness of their creation as male and female and the delight that this sexual difference entails (GEN. 1:27, 31; 2:23). Now they no longer see God's good creation in one another, but seeing mere physicality, they judge one another and themselves by some human standard of what ought to be.<sup>64</sup>

The connection between nakedness and shame — and between sin and fear — is inextricable. What was good, very good, has been spoiled with an unstoppable rot. The rot is now as evident and visible as their nakedness, as odorous as the stench of man's sweat, and as audible as the cries of a woman in childbirth. But it is in Adam's rightful fear of judgment that we see how truly deep is sin's putrid mark. The embodied creature made in the image and likeness of God now bears the leprosy of a decay that flows out from sin's sclerosis of heart and soul to infect bodily parts that serve iniquity and Satan instead of righteousness. Their bodies now proclaim the message of their consciences. They are no longer "very good." They are not good at all.

## 1. Sexual activity as illustrative of rebellion and disobedience

Ironically, sinful humanity is not only marked by the shame of our first parents, but it is also capable of a seemingly impermeable rebellious shamelessness that seeks to deny any legitimate judgment against our wrongdoing (JER. 6:15). Yet, the evidence for sin's evil cannot forever be denied (ROM. 1:19). The law written on the heart will still testify with a whispered warning to the conscience about right and wrong, the accountability humanity cannot avoid, and the search for excuses among their own internal accusations (ROM. 2:15). Therefore, human creatures cannot hide their sin. Not only consciences, but bodies reveal it with "unpresentable parts" that demand modesty (1 COR. 12:23). Although the very notion of "unpresentable parts" might seem quaint to many and even horribly inhibited by others, even a decadent society normally hides its pornography and sexual vices, seeking at least to protect its children from them. So it is that the Word of God gives particular — although by no means exclusive — attention to our sexual embodiment in teaching us about sin.

That shamelessness can easily be illustrated in human sexual activity. So our Lord forthrightly points to the sexual lust that motivates all sexual sin (MATT. 5:27–32; 19:1–9). Likewise, Paul identifies the suppression of God's created intent and His righteousness with the behavior that foolishly idolizes the creature over the Creator and cites the example of those who "exchange natural sexual relations for unnatural ones" (ROM. 1:26, C5B). Paul also illustrates the foolishness of sin's rebellious self-destructiveness with sexual immorality (fornication) since it is sin against one's own body (1 COR. 6:18). So it is that our bodily activity often bespeaks the unrighteousness of the fallen man and woman (MATT. 15:19).

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<sup>64</sup> It is here where we already see the problem of pornography, whereby the body becomes only an object for self-pleasure, not a visible person intended to reflect God's goodness. Sexual acts are divorced from any personal connection not only between the actors, but even more for viewers.

## 2. Righteousness embodied — Christ as the visible Image and Likeness

The depth of human sin and shame is real. The fear of God’s wrath and judgment, so real for our first parents, is warranted. Man and woman ought to fear. God has not abrogated His eternal decree that death follows sin (GEN. 2:17; 3:19; EZEK. 18:4; ROM. 5:12). The bathroom mirrors that reveal imperfect bodies — bodies aging and sick and dying — are visual reminders of the mirror of God’s law with its accusation and judgment (LC I 187; FC SD VI 4, 21).

Embodied sinful creatures facing disease, decline and death cannot be helped by anyone less than God or by anything less than an embodied Savior. So the stunning truth at the center of the Gospel: the Word — who “was with God” from the beginning, who “was God” from eternity, by whom all things were created, who is source of light and life (JOHN 1:1-4) — this “Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (JOHN 1:14). This reality of a truth that seems impossible must somehow be articulated, as Paul does in Philippians 2:6-8. The eternal Son,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

God assumes our likeness, our form — our body. The invisible begotten God is now visible, the living Icon. The Creator is “firstborn of creation” (COL. 1:16). He is conceived in and born from a Virgin (MATT. 1:18, 20, 23). God is embodied for our salvation. He is embodied in, for, and like fallen humanity: subject to our diseases, wounds, sorrows and all the vicious words and deeds of sinful humanity. He has stopped at nothing in His assumption of flesh and blood. The Holy One of God (JOHN 6:69), who knows no sin, is made sin for us (2 COR. 5:21). Only a supremely gracious God can or would do something so impossible.

What God has made in His creation, sin has damaged and defaced. Christ in His incarnation, death, and resurrection has not only redeemed us from our sins, including sexual sins, but embodied for us the living image of purity, chastity and decency. We seek to live in our created, fallen, yet redeemed flesh according to the image and example Christ Himself has set for us. As God’s redeemed people, we simply cannot reject His sovereign, immutable design for creation. Instead, in light of our faith in Christ and the regeneration we have received through Word and Sacrament, we view our bodies and sexual activity through the lens of what God has given us in creation and embodied for us in His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

## C. THE THIRD ARTICLE

He who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:17-20

In the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed, believers confess: “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Such a confession of *faith* flows reflexively from the fact that no one can confess the Christian faith without the Holy Spirit (1 COR. 12:3; see also 1 COR. 6:11; EPH. 1:13). The result of the Holy Spirit’s work is cleansing and a new life and spirit (TITUS 3:5; PSALM 51:10-12). New *spiritual* life, however, does not happen apart from physical life. Rather, the Spirit’s gift of life confesses faith in Christ and His work: “Jesus is Lord” (1 COR. 12:3). Faith itself — spiritual life — ordinarily happens as physical ears hear the “word of Christ” as it is spoken by human tongues (ROM. 10:17). The new spiritual life of faith begins as bodies receive the physical “washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (TITUS 3:5) and as mouths receive bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ by His Word (LUKE 22:19-20).<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> John W. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 10, Kindle Edition. Kleinig adds: “So, paradoxically, my spiritual life, the life that is created and sustained by the Holy Spirit, is always lived in the body. It does not take me away from my body or occur apart from it. Rather, it takes me ever further and deeper into bodily life and into fuller embodiment as a human being. It makes me at home in my body as I live here on earth.”

This elemental connection between the Spirit's work and our physical life is further confirmed as the Third Article moves from "I believe in the Holy Spirit," to "the holy catholic church."<sup>66</sup> To confess the Holy Spirit is to confess the church. In leading people to justifying faith, the Spirit creates a *holy* people (EPH. 1:4; COL. 1:22; 3:12) and a *catholic* people gathered from all the nations (MATT. 28:19; GAL. 3:26–29; REV. 5:9). Proceeding from Father and Son as "Lord and giver of life,"<sup>67</sup> the Spirit brings forth a new humanity, a new creation of universal (catholic) dimensions — to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 PETER 2:9).

The church exists entirely because of the Holy Spirit, who — as Luther asserts — "calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church [*Christenheit*] on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith."<sup>68</sup> The Apology anchors this truth in Ephesians 5 where Paul speaks of the church as the body and bride of Christ, paralleling that relationship with the marriage of man and woman.<sup>69</sup>

This image from Ephesians 5 of the church as the unblemished bride of Christ echoes Old Testament language. There God "rejoices over the bride," Israel (ISAIAH 62:5; JER. 2:2–3A; HOS. 2:16, 19–20).

Just as Israel is restored as Yahweh's holy bride despite her sin (see HOS. 2:2), so also the church is the holy bride of Christ only because of His redeeming and cleansing work (EPH. 5:25–27). And so we confess a *holy* church that is Christ's bride.

We also confess a *catholic* church. The Apology clarifies the confession that the holy church is catholic:

Moreover, it says "church catholic" so that we not understand the church to be an external government of certain nations. It consists rather of people scattered throughout the entire world who agree on the gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments, whether or not they have the same human traditions.<sup>70</sup>

Building on the analogy of the holy church as bride, we may also speak of her catholicity as an indication that this holy bride bears children to the Lord from every corner of humanity (REV. 12:17). Luther affirms this:

Learn this article, then, as clearly as possible. If someone asks, What do you mean by the words "I believe in the Holy Spirit"? you can answer, "I believe that the Holy Spirit makes me holy, as his name states." How does he do this, or what are his ways and means? Answer: "Through the Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." In the first place, he **has a unique community in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God**, which the Holy Spirit reveals and proclaims, through which he illuminates and inflames hearts so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it.<sup>71</sup>

These assertions about the church reinforce another attribute of the church, her unity. Even in its catholic breadth scattered among all peoples, the one church has in common one Father, Lord, Holy Spirit, Gospel, and sacraments (EPH. 4:4–6). It is in light of this unity that the church is characterized with particular individual *physical* images as Christ's bride (EPH. 5) and His body (ROM. 12:5; 1 COR. 12:12–27; EPH. 3:6; 4:15–16; 5:23; COL. 1:18, 24). The physicality is important, for the church is always an embodied reality. The one body is made up of embodied persons called into union (communion) with one another.

The Christian confesses a single communion of people made holy here and now by "the forgiveness of sins."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> More common to the LCMS and to many Lutherans in the past is the confession of "the holy *Christian* Church" That tradition may be rightly appreciated as a reminder that Christ is the head of the church (see LSCwE, question 203, A., p. 207). The original texts of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, however, describe the church as "catholic," which stresses its universality and wholeness (see the footnote in LSB wherever the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed appears).

<sup>67</sup> Nicene Creed, LSB 158.

<sup>68</sup> SC II 6; KW 355–56.

<sup>69</sup> Ap VII & VIII 7; KW 175.

<sup>70</sup> Ap VII & VIII 10; KW 175.

<sup>71</sup> LC II 40–42; KW 436; emphasis added.

<sup>72</sup> Apostles' Creed, LSB 159.

It consists of people whose very bodies are even now “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (ROM. 12:1). The believer’s sanctity is a bodily and not merely a spiritual sanctity. So it is that Paul teaches:

Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 COR. 6:18)

So, the one holy virginal bride (EPH. 5) bears children who are also called to a similar purity.

Redeemed humanity is also promised a hope and a future (JER. 29:11) in spirit, soul and body (1 THESS. 5:23). The promise assures us of something far greater than some extra years in decent health. Instead, we have been promised “the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”<sup>73</sup>

This confession is repeated so often by Christians that we may not recognize how ridiculous it sounds to human reason. The problem lies not in the confession of “life everlasting,” but the belief in “the resurrection of the body.” While some religions teach a bodily reincarnation, that doctrine is not the equivalent of resurrection. Most of the rest of humanity holds to some sort of belief that one’s “soul,” however that is conceived, survives death.

That is not the emphasis in the Christian confession. Rather, we boldly confess that a new *bodily life* is to be given. Human reason cannot comprehend the resurrection of the body. Do our eyes deceive us? We see *bodies* that retain beauty and vigor only as long as a seemingly superhuman regimen of diet and exercise is maintained. Even that only postpones the inevitable. Our bodies are ultimately frail on so many levels that everlasting bliss cannot accommodate them. We are perishable, with a “shelf life” much like the food in pantries and refrigerators. How could eternal life include *bodies*, with their frequently corrupted and quirky genes, amoral longings, aging flesh, and vulnerability to everything from obesity to cancer to dementia?

Nevertheless, it is God’s promise that our bodies — so undeniably perishable and mortal — are to rise from death. The resurrection of the body is both an inconceivable and a concretely comprehensible assurance. Job seems almost contradictory as he prophesies: “And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God” (JOB 19:26). Or, as the Spirit reveals through Paul, the perishable “flesh and blood” of this present bodily life “cannot inherit eternal life.” Nonetheless the dead will be raised *bodily* in a change that defies description other than to declare that perishable, mortal *bodies* will “put on” a *bodily* imperishability and immortality (1 COR. 15:53).

These teachings remind us that the spiritual and material may be distinguished, but they must not be divorced. The “spiritual body” that Paul describes is not some other-worldly phantasm, but, ultimately, nothing less than the perfected form of human embodiment. It is a fulfilled humanity — the humanity that is exemplified and illustrated in the resurrected Lord Himself, whose resurrection is not a merely spiritual reality: “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (LUKE 24:39). The risen Christ, who is the “firstfruits” of the resurrection of all flesh, is the assurance that in the coming resurrection of the dead “shall all be made alive” (1 COR. 15:20–23).

We walk by faith and not by sight in the face of this mysterious and glorious assurance of *bodily immortality and bodily imperishability* held out to God’s redeemed people. Therefore, while affirming the immortality of the soul, the Formula of Concord insists that, “concerning the article on the resurrection Scripture testifies that this very substance of our flesh, albeit without sin, will rise, and that we will have and retain this soul, albeit without sin, in eternal life.”<sup>74</sup>

The people God has recreated by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament seek to live in accordance with His design and intentionality for our lives, minds, bodies even our sexuality. As the church is the pure, unstained body of Christ, renewed by the Holy Spirit, so we individuals and members of that body are renewed daily by the same Spirit, that we might become holy and pure in thought, word and deed. We can never hope to attain in our daily lives here

<sup>73</sup> Apostles’ Creed, LSB 159.

<sup>74</sup> FC SD, I 46; KW, 539. Christian anthropology must always distinguish but not divorce soul and body.

on earth the pristine innocence and righteousness that Christ has so graciously imputed to us at Baptism through a faith given us by the Holy Spirit. Yet, as the church always renews and reforms itself according to God’s Word, so with the aid of the Spirit we conform ourselves to the image of Christ in all we say and do — and that does not exclude our sexuality, but necessarily includes it as part of the creation God Himself seeks to redeem.

The three articles of the Creed, though they express different actions of God in the world and different works of the individual persons of the Holy Trinity in time and space, nonetheless present a single, comprehensive portrait of God’s plan for His people to live in their bodies according to His design. The God who has created us in our sexually differentiated bodies with their accompanying characteristics and desires, has redeemed us from the sin that has corrupted those bodies and desires through the Son of God. The Son of God furthermore embodies chastity and sexual decency for us. Through His Spirit, God renews us according to the image of that Son so we might live with that same chastity and sexual decency. How we live in such a way against the countervailing cultural winds and sexual pressures of this world, however, will require more disciplined attention — to that we now turn.

### III. HS 2023 APPLICATIONS: CHASTE AND DECENT LIFE AS MALE AND FEMALE

The Small Catechism’s call for a “chaste and decent life” with respect to the Sixth Commandment on adultery furnishes us with more than a readily recitable description for purposes of memorization. It involves a conscious awareness of the intended design for marriage and sexuality; the temptations and lusts of the flesh that seek to derail that design; and the goal of a Christlike morality that impacts every area of our lives, sexuality included. To live chastely and decently in the male and female bodies given us by God entails:

- First, a commitment to the sexual identity we have received from God in creation and in His ongoing act of creation that fills and replenishes the earth;
- Second, a commitment to an ongoing conflict with the sinful desires introduced at the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve, and with the personal and social consequences that the fall into sin has caused for our sexual activity; and
- Third, a commitment to the sexual ethic of leading a chaste and decent life that finds its purest expression in the person of Jesus Christ and guides the lives of all Christians, whether married or single.

#### A. SEXUAL IDENTITY FROM GOD

As the foregoing section indicates, the foundation for the Christian understanding of human sexuality is one of creaturely embodiment in a life and identity given and restored by the Triune God. We are created and restored for a holy life that glorifies God. This reflects the Catechism’s understanding that many Lutherans learn from childhood in Luther’s explanation of the First Article: “I believe that God has made me and all creatures. He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, *and all my members*. . . .”<sup>75</sup> As His sons and daughters, redeemed by the bodily sacrifice of Christ (“with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death”<sup>76</sup>), we are called to new life.

The title for section three now echoes the Commandments, specifically the meaning of the Sixth Commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” as Martin Luther explained it. The Commandments provide direction and specificity to the way we are to live as God’s holy people, redeemed in Baptism.

The authority behind Luther’s words from his explanation to the Decalogue is not his own, but God’s. In His commands, our Creator leaves no ambiguity about what He expects of His human creatures. To speak about a “chaste and decent life,” or a “sexually pure and decent life,” is necessarily to speak from the standpoint of God’s Law. God’s Law is not only to give order and direction, however, but also has the all-important purpose of bringing humanity to repentance, for all have sinned against God and His Law (ROM. 3:23). It is vital to keep that truth in mind. Otherwise,

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<sup>75</sup> LSCwE, 16; emphasis added.

<sup>76</sup> LSCwE, 17.

discussing with others matters of confusion about sexual identity and sexual rebellion may be a temptation to indulge pride, as if we Christians are somehow free from sin ourselves.

Human beings are not generic. We are male and female. *HS 1981* therefore affirmed that “The male-female duality as the created pattern of human fellowship requires of us fidelity to our sexual identity, a willingness to be male or female.”<sup>77</sup> Our bodies with all our members (including our sexual members) are God’s creation, who makes us “male and female” (GEN. 1:27). The words of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 19 (v. 4) affirm this duality for all time. To reject our created sex is therefore to reject our Creator.

However, there is a measure of truth in the claim that not everyone fits easily in the category of male or female. For example, approximately nine in every 50,000 children born have genital abnormalities that prevent the physician at delivery from determining the infant’s sex with certainty. These children, once referred to as hermaphrodites, are now commonly stated to be intersex rather than male or female.<sup>78</sup> Both in conjunction with such external, visible abnormalities and apart from any genital abnormality, there are also a number of rare chromosomal disorders that may complicate the matter of sexual identity.<sup>79</sup>

Medically speaking, these are all defects present from birth, akin to other birth defects of a genetic or external nature.<sup>80</sup> Theologically, an intersex condition or chromosomal abnormality that makes sex determination difficult is an element of the effects of the fall on creation itself — part of its “groaning” (see ROM. 8:22-23).<sup>81</sup> Such ambiguity is not a denial of the biblical doctrine of creation. Neither does it disprove the Bible’s assertion that God creates man as male and female, rather, each of these very real problems is a corruption of male and female. Their rarity and their deeply problematic character rightly reinforce the view of natural reason and natural theology that human beings are male and female. Such defects involve significant tribulation and deep challenges for the afflicted individuals, their families, and the medical community that treats them. And from the church, they require a thoroughgoing compassionate response.

A similar compassionate and supportive response is needed for individuals who suffer from sexual dysphoria or sexual identity disorder. Such persons, who are of one sex physically, may feel out of place in their own body — and may come to be convinced that, internally, they are the opposite sex.<sup>82</sup> For such genuine confusion and discomfort, the Christian response ought to be loving encouragement. Such an approach, however, should not condone or encourage a misguided desire to reject the body God has given.<sup>83</sup> Loving acceptance of one who is suffering is at the heart of the Christian ethos, but it is important to realize that such affirmation can never involve a rejection of biblical teaching. The distinction between love for individuals and acceptance of false beliefs they may hold is vital.

Another level of ambiguity about sexual identity is quite different from the person suffering from an intersex condition or from the psychological condition of sexual dysphoria. The acceptance of what is sometimes called “expressive individualism” — an ideology that sees individual identity as something one chooses for oneself, particularly in terms of gender — has resulted in ambiguity about the whole matter of sexual orientation. This has resulted in the aforementioned revolutionary thinking about gender, at least in the western world. The heart of the revolution is a rejection of the male-female duality in favor of a tendency to view gender as a spectrum and a personal truth — something that can ultimately be decided by the self of a particular individual. As the thinking goes,

<sup>77</sup> *HS 1981*, 33.

<sup>78</sup> See Leonard Sax, “How Common Is Intersex? A Response to Anne Fausto-Sterling,” *J Sex Res.* 39, no. 3 (August 2002):174–78, Doi: 10.1080/00224490209552139. PMID: 12476264.

<sup>79</sup> For example, Klinefelter syndrome (XXY male), XX male, XYY male, Turner syndrome (a female with a missing or altered X chromosome), trisomy (XXX female), XXY female, XY female, and late-onset adrenal hyperplasia.

<sup>80</sup> Examples of common defects include Down syndrome, cleft palate, and defects of the heart, stomach, eye and musculoskeletal system.

<sup>81</sup> David reflects on the impact of the fall on creation in Psalm 60:1–2: “O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses; you have been angry; oh, restore us. You have made the land to quake; you have torn it open; repair its breaches, for it totters.”

<sup>82</sup> According to the Gallup organization’s 2020 survey, 0.6% of US adults identify as transgender. The total percentage of individuals identifying themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender has grown steadily from 3.5% in 2012 to 5.6% in 2020. This is almost entirely a result of increasing numbers of young adults identifying as something other than heterosexual with 15.9% of adults born from 1997–2002 (Generation Z) identifying within an LGBT category. Jeffrey M. Jones, “LGBT Identification Rises to 5.6% in Latest US Estimate,” Gallup, February 24, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/329708/lgbt-identification-rises-latest-estimate.aspx>.

<sup>83</sup> See the CTCR report, *Gender Identity Disorder or Gender Dysphoria*, <https://files.lcms.org/dl/ff53E2B773-CD82-4B0D-96F4-D3FB56B17952>.

since gender is fluid it must therefore be a matter of individual discovery or choice.<sup>84</sup>

The Census Bureau of the U.S. provides an indication of how this perspective now permeates American thinking. According to a July 2021 survey, more than 10% of all Americans no longer think of themselves simply as male or female but identify themselves sexually in another way. While 88.3% of American adults say they are “straight” (either male or female), 4.4% identify themselves as bisexual, 3.3% say they are either gay or lesbian, 2.1% say they do not know their sexual identity, and 1.9% say they are “Something else” other than male or female.<sup>85</sup>

Such thinking is routinely fostered by American media and educational leaders. For example, the prominent publication, *National Geographic*, devoted a special issue to the topic of the “Gender Revolution” in January 2017.<sup>86</sup> The stated goal of the special issue is to “provide a wealth of facts, images, and ideas about gender and how it is expressed in our contemporary world,” but, citing the World Health Organization, it affirms “different identities that do not necessarily fit into binary male or female sex categories.”<sup>87</sup> A similar desire to focus on gender variation and fluidity led to the term “cisgender” to refer to those who continue to identify with the sex they were “assigned” at birth.<sup>88</sup>

This set of ideas or teachings about human nature must be addressed directly. The rejection of the “binary” view of sexuality — that human creatures are male or female — is a frontal challenge to biblical teaching. While, as noted, some individuals have an intersex condition, the transgender ideological movement against a dimorphic view of humanity is not fueled by the fact of actual physical and/or chromosomal differences. Rather individuals, whose bodies from birth are clearly male or female, make the claim that they have discovered that they are something other than simply male or female: perhaps a male trapped in a female body, or a female trapped in a male body, or something else that is not the sex “assigned” to them because of their actual bodily sex.<sup>89</sup>

The church cannot accept the current claim to autonomy over one’s sexual nature. Neither can the church relinquish the teaching of the Scriptures that views human creatures in a “binary” manner, as male or female. “All flesh,” including animals, is male and female (GEN. 7:16; SEE ALSO GEN. 6:19; 7:3, 9). This simple, basic truth is what has been affirmed from the beginning of time. The church cannot abandon it now, or ever.

The idea that human creatures can or ought to attempt to remake their sexual identity as something other than male or female is a dangerous falsehood. It is, at its heart, a violation of faith in God, our Creator. As Luther says so simply, “God has made me.”<sup>90</sup> For a creature to determine that he or she is not really the individual God has made is nothing less than a bid to be one’s own god, one’s own creator.

In summary, then, while we must directly affirm the biblical view of humankind as male or female, we do not wish to imply that our creation as human sexual beings is unaffected by the fall, hence the discussion above about intersexuality and genetic disorders. Moreover, to identify the theological error of the transgender movement does not mitigate the need for a pastoral response to individuals experiencing sexual dysphoria or intersex individuals and their families. The distress at work in such cases dare not be minimized. Nor should we think that Christians are

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<sup>84</sup> For the history behind such thinking, see Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2020).

<sup>85</sup> Lydia Anderson, Thom File, Joey Marshall, Kevin McElrath, and Zachary Scherer, US Census Bureau, “New Household Pulse Survey Data Reveals Differences between LGBT and non-LGBT Respondents During Covid-19 Pandemic,” <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/11/census-bureau-survey-explores-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity.html>.

<sup>86</sup> An online guide that summarizes the issue is available at [https://media.nationalgeographic.org/assets/file/GenderRevolution\\_GUIDE\\_UpdatedFeb9.pdf](https://media.nationalgeographic.org/assets/file/GenderRevolution_GUIDE_UpdatedFeb9.pdf). The print publication accompanies a video documentary hosted by Katie Couric, *Gender Revolution: A Journey With Katie Couric*. The video is encouraged for use in schools, is also available for purchase or for viewing via some streaming services.

<sup>87</sup> “Gender Revolution Guide,” Introduction, 4. We note that *National Geographic’s* assessment of the so-called “gender revolution” is itself wide and imprecise. Much attention is devoted to the matter of political and socio-cultural inequalities between male and female, such as the lack of educational opportunities for girls in many countries, cultural patterns that encourage women to be wives and mothers rather than pursuing careers outside the home, female genital mutilation, and other examples of what are viewed as injustices against females. The CTCR acknowledges that girls and women have suffered many injustices and inequities and that such suffering continues. However, to address those issues in this report would take us far afield from our central concerns.

<sup>88</sup> The term is increasingly used beyond the LGBT world. Consequently it is now included in the Oxford English Dictionary: *cis-, prefix: Oxford English Dictionary (ocd.org)*.

<sup>89</sup> Transgender individuals who seek to remake their bodies into the opposite sex are actually thereby affirming a binary view of humanity. Their discomfort with their “assigned” sex (the sex of their bodies) leads them to seek to become the *other* sex, not a third sex on a gender continuum.

<sup>90</sup> Small Catechism, II, First Article.

immune from such sexual dilemmas. Bodily life on every level — including our sexuality — groans for redemption. Individual pastoral care acknowledges this. It requires that every sinner, every sinful aspect of our lives, and every result of sin's corruption of creation be addressed in an individual manner.<sup>91</sup>

## B. REBELLIOUS SEXUALITY IN NEED OF REDEMPTION

### 1. Sexual rebellion, constant and changing

One aspect of rebellious sexuality is the rejection of the male-female distinction in the name of gender fluidity and radical self-determination. This is, in many respects, a new phenomenon — one that the Bible does not explicitly address and that, consequently, previous Christian thought did not directly consider. But both the Scriptures and Christian theology have given ample attention to the underlying reality of a sexual dimension in human rebellion against the Creator. The presence of a specific command against adultery in the Decalogue is the most striking evidence for this (EX. 20:14; DEUT. 5:18). In the commandment God condemns the blatant act of infidelity against one's spouse or the spouse of another person. But implicit in that same command is a condemnation of the subtle rebellion of the heart that lusts for someone other than that person to whom God has joined us (MATT. 5:27-28). That this commandment is first given to Israel is a reminder that rebellious sexuality is a problem for the people of God, and not just for those who are apart from him (see JER. 7:8-10).

Lest sexual rebellion be viewed too narrowly as only a matter of marital infidelity, the Scriptures directly address all forms of immorality and sexual impurity. In both the Old and New Testament worlds, prostitution was a widespread phenomenon. The OT faced the serious problem of the Baal cult's religious practice of sacred prostitution while the NT had to wrestle with the Greek world's widespread secular prostitution and lax sexual morality. In each case the result was both forbidden sexual conduct and also the sin of apostasy from God. However, in both testaments, the term that sometimes refers only to engaging in prostitution in the Greek and Roman worlds (either as the prostitute or the one who uses her or him) takes on a wider meaning of committing any kind of extra-marital sexual intercourse.<sup>92</sup> The English term fornication, or sexual immorality, in our translations renders terms that connect illicit sexual behavior to abandoning the true God (e.g., EZEK. 16, 23; 1 COR. 6:18).<sup>93</sup>

It is important to note that the Bible's condemnation of fornication is *primarily* addressed to sexual acts between men and women, not to same-sex acts. This is a salutary reminder that the heterosexual person is as perverse as any other sinner. Jeremiah is speaking about all humanity when he rightly laments: "The heart is perverse above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (17:9). Sexual rebellion, then, is certainly not confined to the present-day.

However, each age gives its own shape to human sin, including sexual sin. Luther implies as much in the Large Catechism. He suggests that in the Old Testament world, "adultery was the most widespread form of unchastity," but claims a somewhat different kind of unchastity in his day with its "shameless mess and cesspool of all sorts of immorality and indecency among us."<sup>94</sup> So also in our world, we see sexual rebellion in the forms of a dramatic decline of marriage in favor of cohabitation and short-term and "one-off" sexual connections, high rates of intentional single motherhood, a widespread affirmation of the legitimacy of same-sex acts and same-sex marriage, and other behaviors that heretofore were viewed as abhorrent. So, while we may simply say that sin is at the root of all sexual rebellion in every age, it is also worth asking what other cause may be at work leading to our own age's sexual rebelliousness.

<sup>91</sup> A helpful resource for pastoral care of transgender persons is Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Wheaton, IL: IVP Academic, 2015). See also CTCR, *Gender Identity Disorder*, as well as Paul O. Wendland, "A Pastoral Statement on the Transgender Movement" available at <http://essays.wisluethsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/4507/WendlandTransgender.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>92</sup> The Hebrew term is *zānâh*; the Greek word, *porneuō*. Kyle Harper, in "Porneia: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 2 (January 1, 2012): 374, says of the Greco-Roman world: "By the first century c.e., *porneia* was the chief vice in a system of sexual morality rooted in conjugal sexuality. *Πορνεία* was broad enough to cover sexual sins as diverse as incest and exogamy." He adds, "But for Hellenistic Jews, in a culture where sex with dishonored women, especially prostitutes and slaves, was legal and expected, the term condensed the cultural differences between the observers of the Torah and Gentile depravity" (374-75).

<sup>93</sup> For a summary of the way Scripture addresses the whole gamut of sexual sin under the prohibitions of *porneia* (and cognates), see R. Hauck and S. Schulz, "πόρνη, κτλ," TDNT 6:579-95; BDAG, 854-55; H. Reisser, *πορνείω*, *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 1:497-501.

<sup>94</sup> LC I 199; KW 201, 202.

In recent decades much of the western world came to assume the legitimacy of a nearly endless sexual “freedom” that is an outgrowth of a more subtle revolution regarding the human self.<sup>95</sup> On its simplest level, many assume no ongoing order that governs the world — no foundation. Rather, individuals must find their own meaning for existence, their own ethical codes, and — above all — their own sense of who they are, their identity.<sup>96</sup> All preferences and standards are equal, so that no one dare to question the validity and worth of another person’s preferences and standards. An overarching moral or ethical code for all people is viewed as inherently oppressive. Morality is strictly personal, emotional and pragmatic. What is right is what is right and desirable *for me*. What is wrong is what is wrong and undesirable *for me*.

We earlier noted that this view claims “that each of us finds our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires.”<sup>97</sup> But such a claim goes beyond this individual claim. It easily accepts a corollary assumption: that anyone or anything that claims authority over me and limits my individual autonomy is oppressive and ought to be overthrown. From this it is a small step to reject all biblical moral teachings about the self and sexuality, beginning with the claim of God and His authority over all people. And if *God’s* authority over ourselves is questioned, the idea that parents or other human authorities can make any claim to speak truths that could rightly limit one’s autonomy is certainly ruled out.

Given such widespread assumptions it is no accident that biblical morality is increasingly viewed as out of order. Indeed, some would argue that Christianity is *immoral*.<sup>98</sup> And even if many would not engage in such a frontal attack on the Christian faith, there is no doubt that increasing numbers of people want less and less to do with the church and its doctrinal claims about who we are and how we are to live. Many see the church’s teachings on sexual morality to be oppressive demands placed over them — demands that would deprive them of their freedom of self-determination.<sup>99</sup>

This is particularly evident among younger age cohorts. Even people raised in the church are increasingly likely to drop out of church after high school. Among the reasons cited for this drop out are that many younger adults view traditional Christianity as judgmental or hypocritical and disagree with the church’s socio-political positions — such as opposition to gay marriage.<sup>100</sup>

## 2. Heterosexual rebellion

As much as the LGBT agenda challenges the church today, we should remember that the majority of people continue to be heterosexual in their desires and sexual activity. This fact may give a certain comfort, but it should not blind the church to the fact that widely accepted heterosexual views about human sexuality are also deeply contrary to the Word of God.

C.S. Lewis says, “Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it; the Christian rule is, ‘Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.’”<sup>101</sup> Lewis wrote more than half a century ago, but as we have seen, humanity has always rebelled against this uncompromising truth. It is so still today. And, given that the majority of people are attracted to the opposite sex, the human rebellion against God’s will for human sexuality most often takes the form of *heterosexual* fornication.

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<sup>95</sup> See Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

<sup>96</sup> Trueman, *Triumph of the Modern Self*, 76–78.

<sup>97</sup> Trueman, *Triumph of the Modern Self*, 46. This report does not deny that individuals are unique in some ways and therefore develop likes and dislikes, find some things more personally meaningful than others, choose priorities for themselves, and so forth. Such subjective aspects of personal identity are not at issue.

<sup>98</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

<sup>99</sup> See, for example, Barna, “Signs of Decline and Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith” (March 4, 2020), <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/>.

<sup>100</sup> See, for example, Aaron Earls, “Most Teens Drop Out of Church When They Become Young Adults,” LifeWay Research, (Jan. 15, 2019), <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/>. For more extensive consideration: David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 26, 89–118; and David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 149–68.

<sup>101</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1952), 91.

Lewis's simple formula — either marriage or abstinence — is indeed the biblical norm. But contemporary threats to marriage are significant. As noted earlier, only about half of Americans are married. While some of the unmarried are, of course, sexually inactive, many other unmarried people prefer cohabitation and still others engage in short-term sexual liaisons.

Studies indicate that most married Americans are faithful to their spouses, but marital infidelity is not infrequent.<sup>102</sup> The General Social Survey reports that American husbands commit adulterous affairs against their wives more frequently than wives do, but the number of adulterous women has risen significantly in recent years.<sup>103</sup> However, while outward behavior is important, Christians must take to heart Christ's warning that adultery begins in the heart (MATT. 5:28). This is all-the-more important in the present context in which pornography is pervasive, providing ready stimulus for lustful thoughts and acts. Moreover, for those dissatisfied with their spouses and inclined to have affairs, websites designed to facilitate affairs are readily available. The internet has fostered an epidemic in sexual sin, seducing both the married and the unmarried toward adultery in thought, word and deed.

The decline in marriage in the US does not mean that marriage is unpopular. Americans of all races and classes continue to want to be married. The National Marriage Project, for example, found that across the social strata — from the least educated and poorest Americans to the most highly educated and economically prosperous — Americans desire marriage and see it as very important. More than 75% of all Americans want to be married. But marital success, in terms of longevity and happiness, is not equal across various social groups. Marriages tend to be long-lasting and happy for only the most highly-educated 30% of Americans. It is the less-educated and less-prosperous for whom marriage is more likely to be an unrealized dream rather than a reality.<sup>104</sup>

When marriage is in decline the challenge to chastity is acute and widespread. While most still value faithfulness within marriage and frown on adultery, few Americans recognize sex between unmarried persons to be a moral problem — nearly 60% strongly defended such non-marital sex as “not wrong at all” a decade ago, while more recent studies suggest that about 70% of the population condones sex outside of marriage.<sup>105</sup> In such a climate, virginity is viewed as more shameful than virtuous, and even its defenders seem unwilling to view it as anything more than a personal choice — an alternative to the equally acceptable option of having as many sexual partners as one wants.<sup>106</sup> The use of pornography is not only ubiquitous, it is also increasingly accepted as moral behavior.<sup>107</sup> The majority of Americans evidently affirm the assumption of most media (from movies, to television, to books, blogs, and music) that consensual sexual activity is morally acceptable between individuals, whether or not they are married.<sup>108</sup>

Certain behaviors necessarily follow such perspectives, of course. Among them are a willingness to have

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<sup>102</sup> GSS data indicates that among married adults about 20% of men and 13% of women committed adultery. See Wendy Wang, “Who Cheats More? The Demographics of Infidelity in America,” Institute for Family Studies, January 10, 2018, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/who-cheats-more-the-demographics-of-cheating-in-america#:~:text=also%20means%20infidelity>.

<sup>103</sup> Zach Schonfeld, “Wives Are Cheating 40% More than They Used to, but Still 70% as Much as Men,” *The Atlantic* (online ed., July 2, 2013), <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/07/wives-cheating-vs-men/313704/>. Married heterosexual North Americans, both from Canada and the US, are far less likely to commit adultery than Europeans or Asians. Jacob Sims, “Infidelity Statistics: Male and Female Cheating Statistics around the World,” *OutlookMagazine.ca* (April 3, 2019), <http://www.outlookmagazine.ca/family/infidelity-statistics-male-and-female-cheating-statistics-around-the-world/#:~:text=While%20Canada%20has%20an%20infidelity,they%20surveyed%20customers%20and%20users>.

<sup>104</sup> Wilcox, *When Marriage Disappears*, 27–37. By “highly-educated” the National Marriage Project was referring to those Americans who have completed a bachelors degree or more, which was about 30% in 2010 at the time *When Marriage Disappears* was published. The percentage of Americans 25 or older in that category had risen to 36% according to a 2019 American Community Survey. “US Census Bureau Releases New Educational Attainment Data,” Release no. CB20-TPS09 (March 30, 2020), <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2020/educational-attainment.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Jean M. Twenge, Ryne A. Sherman, and Brooke E. Wells, “Changes in American Adults Sexual Behavior and Attitudes, 1972–2012,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 44, (2015): 2273–85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0540-2>. See also Statista.com, “Do You Think Sex Between an Unmarried Man and Woman Is Morally Acceptable or Morally Wrong?” (July 2018), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/225947/americans-moral-stance-towards-intercourse-between-unmarried-partners/>.

<sup>106</sup> For example, see M.C. Barnes, “My Virginity Is Empowering, Not Embarrassing,” *Huffington Post* (Aug 14, 2020), [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/virginity-sex\\_uk\\_5f3510f1c5b6fc009a62073c](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/virginity-sex_uk_5f3510f1c5b6fc009a62073c).

<sup>107</sup> Andrew Dugan, “More Americans Say Pornography is Morally Acceptable,” *Gallup* (June 5, 2018), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/235280/americans-say-pornography-morally-acceptable.aspx>.

<sup>108</sup> See Twenge, Sherman, and Wells, “Changes in American Adults Sexual Behavior,” 2273–85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0540-2>. Statista.com's data indicates that 69% of the population views sex between an unmarried man and woman to be morally acceptable. See “Do You Think Sex Between an Unmarried Man and Woman Is Morally Acceptable or Morally Wrong?” (July 2018), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/225947/americans-moral-stance-towards-intercourse-between-unmarried-partners/>.

numerous sexual partners and engage in casual sex (sex apart from any commitment),<sup>109</sup> increases in cohabitation,<sup>110</sup> support for open relationships or marriages,<sup>111</sup> for polygamy,<sup>112</sup> for bisexual relationships,<sup>113</sup> and continuing high levels of divorce.<sup>114</sup> Alternatively, an individual who is drawn exclusively to the opposite sex, or values virginity, or desires heterosexual marriage finds little encouragement to fulfill such wishes. Few movies, novels, or other media portray people living “chaste and decent lives in word and deed” or spouses who love and honor one another. Instead, there is a boring predictability to the portrayals of sexual relationships in popular media, almost inevitably involving unmarried couples driven only by passion without a whit of sexual integrity.

Thus, there can be no mystery in the fact that fewer couples marry or that many marriages end in divorce. Actual divorce percentages are notoriously difficult to determine.<sup>115</sup> Clearly, however, the number of couples that divorce is high. Moreover, while there is evidence that divorce rates are declining, one of the major reasons is that fewer adults are getting married.<sup>116</sup>

It should not surprise us that these behaviors — casual sex, cohabitation before or in place of marriage and divorce — are not only widespread, but are approved as moral alternatives to past patterns of understandings of sexuality and marriage. Certainly, not all agree with these attitudes or engage in these behaviors.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, they are so much a part of American life that many boast about them. For example, one writer calls her divorce “radical self-love,” proclaiming that although she loved her husband (and even praises him as a husband and father), she divorced him because she loved herself more.<sup>118</sup>

Such facts indicate that even though Americans may still desire marriage, their understanding of marriage is inadequate. In truth, there is widespread rebellion against marriage as it is understood biblically. As *HS 1981* affirmations three and five remind us: to “regard marriage as a divine, lifelong institution, ordained by God for the good of man and woman” is to “affirm God’s will that sexual intercourse be engaged in only between a man and woman committed to a complete and lifelong sharing of their lives with one another in a marriage covenant not to be broken.” Sadly, these affirmations do not reflect the views of most Americans today. *HS 1981* warned:

A society in which casual sexual encounters and divorce prevail is on its way to viewing sexual partners as interchangeable. Its tendency is to dehumanize people and treat them solely in terms of their sexual functions, abstracting such functions from any content of personal significance.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> CDC lists the mean number of lifetime sexual partners at 4.3 for women and 6.3 for men. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Number of sexual partners in lifetime,” (November 8, 2021), [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key\\_statistics/n-keystat.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key_statistics/n-keystat.htm).

<sup>110</sup> “Among people ages 18 to 44, a larger share have cohabited at some point than have been married (59% vs. 50%).” Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Nikki Graf and Gretchen Livingston, “The Landscape of Marriage and Cohabitation in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center (Nov. 6, 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/11/06/the-landscape-of-marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/>.

<sup>111</sup> According to YouGov polling, 26% of all Americans would be interested in an open or non-monogamous relationship. 46% of LGBT adults expressed an interest and 22% of heterosexuals did and, between the sexes, more men than women expressed interest. Jamie Ballard, “A Quarter of Americans Are Interested in Having an Open Relationship,” YouGovAmerica (April 26, 2021), <https://today.yougov.com/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2021/04/26/open-relationships-gender-sexuality-poll>.

<sup>112</sup> Frank Newport, “Understanding the Increase in Moral Acceptability of Polygamy,” Gallup (June 26, 2020), <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/313112/understanding-increase-moral-acceptability-polygamy.aspx>.

<sup>113</sup> Cara Murez, “Big Rise in US Teens Identifying as Gay, Bisexual,” *WebMD* (June 15, 2021), <https://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/news/20210615/big-rise-in-us-teens-identifying-as-gay-bisexual>. Sangeeta Singh-Kurtz & Dan Kopf, “The Rise in Americans Saying They Are Bisexual Is Driven by Women,” *Quartz* (April 23, 2021), <https://qz.com/1601527/the-rise-of-bisexuals-in-america-is-driven-by-women/>.

<sup>114</sup> Virginia Pelley, “What Is the Divorce Rate in America?” *Fatherly* (Feb. 18, 2022) <https://www.fatherly.com/love-money/what-is-divorce-rate-america/>.

<sup>115</sup> Pelley, “What Is the Divorce Rate in America?”

<sup>116</sup> Horowitz, Graf, and Livingston, “Landscape of Marriage and Cohabitation,” <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/11/06/the-landscape-of-marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/>. See also Andrew Dugan, “U.S. Divorce Rate Dips, but Moral Acceptability Hits New High,” Gallup (July 7, 2017), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/213677/divorce-rate-dips-moral-acceptability-hits-new-high.aspx>.

<sup>117</sup> Sarah Kliff and Soo Oh, “Americans Think Divorce Is Less Acceptable Than They Did a Decade Ago,” *VOX*, Mar 17, 2016, 10:00am EDT <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/17/11250888/divorce-public-opinion-united-states>. But compare Dugan, “U.S. Divorce Rate Dips, but Moral Acceptability Hits New High.”

<sup>118</sup> “There was no emotional or physical abuse in our home. There was no absence of love. I was in love with my husband when we got divorced. Part of me is in love with him still. I suspect that will always be the case. Even now, after everything, when he walks into the room my stomach drops the same way it does before the roller coaster comes down. I divorced my husband not because I didn’t love him. I divorced him because I loved myself more.” Lara Bazelon, “Divorce Can Be an Act of Radical Self-Love,” *New York Times* (Sep 30, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/30/opinion/divorce-children.html>

<sup>119</sup> *HS 1981*, 16.

### 3. Homosexual rebellion

Homosexual desires could be viewed as an example of confusion over sexual identity with some connection to gender dysphoria (sexual identity disorder). Nevertheless, this report addresses homosexuality as a distinct issue. The different groups and individuals who claim a place within the overarching LGBT movement see themselves as distinctive, with Lesbians and Gays and Bisexual persons all claiming an individual place at the table. Moreover, these three groups generally say they are perfectly comfortable as male or female and have no desire to be the other sex. Rather, their concern is that homosexual desires (or sexual desire for both sexes) are perfectly natural for them and ought to be affirmed by others. Also, a significant difference between sexual dysphoria and homosexuality is that sexual dysphoria is focused inwardly — the persons with such dysphoria are dealing with a sense that their inner being is contrary to their physical embodiment — while the person with homosexual desire is focused outwardly, longing for sexual activity with someone of the same sex.<sup>120</sup>

However, just as homosexuality and sexual dysphoria must be distinguished, so also homosexual desire and same sex activity must be distinguished. Homosexual desire, like all sinful human desires, is a consequence of original sin. While it is different from sinful heterosexual desire, both alike are a form of lust. For the believer, every sinful desire is cause for repentance and the prayer that the Holy Spirit would give the power to lead a chaste and decent life in word and deed.

Western society does not affirm such repentant prayer, but instead affirms homosexual desires as fundamentally normal for some persons. In keeping with the general societal view that all sexual desire is at least neutral, if not inherently good, our culture encourages those with homosexual desire to follow those desires. The statistics bear this out.<sup>121</sup>

Homosexual acts, however, are acts that refuse the will of God for us. Fundamentally, homosexual behavior rebels against God's intent in creating humankind male and female. Therefore the Scriptures are not silent about same-sex erotic behavior. Wherever the Word of God speaks of sexual behavior, it does so in a manner that is consistent with its understanding of marriage as unfolded in the creation narrative (see GEN. 1:26–28; 2:24–25; see also MATT. 19:4–5 and EPH. 5:31, 33). It is the human as male and female that God creates in His own image.<sup>122</sup> Only the male-female relationship has the potential to “be fruitful and multiply” (GEN 1:22). Only the man and woman complement one another by their sexual otherness (GEN. 2:18–23). So all sexual acts that violate the relationship of male and female in the bond of marriage are forbidden. That includes, quite obviously, all non-marital and extra-marital heterosexual acts. And it also includes every same-sex practice.

For such reasons homosexual practice is explicitly condemned in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. The OT prohibition is then reaffirmed in the New Testament. In Romans 1:24–32, the apostle Paul attributes desiring and engaging in same-sex relations as having “exchanged the truth about God for a lie” (ROM. 1:25) with the result that minds are debased or corrupted (ROM. 1:28). First Corinthians 6:9–10 includes those who practice same-sex acts together with the sexually immoral (fornicators), adulterers, and a number of other “unrighteous” people who will not “inherit the kingdom of God.” First Timothy 1:9–10 similarly warns “the ungodly and sinners,” “the unholy and profane,” “those who strike their fathers and mothers,” “murderers,” “the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and [those who do] whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine” that their behavior is contrary to the Law of God.

Hence the Scriptures are consistent in their prohibition of all non-marital sexual activity, whether with the opposite sex or the same sex. These prohibitions against sinful sexual activity are not limited in scope but stretch throughout the different periods of salvation history and within different cultural settings. In every time and place, God calls to repentance all who live in these ways.

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<sup>120</sup> This does not deny that there are individuals who experience sexual desire for persons of the same-sex, but do not seek affirmation of those desires. Rather, they would prefer that they could be rid of such desires and are instead committed either to celibacy or to following only desires for the opposite sex.

<sup>121</sup> “The National Survey of Family Growth” from the National Center for Health Statistics (published by the CDC) shows the increase in sexual activity between same-sex persons between the 2015–2017 time period and the 2017–2019 period. The percentage of women who had sexual activity with another woman increased from 17.9 to 20.8 in that period. The percentage of men who engaged in same-sex acts grew from 7.0% to 7.3%. [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key\\_statistics/s-keystat.htm#samesexpartners](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key_statistics/s-keystat.htm#samesexpartners).

<sup>122</sup> God created man “in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them,” (GEN. 1:27–28); note that the Hebrew parallelism of these verses moves from man as him (generic use of the pronoun) to man “male and female.”

We realize that to uphold and teach chastity in the West today is to face more than the unpopularity C.S. Lewis observed. As we have already noted, these biblical teachings invite disbelief and scorn from the majority of our contemporaries. In a single generation, the view of the majority of Americans about the morality of practically any sexual activity, including homosexual acts, has been reversed, from disapproval to approval. More than a few voices from within Christianity also question such a strict understanding of sexual virtue. About half of all those who refer to themselves as Christians now view non-marital casual sexual relationships as moral.<sup>123</sup> Same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage also now have the support of the majority of self-identified Christians.<sup>124</sup> According to Pew Research, this may include a majority of self-identified LCMS individuals.<sup>125</sup> No wonder, then, that increasing numbers of teens now identify themselves as being gay, lesbian or bisexual.<sup>126</sup> How could it be otherwise when our culture exhorts them to discover their sexual identity rather than to give thanks for it as a gift? Such a quest provides what seems to be a perfect “solution” to the inevitable angst or ambivalence that attends coming of age but is in truth an oppressive burden.

Acceptance of homosexual desire and acts as moral is not only the perspective of many laity, it is also the public teaching of increasing numbers of church bodies. In recent decades, various church bodies have adopted the view that homosexual acts are not sinful and that same-sex marriage should be both sanctioned and celebrated in the church.<sup>127</sup> The arguments invoked for making these changes cannot be addressed in this document, but ample attention and response to them is available.<sup>128</sup> Suffice it to say that arguments for the acceptance of homosexual acts as moral for the Christian employ one or more of the following arguments: (1) that the Bible’s authors knew only exploitative homosexual acts and were ignorant of the kinds of homosexual relationships that are loving and nurturing; (2) that the direction of history shows that homosexual acts are the equivalent of heterosexual acts in their general character and biblical condemnations are outdated in the same sense as biblical references that were accepting of slavery; (3) that biblical authority does not extend to cultural matters so that homosexual condemnations, for example, together with teaching about submission of women, or forbidding women preaching and serving pastorally, are all no longer applicable.

#### 4. The need for redemption in Christ

Thus, the rebelliousness of humankind is often seen explicitly in the corruption of the precious gift of sexuality. From the fall sexual desire is easily twisted together with a longing to exercise autonomy with the claim, “my body is my own,” and with a passion for self-satisfaction. Such a passionate claim is stung by God’s rebuke: “You are not your own” (1 COR. 6:19). And that rebuke demands repentance.

We stand before God as sexual beings just as we do in every other aspect of our lives — in need of the forgiveness bestowed only because of the redeeming work of our Lord Jesus Christ. “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ [MATT. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”<sup>129</sup> Our need for forgiveness is

<sup>123</sup> Jeff Diamant, “Half of US Christians Say Casual Sex between Consenting Adults Is Sometimes or Always Acceptable,” Pew Research Center (Aug. 31, 2020), <https://pewrsr.ch/3lJyBBE>.

<sup>124</sup> Jana Riess, “Same-sex Marriage Has Support Among Most American Religious Groups,” National Catholic Reporter (May 1, 2018), <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/same-sex-marriage-has-support-among-most-american-religious-groups-study-shows>.

<sup>125</sup> Pew Research Center, “Views about Homosexuality among Members of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” Religious Landscape Study (2014), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/lutheran-church-missouri-synod/views-about-homosexuality/>.

<sup>126</sup> Jones, “LGBT Identification Rises to 5.6%,” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/329708/lgbt-identification-rises-latest-estimate.aspx>.

<sup>127</sup> At the present time a number of US church bodies teach that homosexual relationships are morally permissible and sanction same-sex marriage. This includes: the Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Society of Friends, United Church of Christ. The United Methodist Church has experienced a formal division especially over this issue.

<sup>128</sup> See, for example, Robert A. J. Gagnon’s exhaustive rebuttal of exegesis that minimizes or denies the biblical view of homosexual acts as sin in *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001); also the pro-con exegetical debate between Gagnon and Dan O. Via, *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003). The LCMS has addressed this as well: CTCR, *Response to Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2012); also three responses to *Reconciling Works: Lutherans for Full Participation* by Drs. Joel Biermann, <https://files.lcms.org/file/preview/FE18AEFE-99C1-4AB4-826D-DC4E7FBD7674?>; Thomas Egger, <https://files.lcms.org/file/preview/C5149888-007E-43E0-B704-AC4788A2002F?>; and Timothy Saleska, <https://files.lcms.org/file/preview/EE01391E-E1B0-4FCD-9719-81980B663C6E?>.

<sup>129</sup> Martin Luther, *Ninety-five Theses or Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* [1517], LW 31:25.

a call for repentance — ongoing, constant repentance. Our lives as sexual beings makes that abundantly clear. Gay or straight, bisexual or transgender, all human beings live with a universally corrupted sexual desire whatever their “sexual identity” may be. So the call does not end, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (MATT. 3:2).

God calls us to repent, to turn and be saved (ISAIAH 45:22), because our redemption has come (LUKE 21:28). God’s redemption for His fallen world comes by a bodily sacrifice: “not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.” To hear this call to repentance rightly is to know that it is constant, that “we daily sin much” — all of us, and in all manner of ways. But, with repentant faith in the Father of all mercy and grace who so freely bestows forgiveness, His children also become recipients of the Spirit’s gifts — most especially patience and longsuffering and a forgiving spirit in our relationships with one another.

## 5. Tension for the redeemed

That there is redemption in Christ — by His death and resurrection — is the foundation for living in the way that is right. It is the basis for every Christian hope. Even for the redeemed, however, there is no complete relief from the scourge of sin. Rather, believers live in a unique tension — sinner and saint, life in constant repentance.

It is easy to divorce bodily life from life in the Spirit. The NT often uses the term “flesh” and refers to living “in the flesh” to refer to a sinful life. Speaking to believers, Paul contrasts life in the flesh from life in the Spirit: “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you” (ROM. 8:8–9a).<sup>130</sup> There is an aspect of human rebellion that is manifestly *physical*.

The infirmities of the fallen flesh, however, reveal a weakness that is more than skin deep — running to the heart and center of our whole being as living souls. Genesis 3 connects physical death to the spiritual rebellion of our first parents, that is, to their disobedience, not to the mere physical act of eating fruit. So our Lord is hardly pointing to the muscle in our chest when He says, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (MATT. 15:19).

For us to speak of sexuality in rebellion against God, then, is not to place the seat of human sin in one’s sex. Rather, the physical acts of adultery and other forms of sexual immorality are inextricably bound up with an internal, psychological, or, ultimately, *spiritual* weakness — one that marks our soul, our deepest inner life. Malachi therefore rightly addresses something more than physical behavior as he condemns marital unfaithfulness: “Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves *in your spirit*, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth” (MAL. 2:15). Faithfulness in bodily conduct flows out of one’s spiritual life.

St. Paul reminds believers that bodily life is the realm in which the Holy Spirit works. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 COR. 6:19–20). John Kleinig explains: “So, paradoxically, my spiritual life, the life that is created and sustained by the Holy Spirit, is always lived in the body.”<sup>131</sup>

Life in the Spirit cannot be divorced from bodily life, but it must be distinguished. We are spiritually alive (ROM. 6:11), but our life here and now is lived in a fallen “body of death” (ROM. 7:24). We may speak of a redemption that is already accomplished in our justification by grace through faith: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law” (GAL. 3:13, note the past tense). Yet, at the same time, Paul speaks of us eagerly awaiting the completion of the Holy Spirit’s redeeming work of full bodily redemption. Only the return of Christ and the completion of His new creation — His new heaven and earth — will complete our redemption.

The “redemption of our bodies” (ROM. 8:23) is not yet, but it is certain, for Christ has taken our body of death for His own — reconciling us “in his body of flesh by his death” (COL. 1:22) and in exchange bestowing on our mortal bodies His resurrection (1 COR. 15). Our present “flesh and blood” cannot receive this new bodily life for “the perishable cannot

<sup>130</sup> Note also Paul’s ongoing contrast between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh in Rom. 7 and 8 as well as in Gal. 5:13–26.

<sup>131</sup> Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 10. He adds: “Since the spiritual life is produced by the Holy Spirit for people with bodies, Christian spirituality is embodied piety.”

inherit the imperishable” (1 COR. 15:50). But our mortal, perishable bodies “will be changed” (1 COR. 15:53) and “clothed with immortality.” For these reasons the believer lives within both a now and a not yet: “So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin” (ROM. 7:25).

What the apostle says is echoed in the lives of all the baptized, caught in the midst of this “now but not yet” reality — trusting Christ and His life and righteousness even while thoughts, words, and deeds betray that faith. Despite our confession that “the good I want to do I do not do” and the wretchedness of guilt for all we have done and said and thought that is wrong (ROM. 7:14–25) — despite all of that we nevertheless live in a sure hope of freedom from the enslaving power of sin and death because, by faith, we have received the promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation — of redemption in its fullness (ROM. 8:23–24).

Thus, as Kleinig suggests,

Scripture paints two pictures of bodily life on earth. On the one hand, it shows us how God regards the human body, the body that he creates in his image, redeems by the incarnation of his Son, and sanctifies for life with him through the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, it also shows us how completely it has been corrupted by rebellion against God, how badly it has been misused to damage other people and the world around it, and how tragically it is doomed to die.<sup>132</sup>

We have looked at the deep rebellion that is at work in human sexuality as it is subjected to the fall into sin. What might a positive statement of the Christian sexual life look like?

## C. A CHASTE AND DECENT LIFE

Only by the work of the Holy Spirit can there be sanctification. So also, only by the Spirit can there be the sanctity called for in the Sixth Commandment, that “we lead a sexually pure [chaste] and decent life in what we say and do.”<sup>133</sup> Chastity, by definition, refers to the virtue of sexual purity, and it is to be practiced by all Christians, whether married or single. Chastity precludes any sexual activity outside of the parameters ordained by God. For the married, chastity restricts all such sexual activity to that between husband and wife; for the unmarried, chastity means to refrain from any sexual activity whatsoever until they are married and thus can be active in a manner pleasing to God.<sup>134</sup>

### 1. Desire and the Christian

Sexual desire is an aspect of God’s good creation. Adam’s exclamation: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (GEN. 2:23) is a word of joyful thanksgiving for this good gift. The desire of woman for man and man for woman remains a gift, even in a fallen world, as expressed in Scripture: “Oh, that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! For your love is better than wine” (SONG OF SONGS 1:2 RSV; CF. 7:10). Before the fall — before humanity’s inward turn toward the self (*incurvatus in se*) — desire was response to a gift given. So Adam’s exclamation, “This at last!” (GEN. 2:23) drips with a joyful desire to have and to hold the Creator’s gift of Eve. Such desire for one who is present (and a present from God!) emerges also for the redeemed in delighted desire for a spouse God has given (PROV. 5:18). For, even as the fall continues its heavy hand on Christians, the sanctifying Spirit is nevertheless leading them out of their inward turn.

Yet, where sin reigns unopposed, desire is horribly twisted. Sin makes desire a bitter ally, for now it is no longer delight in a gift given, but a demand for what is not present. Desire for what we do not have leads to tension instead

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<sup>132</sup> Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 16.

<sup>133</sup> LSCwE, 14 and 93.

<sup>134</sup> Historically speaking, celibacy refers to the state of singleness, applying both to those who have never been married and to those who have been married but subsequently divorced or widowed. Celibacy may be by choice or circumstance; it may be temporary or permanent. Continence, on the other hand, refers to absolute restraint from any sexual activity. Those who are married may practice continence by refraining from sexual activity, either by agreement or due to some other unavoidable necessity, such as health concerns or distance due to travel. Those who are single practice continence so long as they are single; that is the shape of their chastity. The celibate must practice continence in order to be chaste. The married may practice continence, yet what makes them chaste is limiting all sexual activity to marital relations alone. On these terms and their historical use, see the relevant entries in Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973).

of joy (GEN. 3:16), to covetousness instead of thanksgiving (DEUT. 5:21), to violence instead of tenderness (PROV. 13:2). While God intends desire for good, it too often culminates not only in sexual immorality, but in idolatry itself (COL. 3:5).

The desires of fallen humanity flow out of the human heart and wreak havoc in human behavior (MATT. 15:18–20A). Murder comes from hatred's desire for revenge. Adultery comes from dissatisfied desire with one's spouse or jealous desire for another's spouse. Every kind of fornication flows out of desires for some forbidden behavior or someone God has withheld from us. Theft flows from desire for the things that are not one's own. Desire crouches at the neighbor's door (GEN. 4:7), primed to do harm, not good.

To desire something is to will it. All of this, therefore, is simply to acknowledge the bondage of the human will. Before redemption, all are spiritually dead (EPH. 2:1; COL. 2:13) and human will or desire is bound to seek only what God forbids and has not given or intended.

God's Word testifies that the natural, unregenerated human mind, heart, and will are not only completely turned away from God in all divine matters, but are also perverted and turned toward every evil and against God. Likewise, they are not only weak, impotent, incapable, and dead to the good, but through original sin they have also been tragically perverted, poisoned through and through, and corrupted. The result is that by character and by nature they are very angry with God, rebellious against him, hostile to him, and far too energetic, vigorous, and active in everything that is displeasing and repugnant to God. Genesis 8[:21]: "The inclination of the human heart is evil from youth."<sup>135</sup>

Fallen humanity, so "very angry with God, rebellious against him, hostile to him, and far too energetic, vigorous, and active in everything that is displeasing and repugnant to God," requires redemption, regeneration, new birth, "a new and right spirit." "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved" (EPH. 2:4–5; CF. JOHN 3:3–8; 1 PETER 1:3, 23; TITUS 3:5).

The new birth and new life given in Christ, the Christ-life, is a holy life (EPH. 1:4; 5:27; 2 TIM. 2:21). "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 PETER 1:14–16).

In such a condition human desire is being restored. "The living spirit of a believer, which has been created and is kept physically alive by God's Spirit, has also been recreated and revived for eternal life with God by his Spirit."<sup>136</sup> The Holy Spirit is at work bending the believer's desire toward God and His gifts and purposes. His work is to make us the "obedient children" Peter speaks of. Obedience begins within, as the Spirit turns us away from the passions that seek to grasp and covet and selfishly claim for the self and turns us toward the holy desire to please God.

To have godly desire restored is also to be "holy in all your conduct." Holy obedience begins within, but it flows outwardly in holy conduct.

This is the life we see in Christ Jesus. He is holy: "in him there is no sin" (1 JOHN 3:5; CF. HEB. 4:15) even though, "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 COR. 5:21)

## 2. Chastity and Christlikeness

### a. The chastity of Jesus

Christ has fulfilled the law in our stead. "For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (ROM. 5:18–19; CF. GAL. 3:13; 4:4–5). In Christ — in the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God — lies the salvation of the world. The law's condemnation ends with His obediently providing the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world (His vicarious satisfaction of the law's righteous demand).

<sup>135</sup> FC SD II, 17; KW 547.

<sup>136</sup> Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 14.

Thus, our Lord's obedience means that all the commandments have been perfectly fulfilled for us. This includes the command: "You shall not commit adultery." We see in Jesus a perfect chastity. He is a man, tempted as we are in every way (HEB. 4:15) — and so to all "the works of the flesh" including "sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these" (GAL. 5:19-21). Yet, His is "a chaste and decent life in word and deed."

Note well that Christ's chastity does not lie in His not marrying, but in His sexually pure life. He surprises His disciples with His willingness to interact with women about every aspect of their lives. As He encounters a woman at Jacob's well in Samaria, her entire life is open to the Messiah (see JOHN 4:1-42). Another woman trusts that she can come to Jesus with the most intimate of problems and is healed (MATT. 9:20-22). His relationships with women can therefore be deeply intimate, but they are always honorable. Even when intensely personal, they are without even a shadow of anything amorous or concupiscent. So His followers include many women believers, a fact that shows His attentiveness to their needs, His openness to them as disciples, and their eager willingness to support His work (MARK 15:14; LUKE 8:2; 23:27). Despite the Gnostic and Hollywood fantasies about Jesus's relationship with Mary Magdalene,<sup>137</sup> the Gospels reveal Him not as Mary's husband, but as her healer from the demonic and her gentle Lord, evident in His tender compassion toward her on Easter morning (LUKE 8:2; JOHN 20:11-17). The devotion of the women followers is so evident that they are mentioned a number of times especially after Jesus' condemnation, crucifixion, death and resurrection (e.g., LUKE 23: 49, 55; 24:10, 22, 24).

All of this shows the powerful effect of the loving, chaste relationship Jesus had with women. In His chastity He treats women not as sexual objects but as in every way "heirs with [men] of the grace of life" (1 PETER 3:7) and thus bestows the highest dignity on women.

## **b. Chastity as embodied love**

As Christ's own people and His disciples, we too are called to a holy chastity. Ours flows out of faith in the One who has fulfilled the law on our behalf, so it is not a chastity of merit. It is a matter of glad obedience because of our redemption, not an obligation for us to earn redemption. The law never ceases to condemn us, nevertheless, the chaste life of the believer springs from the love for God who is love (1 JOHN 4:16).

Where there is faith, there is love. Love is faith enacted (GAL. 5:6) by obedience to the commandments (1 JOHN 5:2). Chastity is an embodied love, an example of love shaping actions and behavior. Faith knows God's gift of bodily life, His redemption of our bodies in Christ, and His sanctifying of our bodies by His Spirit. Our baptismal washing is the sign of the Spirit's presence and work — sanctifying the justified. "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 COR. 6:11).

The believer is not "washed ... sanctified ... justified" for no reason. And this Spirit-work does not involve only our spirits as faith is given and nurtured. It is also a *bodily* work. The Spirit's indwelling makes each believer's *body* "a temple of the Holy Spirit within you" (1 COR. 6:19). Paul thoroughly expounds this (1 COR. 6:12-20):

"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be enslaved by anything. "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food"—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

<sup>137</sup> The Gnostic *Gospel of Philip* and the purported fragment called the *Gospel of Jesus' Wife* suggest that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married. Dan Brown's popular novel and movie, *The Da Vinci Code*, makes the same claim. These and other Gnostic writings date long after the New Testament and while Brown's *Da Vinci Code* implies that there is good evidence for the contention, the claim is completely without merit. See also Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (NY: Harcourt, 1993).

Note the concerns the Apostle raises. First, the Corinthians evidently are exulting in being “justified by faith apart from works of the law” (ROM. 3:28). However, because of that teaching some falsely assume that their bodily life is now of little importance. Paul portrays the character of sin as an enslaving force. Set free “spiritually” they fail to see that they have willingly embraced slavery. As Luther says, they have foolishly chosen “a free choice which is not free, which is as sensible as calling fire cold and earth hot.”<sup>138</sup>

Paul contrasts two opposing purposes or meanings of bodily life as sexual beings: one is focused on fornication (*porneia*; τῆ πορνεία; sexual sin, immorality, 1 COR. 6:13). “Some of the Corinthian Christians seem to have defended their right to continue consorting with prostitutes.”<sup>139</sup> This is not to say that everyone in the Corinthian church was participating in prostitution, but it recognizes that by tolerating those who did, Corinthian believers disconnected bodily behavior from their identity in Christ. Sexual behavior was of no greater significance than eating. “When hungry, eat what you want. When desiring sexual release, satisfy the desire as you wish.” In effect, whatever the body wants, it should have. It is a matter of serving — serving the self as a body.<sup>140</sup>

The contrasting understanding of bodily life, including sexuality, focuses on the body as God’s creation, subject to him. The body is intended “for the Lord” not for self-satisfaction. So the Apostle unfolds this understanding. First, the bodies of believers — not just their “soul” or “spirit” — will be raised with Christ because embodied believers are members of Christ, the risen Lord (1 COR. 6:15).<sup>141</sup> Paul asserts this in contrast to an apparent Corinthian slogan that God will destroy the body with its implication that bodily life and actions are unimportant.<sup>142</sup> Here the resurrection means that the body has enduring significance and to join one’s body to a prostitute is to join Christ with that prostitute. This is the profound truth of Genesis 2:24 about sexual intercourse: “The two will become one flesh.”

The standard — fidelity in marriage or sexual abstinence outside of marriage — determines sexual morality. Thus the command is: “Flee from sexual immorality.” It is deadly, says Paul. It is of a different character than other sins because they are “outside the body,” but sexual sin is sin against the body (1 COR. 6:18). The full meaning of this verse is a matter of great debate.<sup>143</sup> One certainty must be stressed, however, and one misperception should be identified. The misperception is the belief that sexual sin is the greatest of all sins. Paul speaks only of the character of sexual sin, not its gravity in comparison to other sins. The certainty is the emphasis in verses 19 and 20 that sexual sin denies the high purpose of the believer’s body: that the believer’s body is God’s temple, purchased by Christ for the purpose of glorifying God.

Thus, Paul has argued, not only does the sexually immoral person sin against the church and her spiritual union with the Lord (1 COR. 6:15–17), but he also defiles his own body. This body, which has been consecrated by God as a temple of his Holy Spirit (1 COR. 3:16–17), which has been bought for a price, and which is destined for resurrection, has now been torn from its spiritual union with Christ and joined in an unholy union. Again, that sinful desecration takes place in all sinful liaisons—in any sexual act besides that between husband and wife.<sup>144</sup>

On the deepest level, the contrast of serving bodily desires versus chastity will always be between serving God and serving Satan. The human quest for sexual fulfillment is indeed a form of idolatry. Luther is again on the mark. Whom will we serve? “Thus the human will is placed between the two like a beast of burden. If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills, as the psalm says: ‘I am become as a beast [before thee] and I am always with thee’ [PSALM 73:22]. If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills; nor can it choose to run to either of the two riders or

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<sup>138</sup> *Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:67.

<sup>139</sup> Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 214.

<sup>140</sup> The echoes of incipient Gnosticism seem evident, a perspective that would coincide with the Stoic-Cynic view that the “wise” need no external curbs on their behavior. See Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, 214.

<sup>141</sup> Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, 217–19; cf. Acts 9:4; Rom. 7:4; 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 3:6; 4:12; 5:23; Col. 3:15.

<sup>142</sup> Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, 215.

<sup>143</sup> On the possible nuances of meaning, see Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, 219–20.

<sup>144</sup> Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, 220.

to seek him out, but the riders themselves contend for the possession and control of it.”<sup>145</sup>

So it is that Lewis’ simple standard for Christian conduct remains true, despite its unpopularity: either faithful marriage or total abstinence.<sup>146</sup> While popular western culture has made the fulfillment of any and all sexual desires the key to a fulfilled life, the Word of God makes the discipline of sexual desire a matter of life and death.

To say the body is “for the Lord” therefore means that sexual activity is not something in the realm of free choice for the believer, like deciding whether to have cereal or eggs for breakfast. It is a matter of right and wrong — and sexual sin is no mere peccadillo. So any “immorality” is forbidden to the believer as contrary to a bodily life for the Lord.

Yet, the exclusive focus on the forbidden misses the constructive purpose of Paul’s instruction. He concludes, “So glorify God in your body” (1 COR. 6:20). In love for God who bestows our bodies, the Christian is called to see that embodied life is the realm in which God is glorified — thanked, praised, served and obeyed.<sup>147</sup> Chastity is, therefore, love embodied for God and the neighbor. Freed from the self-absorption of lust and its actions, the chaste and decent life is one in which God’s love for us can be returned with a life more directly devoted to Him and our neighbor.

### **i. Chastity as obedient love**

To be justified by grace through faith is to be “in Christ” (ROM. 8:1). A chaste and decent life flows from unity with Christ by faith. This faith desires to serve the God who justifies — to serve Him as redeemed, embodied people. Faith aspires to the kind of sanctification that will “glorify God in your body” (1 COR. 6:20). In his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul exhorts believers as those who have been “reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him” (COL. 1:22). Having received Christ as Lord by grace through faith, we “walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (COL. 2:6-7). Then, in the third chapter, he portrays specific facets of the new life of those who “have been raised with Christ” and are therefore to “seek the things that are above” (COL. 3:1).

And what does it mean to “seek the things that are above”? To put to death “earthly” things (COL. 3:5). Here he first names “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” But included with them are “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk” together with lying to one another. This manner of life is ours since we “have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (COL. 3:9-10). Life in Christ is a putting off with the old self, on with the new self. Paul then turns away from the earthly things toward the things of the new self, “the things that are above,” namely: “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and ... forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you” (COL. 3:12-13). And then, “above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (COL. 3:14).

Note then how Paul portrays the life that has been “raised with Christ” and seeks “the things that are above.” It disciplines the body by restraining the old self; a discipline that repudiates all immorality, sexual or otherwise (3:5). It then discards the old self’s corrupt heart and lips (COL. 3:9-10). But to take off all these soiled things leaves us in need of new garments, which God alone can supply by his Spirit — the virtues listed in Colossians 3:12-13 bound together in love’s perfect harmony.

Here we see that the chaste and decent life is bound inexorably with love’s “perfect harmony.” It is the “no” to crass sins that allows love’s beautiful virtues to shine.

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<sup>145</sup> *Bondage of the Will*, LW 33:65-66.

<sup>146</sup> See p. 30, above.

<sup>147</sup> See SC II, First Article.

## ii. Chastity as sacrificial love

Our Lord issues a sobering call to His disciples: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (MATT. 16:24). Paul speaks of a bodily sacrifice in Romans 12:1: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” This call should not be softened or trivialized as a small thing. It impacts everything in life, including our sexuality. The Bible’s call to a chaste and decent life demands the sacrifice of human desires, pleasures, and even a certain level of physical relief and release. It entails a cross that will include the denial of many wants and some needs. For all believers of every age, it means the denial of every desire for sexual fulfillment and pleasure that contravenes the bond of husband and wife.

An immediate objection follows: that it is unfair to the unmarried if the only acceptable setting for sexual activity is between husband and wife. Yes, biblical teaching exclusively allows for sexual activity in the bonds of marriage and withholds it from all who are unmarried. The married and the unmarried are not treated equally in that respect. “The union of husband and wife extends to the most intimate sharing in the act of sexual intercourse. The complete physical sharing of husband and wife is characterized by relaxation, enjoyment, and freedom from guilt.”<sup>148</sup> And this is not just temporally, but also spiritually beneficial. “For it is better to marry than to burn with passion,” writes Paul (1COR. 7:9). Only the married man and woman can provide to the other the healing purpose of marriage in the restraint of sin. “Sexual appetites need to be controlled and disciplined. Marriage functions under God’s ordinance to domesticate our passion and channel it in ways which, to some extent, bring it back into accord with the Creator’s order.”<sup>149</sup>

This sexual good is denied to the unmarried by the Christian ethic of marriage and sexuality. Although countless unmarried men and women long to be married, for many their desire for both the temporal and spiritual blessings of godly marriage remains unfulfilled. Many who have not received a gift like Paul’s — a chaste celibacy that he happily commended to all who could receive it — instead “burn” without a husband or wife, with no opportunity to rejoice in a sexual relationship that is godly, fulfilling, and life-giving.

Such a reality cannot be denied. It also may not be used to support violation of the commandments. It is not uncommon for Christians with same-sex desires to argue that they ought to be able to marry in order to fulfill their sexual desires and not “burn with passion.” As already noted, this cannot be conceded.<sup>150</sup> Every commandment creates greater and lesser challenges to individuals, based on their personal setting. Those who are oppressed by unjust authorities will face a greater temptation to dishonor authority than those who have “good and gentle” individuals in authority over them (1PETER 2:18). So, too, in the realm of sexuality, all people spend part of life in the unmarried state and thus have the command of chaste celibacy to obey during their single years. Yet, Scripture does not hesitate to require chastity of every Christian. Meilaender states:

Nevertheless, without underestimating the anarchic power of sexual appetite, we need not characterize chastity as impossible for the unmarried, and we have every reason to encourage those who are unmarried—whether by choice or by accident of one’s personal history—to seek to cultivate within themselves the discipline to live in ways that honor our creation as sexual beings.<sup>151</sup>

Can celibacy be a cross and a burden? Yes. And, as such, it is an encouragement to pursue godly marriage for the Christian who burns with desire. But it is also a specific call to take up one’s cross along the way of holy living — an avenue of presenting one’s body as a living sacrifice.

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<sup>148</sup> HS 1981, 14.

<sup>149</sup> HS 1981, 21.

<sup>150</sup> A more personal approach that encourages a biblically faithful response to homosexual desire is evident in Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, whose conversion led her to repudiate her former lesbianism as “a case of mistaken identity.” See *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ* (Pittsburg: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2021), 156, Kindle Edition. See also Mark A. Yarhouse and Olga Zaporozhets, *Costly Obedience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019).

<sup>151</sup> Meilaender, “Sixth Commandment,” 238.

### 3. Chastity in marriage and apart from marriage

The NT teaches chastity and a godly life for both the unmarried and the married believer, but it has a different shape in these two settings. More than 16 centuries ago Gregory of Nazianzus said: “How great is the difference between pastoral counsel for the married and the unmarried.”<sup>152</sup> That difference is acute when one considers the topic of how a sexually pure and decent life is to be lived.

#### a. Chastity in marriage

Jesus, in forbidding divorce for His followers, seeks to preserve not only marriage, but also sexual fidelity within it. He shows that infidelity destroys a marriage, having divided what God has joined together (MATT. 19:1–9). What is true from the beginning (MATT. 19:8) continues in marriages today. Husbands and wives are called by God to a full and faithful love that takes to heart that God has joined them together. His creation of marriage is the establishment of a man-woman relationship in which the two are one flesh. As the woman is created from the man, so also in every marriage are the man and woman one flesh.

God’s Word exalts marriage: “House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the Lord” (PROV. 19:14). The gift of marriage and children is known to be a great blessing from God Himself (PSALM 128:3–4). In light of this precious gift, it is no wonder that God harshly condemns all that destroys marriage in Malachi 2:14–16:

[T]he Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her,” says the Lord, the God of Israel, “covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.”

These verses from Malachi remind us that in making a man and woman one in marriage, God establishes a life-long covenant between them — one of fruitful love that, where God provides, results in godly offspring. To love is in stark contrast with divorce, which is here labeled a form of violence. There can be no mistake that marital chastity is grounded in a loving, faithful, procreative, and therefore *sexual* bond.

Chastity within marriage, then, is a matter of sexual purity within a relationship that is inherently active sexually. This is at the heart of biblical teaching on chastity. In Paul’s first epistle to the troubled Corinthian church, he devotes a lengthy chapter to practical matters of human sexuality both in and outside the context of marriage. His directions may be startling to the sensibilities of people today. He refers, for example, to what may have been a common saying among some Corinthian Christians: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman” (1 COR. 7:1).<sup>153</sup> Paul, however, does not condemn sexual relations or urge everyone to be celibate. Although he says that “it is good to remain single, like I am” (1 COR. 7:8) he affirms that the majority of people are called to the vocation of marriage. This is the case, says Paul, “because of the temptation to sexual immorality.”<sup>154</sup> In the flight from sexual immorality (1 COR. 6:18) it is evident then, that for the married couple, their sexual relationship is to be marked first and foremost by fidelity in every way. God intends for marriage to be the calling wherein husband and wife serve one another. This includes them not withholding themselves sexually from their spouses (1 COR. 7:5). The development of a healthy, joyful sexual life is a significant aspect of chastity in marriage.

Marriage also, however, involves times of continence, or abstinence from sexual activity. Paul refers only to the idea of spouses refraining from sexual activity in order to devote themselves to prayer (1 COR. 7:5). But other times when sexual activity is not possible or practical are also part of the pattern of married life — during an illness, during

<sup>152</sup> Oration II, 28.

<sup>153</sup> See Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, 224–25, on the matter of whether the quotation in 7:1 is Paul’s own assertion or a saying by the Corinthians. Lockwood, with many modern commentators, believes the statement was a Corinthian saying rather than Paul’s expression.

<sup>154</sup> The Greek is *dia de tas porneias*, which literally is “because of the immoralities,” using a plural in place of a singular “immorality.” The plural may look back to some of the kinds of sexual immorality Paul has already addressed in the epistle including incest, adultery, homosexuality, and prostitution. Lockwood suggests that visiting prostitutes was the most prevalent immorality. See Lockwood, *1 Corinthians*, 229, 231.

a period where one spouse must be away from the other, because of prolonged infirmities, due to disparities in the physical effects of aging, and so forth. There will also be times when a spouse withholds himself or herself intentionally. Whether this is for understandable or necessary reasons or not, the other spouse is not free to take this as an excuse for sexual immorality. It is simply a reality of a fallen world that marriages will experience periods — even long periods — during which sexual activity between spouses does not occur. All of this is part of the challenge of chastity for the married.

### **b. Chastity for the unmarried**

Even if every Christian were to marry, none would be married throughout life. Marriage may be delayed for those who will marry (as it is increasingly today). And every married couple eventually will be separated from one another by death. And, of course, many people will not marry, some by choice and others by circumstance. In our broken, fallen world, marriage will too often end because of divorce.

For the unmarried, chastity is still required. And without the outlet of sexual relations in marriage, chastity will be a matter of self-control — that is, abstaining from sexual relationships and acts. For some, self-control is a gift — a charism (1 COR. 7:7) to echo Paul. For such persons, like Paul,<sup>155</sup> to be unmarried will not be a sacrifice. Rather, they will be freed from a whole realm of familial duty and responsibility that demands time and attention, to dedicate far more of themselves to serving Christ and His church.<sup>156</sup> This is the great strength and promise of celibate chastity.

For others who are unmarried, however, sexual self-control is not given as a gift. Rather, they face an ongoing desire for sexual relations and a sexual relationship (they “burn,” to quote Paul). To them, as noted before, Paul counsels marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. He does so rather matter-of-factly, seeming to see the decision to marry as something easily accomplished. In part this is because he is addressing some believers who are betrothed or have otherwise made marriage plans. But to counsel marriage today is somewhat different. We have earlier noted that a growing number of adults in North America are unmarried. Many — especially many Christians — want to be married but are not. Moreover, they want to marry in the Christian faith to a husband or wife who shares their beliefs and who is committed to a biblical understanding of marriage, to the gift of children, and to the responsibility to nurture those children in faith.

The church’s response to those who experience an unfulfilled desire for marriage must begin with a recognition of the problem. A chaste and decent life in a highly sexualized world is challenging to everyone, and especially to those without the gift of celibacy who long for a spouse. To recognize the needs of the single person is critical.

Church preaching and teaching can be of some benefit. One basic truth is worthy of note: Scripture is more inclined to address individual Christians as “brothers” (with “sisters” implied) than it is to speak to individual spouses or families. This at least suggests that we take more seriously this fact: all of us are brothers and sisters in Christ — that is our highest Christian identity, even higher than that we may be a Christian husband or wife, as significant as that is.

The church may also be able to help diminish unrealistic expectations about marriage. In light of the heavily romanticized views of marriage today, there is a tendency to expect that marriage demands the discovery of some sort of “soul mate.” Church teaching can counter this with the reminder that the foundation for marriage is not primarily an emotional connection or some kind of love-at-first-sight bolt out of the blue, but a commitment to life-long fidelity according to the Word of God. In light of that, a more down-to-earth view of seeking a spouse could result. Romanticized distortions of marriage, writes Stanley Hauerwas, should “remind us that if we are to sustain marriage as a Christian institution, we will not do it by concentrating on marriage itself. Rather, it will require a

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<sup>155</sup> In 1 Cor. 7, Paul refers to the unmarried as being in the same circumstance as he is. Whether Paul was himself a widower or had never married cannot be determined conclusively. Luther believed him a widower. Lockwood, with Luther, argues that rather than translating the phrase “to the unmarried and the widows,” it would be better to read “to the widowers and the widows.” See *1 Corinthians*, 234–36.

<sup>156</sup> Paul refers to “worldly troubles” (1 COR. 7:28), anxiety about pleasing one’s spouse, and divided interests (1 COR. 7:28, 32–34).

community that has a clear sense of itself and its mission and the place of family within that mission.”<sup>157</sup>

Even if Christians were to adopt a more thoughtful and biblical way of approaching marriage, there will still be the reality of many unmarried believers who have an unfulfilled longing for marriage but are required to exercise the discipline of a celibate lifestyle nonetheless. There is no avoiding the difficulty this entails. For too many, their unfulfilled desires will result in willingness to engage in sexual liaisons apart from marriage. For others, lusts will push them toward pornography and masturbatory behavior. For still others, their unsatisfied longing for a spouse will result in loneliness, despair, and depression.

A chaste and decent life in a highly sexualized world is challenging to everyone, and especially to those who long for a spouse. Recognition of the needs of the single person is critical. Many single Christians have said that their church is so focused on families that they feel out of place. Others may fall into the trap of letting their sinful behavior alienate them from the communion of confessing sinners and forgiven saints. At a minimum, therefore, this calls for honest conversations and for exploring settings for fellowship and support for the unmarried.

These are challenges for responsible pastoral care. A combination of compassion and fidelity to the high standards of God’s Word is called for from pastors who hear the confessions of those who are caught in sinful behavior brought on by loneliness and lust. Additional counseling and support groups may also be available for recommendation. It is worth noting that resources are available to encourage unmarried chastity for Christians with same-sex attraction.<sup>158</sup> Similar resources are available for heterosexual Christians.<sup>159</sup>

Such considerations may appear to make life for the unmarried Christian nothing more than a grim acceptance of a burden. In our Lord’s teaching about the permanence of marriage, however, another thought emerges. To be sure, Christ is not averse to blunt teaching about the demands of the Christian life. Indeed, because He emphatically forbids divorce the disciples say that “it is better not to marry” (MATT. 19:10). His response acknowledges a certain truth in that assertion:

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.” (MATT. 19:11–12)<sup>160</sup>

“Eunuch” is seldom used today, but in the biblical world eunuchs were fairly common. Eunuchs were men who were sexually unable to marry either because of a lifelong condition or because of castration.<sup>161</sup> Jesus refers to such men as the first two examples of eunuchs. Then He adds a third kind of eunuch: “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.”

Jesus is obviously not commending self-castration. So what is He saying? At the very least, He says this much. Eunuchs — people who are not sexually active — have the opportunity to devote themselves to God’s kingdom. To do so is commended by our Lord, even though other Jewish teachers at that time viewed marriage as required for all people so that the command to be fruitful and multiply would be fulfilled. But Jesus here teaches that to be unmarried and chaste is not only godly, but is, indeed, a way of life that ought to be “received” if that is possible.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 174, but see also 155–66.

<sup>158</sup> See the resources noted above in fn. 150.

<sup>159</sup> See, e.g., Adriane Dorr Heins, *Hello, My Name Is Single* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014); and Joshua Cintron, *His Secret Addiction: Every Man’s Struggle* (Sayspire, 2012).

<sup>160</sup> Jesus’ words in Matt. 19:11–12 are challenging. As Jeffrey Gibbs has noted, the referent of the phrase “this saying” is debated. Does it refer to Jesus’ teaching about divorce being contrary to the will of God from the beginning, or does it refer to the disciples’ assumption that in light of that teaching it is better not to marry? Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34, ConcC* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 953–56.

<sup>161</sup> In some pagan religions, castration was viewed as the highest offering one could make to the gods. This was obviously contrary to biblical teaching and both the OT and later Judaism therefore strongly condemned any such practice so vehemently that the Law forbade eunuchs from even entering the temple courts (DEUT. 23:1). Jesus refers first to lifelong eunuchs (“from birth,” literally, “from the mother’s womb,” *eisin gar eunouchoi hoitines ek koilias mētros egennēthēsan houtōs*), then to the castrated (*kai eisin eunouchoi hoitines eunouchisthēsan hupo tōn anthrōpōn*).

<sup>162</sup> See Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 148.

Given such teaching from our Lord and Paul's similar counsel in 1 Corinthians 7 to the unmarried, the church ought to emphasize the positive dimension of unmarried, celibate life. The unmarried have a special opportunity for service to the Lord. To embrace this is in keeping with the apostle's reminder that "the present form of this world is passing away" (1 COR. 7:31) and this manner of "undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 COR. 7:35). The church ought to recognize the importance of this teaching and not be hesitant about asking unmarried Christian men and women to assume responsibilities and utilize their individual gifts and abilities.<sup>163</sup>

Such high regard for celibate chastity gets scant attention in the church today. To all the unmarried, whether celibacy is received as a gift or embraced out of obedience, this is a reminder of the meaning and high purpose of the single life for believers. While the Reformation rightly warned against the dangers and abusive results of enforced celibacy, the church today can benefit greatly from a reminder of the great potential and value when unmarried Christians devote themselves wholeheartedly to the Kingdom and its work. As Luther himself says in his 1522 treatise on marriage:

One should not regard any estate as better in the sight of God than the estate of marriage. In a worldly sense celibacy is probably better, since it has fewer cares and anxieties. This is true, however, not for its own sake but in order that the celibate may better be able to preach and care for God's word, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7[:32-34]. It is God's word and the preaching which make celibacy—such as that of Christ and of Paul—better than the estate of marriage.<sup>164</sup>

He adds elsewhere, "To be sure, there are some (albeit rare) exceptions whom God has especially exempted, in that some are unsuited for married life, or others God has released by a high, supernatural gift so that they can maintain chastity outside of marriage."<sup>165</sup>

### c. Chastity as witness

The chaste and decent life is an important witness to the world. In a life of chastity others will see individuals whose life and values stand in sharp contrast from the heavily sexualized lifestyle of American media and culture. Rather than the pursuit of sexual pleasure for its own sake, they will see people with a higher meaning and purpose — men and women whose joy is not a kind of bitter self-denial, but one of fruitful service that honors God and values other persons as His creatures, not objects for the pursuit of personal pleasure.<sup>166</sup> In chaste unmarried believers, this witness can be uniquely powerful (JER. 16:9).

Such a witness also points to the future hope of the Christian faith. We obviously know life in the new creation only in part, but among the glimpses of that new world where we are still embodied, we see a form that is far beyond our earthly bodies, imperishable, glorious and spiritual (1 COR. 15:42-44). In this new creation of the resurrection, we "neither marry nor are given in marriage" (MAT. 22:30). Despite the mystery in such words, we are led to expect something beyond the sexual and marital existence we now know. To live toward such a reality in the present age is not to despise any earthly blessing and pleasure of the present-time, but it is to see even something as precious as marriage to be only a passing gift.

Life for the Christian in this present age, despite all its seemingly "new" challenges, is ultimately no different than life for every earlier generation of the church. The God who has graciously redeemed us in the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of His Son calls us to faith active in love (GAL. 5:6). Love for God sees Him as our supreme good and His Word as the one unshakeable truth. It rejoices in being His creatures and delights in His commands. It

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<sup>163</sup> An example of this may be the encouragement of unmarried men to accept calls to serve in ministries where families with children might be reluctant to serve.

<sup>164</sup> LW 45:46-47.

<sup>165</sup> LC I/6, 211; KW, 414-15.

<sup>166</sup> Note this significant footnote (#4) from *HS 1981* on page 6:

This Scriptural assertion implies that the subject of human sexuality includes much more than the male/female relationship in marriage. While it has been necessary to limit this study to a basic discussion of the male/female duality as it pertains to marriage and certain other problems, such as homosexuality, the Commission recognizes that more could and needs to be said about how our creation as sexual beings affects a whole variety of relationships such as between parents and children, friends of the same sex as well as friends of the opposite sex, male and female colleagues, employers and employees, and many other personal encounters between the sexes.

blossoms and bears fruit in love for the neighbor.

Faith active in love is seen in every realm of life, including sexuality and marriage. Valuing God above all else, the Christian life sees our creation as male and female as gift and seeks to glorify God with the body He has given to each of us. It heeds the call to chastity in every circumstance. Christians view marriage as the typical vocation for most men and women and seek to honor Christ within it when that gift is given. Christians delight in the way God provides both relational and procreative blessings within marriage. Christians delight in the otherness of male and female, the help they give one another in joy and adversity, and the fact of a one-flesh union within which God grants the gift of children. Knowing God is the author of life by procreation, believers will welcome children and give thanks for them.

In the face of sin's present power, we see God's love in the way wives and husbands help to restrain sin in each other as their closest neighbor in Christ. We also see the importance of virtuous single men and women who at every stage of life and for whatever reason they are single embrace a life of sexual self-restraint either permanently or until such time as God gives them a spouse.

In brief, the Christian view of human sexuality is love for God overflowing in love for the neighbor.

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 JOHN 4:19-21)

## CONCLUSION

God's intention for human sexuality does not change. It does not evolve with time, nor does it adapt to cultural, social, legal, political or medical-scientific views of it. Perceptions of human sexuality may change, but God's design for it does not. Christians, however, bear witness to the truth of God's revelation about how this sovereign Creator God has made us, redeemed us, and sanctifies us. God has given us our bodies. He has redeemed us from the sin that has complicated how we view our bodies. He seeks to renew our hearts and minds so that we live in accordance with how He has made us.

In responding to resolutions from recent Synod conventions to update *Human Sexuality 1981*, the Commission has ultimately found nothing wrong or demanding correction. It has, rather, sought to do just what the resolutions requested: bring the teachings of that report into conversation with a vast array of new challenges to traditional Christian understandings of marriage and sexuality. Attitudes toward gender identity and dysphoria, homosexuality and homosexual marriage, and societal pressures regarding sexuality, among others, have changed markedly in the last four decades. While we categorically affirm the teachings of *Human Sexuality 1981*, we also must acknowledge the manifold differences that exist today and will face our children in the decades to come.

What this report puts forward, however, places its emphasis upon countering these current movements with the one thing that provides a firm basis for faithful Christian morality and sexual ethics: theology. We offer a biblical theology of human sexuality that revolves around a creedal, Trinitarian framework and presents our sexual identity, our sexual activities, and our sexual thoughts in light of the God who has created us, the God who redeems us from sin, and the God who sanctifies us as His people who live according to His Word. No other foundation will do. It will, as St. Paul says, "become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire" (1 COR. 3:13). Any foundation other than God's Word — "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw" will ultimately fail. God's Word, will not. "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever" (1 PETER 1:24-25).

Likewise, in keeping with the venerable tradition of Luther's catechism, the Commission urges the Christian ethic of "a chaste and decent life" as a model for how Christians should live in a culture that denies its basic moral foundations. All Christians — male and female, married and single, adult and youth, widowed and divorced — should value chastity in all their sexual dealings. Chastity should govern how we view our sexual identity and sexual activity, our sexual thoughts and sexual behaviors, our relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ, with husbands and wives in the flesh. Above all, it finds in Jesus Christ — the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord, the Savior of sinners and all

creation, the author and perfecter of our faith — the perfect example of chastity and decency. This Lord Jesus laid aside His rightful heavenly glory, withstood the temptations of the devil, became the perfect sacrifice upon the cross, rose from the dead, and accomplished the forgiveness of our sins. He has done what no sinful human being could. God's Word urges us to lead holy lives, by doing as Christ Himself did and taught us to do (EPH. 5:1-10). Yet, more than that, God's Word also offers forgiveness. God's Word offers forgiveness to those who have sinned. God's Word offers forgiveness to those who have sinned sexually. God's Word finally offers the healing truth of who we are and how we were created, that through repentance and faith we might in the Holy Spirit's power seek to live chaste and decent lives sexually until Christ returns to end all temptation and sin forever.

