

The Gospel, Gender and Sexuality

Written by the Gospel in Society Today (GiST) Team of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland, July 2020.

Introduction

This paper explores a theological framework for understanding and responding to key contemporary aspects of gender and sexuality. We delve into God's rich purposes in creating us as gendered people with sexual desires — purposes we can all ultimately rejoice in.

It is vital to articulate such a theological framework because while our gender and sexuality are inherently good aspects of God's creation, our understanding and experience of them in this fallen world is increasingly complicated. Messages from inside ourselves, a confused and changing culture and even from within our churches pull our desires, minds and moral barometers in all sorts of directions.

The task of speaking about and living out a biblical view of gender and sexuality can also generate enormous fear for Christians. On the one hand, we can fear 'giving in' to the pressure of worldly assumptions, subtly 'selling out' our trust in Christ and witness to the world. These fears are legitimate, but they can sometimes drive us to adopt a hostile, defensive and clumsy attitude towards anyone perceived as a threat. On the other hand, we can fear that the biblical view of gender and sexuality sounds so harsh, out-dated and even toxic in our context today that stating it can even hinder our gospel witness. We can fear further isolating those who struggle with gender and sexuality issues and who may have already been wounded by the church. These fears are also legitimate, but they can tempt us to hide aspects of biblical teaching, yield in subtle ways to cultural attitudes and become hostile towards others. Some of us might even quietly wonder whether the biblical picture is itself flawed.

However, these fears also present us with an opportunity to restate and re-examine our understanding of how core gospel doctrines shape our understanding of gender and sexuality. We have a Lord who gives each of us what we most need, telling us nothing but truth but also lavishing us with grace, mercy and love. The gospel of Christ must shape all we say and do if we are to love and help each other as his church in these areas.

The key theme of this paper is that in every aspect of our gender and sexuality, each of us needs to be profoundly reoriented to Christ. 'Orientation'¹ is the action of aligning or taking one's bearings relative to a specified position. The position relative to which we orient ourselves shapes our preferences, desires, thinking and doing.² As Christians, our position is a person — Jesus Christ.

This paper explores God's purposes in creating us as men and women oriented to relationships with each other by our relationships *in him*. For as Paul writes to the Ephesian believers, both Jew and Gentile: "In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the

¹ Note we are not referring here to 'sexual orientation' (See Part 4.2b for our analysis of this) but the concept of 'orientation' in general

² "Orientation," *Cambridge Online Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/orientation>

Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:21-22)

We will explore the calamitous effects of orienting our gender and sexuality by our subjective desires rather than God’s revelation in Christ. We will see that God has sent Christ to die and rise in order to address the complex depths of our wilful, enslaving disorientations — nobly cast and yet profoundly corrupted image-bearers that we are. We will discover that when God’s Spirit leads us to repentance and obedience, reorienting our thinking, acting, desiring and sense of identity in Christ, we are liberated indeed. No matter what the nature and strength of our desires, only our God has the love, power and will to bring wholeness and transformation to every aspect of our gender and sexuality. Therefore, our conversations about gender and sexuality both in our churches and with our community must always be shaped by the gospel.

Articulating a theologically-driven framework for understanding gender and sexuality within our context is the expressed desire of the 2019 PCQ Assembly. The writing of this paper was undertaken at the desire of the GiST team as well as in response to the following instructions of the 2019 PCQ Assembly:

(5) Note that in light of complex, and developing cultural and theological discussion in the areas of sexuality and gender, it is wise for the GiST Committee to undertake a review of the two papers previously approved by the Assembly:

- *The Gospel and Sexuality*
- *The Gospel and Gender, Transgender, Queer Theory and Intersex.*

(6) Request the GiST Committee undertake a review of these papers and bring any necessary amendments to the 2020 Assembly for approval.

In the process of reviewing these papers, GiST was also asked to consider the *Central Carolina Presbytery Study Committee Report on the 2018 Revoice Conference* of the Presbyterian Church in America as well as the *Revoice Statement on Sexual Ethics and Christian Obedience* and the *Revoice Statement on Public Posture and Christian Witness*.

Since the 2019 assembly, GiST has sought to retain the best elements of our past papers while undertaking a fresh assessment of the topics of gender and sexuality, particularly in light of issues raised by our rapidly changing context and the resources above. We have also judged it best to integrate these topics into the one paper. It is our prayerful desire to be of help to ministers, elders, those training for ministry and everyone in our local churches. We hope to both show our desperate need for Christ, leading us towards deeper wisdom and obedience, and also extend His invitation to trust Him. We are all desperately in need of Him, and we can all depend upon him, since we are all being reoriented ‘in him.’

Some issues of gender and sexuality are explored with more depth than others. Some important topics fall outside the scope of our paper and are only addressed in passing. We acknowledge that we cannot interact with every one of the vast arrays of voices speaking and writing on these issues.

One important aspect that has not yet been addressed are principles for engagement with our wider community. Our main focus in this paper is to articulate a clear, coherent, faithful and compassionate theological position. We have placed a summary and suggested resources for more in-depth reading on our website — www.gist.org.au

Part 1 – Oriented to Our Creator: Essential Aspects of Creation

It is vital to start our exploration of gender and sexuality in light of the gospel by looking at creation. The creation accounts show us what we must be certain about in order for the gospel to be coherent. They show us that God comes before everyone and everything, that he has made us in his image and to be accountable to him, that he speaks clearly and kindly to us, and that the order and structure of his design for us is inherently good. The goodness of God's design for us and his world continues despite the Fall and points ahead to the glorious new creation we will enjoy through his grace in Christ.

While we do not articulate a fully orbed theology of gender, marriage and singleness in this paper, we present some key coordinates in the following section followed by their fulfilment in Christ in Part 3.1.

1. We belong to God and he defines our identity³

Westminster Confession of Faith IV.i - *It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of His eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days; and all very good.*

IV.ii - *After God had made all other creatures, He created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfil it; [...]*

God is the creator of everyone and everything. He thus has the natural right to rule his creation and define what is good (Gen 1, 2; Heb 11:3). The goodness of creation resides in the way it manifests God's goodness, wisdom and eternal power. Indeed, creation is ultimately made by, through and for the glory of Christ (Col 1:16).

Because God grants our very being to us, he is the One in relation to whom our being is made to be oriented.⁴ Our identity is 'defined in terms of what God does to us and the relationship he creates with us and the destiny he appoints for us.'⁵ At the pinnacle of the creation story, God made human beings 'in' or 'according to' his image (Gen 1:26-27), for the purpose of fulfilling his commission to rule his earth, reflecting his moral likeness, making him known and obediently leading all of creation towards God's everlasting Sabbath.⁶ He has not set us adrift to find our sense of identity within ourselves and according to our own criteria. He has designed us to find our being and destiny in hearing his voice and responding with intelligent, wholehearted trust and obedience.⁷ Ultimately the Bible points to Christ as the one in whom God draws us into relationship with himself through the Spirit.

³ Note we are talking about the general concept of 'identity' at this point. For an exploration of 'sexual identity' see Part 4.2b.

⁴ Rob Smith, "Responding to the Transgender Revolution," *Christ on Campus Initiative* (2017): 4 - <http://www.christoncampuscci.org/responding-to-the-transgender-revolution/>
Akeel Bilgrami, "Notes toward the Definition of Identity," *Daedalus* 135.4 (2006): 5-14,

⁵ John Piper, "Christian Identity and Christian Destiny," <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/christian-identity-and-christian-destiny>

2. God has made us embodied, spiritual people

God's good design for human beings is that we are both body and spirit, wrapped into one psychosomatic unity. In Genesis 2:7, God makes Adam from the dust of the ground and then breathes life into him, giving him a dual but integrated nature (Matt 10:28; Mark 12:30). His substance is then shared with Eve (Gen 2:22-23). Our bodies are not non-personal bodies inhabited by non-bodily persons but the very locus of our personal presence.⁸ We express our wills and desires in and through our bodies and brains. Indeed, Paul's anthropology in 1 Cor 6:12-20 assumes the body is 'no mere external expression or instrument of the true person that resides in some inner essence. For Paul it is truer to say that a human being *is* a body rather than *has* a body'.⁹

Therefore, there is earthy corporeality to our identities. We should receive our bodies with thankfulness as an integral part of who we are. The body alone does not reveal God's purposes for us. But when we observe our bodies in light of Scripture, we can appreciate that every organ and sense has been exquisitely crafted and ordered to serve God's revealed purposes for us. Likewise, we can rejoice that we are not merely material beings, but also spiritual beings, intimately related to our Creator. Indeed, our bodies are charged with spiritual significance and declare his glory:

*For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful [...] (Psalm 139:13-14)*

Because God has designed our bodies in accord with his purposes for us, we cannot downgrade the importance of human bodily life, use our bodies for our own purposes or pit our desires against them.¹⁰ Instead, we should strive to discern God's will for us, body and spirit.

3. God has made us gendered people

Our gender is a basic, formative category of human identity.¹¹ From the very beginning, human beings have been created with a biological sex (male or female with different genetic, chromosomal and anatomical characteristics) intended to align with a fitting gender identity (the recognition of being a man or a woman) and gender roles in relationships (for example a husband or a wife). Although the alignment of gender identity with either male or female biological sex (biological essentialism) has been more or less assumed by Christians over the centuries, discussions in recent years have drawn out important latent meanings and applications of the Bible's teaching at this point.

⁶ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 397.

⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 52-53.

⁸ Ryan T. Anderson, *When Harry Met Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter, 2019), 105.

⁹ D. F. Wright, "Sexuality, Sexual Ethics," in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, eds. G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid (Illinois: Downers Grove, 1993), 872.

¹⁰ Christopher C. Roberts, *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage* (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2007), 240

¹¹ Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 114.

Firstly, the binary and dimorphic nature of gender is established with simple clarity (see also WCF IV.2):

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.

*So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)*

When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them "Mankind" when they were created. (Genesis 5:1-2)

The Genesis text slides seamlessly from God creating humanity in his image to creating them as 'male' and 'female' in his image. This implies two truths: humanity is fully expressed by male and female together, and each person images God equally as either a man or a woman.¹² Jesus affirms the binary nature of gender when he quotes Genesis 2:24, 'the creator made them male and female' in Matthew 19:4.

Secondly, we see that God did not create a third gender or a diversity of genders. Eunuchs (those who lack the ability to procreate) do appear in the Bible, usually as royal officials (2 Kings 9:30-32; Esther 4:4-5; Acts 8:27). In Matthew 19:12, Jesus talks about those who are born or rendered eunuchs as well as those who forsake marriage and choose to live like eunuchs. It is important to notice, however, that eunuchs are never presented as a third gender but as males who, by birth or by injury, are unable to procreate.¹³ Male and female are never portrayed as poles at either end of a gender spectrum.

Thirdly, we see that a person's biological sex reveals and determines both their actual or objective gender identity and potential gender roles. The Genesis text moves seamlessly from the adjectives 'male' (*zakhar*) and 'female' (*neqevah*) in chapter one to the nouns 'man' (*'ish*) and 'woman' (*'ishshah*) applied to Adam and Eve in chapter two.¹⁴ Adam and Eve then become 'husband' and 'wife' respectively (Gen 2:24-25). Binary sex and apposite gender identity and relational roles then continue through the biblical narrative eg. sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, kings and queens. There is no sign that a person's biological sex and gender identity can naturally or rightly vary or be at odds within the one person.

Fourthly, we see that the two genders are made to be profoundly oriented to their Creator. Their primary life-giving relationship is with their God. They are both made in God's image. They both bear moral responsibility towards God. They are also both entrusted with the task of exercising dominion over creation in obedience to God (Gen 1:28).¹⁵

Together they also mirror something of God's relationality through harmony in binary difference. God himself is fundamentally relational. The relationship between Father, Son and Spirit is the epitome of intimate, trusting, harmonious relationship. (John 14:20-21; 16:12-15). God is love (1 John 4:16) and he lavishes his love on human beings, both through the beautifully ordered workings of his creation and in his saving deeds. Relationships between men and women echo this. The unity and plurality seen in Genesis 1:27, as both 'him' and 'them' are made in God's

¹² Gospel, Society and Culture Committee, "The Transgender Moment, the Gospel and the Church: A Report to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of NSW," (2019): 8 - <http://gsandc.org.au/the-transgender-moment/>

¹³ G, S & C, "The Transgender Moment," 8.

Smith, "Responding to the Transgender Revolution," 13.

¹⁴ Smith, "Responding to the Transgender Revolution," 11.

¹⁵ Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God*, 113.

image, hint at the plurality and unity we see in God in Genesis 1:26 (let *us* make man in *our* image).¹⁶ Paul points out in 1 Cor 11:3 that ordered relationships between men and women reflect the order of Trinitarian relationships. We are, in a way, God's books, communicating something of his nature to the world through our embodied relationships. However, we must be careful not to press more detailed comparisons between Trinitarian and gendered relationships. As Sanders says, 'These are two doctrinal tracts which are widely separated from each other in a total theological system, and which must be doctrinally articulated according to very different internal logics.'¹⁷

While the unfolding biblical story reveals a much fuller picture of the way God's redemptive love for his people is displayed in male-female relationships (particularly marriage), at creation we already see that men and women are not made to be at war or to collapse into a 'one size fits all' gender package.¹⁸ They are made both similar and different, fine-tuned to reflect their Creator and fulfil his task for them in harmonised, complementary ways. Being both made in God's image (Gen 1:26-27), they share equal dignity, worth, purpose and blessing. When God presents Eve to Adam, he bursts into ecstatic poetry at the sight of a true companion:

*This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh
She shall be called Women
Because she was taken out of Man. (Genesis 2:23)*

However, Adam and Eve are also made at different times and from different origins (Gen 2:7, 22; 1 Cor 11:7-8). Paul draws on these differences in Genesis to highlight different gender roles and responsibilities. Adam is the firstborn with primary responsibility for fulfilling God's purposes and Eve is a helper who is fit in every way to accompany him (Gen 2:18, 20-22; 1 Cor 11:7-8; 1 Tim 2:13).¹⁹

In the creation account, these differences are expressed first in purposeful, ordered patterns of loving relating within marriage to the opposite gender and family life (Gen 2:24). These patterns also shape responsibilities within the church or God's household (1 Tim 2, 3:15, 1 Timothy 5:1-2). Indeed, patterns of gender relating within marriage and family have the power to organise, build and secure whole communities and societies.²⁰ Men can be called to be faithful as husbands, fathers, sons, friends, leaders within church families, amongst many other roles at different times in their lives. Women can be called to be faithful as wives, mothers, daughters, friends, and leaders and teachers of women within church families amongst many other roles at different times in their lives (Titus 2:1-8). Thus, gender differentiation is indispensable to God's design for humanity, both for married and single people.

God-given purposes and roles within marriage, family and church also ground notions of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.²¹ While this is an area for further research, we can notice there is a refreshing lack of gender stereotypes in terms of styles, interests and personality in both Genesis and the biblical story as a whole. Indeed, Andreas and Margaret Kostenberger argue that many ideas of masculinity and femininity 'owe more to cultural perceptions than biblical guidance'.²² For

¹⁶ Claire Smith, *God's Good Design: What the Bible Really Says About Men and Women* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2012), 166.

¹⁷ Fred Sanders, "The Trinity in Gender Debates," *Patheos* (2012) - <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/scriptorium/2012/10/the-trinity-in-gender-debates/>

¹⁸ G, S & C, "The Transgender Moment," 11.

¹⁹ Smith, *God's Good Design*, 36, 63.

²⁰ Roberts, *Creation and Covenant*, 243.

²¹ Andreas and Margaret Kostenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman: A Biblical Theological Survey* (Illinois: Crossway, 2014), 285.

²² Kostenberger, *God's Design for Man and Woman*, 285.

example, the Genesis 25 narrative passes no critical comment about Jacob's less 'stereotypically masculine' role working amongst the tents compared to Esau.²³ In 1 Timothy 2:8-10, women are encouraged to adorn themselves more with good deeds than elaborate and expensive dress. Alastair Roberts also warns against prescribing features of masculinity and femininity as though these are essentially a social 'performance' to be 'portrayed' or 'pursued'. Instead, we should embrace and conform to the male or female gender identity we already have written into our bodies and pursue its associated God-given responsibilities eg. as a father or wife etc. The distinct virtues of 'manliness' and 'womanliness' develop as we embrace our God-given relational roles and the bodily strengths and functions (for example male muscular strength and female childbearing capacity) that equip us for these.²⁴

4. God has designed us for two possible vocations as gendered people — marriage and chaste singleness

The Bible teaches that God has provided us with two possible vocations as gendered people — marriage and chaste singleness. A person may experience both vocations at various times in a lifetime.

The vocation of marriage sits squarely in the spotlight in Genesis (2:24). At creation, sexual union is introduced as integral and exclusive to the marriage union. Genesis 2:24 says 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'. 'One flesh' describes the total union of the couple, including their sexual union (also 1 Cor 1:16).²⁵ Thus, the ethics of sex is tightly bound to the nature, purpose and meaning of marriage.²⁶ These are, in turn, determined wholly in relation to God, not merely our own desires. While our cultural thinking picks up on the enjoyment and intimacy God has given to sexual expression, it misses the profound, God-given meaning of sexuality that is vital for its true enjoyment. The key purposes of sexuality in relation to the purposes of marriage at creation are as follows:

Firstly, Kostenberger points out covenantal features in the way marriage is introduced in Genesis 2:23-24 and later in Prov 2:16-17 and Malachi 2:14. Marriage is:

*[...] an exclusive heterosexual covenant between one man and one woman ordained and sealed by God, preceded by a public leaving of parents, consummated in sexual union, issuing in a permanent mutually supportive partnership and normally crowned by the gift of children.*²⁷

Thus, marital and sexual union is not entered into merely on human contractual terms, for a limited period of time and conditioned upon the desires, tastes and satisfaction of each partner.²⁸ It is a permanent, exclusive (monogamous), solemn, covenantal commitment undertaken under the authority of God and reflecting his faithful, enduring commitment to us.²⁹

Secondly, marital and sexual union are designed to be between a man and woman (WCF XXIV.1). This is made clear in Genesis 1-2 and also by Jesus in his discussion on marriage in Matthew 19:4.

²³ G, S & C, "The Transgender Moment," 13.

²⁴ Alastair Roberts, "Natural complementarians: men, women, and the way things are," *The Calvinist International* (Sep 2016) - <https://calvinistinternational.com/2016/09/13/natural-complementarians-men-women/> See also - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BD3JNLFd4Y4&feature=youtu.be>

²⁵ Denny Burk, *What is the Meaning of Sex?* (Illinois: Crossway, 2013), 94.

²⁶ Ash, *Marriage*, 115.

²⁷ Andreas Kostenberger, *God, Marriage and Family* (Illinois: Crossway, 2010), 74.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 72.

²⁹ Burk, *What is the Meaning of Sex?* 89-93.

Thirdly, marriage and sexuality are introduced in the context of the human task of exercising dominion over creation before God. (Gen 1:28; 2:8, 15, 18). The primary purpose of marriage is this enormously dignified, shared goal that points beyond the horizons of any given couple.³⁰ As the Bible story unfolds, this task develops into one of rejoicing in, obeying and making known the Lord as Creator and Redeemer together.³¹

Fourthly, one major reason for this complementarity in marriage is that the God-given task of dominion involves couples giving themselves towards the begetting and nurturing of children. Embodied men and women are uniquely paired to beget children through sexual union. Indeed, God's first command to them is to procreate (Gen 1:28), a norm which continues after the Fall (Gen 9:1; 35:11). The Bible's first description of sex when Adam 'knew' his wife Eve and she gave birth to Cain and then Abel 'with the help of the Lord' (Gen 4:1-2) shows relationships of care and responsibility as the good fruit of marital sex.³²

The raising of godly children is the means by which God's dominion is spread throughout the earth.³³ In the Old Testament, procreation is the blessed means by which Abraham's family multiplies to bring God's light and righteous rule to the nations (Ex 1:1-7; Isa 48:18ff; 52:1ff). When married couples in the Bible are unable to have children it is a source of great grief (1 Sam 1&2; Luke 1:5-25). However, childlessness in no way undermines the integrity and beauty of the marriage covenant.

Fifthly, sex helps build an intimate companionship between a married couple as they strive to serve God's gospel purposes together (WCF XXIV.2).³⁴ Nakedness is an expression of unabashed trust (Gen 2:25). Song of Songs celebrates the rapture and yearning of sexual pleasure in marriage. Indeed, sex forms a vital part of the greater whole of a marital union — the mutual giving, perceiving, repenting and graciousness that characterises marriage at its best (1 Cor 7:1-6). Male and female sexual organs are obviously wired to (ideally) generate enormous pleasure in their meeting. Consistent marital sex also helps guard marriage against the temptation to sexual immorality (1 Cor 7:2).

However, an important note of caution must be sounded at this point. Christopher Ash provides a detailed critique of the idea (which he traces to Barth) that a key purpose or goal of marriage and sex is to serve as the answer to human loneliness. He observes that 'this idea has seeped deep into the substructure of our thought, both in Western society and in the church.'³⁵ The corollary is that celibacy will inevitably result in loneliness.

Ash observes the natural and innocent affirmation of sexual desire and delight between Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:18-23.³⁶ However, the context of these verses shows the woman is brought to and united to the man foremost for the sake of their God-given task in God's world, not for pleasure or company as an ends in themselves.

*[...] we must not conclude that the final goal of this delightful and intimate companionship is to be found in the delight, the intimacy or the companionship. This is delight with a shared purpose, intimacy with a common goal, and companionship in a task beyond the boundaries of the couple themselves.*³⁷

³⁰ Ash, *Marriage*, 120-121.

³¹ *Ibid*, 165.

³² Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity* (Illinois: IVP, 2011), 116.

³³ Burk, *What is the Meaning of Sex*, 96.

³⁴ Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity*, 116-117.

³⁵ Ash, *Marriage*, 116.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 121.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 121.

Furthermore, the biblical remedy for human loneliness, both for the unmarried and married, is not to pursue marriage but to pursue fellowship and friendship in the Lord.³⁸ For example, the Psalms say much about the plight of the broken hearted but as a remedy marriage and sex are conspicuous by their absence.³⁹ Jesus' also shows striking intimacy with his circle of disciples in John 13-16 and the church is marked by love in 1 Corinthians 13. Ash concludes:

[...] while sexual fulfilment may be one of the ways in which God remedies human loneliness, the Bible does not teach that it is the only, or even the major, remedy.⁴⁰

Indeed, it is striking that in the creation accounts, sex is an integral part of marriage, but it is not at the core of human life or identity. Our core identity is that we are God's beloved creatures. Secondarily, we have made male or female, for the purpose of obediently responding to his voice, and anticipating the destiny he has appointed for us.

Nevertheless, celibacy or chaste singleness (whether never married, divorced or widowed) is seen relatively infrequently in the Old Testament and is usually regarded as somewhat unnatural and lamentable. Danylak argues this is because procreation is an integral part of the Old Testament covenants, from the Abrahamic through to the Davidic. 'The entire family inheritance structure in Old Testament times was predicated upon the centrality of the offspring-blessing relationships (Ex 32:13; Deut 4:20; 32:9; 1 Kings 21:3).⁴¹ As we shall see, however, the vocation of singleness gains new prominence in the New Testament.

Summary

We can only truly understand the significance and nature of gender and sexuality in relation to the God who created us. Gender is a basic and powerful aspect of our God-given identity that is objectively and immutably rooted in our bodies, serves God's purposes for humanity and reflects God's love for loving, ordered relationships. Gender plays an integral part in the two possible vocations God has given us— marriage and chaste singleness. Sexual union is integrally and exclusively tied to the marital union and is oriented to God's purposes for marriage. However, while sex is a very important part of created human life, it is neither essential to human life and companionship nor central to our identity. Our core identity is that we are God's beloved creatures, Secondarily, we have made male or female, for the purpose of obediently responding to his voice in distinctive ways and anticipating the destiny he has appointed for us.

³⁸ Ibid, 122.

³⁹ Ibid, 118.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 119.

⁴¹ Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness* (Illinois: Crossway, 2010), 80-81. Kostenberger, *God, Marriage and Family*, 177.

Part 2 – Culpably Disoriented: Essential Aspects of the Fall

It is impossible to gain a deep understanding of our experience of gender and sexuality in our world or a deep grasp of what Christ achieves on the cross without a deep grasp of the nature of our sin.⁴² This is particularly important given the deep reluctance to identify sin in our culture. As Christians we can feel enormous pressure to dampen the true nature of God's holiness and of our human guilt. However, if we don't properly comprehend our sin, we will inevitably misinterpret the Bible's teaching on gender and sexuality, as well as a range of other important matters. We will fail to understand the heart of our problems, individually and corporately. We will fail to own our own sin and need. We will fail to understand the needs of our brothers and sisters and pray big and deep enough prayers for them. We will fail to point each other to the fullness of mercy and hope in Christ.

The impact of sin on our experience of gender and sexuality is currently a topic of considerable, complex discussion within evangelical theological circles and beyond. We cannot cover all aspects of this discussion in this paper. However, we will attempt to identify key aspects of sin that are particularly relevant to gender and sexuality. These key aspects of sin will be articulated more generally in this section and then applied to some specific areas of gender and sexuality in Part 4.

1. The essence of the Fall is human sin against God

WCF VI.i -*Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptation of Satan, sinned in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory.*

The account of Adam and Eve's sin in Genesis 3 introduces the basic elements of sin. There we see their seduction by Satan to rebellion against God, succumbing to the temptation to become like him, failure to trust God at his Word, dismissal of the reality of judgement, defiance of specific commands and the sacrifice of intimate fellowship with God. At the heart of sin is 'rebellion against God's very being, against his explicit word, against his wise and ordered reign'.⁴³ John Owen describes sin in terms of a profound aversion, loathing and opposition of our hearts towards God, dwelling in our minds and affections.⁴⁴

The sinful reversal of God's plans for the original creation — the corruption of what he pronounced 'very good'⁴⁵ — brings brokenness, disorder, pain, loss and death.⁴⁶ We experience this pain both as the result of our own sin and the sin of others towards us. While it is vital to describe the devastating effects of sin, we must be careful not to shift our attention from sin itself. All those acts and desires that fall short of God's standards of love and righteousness and defy his will for his creatures are properly called sin and we are held responsible for them (Rom 3:19-23).

⁴² D.A. Carson, "Sin's Contemporary Significance," in *Fallen: A Theology of Sin*, ed. Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson (Illinois: Crossway, 2013), 22.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 23.

⁴⁴ John Owen, *The works of John Owen*, ed. W. H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1966), 6:182.

⁴⁵ S. Jeffrey, M. Ovey and A. Sach, *Pierced for our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (UK: IVP, 2007), 110.

⁴⁶ Carson, "Sin's Contemporary Significance," 22.

We must all admit we are both perpetrators and victims of sin. Moreover, we should rightly hate and grieve not only the pain our sin brings to ourselves and others but also the offence of our sin itself to the Lord who has lovingly crafted us (Psalm 51:4; Ezek 18:30-31; Isa 54:5,6; WCF 15.2).

2. We all share in our first parents' guilt and sinful nature

WCF VI.iii - *They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.*

Our first parents' depravity and guilt has spread to every member of the human race. As Henri Blocher says, 'sin is of the race, and the same time it is of each one of us because each of us wills to sin' (Rom 3:19-23; 5:12-19; Eph 2:1-3).⁴⁷

Calvin describes original sin as:

*[...] a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us liable to God's wrath, then brings forth in us those works which Scripture call 'works of the flesh' (Gal 5:19). And that is properly what Paul often calls sin. The works that come forth from it — such as adulteries, fornications, thefts, hatreds, murders, carousings — he accordingly calls "fruits of sin" (Gal 5:19-21), although they are also commonly called "sins" in Scripture, and even by Paul himself.*⁴⁸

The following points further explore key aspects of original sin.

3. Sin affects every part of our being

WCF VI.ii - *By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body.*

This statement emphasises the wholistic nature of sin.⁴⁹ As a result of Adam's sin, our attitudes, orientations, propensities, tendencies and behaviours in every part of our lives are naturally oriented away from God's law and are incompatible with his holiness (Rom 3:9-20).⁵⁰ In Psalm 51, for example, David realises that his very being is shot through with tendencies that produce the fruits of adultery and murder.⁵¹ However, we must remember that the sinful nature is our 'quasi-nature' or 'anti-nature', a radical departure from our good nature as originally given and created by God.⁵²

An important way that Paul describes the sinful nature is in terms of the 'flesh' (Eph 2:3; Gal 5:16-21; also John 3:6). As Moo explains, the natural human condition after the Fall is to be 'in the flesh', to be fundamentally determined by the perspective of this world, in contrast to the world to come.⁵³ To be ruled by the flesh is to allow what feels primal and natural, our bodily and social

⁴⁷ Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (UK: Apollos, 1997), 94.

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol 2.1.8

⁴⁹ Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) Committee on Human Sexuality "Report to the forty-eighth General Assembly," (May 2020), 14 - <https://pcaga.org/aicreport/>

⁵⁰ Blocher, *Original Sin*, 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 28.

⁵² *Ibid*, 30.

⁵³ Douglas Moo, "Sin in Paul," in *Fallen: A Theology of Sin*, 120.

desires, to become the sum total of the way we think about ourselves and act and engage with what surrounds us. The flesh resists any interrogation of those desires by God.⁵⁴ Sins such as sexual immorality, sensuality, idolatry, anger, envy and divisions are the inevitable result of this condition.

WCF VI.v - *The corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be through Christ pardoned and mortified, yet both itself and all the motions thereof are truly and properly sin.*

As Owen discusses with reference to Romans 7:21-25, although grace and doing good are the ruling and ordinarily prevailing principles in the hearts and minds of regenerate people, the enemy of sin continues to be ‘a powerful and effectual indwelling principle, inclining and pressing unto actions agreeable [...] unto its own nature’, pressing into our will, affections, vanity and inclinations.⁵⁵ This reality of sin continuing to indwell the believer is also seen in 1 John 1:8-10, James 3:2 and the intense picture of spiritual battle in Galatians 5:16-17.

a. Sin affects our sense of identity

Sin profoundly distorts our sense of identity. As Blocher says:

- *[...] it [sin] involves a disorganisation of humankind's exquisite complexity, with functions, instincts and powers given over the uncontrollable divergence. Yet the evidence, carefully investigated, shows that evil attaches supremely to the 'higher' or more central parts of our nature — to the locus of our most precious identity. It supports the biblical insight that what defiles a person comes from the heart. It confirms the doctrine of original sin as a bent in and of the human will, a bondage within freedom.*⁵⁶

Indeed, fleshly notions of identity have assumed particular importance in our current cultural context. Rather than perceiving identity objectively, that is according to certain biological facts (biological essentialism) or biblically revealed purposes, it is perceived more subjectively, according to who we conceive or desire ourselves to be (psychological existentialism).⁵⁷ It is assumed that our subjective desires make us who we are and are essential for our well-being. It therefore becomes possible by a declarative act of our own will (voluntarism), to give voice to those subjective desires and to assert that our identity is defined by them.

This turn to the subjective has its roots in the sexual revolution of recent decades which brought a sense of freedom from traditional, authoritative gender and sexual expectations. Feminism has sown the idea that gender is a social construct that does not automatically flow from biological sex.⁵⁸ This disconnection between the body and gender has developed into homosexual ideology then finally into queer ideology. Rob Smith summarises this progression of thought as follows:

*If being born a female and becoming a woman are two different things (feminist ideology), and if there is no necessary correlation between your biological sex and your sexual orientation (homosexual ideology), then why should there be any necessary correlation between your biological sex and your gender identity (queer ideology)?*⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Andrew Cameron, *Joined-Up Life: A Christian Account of How Ethics Works* (UK: IVP, 2011), 66.

⁵⁵ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 6:158.

⁵⁶ Blocher, *Original Sin*, 90.

⁵⁷ Bilgrami, “Notes Toward the Definition of Identity” - <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20028067?seq=1>

⁵⁸ Smith, “Responding to the Transgender Revolution,” 5.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 6.

The primacy of our desires is enshrined in the language of authenticity. To be authentic means that to be a proper, flourishing person of integrity we need to live according to the grain of our subjective feelings.⁶⁰ Furthermore, we feel we are free to make, unmake and remake our sense of self according to our developing desires, and that it is right (and even ‘natural’) to express our personal wills in this way to redefine ourselves rather than to embrace all aspects of our God-given identity and live according to *his* will.⁶¹ Huge developments in biotechnology have also enabled us to manipulate our bodies to serve our desires.

b. Sin affects our bodies

Given our bodies and souls are integrated in psychosomatic unities, it is unsurprising to find that both our bodies and souls are affected by sin in extremely complex ways. When talking about the way sin affects our bodies, emotions, brains and genes, we must be careful to humbly acknowledge this complexity and avoid over-simplification.

On the one hand, we must not confuse body and spirit. Sin cannot be attributed simply to a biological illness, brain disorder or genetic disease. Although we may describe original sin as ‘hereditary’ and Jesus describes sinners as ‘the sick’ (Matt 9:12ff), sin is not formally located in the body, brain or genes. There is no ‘sin gene’. Sin is a voluntary disposition and responsibility.⁶² Indeed, the Bible gives no cause to think that a physical condition can either force a person to sin or keep them from faith and obedience through the Spirit (2 Cor 4:16). Where a person displays desires and behaviour the Bible clearly calls ‘sin’, we must not neutralise this by simply attributing it to a biological disorder.⁶³ Biological illness cannot also be attributed simply to sin. In John 9:1-7, Jesus denies that sin caused a man’s blindness. The Bible does, though, describe some instances of sin-prompted sickness (John 5:14; 1 Cor 11:30; James 5:15).

On the other hand, we must not to drive a wedge between the biological and spiritual. Corrupt fleshly desires have thoroughly inhabited human physical flesh since Adam (John 3:6). We are ‘spiritual right down to our toes, or to our instincts; we are living bodies right up to our mental activities, our longings, our loves’.⁶⁴ Because there is a biological element to our longings and loves and a spiritual element to our bodies, we must acknowledge the complex interplay between the two. Although we don’t inherit sin formally in our genes and organs, sin can be found ‘inchoatively, dispositionally and radically in the body as the proper abode of the soul’, perhaps even subtly influencing genetic expression and body chemistry in some way.⁶⁵ This area requires further research. However, we can say that sin thoroughly penetrates us, body and spirit.

In practice, this body-spirit interplay means we must avoid simplistic declarations about causes and solutions to problems in the areas of gender and sexuality. We cannot understand each and every struggle we have in purely physical or spiritual terms. For example, we must be careful of reading too much into psychiatric diagnoses. Psychiatric diagnostic manuals such as the DSM-V and ICD-10 describe patterns of human thought, emotions and behaviours that are considered ‘disordered’, particularly in light of cultural norms. Some of these diagnoses Christians would

⁶⁰ Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 473ff

⁶¹ Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing* (UK: IVP, 2016), 15.

⁶² Blocher, *Original Sin*, 110-111.

⁶³ Michael Emlet, *Descriptions and Prescriptions: A Biblical Perspective on Psychiatric Diagnoses and Medications* (NC: New Growth Press, 2017), Kindle Edition, Ch.6.

⁶⁴ Blocher, *Original Sin*, 122.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 125-126 - quotes Francois Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elenticae* (NY: Robert Carter, 1847), IX:12.8.

consider descriptive of sin. However, they do not provide definitive, biological causes or pave the way to straightforward medicinal solutions.

Tracing biological influences on desires and behaviour is also by no means straightforward. Brain imaging doesn't provide anything like a direct window into thoughts. The brain is much more complex to 'read' and conceptualise than sexual features of the body. It is also unclear whether changes evident on brain scans contribute to certain desires and behaviours or result from these (the phenomenon of neuroplasticity).⁶⁶

Even where there are clear biological contributions to desires or behaviours, scientific evidence supports the view that all our desires are driven by a complex, even mysterious interplay between spiritual, physical, relational, environmental and cultural factors.⁶⁷ Our choices and sense of identity can sometimes be profoundly shaped by the sins of others against us. This body-spirit interplay should also arouse sympathy for one another as we deal with gender and sexuality issues. Bodily predispositions can make obedience extremely hard, expose spiritual problems and cause intense suffering. Spiritual decisions can also subtly impact and change the body. This means sanctification can be a hard and complex road requiring different kinds of help along the way.

However, in all cases, we must attend to the spiritual state of each person, as well as whatever biological forces appear to also be at play. While the Bible notes the importance of bodily weakness, illness and strength, it highlights the primacy of attending to our moral-spiritual disposition before God, coming to Jesus who tends to us body and soul (Matt 15:10-20; Luke 6:43-45).⁶⁸ While being careful to acknowledge this complexity, we must continue to recognise the presence of original sin threading through us, shaping our impulses. Indeed, incremental choices made in response to those impulses may further strengthen them.⁶⁹

c. Sin affects our desires

'Desire' and 'attraction' have a very similar scope of meaning in current English usage. Without trying to draw too fine a distinction, 'attraction' can mean more than an appreciative observation of beauty. Its meaning is often akin to allurement, desire and the kind of interest that draws someone towards something.⁷⁰ The question of whether not only actual transgressions but corrupt desires or attractions are sinful and culpable has gained prominence in recent discussions about same sex attraction (see below). While these discussions have arisen relatively recently, the sinfulness and culpability of fallen desires or attractions has been the subject of discussion for centuries. Indeed, the sinfulness of desire is a vital aspect of reformed anthropology and hamartiology that is of enormous pastoral importance to every one of us, no matter what our gender and sexuality struggles are. Important aspects of this question are addressed as follows:

⁶⁶ Sally Satel and Scott Lilienfeld, *Brainwashed* (NY: Basic Books, 2013), Ch. 5.

⁶⁷ Lawrence Mayer and Paul McHugh, "Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological and Social Sciences," - <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/executive-summary-sexuality-and-gender> Emler, *Descriptions and Prescriptions*, Ch. 4.

⁶⁸ Emler, *Descriptions and Prescriptions*, Ch. 8.

⁶⁹ Robert Gagnon, "How Should Christians Respond to the Transgender Revolution" (Oct 2015) - <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/10/how-should-christians-respond-to-the-transgender-phenomenon>

PCA, "Report to the 48th GA," 27-28.

⁷⁰ See also Central Carolina Presbytery Study Committee, "Report on 2018 Revoice Conference" (2019), 7 - http://ccpca.net/news/2018_revoice_report.htm

i. **Even our impure desires are sinful, and we are culpable for them**

WCF VI.iv - *From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.*

VI.v - *This corruption of nature, during this life, does remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified; yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin.*

VI.vi - *Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, doth, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.*

The biblical evidence is that both impure desires *and* the actions that flow from them are considered sinful and therefore culpable. For example, the biblical word for desire (Gk – *n. epithumia* and *v. epithumeo*) is used by Jesus in his teaching on sexual desire in Matthew 5:27-28. Here he considers the case of a man desiring or looking lustfully at a woman, even prior to acting upon that desire. This desire itself, he teaches, transgresses both the seventh (you shall not commit adultery) and tenth (you shall not covet or desire) commandments (Ex 20:14, 17; Deut 5:8) and is therefore truly sinful.

The sinfulness of desire is clearly seen in many biblical passages. Sin is described as written upon the heart (Deut 10:16, 30:6; Jer 6:10, 9:25ff; 17:1). Jesus stresses that evil, defiling words and deeds originate in our hearts, for example ‘For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person’ (Matt 15:19-20 also Matt 12:34ff). The apostles describe many desires as sinful and fleshly, for example ‘Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul’ (1 Pet 2:11 also Rom. 6:11-12; 1 Pet 1:14).

Note that it is neither the intensity nor the ‘chosenness’ of desire that Jesus has in view in his prohibition of adultery, but the object. Throughout the Bible, whether ‘desire’ is used in a positive or negative sense is dependent on whether the object desired is good.⁷¹ A desire for a sinful or disordered object or end is itself a sinful desire. For example, sexual desires whether for a person of the same sex or disconnected from the context of biblical marriage are sinful.⁷² Couples also experience various kinds of distorted and sinful sexual desires within marriages — marriage by no means brings an end to sinful sexual desires. Only those desires that accord with God’s commands and purposes for gender and sexuality can be considered good.⁷³

Thus, it is not merely broken, disordered or fallen to desire something God forbids but truly and properly sin (WCF VI.v).⁷⁴ Moreover, both original and actual sins, being transgressions of the God’s law and contrary to his nature bring guilt upon the sinner (WCF VI.vi). Every one of our sins deserves death and renders us liable to God’s eternal wrath (Rom 3:23; 2 Thess 1:7-9; James 2:10-11).

⁷¹ Denny Burk and Heath Lambert, *Transforming Homosexuality* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2015), 45 n.16; J. Louw and E. Nida ed., *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : based on semantic domains* (NY: United Bible Societies, 1988), 25.20.

⁷² PCA, “Report to the 48th GA,” 8.

⁷³ Burk, *Transforming Homosexuality*, 44-47.

⁷⁴ This is sidestepped in “Statement on Sexual Ethics and Christian Obedience: Creation and Design,” *Revoice* - <https://revoice.us/about/our-beliefs/statements-of-conviction/statement-on-sexual-ethics-and-christian-obedience/>

ii. **Impure desires are sinful even if they are unchosen**

Behind article VI of the WCF, is an important dispute between the Protestant Reformers on the one hand and the Roman Catholic Church on the other, over the concept of ‘concupiscence,’ or desire as corrupted by the Fall. Debate was particularly focussed on spontaneous or unbidden desire before the will had consciously consented or approved of it. Therefore, the term ‘concupiscence’ came to not only refer to corrupted desire in general but to an inward feeling, arousal or attraction towards a disordered end prior to any conscious cultivation of those feelings. This usage stems from Augustine’s discussion of the experience of desire (often sexual desire) rising up in him prior to his conscious consent and contrary to his reason.⁷⁵

The Protestant Reformers argued that concupiscence (specifically including unbidden desires and those not consciously willed) is truly and properly sin in contradistinction to the Roman Catholic view. The Roman Catholic view is summed up in the Council of Trent’s decree on original sin:

But this holy synod confesses and is sensible, that in the baptized there remains concupiscence, or an incentive (to sin); which, whereas it is left for our exercise, cannot injure those who consent not, but resist manfully by the grace of Jesus Christ; yea, he who shall have striven lawfully shall be crowned. This concupiscence, which the apostle sometimes calls sin, the holy Synod declares that the Catholic Church has never understood it to be called sin, as being truly and properly sin in those born again, but because it is of sin, and inclines to sin.⁷⁶

In other words, according to the Council, concupiscence is a result of sin and inclines persons to sin but is not in itself sin.

The Reformers argued against this Roman Catholic teaching out of a desire to allow Scripture to define sin - rather than tradition, experience or expediency; to maintain that anything whatsoever in us that is contrary to God’s Word and law is sin; **and to ensure that people understood the full depth of their sinfulness in order to properly grasp the riches of the gospel.**⁷⁷

In doing so, they stood in continuity with Augustine’s thoroughgoing doctrine of original sin. Pelagius, a contemporary of Augustine, and his followers held that we are only sinful insofar as we make sinful choices, as an act of our own conscious willing.⁷⁸ Especially in his later works, Augustine argued forcefully against Pelagius that the desires that give birth to sinful deeds (concupiscence) are sinful. He argued this with particular reference to sexual sin.⁷⁹ Augustine’s teaching on concupiscence was explicitly endorsed by Calvin:

And Augustine does not always refrain from using the term “sin,” as when he says: “Paul calls by the name “sin,” the source from which all sins rise up into carnal desire. As far as this pertains to the saints, it loses its dominion on earth and perishes in heaven.” By these words he admits that in so far as believers as subject to the inordinate desires of the flesh they are guilty of sin.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ St Augustine, *The City of God* (UK: Penguin, 1972), trans. Henry Bettenson, Book XIV.

PCA, “Report to the 48th GA,” 15;

Burk, *Transforming Homosexuality*, 42ff;

⁷⁶ Council of Trent, *Concerning Original sin*, first decree of session 5, 5th article -

<http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch5.htm>

⁷⁷ PCA, “Report to the 48th GA,” 19.

⁷⁸ Burk, *Transforming Homosexuality*, 42.

⁷⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844-1845), ed. J. G. F. and J. Rivington; J. and F. Rivington. Vol. 2, 747.

Ibid, 709.

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.3.10.

John Owen spoke about ‘involuntary surprisals of the soul unto sin’⁸¹ and the Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge argued we are sinners by nature and our sinful nature produces our sinful choices.⁸² Evangelical New Testament scholar Richard Hays concludes:

‘[...] it is precisely characteristic of Paul to regard ‘sin’ as a condition of human existence, a condition which robs us of free volition and drives us to disobedient actions which, though involuntary, are nonetheless culpable. The gulf is wide between Paul’s viewpoint and the modern habit of assigning culpability only for actions assumed to be under free control of the agent.’⁸³

Sinful concupiscence is common to every one of us. If we humbly and rightly assess ourselves, we must agree that, even as Christians, **we all experience troubling inward draws towards many sins that are often uninvited, incessant and prior to any conscious deliberation, despite concerted efforts to resist. Moreover, we do not love what glorifies God as we should, and evil does not repel us as it should. We all stand before God in a desperate condition indeed.**⁸⁴ As we shall see, **acknowledging the sinfulness of our desires and seeking to put them to death is vital for both rejoicing in God’s deep mercy to us and drawing upon God’s resources for mortification of our sin.**

iii. We can be tempted by our own sinful desires

A temptation is anything that has the force or efficacy to seduce us from obedience to sin.⁸⁵ The Bible speaks about temptation⁸⁶ in two different ways. Temptation can involve a period of trial or testing that includes an allurement to sin through suffering or deprivation, such as Satan’s tempting of Jesus in the desert (Matt 4:1-11). In this case, Jesus was enticed to sin passively, in the form of the devil’s external entreaties and trials. The enticement did not emerge from his own nature or any disordered desires because he was sinless.⁸⁷ We can be similarly tested by forces external to us. In this case, experiencing temptation is not sin in itself unless we consent and enter into the temptation (James 1:12-18).⁸⁸

On the other hand, temptations can also arise within us. James 1:14 shows that the temptations that so often well up from within us come from the evil desires in our own hearts.⁸⁹ As Allberry says:

⁸¹ Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 6:192-193.

⁸² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1872; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 2:107-113.

Also see: The Lutheran *Book of Concord* (the official Lutheran Confession globally from 1580 till the present day), very clearly makes the same point (*The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord: I - Original Sin*), in theses 17-25 especially, where it explicitly condemns the alternative view and explicitly declares it to be a form of Pelagianism. 39 Articles (Anglican, 1562: still the official doctrinal standard of the Anglican Church of Australia)

Article IX - Of Original or Birth-Sin

⁸³ Richard B. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 14:1 (Spring 1986): 209.

⁸⁴ PCA, “Report to the 48th GA,” 21.

⁸⁵ Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 6:96.

⁸⁶ The Greek word for temptation can also be translated ‘trial’ (n. *peirazo*, v. *peirasmos* – see James 1:2, 14).

⁸⁷ Steven Wedgworth, “Tempted Without Sin: The Temptations of Christ in Accordance with Reformed Theology,” *The Calvinist International* - <https://calvinistinternational.com/2019/10/18/tempted-without-sin-reformed-christology/>

⁸⁸ PCA, “Report to the 48th GA,” 9.

⁸⁹ Sam Allberry, *James for You* (US: The Good Book Company, 2015), 34.

*James is showing us something deeply profound about our human nature, for we are both agent and victim of our desires. The desires are our own, from our own hearts—yet it is us that they entice and attack. Within each of us there is this deep tension. We really are our own worst enemies.*⁹⁰

This proposal from within, being the soul's own act, is rightly called sin.⁹¹ Again, we cannot escape responsibility and culpability for the sinful desires that arise within us, even before a sinful deed is done.

iv. **But there is an important moral difference between sinful desire and act**

While it is vital to recognise the sinfulness of impure desires so we can truly know our need before Christ, it is also vital to recognise that experiencing sinful desires is not the same as defiantly acting upon them. We must not heap shame upon brothers and sisters (or upon ourselves) who struggle against sin, particularly those sinful desires that arise unbidden. The Old Testament law recognised the difference between unintentional and defiant sins (Numbers 15:27-31), even as it regarded both as forms of sin for which we bear responsibility. In James 1:14-15, there is a significant step from the inward arousal of indwelling sin to the decision to cultivate actual transgressions.⁹² When Paul lists all those who will not inherit the kingdom of God in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, he is not speaking of those who struggle against their indwelling sin by the power of the Spirit or even those believers who temporarily fall into grievous sins. He is speaking of those who do not agree with God about their sins and who embrace their sins.⁹³ To those who grieve at both their unbidden desires and conscious falls into sin, the gospel holds out clear and solid hope. As Paul says:

For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:22-25)

It is also important to thank God that by his common grace no one is as sinful as they could be. God restrains the workings of human depravity so that all are able to desire and act in ways that are in some sense 'good'. Indeed, the doctrine of original sin recognises that even in the unregenerate state we experience a natural uneasiness of conscience and a longing for some measure of goodness. Paul recognises that those Gentiles who know nothing of God's law nevertheless show evidence that his law is written on their hearts and consciences (Rom 2:13-15).

Summary

Every one of us inherits our first parents' propensity to wilfully disown our Creator and Saviour and follow our own desires. Our sin is first and foremost an offence to the God who lovingly crafted us. Because of this, sin has profoundly affected our whole being including those aspects that shape the way we understand and live out our gender and sexuality — our bodies, our sense of identity and our deepest, unchosen desires. The depth to which sin has penetrated us

⁹⁰ Allberry, *James*, 35

⁹¹ Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 6:194.

⁹² CCP, "Report on 2018 Revoice Conference," 10

⁹³ Michael Horton, "Let's Not Cut Christ to Pieces," *Christianity Today* (July 2012) -

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/julyweb-only/lets-not-cut-christ-to-pieces.html?paging=off>

means we cannot simply stop our sinful desires and deeds through concerted effort. Neither can we declare our sinful desires to be a morally good, neutral or merely 'fallen' or 'broken' part of who we are. Furthermore, not one of us can look down upon another's particular sinful desires as worse or more 'perverted' than our own. All of our sinful desires are perversions of God's design for us, and all humans apart from Christ have some sinful desires of their own even if they vary in shape and intensity from person to person. We all together stand in need of the mercy and transforming power of Christ.

Part 3 – Reoriented in Christ: Essential Aspects of Salvation

WCF VIII.i - *It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Saviour of His Church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world: unto whom He did from all eternity give a people, to be His seed, and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified.*

Having explored a doctrine of sin we now gaze upon an entirely different sight – Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God’s Son, entirely one with his Father and sharing fully in his character and attributes, and yet fully human, sharing life with us in all its complexity. In his humanity, Jesus never put a foot wrong. He has remained ‘holy, harmless, undefiled and full of grace and truth’ (WCF VIII.ii-iii). Merely looking upon such perfection hardly comforts us in our prison of sin. But the immense relief of meeting Jesus is in discovering that his perfection is expressed in love towards blind, sinful people such as ourselves — **redeeming, calling, justifying, sanctifying and glorifying us**. Every part of our being needs to be reoriented not to our subjective desires but to him. He is the new head of humanity who has powerfully reversed the impact of Adam’s headship (Romans 5:12-21), breaking the penetrating power of sin in his death and resurrection and bringing us to God. Indeed, his return will mark the definitive expiry date of sin, death and the devil and the joy of renewed creation in his company (Rev 21:1-4). In this section, we will look at some of the fundamental ways God reorients us in Christ before applying the gospel to particular gender and sexuality issues in Part 4.

1. In Christ, God gives full meaning to gender and sexuality

The New Testament writers draw together the threads on gender and sexuality weaving through the Bible from Genesis onwards and show their full, glorious meaning in Christ. In Christ, we can fully appreciate the purpose of sex and gender as arrows to God’s glory.

a. In Christ, God’s creation design stands

Although sin has ravaged our experience of gender and sexuality, creating many complex relational situations, Christ upholds God’s original design for us (Col 1:15-20). **Christ came to rescue us from this evil age, not from God-given creation structures themselves.** Distinctions between male and female are not eradicated when we become Christians but serve more than ever to glorify God and his salvation (Gen. 1:27; 1 Peter 3:7; Rev. 5:9; 7:9-10). As O’Donovan says, **Christ’s resurrection ‘tells us of God’s vindication of his creation and so of our created life’.**⁹⁴

Holding fast to God’s good order for gender and sexuality is a key part of knowing ourselves as his (1 Thess 4:3). We may not be able to enjoy God’s purposes for gender and sexuality to the full because of the Fall, for example a couple may encounter sexual problems or infertility, or a child may be born with ambiguous sex. We also care about many people who not honour God’s purposes for gender and sexuality and think very differently to us. In all our experiences of gender

⁹⁴ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 13.

and sexuality in our fallen world, however, we uphold the goodness of God's design and never condone unrighteous desires and acts, for example sex outside marriage or same sex relationships.⁹⁵

b. In Christ, we honour our bodies and gender

Our union with Christ is more than spiritual. Our bodies, as an integral part of our 'selves', have been redeemed for his glory at great cost. Although our sinful desires continue to inhabit our bodies, they are now joined to Christ, sacred houses of his Spirit, belonging to him and no other (1 Cor 6:12-20). It is as embodied people that we respond to the God's love for us in Christ. Christ's resurrection has also set in motion our future bodily resurrection when we will be clothed with glorious, sinless immortality (1 Cor 6:14; 15:42-29). Therefore, we are not free to use our bodies to satisfy even our strongest desires or the accepted values of our culture (1 Thess 4:4-5). Instead we are to discipline and control them to serve God's purposes as we await the new creation (1 Cor 9:27).

Thus, our gender expression is rightly shaped by our grateful honouring of Christ and the redemption to renewed life he has brought. In the New Testament, the two genders, unified biological and relational 'packages', continue to be consistently regarded as good, equal in value and yet integral to ordered, interdependent relations (1 Cor 11:2-16; 1 Timothy 2: 8-15; see Part 1).⁹⁶ As men and women together, pursuing generous, up-building relationships with each other in marriage and in God's household (1 Tim 3:15), we paint a picture of Christ's eternal saving love for us (see below). While our resurrected bodies will change from mortal to immortal, there is no indication that our gender will disappear even as sexual relationships may be superseded.⁹⁷

Thus, without ignoring our feelings about our gender, through Christ's power we start to grow into our skin through his restoring power, 'fitting together' biologically, spiritually and relationally, Oliver O'Donovan's description of our responsibility with regard to our gender is worth quoting at length:

The sex into which we have been born (assuming that it is physiologically unambiguous) is given to us to be welcomed as a gift of God. The task of psychological maturity – for it is a moral task, and not merely an event which may or may not transpire – involves accepting this gift and learning to love it, even though we may have to acknowledge that it does not come to us without problems. Our task is to discern the possibilities for personal relationship which are given to us with this biological sex, and to seek to develop them in accordance with our individual vocations. [...] we cannot and must not conceive of physical sexuality as a mere raw material with which we can construct a form of psychosexual self-expression which is determined only by the free impulse of our spirits. Responsibility in sexual development implies a responsibility to nature – to the ordered good of the bodily form which we have been given. And that implies that we must make the necessary distinction between the good of the bodily form as such and the various problems that it poses to us personally in our individual experience.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Michael Hill, *The How and Why of Love: An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2002), 132-134.

⁹⁶ Roberts, *Creation and Covenant*, 128-131.

⁹⁷ See Jennifer Anne Cox, *Intersex in Christ* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2018), Kindle edition, Ch.6 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.17.

⁹⁸ O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* 28-29.

c. In Christ, marriage (and sex) ultimately point to the marriage of Christ to his bride

The New Testament upholds the creation purposes of marriage and highlights that relationships between men and women are not ends in themselves but arrows, pointing a lost world to Christ's redeeming love for us. Throughout the Old Testament, God's persevering love for his people is often spoken of in terms of a husband's extraordinary love for an unfaithful wife (Jer 2-3; Ezekiel 16; Hosea 2). In the New Testament, *the deepest meaning of marriage is explicitly shown to be an enacted parable of another marriage — the marriage of Christ to his bride*. In Ephesians 5:31-32, we see that the dynamic between a husband and wife reflects the delighting intimacy between Christ and his church (Eph 5:31-32). The creation foundations of marriage all point to this symbolic purpose of marriage. Marriage reflects the exclusive, permanent, fruitful love of Christ for those to whom he had no obligation to love but freely chose to do so.⁹⁹ Indeed, marriage as we know it will eventually give way to the marriage between Christ and his bride in the new creation (Matt 22:30; Rev 19:6-10). In the meantime, a husband is called to a Christ-echoing, sacrificial headship, loving his wife as his own body, nourishing her in godliness, cherishing and holding fast to her as Christ does his church. In turn, a wife is called to wholeheartedly and thoughtfully respect her husband's authority as the church submits to Christ.¹⁰⁰

Sex serves this reflection of eternal intimacy. In 1 Cor 7:3-4, Paul affirms that husbands and wives' bodies belong to each other, to be given as an expression of whole person self-commitment (Gen 2:24; 1 Cor 6:16-17).¹⁰¹ This is because, as the context shows, each belongs to God. God has made us to be lovers, passionately responsive to God's faithful love with our hearts, minds and bodies all operating in sync. Sexual intimacy in the faithful commitment of marriage reflects the greater reality of Christ's initiating love and the church's response, even in the way mutual sexual arousal can occur.¹⁰²

Although sex is intensely private, it serves marriage's outward oriented task of showing Christ's love to his people and the lost. Nurturing children is a particularly important way marriage reflects God's hospitality.¹⁰³ In many ways, children embody the fruitful love of a married couple, teaching a new generation about the Lord's glorious deeds of redemption (Ps 78:1-8; Eph 6:4), hoping in God's salvation purposes (Ex 20:5-6; 2 Tim 3:14-15).¹⁰⁴

Thus, in the New Testament marriage serves God's primary purpose of showing Christ to a lost world and nurturing faithful disciples (Matthew 28:19-20).

d. In Christ, chaste singleness ultimately points to our heavenly marriage

A person who is unmarried, whether due to widowhood, divorce or never having been married has a vocation that equally serves gospel purposes. In comparison to messages often implicitly communicated within churches, the New Testament is clearly positive about chaste singleness.

⁹⁹ Burk, *The Meaning of Sex*, 108.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, *God's Good Design*, Ch. 5.

¹⁰¹ Wright, "Sexuality, Sexual Ethics," 873.

¹⁰² Patricia Weerakoon, *The Best Sex for Life* (Sydney: Growing Faith, 2013), 71.

¹⁰³ O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* 16.

¹⁰⁴ Ash, *Marriage*, 174.

While physical offspring were vital to the fulfilment of the old covenant, the new covenant is built on the notion of spiritual offspring through spiritual rebirth. Singleness is a high calling that reflects the fact that our more precious, permanent relationships are with those born into Christ's family rather than our biological families. Indeed, in the new creation, men and women will not marry but enjoy the infinitely better intimacy of life together in Jesus' company (Luke 20:35; Rev 19). As Danylak says:

*[...] the presence of both single and married people in the church together signifies the fact that the church lives between the ages. Married people are necessary because the church is still part of the current age, but single people remind it that the spiritual age has already been inaugurated in Christ and awaits imminent consummation.*¹⁰⁵

Single people remind us that marriage and sex are 'merely' pointers to the infinitely better reality of heaven. Chastity (deliberately not thinking or behaving in a sexual manner) is a way of expressly treasuring this greater reality. For some single people, the absence of the intimacy and permanency of marriage does bring an abiding and even crushing sense of grief and isolation. This should grieve church communities, challenging them to more deeply embrace committed motherly, fatherly, sisterly and brotherly relationships within God's everlasting family (1 Tim 5:1-2).

Singleness may well also bring rich relational opportunities. Many single people form the backbone of extended families. Singleness can bring a relative freedom from the commitments and painful struggles of marriage and child raising, providing opportunities for intimacy across a symphony of relationships (1 Cor 7:7-35).¹⁰⁶ Single friends can play essential roles in the nurturing of many spiritual children. In fact, it is remarkable to notice how much Jesus sees nuclear families as actually competing for loyalty to him and the deep, lasting relationships within his body (Matt 12:46-50, 19:29; Luke 9:59-62). In Christ, the single life is meaningful and valuable, not a problem to be solved or a tragedy to be lamented. Michael Horton points to the beautiful witness to Christ of a same sex attracted person who lives a chaste single life:

And yet, when it comes to cross-bearing, what greater testimony to Christ's cross can there be than that a sinner would find his or her sufficiency in Christ to the extent that even sexual pleasure could be surrendered? Like other single Christians, freed from many domestic responsibilities, these brothers and sisters are able to invest more of their lives in the fellowship of saints. It changes the rest of the congregation, too, as others have to wrestle with their own responses and vulnerabilities. Children growing up recognize the seriousness of their own sin and the call to holiness; they also see firsthand just how true the gospel is on the ground, as they receive Communion together with brothers and sisters who have been forgiven much and therefore love much. This witness to Christ's Cross expands beyond the local church. The unbelieving world may express hostility toward the traditional denunciations of homosexuality by churches, but it's more difficult to mock people who have actually turned up their nose at the culture's prized idol: the self with its unlimited range of

¹⁰⁵ Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Illinois: Crossway, 2010), 23-27.

¹⁰⁶ Kostenberger, *God, Marriage and Family*, 171, 196.

*identities. No, there is something more ultimate in reality and therefore more ultimately worth knowing than sexual pleasure.*¹⁰⁷

2. In Christ, God reorients our view of well-being and love

WCF II.ii - *God has all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He has made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and has most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever Himself pleases.*

As we have seen, an important, underlying theme in discussions about sexuality and gender is that fulfilling our desires is essential to human well-being. In one of many examples, a psychologist says:

*Any serious examination of the good life must carefully examine what human beings think about, care about, and do. Sexuality cannot be ignored. Go forth and enjoy.*¹⁰⁸

However, at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:2-12), Jesus makes it clear that ‘blessing’, a term that overlaps with concepts of well-being and flourishing,¹⁰⁹ is found only in God-centredness, not our subjective desires. We discover our good human *telos* or purpose when the Lord opens our eyes to the reality of the righteousness we were created for, our salvation from unrighteousness and our eschatological hope and reward. In this life we are called to deny foolish, sinful desires, as much as that may bring heartache. However, the Christian life is not renunciation for its own sake but for the sake of centring our lives on God, the fountain of all blessing,¹¹⁰ We exercise self-control and sometimes sacrifice our enjoyment of good things in order to treasure what we gain and share in Christ (1 Cor 9). Indeed, in Christ, we gain new lives, minds, hopes, desires, acceptance, intimacies, perspectives, friendships, family and safety.

Our modern culture also places immense emphasis on human love, particularly romantic love, as essential to our well-being. While God has indeed wired us for intimacy, we tend to consider our own understanding of love deeply good and liberating and so we feel God’s view of love must be attuned to ours. However, our understanding of love needs to start the other way around. God’s love precedes, grounds and shapes human love: ‘This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us’ (1 John 3:16; 4:10).¹¹¹ We see God’s love expressed supremely in his Son. Matthew 5:2-12 shows Jesus has done everything needed to draw us to himself across the cavernous distance created by our sin, filling our empty hands with the riches of the His heavenly kingdom. Our relationship with him is far more intimate than that between the disciples and Jesus — or, indeed between any two people. We are united to him in his death and new-creation life through his Spirit for the purpose of serving him and proclaiming his salvation.¹¹² As we will see,

¹⁰⁷ Horton, “Let’s Not Cut Christ to Pieces.”

¹⁰⁸ Todd Kashdan, “For a Profound Sense of Meaning in Life, Have Sex,” -

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/curious/201706/profound-sense-meaning-in-life-have-sex>

¹⁰⁹ Jonathan Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing* (Michigan; Baker Academic, 2017), Kindle edition, ch. 2-3.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, Ch. 12

¹¹¹ Sean Doherty, “Love Does Not Delight in Evil, but Rejoices with the Truth: A Theological and Pastoral Reflection On My Journey Away From A Homosexual Identity,” *Anvil* 30(1) (March 2014) 13 - DOI: 10.2478/anv-2013-0011

¹¹² Horton *The Christian Faith*, 587.

this union with Christ has profound implications for our relationships of love as gendered people with sexual desires.

Jesus also models human love as God has designed it. Jesus' biological manhood blended perfectly with his gender role, showing active, initiating care for the men, women and children around him (verses). Jesus never desired something his Father had forbidden. Although he endured all manner of intense external temptations, he never nurtured sinful sexual attractions towards any man or woman in his heart. He was able to sit alone with the woman at the well who had made herself sexually available to five men (John 4:1-42), without any turmoil of disordered affections. He just lovingly ministered to her in her sin,¹¹³ and she was 100% safe in his company. He remained a celibate man, a friend to both the married and single, devoted fully to the salvation of others for the joy set before him (Heb 12:1-2).¹¹⁴ At every point, Jesus expresses God's design for love within gendered relationships.

3. In Christ, God reorients our view of acceptance

WCF VIII.v - *The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience, and sacrifice of Himself, which He through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, has fully satisfied the justice of His Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for those whom the Father has given unto Him.*

XI.i -. *Those whom God effectually calls, He also freely justifies; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.*

In Christ, we find an entirely new sense of acceptance and belonging based not on subjective desires but on the objective truth of the gospel. On the one hand, Jesus' acceptance of us cuts through proud, unrighteous human barriers and exclusions such as those based on stigmatised illness and perceived moral superiority. On the other hand, Jesus does not simply rename sin as a good or indifferent part of who we are for the sake of 'inclusion' and he does not eliminate value judgements. He forthrightly names the sins by which we exclude ourselves from his kingdom and tackles these head on by bringing forgiveness and reconciliation through his blood, and transformation through his Spirit. As Miroslav Volf says:

He was no prophet of "inclusion" for whom the chief virtue was acceptance and the cardinal vice intolerance. Instead, he was a bringer of "grace," who not only scandalously included "anyone" in the fellowship of "open commensality," but made the "intolerant" demand of repentance and the "condescending" offer of forgiveness (Mark 1:15; 2:15–17). The mission of Jesus consisted not simply of renaming the behavior that was falsely labeled "sinful" but also in remaking the people who have actually sinned and suffered misfortune.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Burk, *Transforming Homosexuality*, 55-56.

¹¹⁴ Ed Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem: The Church and Same-Sex Attraction* (UK: IVP, 2015), 113.

¹¹⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation* (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996), 72-73.

On the cross, Jesus reveals the depth of our sin, guilt and need for radical self-denial. At the same time, he delivers the highest and strongest possible expression of his love and acceptance of us.¹¹⁶ At the heart of God's acceptance of us is a great legal exchange on the cross. We have transgressed his law (1 John 3:4, Romans 3:10-12). But in his death for us, our sin in its entirety — our inherited sinful disposition as well as our sinful wills, desires (chosen and unchosen) and actions — was credited to Christ, while the entirely sinless Jesus became sin for us, taking all of our sins, their debt and power, on himself. Christ's righteousness became ours. (Rom 4:5-6; 2 Cor 5:21). Therefore, we have been released from the condemnation and bondage of the law, gifted full pardon for our sins, and counted as right with God (WCF XI.i). On the basis of the cross, God also continues to forgive our sins. We can never 'fall from the state of justification' (1 John 2:1,2; WCF XI.v). Even more, as God's beloved, adopted children, we receive all the rights of eternal inheritance (Gal 4:1-7).

Therefore, If God declares has fully accepted us, no one — not even we ourselves — can condemn or separate us from his love (Rom 8:33). Even death and sin have lost their claim on us (Rom 6:1-11). Even when we recall our hidden shame, see nothing good in ourselves and feel hopeless in our struggle against sin, we know we are accepted on the securest possible terms in Christ. Every instance of our sneaking a look at pornography, every surge of lust for someone other than our spouse is paid for by Jesus' death for sinners. Our acceptance is defined not by what we do but by what Christ has done for us. He knows our sinful desires and deeds better than we do and yet he has (still!) drawn near to us.

God's acceptance is also infinitely more secure than self-acceptance. We can say we accept ourselves and ask others to do so too. However, such a confident veneer cannot fully and finally deal with the stubborn reality of our fragility, weakness and guilt as Christ does.¹¹⁷

Some criticisms of the Christian approach to gender and sexuality have highlighted the pressing need to clearly articulate our teaching in light of the fullness of the gospel. For example, while establishing precise causes for mental health issues is more complex than is often supposed¹¹⁸, some studies have argued for a link between Christian teaching and feelings of guilt and suicidal despair amongst LGBT people.¹¹⁹

These are serious charges indeed. We must start by squarely acknowledging that there are people in our churches quietly grappling with their gender and sexuality in a variety of ways, feeling driven to despair and attributing that distress at least in part to real or perceived pressure from Christian words and attitudes. There is so much real but unrecognised pain behind the faces we see every Sunday. We must admit Christians have spoken and behaved self-righteously, abusively, indeed sinfully to others, tragically believing they are advancing Christ's cause in doing so. We must admit we have at times failed to teach on these issues with biblical care and humble hearts. We must also admit we have failed to speak desperately needed words of gospel hope to brothers and sisters who are struggling.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: IVP, 1986), 278ff.

¹¹⁷ Harrison, *A Better Story*, 118.

¹¹⁸ Andre van Mol, "Scapegoating the Church for LGBT Suicide and Stigma," *CMDA* (June 2019) - <https://cmda.org/scapegoating-the-church-for-lgbt-suicide-and-stigma/>

¹¹⁹ Jeremy Gibbs, "Religious Conflict, Sexual Identity, and Suicidal Behaviors among LGBT Young Adults," *Arch Suicide Res.* 19(4) (Oct-Dec 2015), 472-488 - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4706071/>
Note that some (including LGBT scholars) argue that using a mental health framework to understand or help LGBT people can be intrinsically problematic e.g.

Kitzinger, C & Wilkinson, "Social Advocacy for Equal Marriage: The Politics of 'Rights' and the Psychology of "Mental Health", *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 4(1) (2004), 173-194.

¹²⁰ Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay?* (UK: The Good Book Company, 2013), Kindle edition, Ch. 4.

However, we must also say that biblical teaching on gender and sexuality by no means inevitably causes such personal torment.¹²¹ There is a kind of self-loathing we should all feel when we become aware of our sin, no matter what its nature. Before a vision of God, for instance, the prophet Isaiah pronounces himself lost and unclean (Isaiah 6:5). But though the genuine work of God might take us to such a place, it never leaves us there. If we are convicted, it is so that we can embrace God's gift of pardon and be restored.¹²²

4. In Christ, God reorients our view of identity

WCF XII. *All those that are justified, God vouchsafes, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have His name put upon them, receive the spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him as by a Father: yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation.*

Not only does God give us Christ himself and all his righteousness on the cross (Rom 7:6, 11:17; Gal 3:27)¹²³, he also takes possession of us, setting us apart and binding us to himself so that we might serve and please him forever as we were created to do (1 Thess 5:23-24).¹²⁴ This is called definitive or positional sanctification (Hebrews 10:14).¹²⁵ In other words, in Christ we are a new creation with a new identity and orientation (2 Cor 5:17). When we receive God's truth, we are no longer of the world, knowing ourselves according to its false categories or our own fleshly desires. We know ourselves as people drawn into the loving company of Father, Son and Spirit, belonging wholly to him as adopted children (John 14:16-21; 17:14-19) and able to worship and obey him as we were made to do. In Christ, we receive a new foundation for our identity that humbles our self-righteous egoism but also assures us we are infallibly secure in his justifying love.¹²⁶ It is in Christ that we discover our true selves and also know each other truly.

5. In Christ, God reorients our hearts, minds and deeds

WCF XIII.i - *They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.*

God did not send his Son and his Spirit merely to offer us a little help around the edges of our lives. When God takes possession of us, we cannot remain unchanged, but are completely and thoroughly transformed. His grace 'reaches down to the lowest depths of our need and 'effects a change which is radical and all-pervasive, a change which cannot be explained in terms of any combination [...] of human resources.'¹²⁷ Indeed, Christ gave himself up for his church 'that he

¹²¹ Ibid, Ch. 4

¹²² Ibid, Ch. 4

¹²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1.

¹²⁴ David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Illinois: IVP, 1995), 47.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 27

¹²⁶ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 147.

¹²⁷ John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Michigan: Banner of Truth Trust, 1955), 96.

might sanctify her [...] that she might be holy and without blemish.’ (Eph 5:26-28). To that end, he nourishes and tends to us (Eph 5:29).

However, when we realise the deep traction sin has within us in matters of sexuality and gender (alongside various other areas of life, for each of us) it can be easy to feel any sort of change or reorientation is impossible. We can so easily give up on ourselves, each other, and, most importantly, the power of God. However, we dare not underestimate the powerful love of Father, Son and Spirit towards us.

We must be careful understand what is *not* meant by change. Reorienting our desires, actions and lives in Christ does *not* mean attaining sinless perfection in this life, or an absence of the struggle against sin and the sinful fleshy nature in this life before heaven. It does *not* mean denying or hiding away our struggles under a triumphant veneer. It does *not* mean striving for a new identity that might seem more acceptable or ‘normal’ to some, but which is still ultimately based on faulty understandings (Part 4.2b).

Rather, those to whom God has lovingly bound to himself are called to draw on his nourishing resources in Christ again and again for a new path of devotion, giving ourselves wholly to him, rejecting sinful desires and seeking a purity of heart that sings in tune to our true identity.¹²⁸ That includes honouring the gender rooted in our God-given biology as well as striving for sexual purity either in marital faithfulness or chaste singleness. Here are some key aspects of growth in holiness:

a. **We continually draw near to Christ through his Word and Spirit**

Christ works in us firstly through his Word. Jesus’ very words are ‘spirit and life’ (John 6:63). Gods’ Word that works in us to think God’s thoughts after him and keep us from the world (John 17:16-17).¹²⁹ Through his Spirit God binds us to himself, brings his Word alive in us with its ‘sin-killing power’, weans us away from the flesh (Rom 8:1-8) and invigorates us to pray.¹³⁰ Prayer is our Spirit-provoked reply to our Father as his adopted children (Rom 8:15) and the way we draw near to him in need (Ps 5:3; Matt 26:41; Phil 4:6-9). Prayerful intercession is also the best way we can show love to each other.

These are basic aspects of the Christian life and yet it is easy it is to want to change in the area of sexuality and expect change in others while neglecting the daily encouragement of the gospel. It is so easy to dispense human wisdom while neglecting God’s ordinary means of grace in the word and prayer; assume that political action, science, logic or a good telling off is all that is needed to change a person; look for comfort and help everywhere except God’s word about Christ, and look for any hero other than Christ. How easy it is to assume God has given up on us, hanging onto our sins and insisting we still have no choice but to sin. As we all struggle with sin in the areas of sexuality and gender, the first and constant help we need is God’s Word and Spirit.

b. **We own our guilt and repent from sin**

WCF XV.i - *Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the Gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.*

¹²⁸ Peterson, *Possessed by God*, 53

¹²⁹ Ibid, 31

¹³⁰ Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 6:85-86.

XV.ii- *By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.*

XV.iii - *Although repentance is not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ, yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.*

XV.iv - *As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.*

The Spirit convicts us of our sin through the Word (John 16:8). As John Owen says, ‘the Spirit ‘convinces the soul of all the evil of it, cuts off all its pleas, discovers all its deceits, stops all its evasions, answers its pretenses, makes the soul own its abomination, and lie down under the sense of it. Unless this be done all that follows is in vain’.¹³¹ We cannot experience God’s sanctifying power until we have admitted our guilt (Acts 3:19; 26:18-20). Indeed, one of the key reasons we may not grow in holiness is that we don’t hate the sin in us and long to be rid of what grieves God (2 Cor 7:8-9).¹³²

Having confessed our sin, we must also repent of our sin, fighting against temptation and fleeing immorality while turning our eyes to the relief of Christ’s forgiveness (1 John 1:8-9) and putting him centre stage in our lives.¹³³

c. **We put off our old selves, put on our new selves and brace for trial**

WCF XIII.1 - *They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.*

XIII.ii - *This sanctification is throughout, in the whole man; yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence arises a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.*

XIII.iii - *In which war, although the remaining corruption, for a time, may much prevail; yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part does overcome; and so, the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.*

In Christ we have been taught to actively put to death our old, sinful selves (Eph 4:22-24), starving, weakening and putting to death our sinful desires and deeds by the power of his Spirit. Our goal ‘is not just consistent fleeing from, and regular resistance to, temptation, but the diminishment and

¹³¹ Ibid, 6:85-86.

¹³² Heath Lambert, *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2013), Kindle edition, Ch. 2

¹³³ Murray, *Redemption*, 113.
Lambert, *Finally Free*, 23-4.

even the end of the occurrences of sinful desires' through embracing our new selves with reordered loves and desires toward Christ (Roman 8:12-17; Col 3:5-17).¹³⁴ We are warned that persistently favouring self-gratification over obedience means we forfeit God's grace (Heb 12:15-17). Without striving for holiness in Christ's strength, no one will see the Lord (Rom 6:14-19; Heb 12:14).

Even as God's beloved children, diligently striving against sin, we are always vulnerable to the tenacious pull of ingrained, 'old self' desires. This causes intense internal conflict between Spirit and flesh that can leave us exhausted and disheartened, even on the brink of despair. The sheer intensity of this fight is a common reason for simply giving up. It can feel in any particular moment as though the only way out of temptation is to give in. There can be great immediate relief in succumbing despite the guilt, shame and other consequences.¹³⁵ And it's even more tempting to do this when everyone around us says 'just accept yourself' and 'you don't need to suffer'.

But the Christian life is more hopeful than depressing. That which we are called to put to death, God has already put to death on the cross for us, in Christ. Because sin, death and the devil have lost their claim on us (Romans 6:1-11), we are no longer helpless slaves to sin. We have a Father who parents us through trials and suffering, moulding us to be the people he wants us to be (Heb 12:7-8), prizing us away from that which will destroy us and whetting our appetites for deep and lasting happiness. God never wastes our intense struggle. Jesus is the founder and perfecter of our faith who has walked the path of endurance before us and withstood much greater temptation (Heb 12:1-4). The Spirit who prompts and empowers the fight against the flesh is also the expression of God's intense love for us and our pledge of resurrection life (Eph 1:14). Knowing this lifts our drooping hands and strengthens our weak knees in our hardest moments (Heb 12:12). Finally, we rejoice in the sure hope that our struggle against sin will end in God's new creation.

Hence, Paul also exhorts us to 'put on' new selves who belong to the new creation, 'created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (Eph 4:24). The Spirit does not draw us away from our old selves to an empty wasteland but a land of rich goodness. Through him we discover God's good design for our gender and sexuality and enjoy it the fruits of patience, thanksgiving, self-control, courage, kindness, tenderness and forgiveness.

We must remember, though, that putting off our old self and putting on the new can be a slow process indeed, and to make substantial progress against particular areas of sin can sometimes take many years. God moulds us in his own time. We can't hurry up sanctification or skip trials (Rom 5:3-5; James 1:2-8). Although the Bible's message on sexuality and gender is relatively straightforward, we must not speak simplistically about the process of sanctification. If sin were simply a behaviour, we could just stop it. God's work of unravelling sin in us is long and complex but knowing God's energising love for us, we can 'flee sexual immorality' (1 Cor 8:18) and distorted expressions of gender to find discover his good designs for our flourishing.¹³⁶

6. God helps us know, love and proclaim Christ together

¹³⁴ PCA, "Report to the 48th GA," 10.

¹³⁵ Emler, "Why We Give In To Temptation," CCEF (March 2020) - <https://www.ccef.org/why-we-give-in-to-temptation/>

¹³⁶ Horton, "Let's Not Cut Christ to Pieces."

WCF XXV.iii - *Unto this catholic visible Church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and does, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.*

Finally, God reorients us to Christ through his Spirit not only as individuals but together as the church. God draws us together in Christ, creating and ruling his church through his Word, leading us to faith and repentance in each other's company, even as we live within and before a dark world. The church is the part of the world 'being penetrated by the rays of the new age as the Spirit unites us to Christ, disturbing and reorganising our fellowship around his person and work'.¹³⁷ While the world creates identities and tribes based on gender, sexual desires, generations and political persuasions, the church derives its being and identity from Christ.

Thus, we should strive to reject false labels and identities in our church communities, knowing each other as sinners who are intimately loved, forgiven and called to righteousness in Christ. We also share and nurture our growth in holiness with regard to our gender and sexuality together in our church families. In sharing Christ, we also deliberately nurture love and intimacy not only or even primarily within marital relationships but within many relationships in the body of Christ (John 13-16; Eph 4:1-16; 1 Thess 2:6-8; Philemon 7).

However, we must be careful of an over-realised eschatology with regard to church. The church is only a partially realised form of God's kingdom. Like each believer, the church is simultaneously justified and sinful, holy in Christ and yet often far from righteous in desires and actions (1 Cor 1:2-3; 3:1).¹³⁸ Therefore, we called to pursue greater maturity in faith and action together, taking our mutual accountability in Christ seriously with its tasks of teaching, warning and discipline (Col 1:28) while also caring for each other graciously, humbly, faithfully and warmly. Together we press into the pain of discovering our own false identities, find ourselves truly in him, develop a dynamic love for our Father, read Scripture, pray, sing of heaven, look for ways to serve tenderly and insightfully, use our struggles to comfort and encourage others (2 Cor 1:3-7), forgive and bear with one another. We do this trusting God is at work building up the body of Christ (Eph 4:1-16) and drawing the lost into his kingdom.

Indeed, the central mission of the church and all its members, both married and single, is to proclaim Jesus as Saviour and Lord to the world and make disciples (Rom 10:14-17; Matt 28:19-20). A vital way we can reach the lost, particularly those who embrace various gender and sexual identities, is through hospitality, showing Christ through caring, engaging, gospel-speaking relationships.¹³⁹

Summary

In union with Christ, the new head of redeemed humanity, God reorients us to himself. This profoundly affects our knowledge of and response to our gender and sexual desires. He shows us that flourishing is only found in God-centredness, not our subjective desires. Through his death on the cross Jesus wins us pardon for our sins and deep acceptance for us as the beloved children of his Father. Through his resurrection he restores us to a relationship of intimacy with himself, centring our identities on him and transforming our deepest desires and actions. The

¹³⁷ Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 846.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 869

¹³⁹ Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World* (Illinois: Crossway, 2018).

knowledge of Christ also brings a deeper appreciation of marriage and chaste singleness, and the way both these vocations point a lost world to Christ. God works this reorientation in us both individually and together as his church.

Part 4 – Sin, Salvation and Specific Gender and Sexuality Issues

Having surveyed essential aspects of creation, fall and the gospel, we now highlight specific ways in which sin distorts and the gospel transforms our response to gender and sexuality.

1. Gender

a. Biological sex

The Fall: biological sex itself can be ambiguous in Disorders of Sexual Development

A very small number of people¹⁴⁰ are born with conditions in which their physical features do not fully reflect normal binary gender structure. These are called Disorders of Sexual Development (DSD), a term covering a wide range of chromosomal, hormonal and anatomic conditions which cause a variety of problems with sexual development.¹⁴¹ Some of these disorders cause considerable confusion of biological sex. However, in many cases, biological sex is not in doubt — there is just abnormal development of genitals and secondary sexual characteristics.

DSDs are a straightforward biological manifestation of the Fall. They are not a manifestation of individual sinful desires. We must be very careful not to associate DSDs with sin or confuse them with transgenderism. DSDs are *not* primarily characterised by a perceived mismatch between biological sex and a sense of gender.

Those with DSD can suffer greatly for a number of reasons. Because sex and gender are such important aspects of human identity, DSDs take their toll on a person's sense of self and social relationships. Medical interventions can cause considerable discomfort and confusion. Some people feel uncomfortable with the gender they were 'assigned' by medical staff at birth. Parents struggle with great burdens of grief and decision making. Secrecy and shame often pervade the lives of those with DSD and their families.¹⁴² However, people with DSDs also report a variety of different feelings about their condition and its treatment.

While DSDs are not in themselves sinful, our responses to these conditions certainly can be. Firstly, those with DSDs often find others treat them with disgust, isolate them or attach 'shame' to their condition. This denies they are made in God's image and called to grasp God's love and redemption in Christ. Indeed, we all feel the calamitous effects of the Fall in our bodies and long for them to be transformed in the resurrection.

Secondly, people with DSDs are sometimes used as 'proof' that gender is naturally non-binary or fluid in wider debates about gender and identity.¹⁴³ The commonly used term for DSDs —

¹⁴⁰ Cox, *Intersex in Christ*, Ch.1 - The percentage of the population with DSD varies depending on what conditions are included.

¹⁴¹ Selma Feldman Witchel, "Disorders of Sexual Development," *Best Pract Res Clin Obstet Gynaecol*, 48 (April 2018): 90–102 - doi: 10.1016/j.bpobgyn.2017.11.005

¹⁴² Cox, *Intersex*, Ch.1.

¹⁴³ Cox, *Intersex*, Ch. 2-3; Virginia Mollenkott, *Omnigender* (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2007).

‘intersex’ — is taken by some to imply the existence of a ‘third sex’ inhabiting a space between male and female.¹⁴⁴ However, the existence of DSDs in our fallen world does not undermine God’s clear creation intent for binary sex and gender. Nor should it undermine our desire to see those with DSDs restored as far as possible to a stable male or female gender with careful attention to all elements of individual cases over time.¹⁴⁵ As previously discussed, Jesus did not see the presence of congenital or acquired conditions interfering with physical sexual characteristics as undermining the reality of dimorphic sex (Matt 19:12).¹⁴⁶

In Christ: we receive our bodies with thanks, find our true identity and await the resurrection

People with DSDs first of all need to know their identity in Christ, as is the case with all other people living in the present age. They do not find their security first and foremost in their own feelings or in a firm sense of their gender and biological sex alone but in knowing Christ and his acceptance in the gospel.¹⁴⁷ Knowing Christ, they can then find the coordinates they need to cope with their condition.

Firstly, they must know they are made in God’s image and their bodies are God’s good gift to them to be cared for and received with thanks, no matter how the Fall has damaged them. They have no reason to be ashamed of their bodies — they are to be treasured and treated with great care for living out their love of Christ. They also have secure hope of the glorious transformation of their bodies in the resurrection with an unambiguous sex and gender.¹⁴⁸

Secondly, they can also know that Christ will never abide by fallen human exclusions but will accept and love them faithfully. In Christ they also have a Lord who knows persecution and betrayal by those who should have loved and protected him but who forgave and loved his enemies. In him, people with DSDs can put off anger, fear and resentment and put on Christlike forgiveness, gentleness, patience and courage. The challenge for churches is to ensure we listen carefully, speak slowly and do not follow the world but show Christ’s acceptance, care and family love to those with DSDs. This is particularly important given that many people with DSDs may not be able to marry and will experience infertility.

Thirdly, in Christ they can grasp the goodness of God’s created order. This will mean embracing their biological sex as it can be known and living out a gender identity, roles and relationships according to that sex. While biological sex will be relatively clear in the vast majority of people with DSDs, a small number may have to make a choice. Living as well as possible according to biological sex may well be a complex task that requires caution, patience and medical and psychological expertise. The current medical approach to babies with DSDs is highly individualised, multidisciplinary and cautious, particularly with regard to surgery.¹⁴⁹ Very rarely, a teen or adult

¹⁴⁴ G, S & C, “The Transgender Moment,” 15.

¹⁴⁵ The majority of current medical approaches to DSD are conservative, multidisciplinary and undertaken over several years

¹⁴⁶ G, S & C, “The Transgender Moment,” 15.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 33.

¹⁴⁸ Cox, *Intersex*, Ch. 6

¹⁴⁹ Witchel, *Disorders of Sexual Development* -

[https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5866176/#:~:text=Disorders%20of%20sexual%20development%20\(DSD,%2C%20developmental%20programming%2C%20and%20hormones.](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5866176/#:~:text=Disorders%20of%20sexual%20development%20(DSD,%2C%20developmental%20programming%2C%20and%20hormones.)

See also - <https://www.karger.com/Article/Fulltext/442975>

may discover they have a DSD. In that case, the wisest course is determined on a case by case basis.¹⁵⁰

b. Gender identity

The Fall: gender identity can be confused

The Fall has brought not only confusion in biological sex and gender roles but in the phenomenon of transgenderism, the relationship between biological sex and gender identity itself.

i. Transgender experiences

Transgender issues have very much come into the spotlight in recent years and highlighted important facets of God's design for us as gendered people as well as the complex and widespread impacts of the Fall on our sense of identity, minds and bodies.

The transgender experience is not a uniform one. 'Transgender' is an umbrella term for those people who experience some incongruence between their psychological and emotional sense of gender identity and their biological sex, and who want to express the gender with which they identify in some way. One young person described her experience this way:

*It is the "battle of the beliefs": hanging on to your belief that you are who you are despite how others may define you, while also challenging yourself not to compare your insides to other people's outsides. It's a constant effort to align yourself externally with how you feel internally.*¹⁵¹

However, those who gather under the transgender umbrella are by no means uniform. 'Transgender' experiences can include 'gender bending' or pushing against gender norms by intentionally crossing or blending accepted gender norms in a given culture e.g. through attempting to obscure one's gender or adopting the dress and mannerisms of the opposite gender; cross dressing (transvestitism); or seeking medical assistance to transition to the opposite gender. Some people see gender in binary terms and want to assume the identity of the opposite sex. Some see gender as diverse (more than simply male or female) or fluid (changeable within individuals over time).¹⁵² The term 'transgender' may also include those who cross dress mainly for private sexual arousal, to form a countercultural identity or for show/performance (drag). However, these people may lack the deep sense of gender incongruence that is the essence of transgender experience.¹⁵³

This incongruence between a person's gender identity and biological sex may cause sufferers intense distress and impair their daily functioning. The most recent psychiatric diagnostic term for this distress is Gender Dysphoria (DSM-V, 2013). The previous formal diagnostic term, Gender Identity Disorder (DSM IV, 1994), saw gender incongruence itself as problematic.¹⁵⁴ Now it is only the distress resulting from the mismatch that is seen as psychiatrically disordered, by the medical experts who from time to time define and redefine various psychiatric diagnoses. This is a good

¹⁵⁰ G, S & C, "The Transgender Moment," 34.

¹⁵¹ <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-its-like-to-be-trans-and-live-with-gender-dysphoria>

¹⁵² Smith, "Responding to the Transgender Crisis," 4.

¹⁵³ Mark Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* (Illinois: IVP, 2015), Kindle edition, Ch.1.

Smith, "Responding to the Transgender Crisis," 3.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, "Responding to the Transgender Crisis," 3.

example of the way cultural norms can shape psychiatric diagnoses. It also highlights the psychological vulnerability of those who experience gender incongruence

One subject of recent study is the remarkable increase of referrals to gender identity clinics, particularly amongst young people. It has been suggested that peer influence and social media can possibly play a role in prompting a sense of gender incongruence.¹⁵⁵ Several studies have suggested a range of predisposing factors to transgenderism including schizophrenia, autism spectrum disorders, childhood adversity and possibly genetic factors.¹⁵⁶

ii. Transgender ideology

It is important for Christians to distinguish between the personal experiences of those with gender incongruence, and the ideological beliefs advocated by queer theorists and political activists. Individuals struggle with generally unwanted feelings of gender incongruity within different personal circumstance and seek to understand their situation and cope in different ways. Transgender ideology, however, presents itself as a current cultural authority, defender of reality, and its essential features can more easily be encapsulated. The key ideological belief, building upon decades of feminist and homosexual ideology (Part 2.3a) is that subjective feelings override objective facts of biology. In other words, our bodies are merely raw material we use to serve our subjective sense of identity and its expression. Gender is seen as purely performative, socially constructed, personally chosen or determined by the brain apart from biological sex.¹⁵⁷ Queer theorists go even further than proponents of transgender ideology, and seek to dismantle the concept of gender all together so that gender roles and categories become irrelevant.¹⁵⁸

iii. Transgenderism and the Fall

The transgender experience illustrates the deep, psychosomatic damage and distress wrought by the Fall. The Fall does not ever cause a real mismatch between gender and sex within individuals — it does not make a male into a female for instance — but it can lead to great frustration and complication within our embodied selves. For a small number of people, it can be so intensely difficult to live in congruity with biological sex that fleeing from that sex through cross-dressing, medical or surgical manipulation of the body can feel like the only way out.

It appears these feelings are shaped by an extremely complex interplay between genetic, neuroanatomical development, psychiatric and childhood experiences.¹⁵⁹ The sins of others can also profoundly shape transgender impulses and behaviours, for example childhood neglect. Current research is assessing how much cultural pressure and social media may be influencing the recent increase in referrals to gender clinics amongst children and teens.¹⁶⁰ It could well be that these impulses arise both because of the impact of the Fall on our bodies, relationships and

¹⁵⁵ K.J. Zucker, "Adolescents with Gender Dysphoria: Reflections on Some Contemporary Clinical and Research Issues", *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (July 2019), 1 - <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-01518-8>

See also - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5073215/>

¹⁵⁶ Fatima Saleem and Syed Rizvi, "Transgender Associations and Possible Etiology: A Literature Review," *Cureus*, 9(12) (Dec 2017) - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5825045/>
Mayer and McHugh, "Sexuality and Gender"

¹⁵⁷ Smith, "Responding to the Transgender Crisis," 7.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. D.Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁵⁹ Saleem, "Transgender Associations,"

¹⁶⁰ See G, S & C, "The Transgender Moment," 17-19 for an overview

experiences as well as the indwelling corruption of original sin. The biblical evidence is that where our beliefs, impulses and acts push against God's created purposes for sex and gender, these are morally significant expressions of our inherited corruption and we are held accountable for them. However, we must emphasise again that experiencing such non-volitional impulses does not carry the same weight and consequences as wholeheartedly adopting a transgender identity (Part 2.3c, 4).

The Bible rejects deliberate cross dressing by men in Deuteronomy 22:5 as an infringement of God's natural order of creation.¹⁶¹ In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul condemns the specific act of taking an effeminate role in homosexual sex (*malakoi*) in addition to homosexual acts in general.¹⁶² In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul encourages the wholehearted embracing of distinctive gender expression as a reflection of created reality. Furthermore, gender bending or transitioning can put enormous strain on family and other relationships.¹⁶³

In Christ: we treasure our bodies, cling to our true identity and await the resurrection

Again, we first and foremost declare that all people with transgender experiences can find true personal identity and security not in self invention or reinvention, strong desires or even in embracing our biological sex alone, but in Christ. In Christ alone they can find the riches of God's deep mercy which brings forgiveness for their sins, takes away their shame, declares them God's beloved children and gives them hope and rest in expectation of full healing in heaven, body and spirit.

In Christ, a person with gender identity issues has the resources to pursue holiness, living a new lifestyle that involves treasuring their bodies as those purchased by Christ and filled with his Spirit. This means seeking to live out a gender identity that accords with their biological sex.¹⁶⁴ This includes those who have already medically or surgically transitioned in some way. It is probably inadvisable to perform any reversal of surgery, but medical transitioning should probably be carefully ceased. The process of honestly revealing and living according to biological sex will be different for every person and will likely be a long and difficult process requiring God's grace at every step.¹⁶⁵

It may involve putting to death sins of covetousness (desiring a different body) and deception (seeking to cover biological sex) as well as putting on honest, joy, patience and thankfulness.¹⁶⁶ It will involve embracing gender roles and relationships, fostering the relational virtues that build a sense of masculinity or femininity. That also means honouring contemporary cultural symbols that reflect gender. This does not mean slavishly adhering to cultural gender stereotypes. In fact, some stereotypes may need to be challenged. But it does mean refraining from intentional cross-dressing for the purpose of bending or disguising one's true gender.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶¹ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1996), 945.

¹⁶² Gagnon, "How Christians Should Respond to the Transgender Revolution."

¹⁶³ Trish Hafford-Letchfield et al, "What do we know about transgender parenting?: Findings from a systematic review," *Health and Social Care*, 27(5) (Sep 2019) - <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/hsc.12759>

¹⁶⁴ G, S & C, "The Transgender Moment," 34-37.

¹⁶⁵ Russell Moore, "Joan or John?" *TGC* (Oct 2014) - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/joan-or-john/>

¹⁶⁶ Smith, "Responding to the Transgender Crisis," 21.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 17 – compare Yarhouse, "Understanding Gender Dysphoria" *Christianity Today* (July 2015): 45-50.

In all this, a person struggling with transgender experiences needs the active, humble, listening, prayerful, ever faithful, gentle but bold encouragement of Christian brothers and sisters over the long term. This means that Christian brothers and sisters need to resist all sinful impulses to marginalise or even subtly assert self-righteous superiority.¹⁶⁸ Appropriate psychological and medical help that is sympathetic to a Christian view of gender should be readily sought.

Medical and surgical gender re-assignment treatments are increasingly sought in our community to help alleviate the suffering of those with gender dysphoria although this is a controversial area.¹⁶⁹ These treatments, however, do not fit with a Christian understanding of the purpose of medicine. Dr John Wyatt compares the task of medicine to that of art conservation work in which everything possible is done to honour the artist's design. In medicine we should strive to honour God's original design for the body rather than consider the body raw material to fit to our desires, as powerful as these might be.¹⁷⁰ Medical and surgical gender transitioning have serious and often irreversible effects, and there is a significant incidence of transition regret that only increases distress for all concerned.¹⁷¹

In the case of children who report gender dysphoria, sympathetic psychological support should be sought. Gender dysphoria in children often resolves with time and a 'watch and wait' approach is best without taking any steps towards gender transition.¹⁷² Parents may need help to communicate with schools about minimising distress for the child while also encouraging them to embrace their biological sex.

While some Christians may carefully and wisely take on the role of defending speaking against transgender ideology in the public square, we must be careful not to allow 'culture wars' to impact our care of individuals with gender identity struggles. For example, churches should seek ways to provide toilets in a way that ensures all feel safe and comfortable. Opinions within our community and amongst Christians regarding what pronouns to use with transgender people varies.¹⁷³ Given our desire to see our brothers and sisters live in accordance with God's gender design for them, the ideal and goal is to address a person using the name and pronouns that fit their biological sex. However, context should always be taken into account. There may be circumstances when it is appropriate for a person's chosen pronoun to be used at the very beginning of a relationship or when they visit church for the first time and their history is not known. This may help establish trust and open up conversation. Some professionals may be under a legal obligation to use certain pronouns in the workplace.¹⁷⁴ While emphasising the desirability of using names and pronouns that fit with biological sex, we think it best that Christians use their wisdom and discretion in difference circumstances.

¹⁶⁸ Moore, "Joan or John?"

¹⁶⁹ Bizi et al., "Gender Dysphoria: Bioethical Aspects of Medical Treatment," *Biomed Res Int.* (2018) - Published online 2018 Jun 13 - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6020665/>
Mayer and McHugh, "Sexuality and Gender"

¹⁷⁰ John Wyatt, *Matters of Life and Death: Human Dilemmas in the Light of the Christian Faith* (UK: IVP, 2009), 99.

¹⁷¹ Daniel Payne, "Casualties of a Social, Psychological, and Medical Fad: The Dangers of Transgender Ideology in Medicine," *Public Discourse* (Jan 2018) - <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/01/20810/>

¹⁷² G, S & C, "The Transgender Moment," 38.

¹⁷³ Yarhouse, "Understanding Gender Dysphoria" *Christianity Today* cf. Gagnon, "How Christians Should Respond to the Transgender Revolution" and Moore "Joan or John?"

¹⁷⁴ Peter Lynas, *Transformed: A Brief Biblical and Pastoral Introduction to Understanding Transgender in a Changing Culture* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 2018), 16.

2. Sexuality

As we have seen, God has provided us with two possible vocations as gendered people — marriage and chaste singleness. God’s purposes for sex are tightly bound to the nature, purpose and meaning of marriage. However, our sexuality has been distorted by the Fall in complex ways and needs to be deeply reoriented in Christ.

a. The Value of Sex

The Fall: we can make too little and too much of sex

In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul addresses certain slogans concerning sexuality used by the Corinthian Christians.¹⁷⁵ In 1 verse 12, Paul quotes a Corinthian slogan ‘All things are lawful for me’. In light of their new liberty from the law (Rom 6:14-15; 7:4-6), they believe they have the freedom and right to do anything, even to the point of justifying sex with prostitutes (v15) and incest (1 Cor 5:1). The Corinthian Christians have imbibed a notion of radical freedom that involves self-rule and unrestricted expression of desire, particularly in the area of sexuality. Then in verse 13, Paul quotes another slogan — ‘*food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food.*’ This is a teleological argument for sexual expression. Just as the stomach is made for food, so the sexual organs are made for sex. Therefore, what can possibly be wrong with doing what we are wired to do and using the body for sex? Evidently the Corinthians have also imbibed an ethics of the flesh to guide their sexuality, living as though instinctive desires are all there is to human beings while rejecting God’s revealed purposes.¹⁷⁶

This Corinthian ethic of sexuality driven by flesh-driven, unbridled freedom bears striking similarity to our own culture’s approach to sexuality. It shows itself in two related tendencies — making too little and too much of sex.

i. Making too little of sex

O’Donovan points out that when sexual relationships lose their good ends and purposes, they simply become a profound form of selfish play, ‘undertaken for the joy of the thing alone, and dependent upon the mutual satisfaction which each partner affords the other for their continuing justification.’¹⁷⁷ Sex as a form of ‘recreational play’ is common in our culture. As one writer describes:

*Sexual acts are often considered morally neutral, with no resulting shame or honour. We’re told that sex can be mere recreation—unless a person wants it to be unitive or procreative or spiritual, in which case it can be that, if only for her or him. And sex is used for trivial purposes: to sell things, to gain attention, to build superstardom, to become popular or to write lyrics.*¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text* (Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 460–461.

¹⁷⁶ Burk, *The Meaning of Sex*, 46ff.

¹⁷⁷ O’Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* 16-17
Ash, *Marriage*, 123-129.

¹⁷⁸ Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex Is Too Important to Define Who We Are* (Illinois: IVP, 2011), Kindle edition, 10.

Sex can also be trivialised in more subtle ways. We can think nothing of the sexual fantasies we secretly entertain, that second look we take at revealing images. At the same time we can also neglect marital sex and its challenges as though it is of little significance to Christian discipleship.

ii. Making too much of sex

A fleshly understanding of sex also involves vastly inflating its importance and centrality to human life. If we take it for granted that to be a normal, healthy, flourishing person we need to be sexually satisfied, a number of consequences follow.

Firstly, we develop an unrealistic view of the fulfilment sex is supposed to provide:

The modern Western romantic ideal of true love promises instant transformation of dust into gold when true lovers meet. The accompanying ideal of sexual fulfilment promises indescribable erotic ecstasy. All too often, instead of correcting these false promises, Christianity lays a blessing over them, offering Christian marriage as the quick ticket to true love and great sex.¹⁷⁹

This view places enormous expectations on marital sex. Spouses can be left feeling resentful when sex does not provide the rapture it apparently should. It also leaves chaste single people feeling as though their lives inevitably fall short.

Secondly, we tend to evaluate ourselves according to our sexuality. Our sexual desirability and performance can become increasingly significant, governing the way we dress and treat our bodies, and crowding out the nurturing of vital virtues and attributes.¹⁸⁰

Thirdly, we can resent any teaching that stands in the way of achieving sexual satisfaction. To insist upon chaste singleness or marital faithfulness can seem old-fashioned and at worst oppressive and harmful.¹⁸¹ For example, one Australian sex therapist says:

It's difficult to grow into a healthy sexual being when you are told by religious parents, and/or church leaders that "God created sex to be something beautiful, and pure but should only be enjoyed in marriage" – and only between a man and a woman. And that you have to be a virgin, preferably having no sexual activity before marriage, no masturbation and definitely no homosexuality. [...] One of the most destructive emotions a person can experience is guilt. It's not as if this guilt makes people abstain from forbidden sexual activity. No, it just makes them feel bad and depressed.¹⁸²

In Christ: we embrace the true value of sex

Being in Christ means we not merely act differently when it comes to sex but think and talk differently about sexuality itself. We use our freedom in Christ to reject fleshly tendencies to trivialise or inflate the importance of sex and embrace his purposes for sexuality (1 Cor 6:12-13).

On the one hand, we understand the enormous power and value of sex in God's eyes. Paul perceives the act of sex as a powerful act of intimacy and self-commitment which involves the

¹⁷⁹ Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity*, 111-112.

¹⁸⁰ Gospel, Society and Culture Committee, "Sexualisation – Resource Paper 3" - <http://gsandc.org.au/sexualisation-pornography/>

¹⁸¹ Ibid

¹⁸² <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/sex-religion-and-guilt-20160219-gmy3yb.html>

whole person; not the mere manipulation of some ‘peripheral’ function of the body’.¹⁸³ Because sexual activity embodies the whole person, sinful union with a prostitute — or adultery or any other extramarital sexual activity — desecrates a Christian’s bodily union with Christ, purchased at great cost by Christ and realised gloriously in the resurrection (1 Cor 6:14-20).¹⁸⁴ This may also help explain the great power of sex to create intense relational bonds as well hurt and abuse.

We harness the power of sex for good when we treasure its Christ-honouring value in marriage (see Parts 1.4; 3.1). This means laying aside embarrassment and unhelpful joking (Eph 4:29) and encouraging couples to value their sexual relationship, persevering through the inevitable challenges different ages and stages bring and striving for sexual purity.

On the other hand, we resist an idolatry of sex that displaces the lordship of Christ (1 Cor 6:12). Paul doesn’t question that the body is made for sex, but it is a subordinate purpose. As we have seen, the ultimate purpose of the body is that we exist for the Lord and all our instincts, desires, hormones must serve that end. Resisting such idolatry is extremely hard in our sex-obsessed culture. Therefore, we should constantly preach to ourselves and each other it is not sex that is central to meaningful human life and intimacy (see Parts 1.4; 3.1, 2) but the Lord. We shouldn’t rush into marriage or relentlessly pair single people up due to fear of missing out on sex. As both single and married people, we should nurture relationships of intimacy without exaggerated fears about erotic attraction in close same sex friendships, particularly between men. As Margaret Atwood says ‘Nobody dies from the lack of sex. It’s lack of love we die from.’¹⁸⁵ True and lasting love and intimacy is found in Christ and his family, not sex.

b. Sexuality and identity

The Fall: the concept of ‘sexual orientation’ can wrongly place sexual desires at the core of our identity

One very important way in which we make too much of sex is by assigning sexual desires a core place in our sense of identity. The language of ‘sexual orientation’, which has become embedded in our contemporary language, both expresses and perpetuates this.

‘Sexual orientation’ can simply describe an enduring tendency to a particular direction of sexual desire.¹⁸⁶ However, the American Psychological Association (APA) definition of sexual orientation shows the common meaning of this concept is often not so simple:

*Sexual orientation is defined as an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person’s sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviours, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.*¹⁸⁷

Two features of this definition are important to note:

¹⁸³ Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 474.

¹⁸⁴ Wright, “Sexuality, Sexual Ethics,” 872.

¹⁸⁵ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/118616-nobody-dies-from-the-lack-of-sex-it-s-lack-of>

¹⁸⁶ PCA, “Report to the 48th GA,” 30-31.

¹⁸⁷ <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/>

i. **The term ‘sexual orientation’ is about more than sexual attraction**

Sexual attraction is the defining element from which non-sexual attractions such as ‘emotional’ attractions seem to extend.¹⁸⁸ In other words, a larger spread of attractions and desires have become subsumed into the category of sexual attraction.

This is important as it illustrates the way sexual desire has become a category for defining and understanding much more about a person than simply their sexual attractions. A person’s sexual orientation can be understood to shape and inhabit their friendships, aesthetic tastes, interests, sensibilities and even, as this definition shows, their community and sense of belonging.

ii. **The term ‘sexual orientation’ is about identity**

In fact, the APA definition of sexual orientation illustrates the way sexual attractions have come to be seen as identity-constituting. Sexual desires need to be searched out, named and expressed in order for each person to be a fully functional and happy adult. In fact, it earns each individual a label (gay, lesbian, straight, etc.) and social role.¹⁸⁹

It is interesting to note that few other desires are regarded as quite so constitutive of identity as sexual desire, particularly same sex desire. For instance, a woman with an enduring desiring for a man other than her husband is not said to have an adulterous identity. A man with enduring self-centred desires is not said to have a narcissistic identity. The reason for this can be to some extent traced to the history of the concept of sexual orientation.

For centuries sexuality was described not in relation to identity but to procreation and in terms of moral or immoral acts eg. ‘sodomy’. In the 19thC, sexual desire came to be seen as a foundational drive, determining and defining human identity.¹⁹⁰ At that point heterosexuality was considered the norm and homosexuality was described as an aberrant (and repugnant) psychological disorder. In recent years of course, psychiatrists have overturned the concept of homosexuality as a pathological, repugnant diagnosis in line with changing cultural views. But the psychological categories of heterosexual and homosexual orientation have remained in our cultural imagination. Catholic writer Michael Hannon argues ‘Sexual orientation, then, is nothing more than a fragile social construct, and one constructed terribly recently.’¹⁹¹ Cambridge theologian Sarah Coakley also comments on the ‘wholly modern (intrinsically secular?) categorisation of hetero-homo- and bisexuality’ which distracts us from the task of ordering sexual amongst many other desires to God.¹⁹²

Interestingly, that is a conclusion partly echoed by queer theorists. They see ‘orientation’ as a social construct just waiting to be deconstructed. Part of their critique is that feelings, attractions, desires are fickle, and such hard and fast ‘orientation’ categories simply don’t fit reality. They then take that deconstruction all the way and argue for gender diversity or even fluidity and thus a variety of sexual expressions.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered* (Pennsylvania: Crown & Covenant, 2015), Kindle edition, Ch. 4.

Burk, *Transforming Homosexuality*, 28.

¹⁸⁹ Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity*, 40-41.

¹⁹⁰ Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered*, Ch. 4.

¹⁹¹ Michael Hannon, “Against Heterosexuality,” *First Things* (March 2014) - <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/03/against-heterosexuality>

¹⁹² Sarah Coakley, “Prayer as Crucible – how my mind has changed,” *The Christian Century*, 128(6) (Mar 2011), 39.

¹⁹³ Burk, *Transforming Homosexuality*, 35.

Although we certainly don't reach the same conclusions as queer theorists, we share elements of their critique that these fixed, psychologically rooted 'orientation' categories lay a grid of meaning over our humanity that, while reflecting something of intense power of sexual desire to shape our relationships more generally, does not accurately reflect reality. We also say that these categories do not fit God's design or purposes for sexuality.¹⁹⁴ Our desires can be deceitful, changeable and highly complex (Jeremiah 17:9-10). They are simply not worthy to serve as the foundation of a person's identity and the measure of who they are.

Jenell Williams Paris raises a timely critique of the way Christians have uncritically adopted the concept of sexual orientation and its consequences. She says, 'Instead of questioning the validity of sexual identity altogether, Christians have mostly focused on either morally elevating heterosexuality over homosexuality or equalising all sexual identities as blessed'.¹⁹⁵ When biblical teaching on sexuality is combined with a contemporary anthropology in which sexuality is constitutive of identity as well as well-being and intimacy, we find ourselves condemning the core makeup of 'gay' people in a way we don't condemn 'straight' people. We then feel we either need to try and defend or adjust what appears to be an 'unjust' biblical ethic that can lead to enormous distress or abandon it in favour of accepting all sexual identities.

In either case, we fail to speak fully and truthfully about the impact of sin on our sexual desires, and hence fail to minister the gospel to each other. Those Christians who identify as 'straight' can possess unwarranted self-assurance and blindness to the sinful distortions of their own sexual desires and equal or greater need of forgiveness and repentance than those who are same sex attracted. Indeed, no one has a 'straight' sexuality in the sense of a 'normal' or 'healthy' one. Nobody's sexuality remains unaffected by the Fall.¹⁹⁶

In Christ: we recover our true identity

i. What is our identity in Christ?

While upholding the great value and power of sex, the Bible nowhere describes or approves such a defining role as we have seen for sexual desire in the 'makeup' of a person or their community (see Parts 1.1; 2.3a; 3.3, 4). To do that is to obscure or replace the teleology of human sexuality from serving marriage to shaping a sense of self and belonging. Without denying or ignoring our struggles with our sexual feelings, we must root our identities in authentic creation and redemption categories rather false categories and subjective feelings.

Who are we? The answer does not lie in being 'gay' or 'straight' or in the microcosm of our own experiences. It lies in the macrocosmic context of what God has done for us in Christ. While we currently experience sinful sexual desires, in Christ we are God's adopted children, redeemed from sin and restored to fellowship with him, justified and enabled by his Spirit to persevere until we are glorified in heaven. In this knowledge, we grow in righteousness.

The realisation of this identity is exemplified by Jack, a man who had been embracing a gay identity. Here he recounts an intense experience of reading Scripture and finding his identity reoriented by Jesus. He said:

¹⁹⁴ Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity*, 43-46.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 40

¹⁹⁶ Doherty, "Love Does Not Delight in Evil, but Rejoices with the Truth."

- *'I have to go this way because it's who I am – I only know myself as gay.'* Jesus replied, *'But this is not how I know you; therefore, your knowledge of yourself as gay is false.'* It felt as though the rug had been pulled out from under my feet. I felt as though the foundation upon which I had built my identity, being gay, was crumbling. I had come to him with the most difficult and painful aspects of my life – to learn again that he had dealt with them through his death on the cross. To allow his grace and forgiveness to permeate my life and teach me that my identity and worth came from what he had accomplished. I was a forgiven sinner who was a beloved son of God the Father, and even Jesus himself was not ashamed to call me his brother¹⁹⁷.

In Christ we also embrace secondary but good, foundational aspects of our created identity such as our gender. We are men designed for either sexual relations with one particular wife or for chaste singleness; or women designed for either sexual relations with one particular husband or for chaste singleness — all for God's glory. For Sean Doherty, a man who has experienced long term same sex attraction, one of his most liberating discoveries was:

*[...] that my sexual identity as a man was already fixed and secure – because sexuality (in the sense of the sexual differences between men and women) is a gift of God to humanity in creation. My role was not, therefore, to seek to change my sexual desires in order to change my sexual identity. Rather, it was to receive or acknowledge what I already had (a male body) as a good gift from God. [...] the transformation which I then experienced was not on the basis of effort and achievement, but through trusting in God's good ordering of his precious world.*¹⁹⁸

ii. Speaking about our identity

We must then be careful to speak to and about each other in ways that point to our true identity in Christ. One recent challenge to think hard about how we do this has been raised by Wesley Hill and others at the Spiritual Friendship blog.¹⁹⁹ Hill is a Christian who experiences same sex attraction and embraces a celibate lifestyle — and self-identifies using the language of 'celibate gay Christian'. He describes some reasons for this:

*But I know an increasing number of Christians-including myself-who have chosen to own the label "gay" and use it to acknowledge the unique circumstances in which they're called to bear witness to the grace of God. [...] there are many young Christians who are choosing to remain celibate but who nonetheless "share a common sense of experience with members of the gay community, and the use of the word 'gay' (as a self-defining attribution) is an honest account of their sexual attractions and reflects the resonance they feel with the gay community at that level." Surely such use of the word gay is miles away from defining a person's core identity for themselves or anyone else, isn't it?*²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Christopher Keane, ed. *What Some of You Were: Stories About Christians and Homosexuality* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2001), 41.

¹⁹⁸ Doherty, "Love Does Not Delight in Evil, but Rejoices with the Truth," 12.

¹⁹⁹ <https://spiritualfriendship.org/>;

Ron Belgau, "In Defense of Spiritual Friendship and Revoice," *Public Discourse* (June 2018) - <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/06/21927/>

²⁰⁰ Wesley Hill, "The End of Sexual Identity: Review," *TGC* - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/end-sexual-identity/> - see also

Mark Yarhouse, "A Christian Perspective on Sexual Identity" -

<http://www.christoncampuscci.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Homosexuality.pdf>

Thus, Hill argues that the term ‘gay Christian’ does not express an identity with sexuality at its centre but a ‘unique thorn’ at which point ‘I am called to receive and reflect his grace and embody the “perfection” of his strength’.²⁰¹

However, behind Hill’s use of this term does lie a deeper set of assumptions about identity and sexuality. For Hill, ‘being gay’ is a ‘broader, more inclusive category that can’t be reduced to the behaviour, or even the desire for, gay sex’ -

*“A sexual orientation is such a complex and, in most cases, it seems, intractable thing; I for one cannot imagine what ‘healing’ from my orientation would look like, given that it seems to manifest itself not only in physical attraction to male bodies but also in a preference for male company, with all that it entails,” such as conversation and emotional intimacy.*²⁰²

Hill describes his concern that the language of ‘putting to death’ desires for gay sex implies all aspects of a ‘homosexual orientation’ must then be put to death:

*This is a devastating burden for many same-sex attracted Christians to bear, since it then leaves them trying to parse, ever more minutely and obsessively, how much of their desires for friendship, intimacy, companionship, community, etc. are a result of their sexual orientation. Then, if they think that those desires are a result of their same-sex attraction, they’re left feeling that they must repent of things that, surely, God intends for blessing and good in their lives—and things that have a rich history of commendation and sanctification in the history of the Church.*²⁰³

Wes Hill provides an honest, compelling window into the experience of Christians with same sex attraction. His deep love for Christ expressed in chaste singleness is an encouragement to many. His writing reminds us of the complexity of sexual desire and the way it interweaves so many of our experiences and formation. This again warns us against simplistic assumptions about the nature of desires and sanctification, reminding us of both our need for the penetrating riches of God’s grace and to show humble compassion towards each other in our yet-to-be-gloried state. He reminds us of the importance of honesty about the challenges we face following Christ and battling with indwelling sin. He also reminds us of the great importance of not merely saying ‘no’ to same-sex relationships but a resounding ‘yes’ to the deep and abiding friendship for which we have been made (Gen. 2:18, Gal. 6:2, Heb. 10:24-25).²⁰⁴

However, we must raise significant concerns about the theological working and terms used by Hill and the Spiritual Friendship movement. Firstly, we must beware of conflating sexual desires with non-sexual desires as well as sinful desires with non-sinful desires, or at least muddying the waters around them.²⁰⁵ Desires directed towards same sex erotic encounters are sinful but desires for intimate friendship with someone of the same sex are excellent and should be wholeheartedly embraced. A desire that has ‘gay sex’ as its object cannot also be directed towards chaste friendship. They are two different desires with different moral significance. Sinful sexual desires also cannot be called ‘good’ by drawing them together with righteous desires into a broader, more ‘fundamental’ category of sexual attraction and orientation. As we have seen, there is no biblical warrant for rightly allowing sexual attraction such governing significance amongst our desires.²⁰⁶

²⁰¹ Hill, “The End of Sexual Identity: Review”

²⁰² Wesley Hill, “Is Being Gay Sanctifiable?” *Spiritual Friendship* - <https://spiritualfriendship.org/2014/02/26/is-being-gay-sanctifiable/>

²⁰³ Ibid

²⁰⁴ PCA, “Report to the 48th GA,” 32.

Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship* (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2015).

²⁰⁵ Steven Wedgworth, “A Critical Review of Spiritual Friendship,” *Mere Orthodoxy* (June 2018) - <https://mereorthodoxy.com/critical-review-spiritual-friendship/>

²⁰⁶ PCA, “Report to the 48th GA,” 28.

However, it is certainly true that our Spirit driven desires and actions continue to be mixed with corruption at every step (Parts 2.3c; 3.5). Purifying our motives and actions can involve exhausting spiritual battle for all sinners, perhaps particularly so for sexual desires because they so potent. However, we can work at embracing what is lovely and rejecting what is sinful, confident that every small Spirit-given victory over temptation pleases God because of Christ's imputed righteousness (WCF XVI.vi).²⁰⁷

Thirdly, we should recognise that the term 'gay Christian' lacks precise, shared meaning within our context and readily conveys an unbiblical notion of 'sexual identity'. We may agree with Hill and others that the term 'gay Christian' can serve to help Christians be honest about their experiences and struggles, identify shared stories and build bridges with others, especially unbelievers. It may also help some Christians articulate the way Christ has shaped their same-sex attraction (for example 'celibate gay Christian'). For some, 'gay' may simply denote the presence of same sex attraction. However, calling someone 'gay' readily conveys more than a particularly sensitive aspect of sin-stained reality. In our culture, the word 'gay' overwhelmingly communicates a good and rightly formative aspect of human experience that should be embraced and acted upon. Sadly, some Christians do adopt the term 'gay Christian' with this meaning in mind.²⁰⁸

Therefore, we should be careful of using such a contested and often misused or misunderstood term 'gay Christian'. As Ed Shaw argues, language and labels gain a powerful hold on our hearts — the way we name reality also shapes our grasp of reality. We should not add a personal identity marker, especially one commonly associated with sin, to the more fundamental category of 'Christian'.²⁰⁹ It puts people 'in a 'man-made box' that so easily limits our expectations of what God can do with our sexuality and subtly undermines our hope in the gospel'.²¹⁰ It focuses on one particular set of struggles with sin to the neglect of others while also risking the neglect or the downplaying of our remedy in Christ. It risks dividing Christians into majority and minority groups according to sexual inclinations.

Instead we need to choose language that clearly articulates the truth about ourselves, naming our sins but not being named by them. It is instructive that Paul named the Corinthians simply as 'saints' (! Cor 1:2) rather than according to their myriad of sexual or other sins. While some may choose to use the term 'gay Christian' carefully and with clear explanation in certain contexts, it is wisely avoided.²¹¹ We also think it wise not to 'police' every use of this term or make it a basis for discipline but rather an occasion for sensitive pastoral care and encouragement to think about identity in the gospel.²¹² Similarly, the terminology of 'sexual orientation' may sometimes usefully describe the experiences of persistent sexual attractions. Insofar as it may communicate a way of describing identity, though, it should be carefully explained or avoided.²¹³

3. Specific sexual desires and acts

Those sexual desires or acts directed anywhere but towards loving relationship with a specific marriage partner of the opposite sex are regarded in the Bible as 'sexual immorality' (Gk - porneia;

²⁰⁷ PCA, "Report to the 48th GA," 23.

²⁰⁸ Yarhouse – Homosexuality and the Christian p50

²⁰⁹ CCP "Report on 2018 Revoice Conference," 11

²¹⁰ Shaw, *The Plausibility Factor*, 39.

²¹¹ PCA, "Report to the 48th GA," 30.

²¹² Ibid 12, 29-30.

²¹³ Ibid 30-31,

1 Thess 4:4-5).²¹⁴ This include a range of desires and practices: adultery, homosexuality, impurity (James 1:21; Rev 22:11); orgies (Rom 13:13; 1 Peter 4:3), prostitution (Lev 19:29; Deut 23:17; Prov 5:1-23; 1 Cor 6:18), lust and pornography (Matt 5:28; Marl 7:21-22; Rom 1:26-27; Gal 5:16, 24; Eph 4:19), obscene sexual language (Eph 5:3-4) and incest which includes child abuse (Lev 18:7-18; 20:11-21; 1 Cor 5:1).²¹⁵

It is beyond the scope of this paper to reflect on the way sin and salvation shapes all these forms of sexual immorality. We will simply share some brief reflections on adultery and same sex attraction, illustrating foundational concepts already explored.

a. Adultery

The Fall: turning away from a marriage partner and the Lord

Adultery is the breaking of a one-flesh marriage relationship (Gen 2; Matt 19:5-6; Ex 20:14). In most places in the Bible, 'adultery' refers to the act of sexual intercourse between one spouse and another person who is not their spouse. However, as Jesus also uses the term (Matt 5:27-28; also Prov 6:23-29; Jer 5:8), adultery begins prior to any such act, in the corruption of heart and eye (2 Sam 11) with a lustful, covetous look, a redirecting of desires, emotions and fantasies. The quiet, anonymous viewing of pornography by a spouse is one obvious example. As the arousal of indwelling adulterous desires develops into actions, adultery can also involve flirting, kissing, sending sexually explicit texts or going on a date, often accompanied by more subtle behaviours such as spending time away from a spouse or complaining about them. Adulterous sex is the last stop in a long line of unfaithful impulses and acts. These may be triggered by the sins committed against a person in broken relationships. Some research has suggested that a complex interplay between genetic and environmental factors may also be at work behind adultery and divorce.²¹⁶ There is also evidence of neuroplasticity associated with and contributing to compulsive sexual behaviours.²¹⁷ Nevertheless, the Bible clearly teaches that adulterous desires and acts are sinful and culpable.

Christians are far from immune to both adulterous desires and acts. In fact, many Christians may not only engage in adulterous desires and acts but fail to recognise them as such, and deny that their desires and acts are sinful. Adulterous desires have, to some extent, become normalised.²¹⁸ More general research shows that most people value monogamy in their relationships and many newlyweds expect both they and their partner will remain monogamous. However, these same newlyweds often admit to already having had a range of extramarital thoughts and behaviours already such as flirting or feeling aroused by another. Moreover, people have far more lenient standards for themselves than for their spouses. It is perhaps not surprising then that adultery continues to be the primary cause of relationship break-ups and divorce.²¹⁹ The solution, some propose, is to accept a 'consensual non-monogamy' which allows for other romantic and sexual

²¹⁴ Wright, *Sexuality, Sexual Ethics*, 871.

²¹⁵ Andreas and Margaret Kostenberger, *God, Marriage and Family*, 82-3.

²¹⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4235137/>

²¹⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3960020/>

²¹⁸ Joe Carter, "Survey Reveals Many Evangelicals are Confused about Adultery," – *TGC* (April 2017) - <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/survey-reveals-many-evangelicals-are-confused-about-adultery/>

²¹⁹ Lucia O'Sullivan, "Why You Might Want to Rethink Monogamy," *The Conversation* (Jan 2018) - <https://theconversation.com/why-you-might-want-to-rethink-monogamy-88217>

relationships. As one writer says, we need a willingness ‘to supplant the fairy tale — a belief [...] that one person can forever meet all your emotional, romantic and sexual needs.’²²⁰

The language of satisfying needs points to the deeper picture behind adultery. When marriage is seen as a human contract, conditioned upon the desires, tastes and satisfaction of each partner, adultery can be easily justified when those desires are not met. Adultery is a profoundly selfish turning away from and discarding of a person (1 Thess 4:3-8), characterised by insatiable and uncontrolled passion (2 Peter 2:14-16). promise breaking, secrecy (Job 24:13-17) and profound damage to children, families, churches and communities.²²¹

The damage wrought by adultery is all the more profound because of the spiritual purpose of marriage in expressing the character and love of God. This means that every act of adultery is first and foremost a desecration of God’s kindness and faithfulness to us. In both testaments, the metaphorical use of the concept of adultery conveys the horror of people turning away from the God, who has shown them faithful covenant love, in favour of selfish desires, idols and the world (Part 3.1; Matthew 12:39; James 4:4).

In Christ: enduring faithfulness

Knowing the faithful, permanent love of God to us through Christ is at the heart of the very serious business of sexual purity, in and around marriages (Hebrews 13:4). The heart of marriage is often expressed as ‘love’ but this word has become too elastic to serve well. The character of God’s love within intratrinitarian relationships and for his world is faithfulness, eternally unchanging and utterly trustworthy. We see this perfectly in Jesus faithfulness to his Father and to us through the suffering of the cross. It is this faithfulness that meets the longing of the human heart for love that lasts forever and is never broken. Thus, if marriage is to serve God’s purposes, it must be characterised by ongoing faithfulness learned through dependence on Jesus.

By drawing on God’s resources, marriages are able to weather the fires of trouble and temptation, even instances of adultery.²²² Adultery may legitimately lead to divorce but not necessarily (Matt 19:9) By God’s grace we can put on humility and gratitude, confessing adulterous sins to God and others (the earlier the better), finding forgiveness, starving and putting our sins to death, nurturing contentment, joy and servant-heartedness, particularly in sexual relating, drawing upon brothers and sisters for help, prayer and accountability, and thankfully accepting professional help where needed.

b. Same Sex Attraction

The Fall: false sexual identity

Desires for sexual relations with a person of the same sex are another manifestation of sexual sin in our fallen world. To quote the recent Presbyterian Church of America Committee on Human Sexuality Report:

²²⁰ O’Sullivan, “Why You Might Want to Rethink Monogamy,”

²²¹ Ash, *Marriage*, 356ff.

²²² Ash, *Marriage*, 340-341.

*As we consider human sin and corruption, it is clear that sexual attractions that have their telos or end in something that God has forbidden are themselves sinful desires—a part of indwelling sin that exists in all people and remains even in those who are believers. **Any time Christians experience sexual attraction whose fulfillment would be sin, they should recognize such attraction as something to be rejected and mortified.** This is true for all believers, regardless of whether those attractions are to the same sex or the opposite sex. [...] It is possible to conceive of the experience of same-sex attraction as **simultaneously a part of the remaining corruption of original sin as well as the misery of living in a fallen world, one of the ways our bodies themselves groan for redemption** (Rom. 8:22-23; WCF 6.6; WLC 17-19).²²³*

Those acts that are the *telos* of same sex desire are strongly forbidden in the Old Testament (Genesis 19; Judges 19; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; also 2 Peter 2:6; Jude 7). In the New Testament, homosexuality is listed amongst other vices God condemns in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. In Romans 1:26-27 Paul, as part of his profound analysis of the human condition, finds that homosexuality is an example of sexual sin that falsifies our identity as sexual beings, just as idolatry falsifies our identity as created beings. It violates the plan of God, present from creation, for the union of male and female in marriage.²²⁴ Therefore, same sex erotic attractions are morally significant, even when they arise unbidden, although they do not carry the same weight and consequences as wholeheartedly adopting a ‘gay’ identity or participating in same sex sexual relationships (see Part 2.3c).

In Christ: true identity and growth in Christ

While we must clearly teach the sinfulness of same-sex desire it cannot be emphasised enough how important it is to proceed directly to the glorious mercy of Christ. In Christ those who experience same sex attraction know themselves not according to their sexual impulses but as beloved children of God, justified and declared righteous, set apart for Christlikeness and secure in the hope of resurrection (body and spirit) through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Those Christians who experience same sex attraction need to hear again and again that they are freed from guilt and shame. They should never be singled out as though their impulses are more shameful than those of others. They have a Father whose love for them is permanent and does not vary according to their desires and weaknesses.

Indeed, those who experience same sex attraction first and foremost need encouragement through God’s means of grace in the same way every other Christian - God’s Word, prayer and deep fellowship in the Spirit. We must be careful not allow current ideological debates over same-sex marriage, sex education in schools and other similar issues to shape our care for brothers and sisters in Christ. It should be a source of enormous grief to the church that some same-sex attracted people experience crushing loneliness and fear of exposure, condemnation or even being regarded as somehow ‘different’ in our churches. Again, we are challenged to show the pursuing, active love of Christ to each other. However, we must not see brothers and sisters with same sex attraction as people only to be ministered to but as vital members of churches, leaders and encouragers others in treasuring Christ over all else

As we have seen, the goal of sanctification is Christlikeness in every part of our lives, not just our sexual desires. God is, though, intensely interested in transforming our sexuality towards holiness. This transformation cannot be reduced to general attraction to the opposite sex although this may

²²³ PCA, “Report to the 48th GA,” 27-28

²²⁴ Thomas Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow?: Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Illinois: IVP, 1995) 85.

occur. Holiness is shaped by our current vocation — either marriage to one particular person or chaste singleness. As one Christian writer who is married says:

*I would say that I am still predominantly same-sex attracted in general, but as a result of ceasing to define myself as gay, in a sense this ceased to matter. It doesn't matter in the least whether someone is attracted to women or men in general. What matters with respect to marriage is whether someone is attracted and called to marry one person in particular.*²²⁵

Some Christians do experience a partial or complete change in their attractions over months or years. A great many, however, report ongoing struggles with same sex attraction.²²⁶ Indeed, the 'already-not yet' tension of our current age shapes sanctification for those who experience same sex attraction in important ways. On the one hand, we cannot expect that same sex attraction impulses will necessarily disappear. We certainly cannot say the ongoing experience of same sex impulses means they have not sufficiently repented and or have too little faith. That perspective reflects an over-realised eschatology. On the other hand, we cannot treat same-sex desire as though it is a fixed 'orientation' that cannot be changed at all. This reflects an under-realised eschatology that denies the Spirit's power to change us. As repentance and mortification of sin occurs and deep habits of holiness are pursued, a person should expect that the pull towards sin should lessen 'or even be drowned out by the expulsive power of a greater affection for Christ.'²²⁷

Summary

In Part 4 we have seen some of the ways sin distorts and the gospel transforms our understanding and experience of sex and gender. As not-yet glorified, embodied people we continue to experience the effects of the Fall on our gender and sexuality in complex ways. With regards to gender, a small number of people may experience ambiguous biological sex or feelings of disjunction between biological sex and gender identity. With regards to sexuality, we tend to make too little or too much of sex, even placing it at the core of our identity. However, we find our true identity in what God has done for us in Christ. While we currently experience sinful sexual desires, in Christ we identify as God's adopted children, redeemed from sin and restored to fellowship with him, justified and enabled by his Spirit to persevere until we are glorified in heaven. Finally, we shared some brief reflections on adultery and same sex attraction, illustrating foundational concepts already explored.

²²⁵ Doherty, "Love Does Not Delight in Evil, but Rejoices with the Truth," 9.

²²⁶ Mark Yarhouse, *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2010), 93–95.

²²⁷ PCA, "Report to the 48th GA," 25.