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The Emerging Church and Traditional Christian Understanding of Human Sexuality and the Family

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I was at lunch with a friend, discussing our families—as we usually do, as most of my friends and I have grown children living away from home. Typically, we discuss our adult children's career choices and relationships. But this particular luncheon, although pleasant, left me a bit unsettled in my spirit.

You see, I'm no longer shocked when we discuss how some of our unmarried children have decided to move in with their love interest—who may or may not be of the same sex—although I should be shocked, since they have all come from Christian families. But now I am noticing an even more unsettling trend: some of the parents are shifting along with the kids.

My friend explained to me how she had just learned that her son was in a same-sex relationship. She then went on to say how happy she was that he was happy, and that he was still a Christian who had taken on a career as an LGBTQ advocate. Until now, she stated, she had failed to understand that the Bible was a product of ancient Near Eastern culture and

addressed issues relevant to that specific time. She no longer viewed the contemporary LGBTQ lifestyle as inconsistent with godly living. I listened in silence, partially because I was so dismayed and partially because I had just had virtually the same discussion with another friend.

Why are so many families struggling with secular values among our 'churched' children—or simply capitulating to secularism? Why aren't they solidly grounded in basic morality with regard to sexuality? Why is the church veering away from sound doctrinal exegesis with regard to sexuality and godly living? Although the attractions of their increasingly secular surroundings may be partly responsible, another reason is a frequent lack of sound doctrine and instruction on theological anthropology and sexuality within the Christian community—by which I mean both the institutionalized church and Christian homes.

Today's secular worldview is characterized by blurred lines regarding human anthropology, sex and gender. Popular opinion seems to lean to-

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wards a non-binary, non-traditional ideology that affirms personal preference over both traditional moral beliefs and biological facts. Technology can determine the gender of an unborn child, yet in our modern culture, the child's self-awareness becomes the determinant of gender identification. Furthermore, when the self turns to subjective human experience and popular opinion rather than to any objective authority for its moral guidance, the self ends up becoming autonomous, the determining factor of all life choices.

In this regard, it is appropriate to consider the so-called 'Emerging Church' and its teachings. As of 2019, some might claim that the Emerging Church is a passing fad and is already losing its relevance, although in view of the popularity of one of its forerunners—Rob Bell, who is currently booking sold-out appearances throughout the United States and United Kingdom—this claim is questionable.

Bell subscribes to Richard Rohr's seven themes of an alternative orthodoxy, which claim that the traditional exegesis of Scripture propagates exclusivity. The alternative orthodoxy gives substantial authority to life experiences rather than to the doctrines stated in the word of God. It proclaims a non-dogmatic theology that reflects universalism, though without claiming explicitly to be universalist. The Emerging Church is an evolving movement that spans the globe but has no formal structure; perhaps the only factor that makes it cohesive is that it embraces postmodern critiques of traditional Christianity.¹

How and why is a theology that questions traditional orthodoxy and the absolute truth found in the word of God welcomed in the evangelical church? Among those who hold to a secular, materialistic worldview, we would expect that the process of decision making should be untethered from spiritual truth. The focus of this article is how the *church community* reflects and instructs on theological anthropology and its implications for human sexuality. The widespread absence of clarity on this matter presents a moral dilemma for the theological understanding of gender and sexuality, which in turn has enormous consequences for the Christian institution of the family.

The family structure is one of the foundations by which God's message is passed from generation to generation. Genesis 2:24 states that a man should leave his parents and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh; this cleaving mirrors the oneness we experience with God who dwells in us. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 11:3 informs us that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband and the head of Christ is God. In other words, the hierarchical (though not domineering) structure of the Christian family mirrors the hierarchical divine structure of God's own family, which includes his role as creator of all mankind. Pipes and Lee state, 'God intended the family to be the most basic social unit of society.'²

ative Orthodoxy' (podcast episode 86), 10 April 2016, <http://robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-86-richard-rohr-and-the-alternative-orthodoxy/>.

² Jerry Pipes and Victor Lee, *Family to Family: Leaving a Lasting Legacy* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board of the South-

¹ Rob Bell, 'Richard Rohr and the Alterna-

How then do we relate the currently growing view of gender and sex to the biblical definition and role of the family? According to the Emerging Church, we have a responsibility to connect with the present generation in a manner that it considers palatable, even if that manner involves a postmodern deconstruction of Scripture that runs counter to traditional orthodoxy.

In his book *What Is the Bible?* Bell highlights the human origin of Scripture rather than the divine message of God making a way for redemption and restoration through His Son Jesus. Bell states that people wrote the stories in the Bible because they found something in them that would help them restore their dignity.³ Bell argues that the inerrancy of Scripture is not crucial to realizing the highest form of truth.⁴ Truth, he contends, is found in life experiences and interpreted by the one who is active in the experience.

Considering the ambiguity present in this exegesis, it is not surprising that Bell and many others within the Emerging Church movement fail to find a case against the LGBTQ lifestyle in Scripture. He states that the church needs to recognize the shift in cultural consciousness in regard to this lifestyle and affirm same-sex unions within the confines of monogamy, fidelity and commitment.⁵

There is an old saying that every good lie has a remnant of truth in it. Yes, the church must acknowledge the culture of its era so that it can reach out to people effectively—not, however, by conforming the word to the people but rather by conforming the people to the word. Therefore, in this era of postmodernism (and an increasingly postmodern church), we must urgently clarify our theological understanding of gender and sexuality. The application of such clarification is critical to preserve the Christian family unit and its role in glorifying God by reflecting the intended relationship between man and God.

I. Characterizing Theological Anthropology

Characterizing theological anthropology requires us to examine God and man as a relational union. To do so, we must begin with creation. Genesis 1:27 informs us that God created male and female in His own image. Humans, both male and female, were created to possess a body (the material self), mind (rational functions), soul (the non-material ego), will (functions in choosing and deciding), and spirit (operating beyond earthly connections).⁶ According to Gregg Allison, the spirit encompasses the capacity to have a relation with God.⁷

ern Baptist Convention, 1999), 9.

3 Rob Bell, *What Is the Bible? How an Ancient Library of Poems, Letters, and Stories Can Transform the Way You Think and Feel about Everything* (New York: HarperOne, 2017) 291, Kindle edition.

4 Bell, *What Is the Bible?* 282.

5 Rob Bell and Andrew Wilson, 'Homosexuality and the Bible' (interview), 20

April 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XF9uo_P0nNI..

6 Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 807.

7 Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 62.

This spirit, of course, is not to be confused with the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the believer and transforms the heart, mind and soul.

Hans Schwarz states that 'to be created in God's image means to be ethically shaped in conformity with God and to act in a manner for which God serves as the prototype.'⁸ To accomplish this shaping, one must look to Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:3 informs us that 'The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being.' However, in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve dwelt in the presence of God and communed directly with Him. The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, both of which were planted in the middle of the garden of Eden, constituted a vehicle that required Adam and Eve to exercise their free will. God commanded Adam that he was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for if he did, he would certainly die (Gen 2:15–17).

Under temptation from a force outside the boundaries of God, disguised as the serpent, Adam and Eve fell into disobedience. Man exercised his free will to disobey God's command, even though God had made 'all kinds of trees grow out of the ground; trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food' (Gen 2:9). One must question where the true temptation lurked. There is no reason to conclude that the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was more pleasing to the eye (or the mouth) than the fruit from the other trees. The heart of the matter was the ques-

tion of authority and submission. In this regard, the Emerging Church has in effect replicated the sin of Adam and Eve by questioning the authority and validity of God's word and valuing individual experience above traditional Christian teachings.

Adam and Eve rebelled against God's authority to rightfully and righteously maintain rule over His creation. If they had trusted in God's just and good nature, there would have been no rebellion. Mankind was created to submit to the good and righteous authority of God. Temptation and disobedience would plague mankind from that moment on, throughout all future generations. Tragically, this act of disobedience would distort man's ability to reflect God's image and would permanently damage the relationship between creator and creation. The effects of this severing include the implanting of a deceptive understanding of ethics into humanity and the distortion of all social relationships, including sexually intimate relationships.

Today a similar type of rebellion is among us—a form of Christian sexual liberation justified by a liberal theology. The Emerging Church answers the secular world's call for a less stringent sexual morality by questioning the sinful nature of unrenowned men and women and the basic moral code that, according to traditional Christianity, has been implanted in the human heart.

In his 2006 book *The Secret Message of Jesus*, early Emerging Church figure Brian McLaren proposes that the primary message of Jesus concerned the coming kingdom of God, in which all those who are disenfranchised and marginalized, even notorious sinners, would be forgiven

⁸ Hans Schwarz, *The Human Being: A Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 23.

and accepted while the heartless and merciless would be rejected.⁹ For McLaren, in the crucifixion Christ 'took the [Roman] empire's instrument of torture and transformed it into God's symbol of the repudiation of violence—encoding a creed that love, not violence, is the most powerful force in the universe'.¹⁰ McLaren's radical exegesis seems essentially to discern Christ's work as a message against injustice rather than the redemption of souls.

Jeremy Bouma reflects on this tendency in his critique of McLaren's later (2010) book *A New Kind of Christianity*. In Bouma's view, McLaren describes the human condition of 'social sin' as the result of bad systems, a dysfunctional societal machinery, destructive framing narratives and collective human evil rather than a natural inner compulsion to sin. As such, he does not view Jesus as a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the world.¹¹

This understanding allows for a subjective definition of dysfunction. For example, it opens up the possibility of defining intolerance towards lifestyle choices contrary to biblical Christian values as one form of dysfunction. Hence, any objective claim to a biblical moral standard does not meet the postmodern, emergent criteria of relativism. In contrast, sound

doctrine states that God created mankind to experience sexual intimacy, as is evident in His command to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gen 1:28), but only within the boundaries of male and female, husband and wife. Contrary to a culture that desires no fixed gender labels, gender roles are both biologically and biblically established.

II. Gender Roles

It has been established that rightful and righteous authority belongs to God the creator of all things. He has purposefully created all things to be contingent upon each other. To sustain life, nature is dependent on climate, animal life is dependent on nature and prey, and mankind is dependent on God. Within these contingencies, God sustains all things and He has provided order.

In the divine order regarding the hierarchical structure of human creation, one cannot overlook the special position of the male throughout Scripture. The male is called to provide and protect within the family and community. God commissioned Adam to care for the garden of Eden. God had provided all that Adam would need to flourish in the garden, yet Adam was to care for God's provision. This would allow Adam to act as provider through his work.

Furthermore, the man is called to war against nations that threaten not just a physical invasion, but also an invasion of corruption and wickedness. Evidence is found in biblically recorded wars such as the Israelites' fight against the Amalekites (Ex 17:8–16), Joshua's war against the city of Jericho (Josh 6) and Gideon's battle against the Midianites (Judg 7:1–8:21), to name just a few. This is

⁹ Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2006), Kindle edition, 489.

¹⁰ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 2282.

¹¹ Jeremy Bouma, *Understand Emerging Church Theology: From a Former Emergent Insider* (Grand Rapids: Theoklesia, 2014), Kindle edition, 1562.

the nature of man by design.

Generally, the male is more aggressive and competitive than his female counterpart. This difference can be traced back to the hormone testosterone, which is more present in males than in females. On the other hand, the woman, as noted in the creation of Eve, is to be a suitable helper to the man (Gen 2:18). The woman complements and enhances the man. In this description, there is no implication that the female is inferior to the male; rather, she is his corresponding equal. Galatians 3:28 affirms this: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' All people are equal before God. Both male and female are created in God's image, and the woman is designated as the suitable companion for the man.

From a complementarian perspective on gender, which Allison defines as 'the position that men and women are complementary to one another, equal in nature yet distinct in relationships and roles',¹² it is clear that the male-female union offers reciprocal benefits. Generally, the female is designed with a higher capacity to be caring and nurturing. Research has found that the female brain is larger in the limbic cortex, which is responsible for regulating emotions, and that women tend to receive more sensory and emotional information than men.¹³ This research offers biological

insight as to the differences in gender roles and deeper understanding of how the roles balance each other. Generally, within the family unit this combination provides a perfect partnership in enabling parents to raise children with a combination of firmness and empathy.

III. The Sexual Relationship

Human sexuality is part of the human design, intended for reproduction and intimacy. Hence, the sexual relationship is ordained by God. God is not against sex when practised within Christian boundaries; on the contrary, sexual intercourse is the ultimate expression of companionship. Through the act of sex, a male and female fulfil the mandate to be fruitful and multiply and also enjoy physical oneness.

God's word provides a moral and ethical framework for sexual intimacy. A proper theological understanding of the human body must precede sexual activity so that the sexual relationship can reflect a godly union. Chet Mitchell Jechura states, 'Understanding of the human person as the *imago Dei* grounds the primacy of human dignity in theological and ethical reflection.'¹⁴ Therefore, human sexuality must be analysed within its doctrinal design.

Sound doctrine is essential for Christian maturity, as it embodies what the Christian believes and strengthens the believer against the secular counter-culture. The prevalent ideology of a heightened self-awareness and self-fulfilment is

¹² Allison, *Baker Compact Dictionary*, 43.

¹³ Paula K. Carlton, 'Understanding the Brain May Lead to a Satisfying Relationship', *Aurora Health Care: Women's Mental Health*, 3 July 2014, <https://www.aurorahealthcare.org/doctors/paula-k-carlton-np-ap>.

¹⁴ Chet Mitchell Jechura, 'Enfleshing the Erotic', *Theology & Sexuality* 18, no. 3 (2015): 235.

rooted in a self-centred dogma and established in a profane philosophy claiming that humans have intrinsic freedom and autonomy, including the right to pursue pleasure and sensual satisfaction by following the lust of their own hearts. This sentiment is lurking beneath the Emerging Church's promotion of a flexible approach to theology, as displayed for example by Bell's tolerance of the LG-BTQ lifestyle.¹⁵

The Christological understanding is antithetical to this secular philosophy. In the Christian view of humanity, our heart, soul and mind are subject to God (Mt 22:35; Mk 12:28; Lk 10:27). Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 6:19 that the believer's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. He states, 'You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honour God with your bodies.' This message confirms the sacredness, holiness and purity for which the body was designed. Paul's theological understanding of freedom consists of a freedom to obey God, not freedom to sin or participate in immoral behaviours.¹⁶

The difference between the two worldviews is radical. The Christian functions in union with the indwelling Holy Spirit, who instructs, guides and strengthens the heart and mind with godly principles. Although the believer has the freedom to disobey, his or her heart is characterized by

God-awareness rather than solely self-awareness. Any disobedience of which the believer becomes aware is likely to result in repentance, which God embraces in His mercy and grace. This God-awareness impacts every aspect of social experience, including human sexuality.¹⁷

IV. Godly Boundaries for Human Sexuality

Sexual intimacy is established by God who created male and female in His image, ordained the institution of marriage and designed it for sexual bonding. God makes it clear that the sexual act, as well as the mandate to procreate, is to be exercised within the confines of monogamy.¹⁸ Hebrews 13:4 states, 'Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.' A pure marriage bed is achieved by avoiding extramarital affairs.

Previously, I observed that marriage is an institution that glorifies God and a living testimony to the Bride (the church) and the Groom (Jesus Christ). Just as the spiritual bride is to serve no other God, the earthly marriage must also be a monogamous union. Therefore, the church must understand that marriage is greater than the secular definition that has been imposed on it; marriage echoes the holy covenant that the Christian enters with God through Jesus Christ. As such, it entails specific implica-

15 Elizabeth Tenety, 'Love, Gender Roles, and the Fight for Gay Marriage: A Conversation with Rob and Kristen Bell', Berkley Center at Georgetown University, 17 November 2014, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/love-gender-roles-and-the-fight-for-gay-marriage-a-conversation-with-rob-and-kristen-bell>.

16 Allison, *Baker Compact Dictionary*, 89.

17 Allison, *Baker Compact Dictionary*, 193–94.

18 Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 237.

tions regarding sexual intimacy; the union is exclusive, heterosexual and designed to be indissoluble.¹⁹

Regarding marriage, Jesus stated, 'So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.' He continued, 'Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning' (Mt 19:4–8). The Edenic narrative supports marriage as a union grounded in the meaning and purpose created by God.

The first husband and wife, Adam and Eve, had a monogamous relationship. God gave Adam only one female companion. In the biblical sense, Adam knew his wife. God's intent in each marriage is for the husband to 'know' his wife. The Bible is not naïve to the fact that sexually immoral thoughts may occur even in the saints. Paul addresses this temptation by counselling married couples to control their urges through regular sexual activity: 'Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control' (1 Cor 7:5). Sexual intimacy within marriage not only strengthens the marital bond but restrains the God-given sexual urge from veering off towards adulterous fornication. Therefore, the norm is for married couples to enjoy sexual intimacy often, each man with his own wife.

For the Christian, sexual ethics is

not a matter of law, custom or one's self-actualized nature; it is an act of obedience to God's word, as all actions should be. However, obedience to God's word is possible only if one believes that it carries authority. Once one questions the authority of His word, as the Emerging Church seems to do, on what grounds is there reason for obedience? God, in no ambiguous terms, has situated sexual intimacy as a vital part of the marriage relationship, thereby distinguishing it from all other social relationships. The postmodern definition of sex as a means of experiencing pleasure justifies a deviation from its original purpose, leading to sexual intimacy outside godly boundaries.

V. Sexual Intimacy Beyond God's Boundaries

Sexual acts contrary to the biblical mandate are as old as history. Human sexuality has been repurposed as a tool for power, personal gain, intimidation, control and financial gain, as well as simply for pleasure. Stephen Ellingson suggests that 'sexuality is more than the joining of two bodies; it communicates to others something about ourselves and the kind of persons we are.' Being embodied, humans experience the world as sensual and sexual beings. Gender and sexual identity fall within normative social regimes and provide a primary criterion for determining whether an intimate relationship is viewed as 'good' or 'bad'.²⁰ Within theological boundaries, God is the one who makes this

¹⁹ Walter Elwell, ed., 'Sexuality', *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

²⁰ Stephen Ellingson and M. Christian Green, *Religion and Sexuality in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

determination. Although social regimes may shift, God's word does not. What message do Christians, called to be Christ's ambassador and a light to the world, relay to others if their understanding of normative Christian sexuality shifts to reflect what is normative within the culture?

Ellingson makes the astute observation that the growing controversies in the United States over teen pregnancy, abortion rights, homosexuality and same-sex marriage suggest that 'traditional, religiously based representations of sexuality do not accurately map onto the shifting field of reality.' This presents a fundamental challenge to the church community. However, the theological understanding of human sexuality is grounded in objective truth, which does not shift to conform to the surrounding culture. Sexual desires may become overwhelmingly powerful to the point at which they not only challenge and change social norms, but also alter Christian beliefs. In fact, all physical desires and urges, if not grounded in the objective biblical truth, carry this potential to transform ethics and morality.

Avi Sion observes that the sex drive has two facets. Its basic function is reproductive; its urge is to perpetuate one's genetic makeup through descendants. This urge removes the discomfort of the metaphysical fear of nonexistence and satisfies the desire to obey an assumed divine commandment. The other facet is the urge to remove the discomfort of sexual tension by satisfying physical lust. This facet is committed to the hedonistic aspect of sex, ignoring the reproductive aspect. Engaging in masturbation, or in some cases child abuse, homosexual acts or bestiality, may satisfy this sex-

ual lust.²¹

Thus, the major proponent of the divergent sexual relationship is hedonism, which authorizes the fulfillment of an individual's sexual desire apart from biblical confines. C. S. Lewis states, 'The most dangerous thing you can do is to take any one impulse of our own and set it up as the thing you ought to follow at all cost.'²²

It is at this juncture that the Emerging Church and others challenge standard exegesis. Regarding homosexual relationships in particular, the common argument is that a loving same-sex relationship is not antithetical to scripture. Todd Wilson counters that argument in *Mere Sexuality*, stating that 'to trivialize sex is to idolize pleasure and sexual gratification becomes a god.' He adds, 'When we disconnect the act of sex from the purpose of sex, we end up marginalizing children. ... When we divorce sex from its purpose, we treat our body, or someone else's body, as though it were just a tool, something to be used by us or for us.'²³

There is no exegetical support for same-sex relationships. When we consider sexual desire as a fleshly urge rather than a spiritual urge, we recognize that this desire must be submitted to Christ. Galatians 5:19–21 defines the desires of the flesh as encompassing 'sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy,

21 Avi Sion, *Volition and Allied Causal Concepts* (Geneva, Switzerland: Avi Sion, 2008), Kindle edition, 248.

22 C. S. Lewis, 'Christian Marriage', in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 93.

23 Todd Wilson, *Mere Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), Kindle edition, 99.

fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, orgies and the like.' Sexual sins are not the only grievous sins; every living soul has indulged in some aspect of the desire of the flesh at some point, as Paul expressed in Romans 7:14–25. So we should not treat sexual sins as somehow worse than all others. But our only rescue from temptation in this area, as in all other areas, is deliverance in Jesus Christ.

Pope John Paul II recognized the nature of our modern challenge to traditional morality, stating, 'The service which moral theologians are called to provide at the present time is of the utmost importance, not only for the Church's life and mission, but also for human society and culture.'²⁴ To place this comment in context, we must explore how sexual behaviours outside God's command, along with the emerging theology of compromise and relativism, affect the church and the family.

Jeff Johnston notes the slow progression from sound orthodox belief to 'confusion in the body' (of Christ) that has occurred in the last sixty-four years. Johnston cites Anglican priest Derrick Sherwin Bailey, in 1955, as publishing the first real challenge to Christian morality on homosexual practice. Now, most mainline denominations have departed from biblical truth on the issue of homosexuality, permitting the ordination of actively gay clergy and redefining marriage to include same-sex unions.²⁵ Evangeli-

cal denominations may not have formally abandoned the historic biblical position on premarital cohabitation, but many of them have become habituated to the practice. And what the church decides to condone regarding sexuality has a direct impact on the family, which looks to the church to reinforce family values.

VI. The Church, Sexuality and Modernity

The church and modernity should be at opposite ends of the ethical spectrum. The church exists in society, in the midst of current secular social and ethical standards. Its members are 'in the world but not of it' (John 17:16). How then is the church body to exist in the world but not be influenced by its values? More particularly, how does the Christian who may be struggling with hypersexuality, gender identification or same-sex attraction maintain Christian values in a society that glorifies sexual experience?

The pleasure of erotic experience has the power to lead people to justify their sexual compulsions and confirm their perceived sexual orientation. Therefore, the body affirms what the mind or soul has proclaimed and what modern social norms have accepted as permissible.

Accordingly, Christians must recognize the seriousness of this threat and discourage pursuit outside marriage of the erotic pleasure of sexual gratification, pointing out that, as

²⁴ Pope John Paul II, 'On Relativism, Pragmatism, and Positivism', *The Catholic Thing*, 20 April 2017, <https://www.thecatholicthing.org>.

²⁵ Jeff Johnston, 'Three Reasons Why Pastors—and Other Church Leaders—Should Talk about Homosexuality in the Church',

Focus on the Family, 2015, <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/sexuality/three-reasons-why-pastors-and-other-church-leaders-should-talk-about-homosexuality-in-the-church>.

with the forbidden fruit in the garden, tasting it can make one yield to its defining power. One can also point out the forms of dysfunction and abuse that frequently come with giving in to and glorifying free sexual expression.

These crucial concerns are troubling for many in God's kingdom. The church must act responsively, informingly and above all lovingly. Furthermore, the church as a whole must withstand postmodern cultural and social influences.

VII. The Postmodern Church

How well has the church withstood postmodern opinion on sexuality? Within the general population, cohabitation has become highly acceptable. In 2016, the number of Americans living with an unmarried partner reached about eighteen million.²⁶ In the United States, only 63 percent of Christians believe that gender is determined at birth and 34 percent personally know someone who is transgender. According to the Pew Research Center, public opinion has been steadily shifting towards support for same-sex marriage, with 62 percent in favour as of 2017. That group included two-thirds of Catholics and 68 percent of white mainline Protestants. Among white evangelical Protestants, the percentage supporting same-sex marriages jumped from 27 percent in 2016 to 35 percent the following year.²⁷

26 Abigail Geiger and Gretchen Livingston, 'Eight Facts about Love and Marriage in America', *Fact Tank: News in Numbers*, 13 February 2019, <http://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/13/8-facts-about-love-and-marriage/>.

27 Geiger and Livingston, 'Eight Facts about

The 2017 *American Values Atlas* also reported growing support for same-sex marriage and declining religious resistance. Among young adults age 18 to 29, 77 percent were in favour of legalizing same-sex marriage.²⁸ The church is struggling with the concept of LGBTQ inclusion. Many Christian denominations have affirmed same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy.

In January 2018, a symposium involving a diverse group of Christian leaders was held to discuss the challenges facing the church. The participants agreed that a proper understanding of sex, gender, gender identity and gender dysphoria would continue to be a pressing concern. Charles Taylor stated, 'Christian belief has not only been displaced from the default position, but is aggressively contested by numerous other options.' He suggested that the church is in a position to reimagine its social, cultural and political witness to the secular world.²⁹

The prevalent view of the church's apparent lack of influence within the present culture is a symptom of a sick church. Healing of this sickness must begin from within, with a reaffirmation of the church's responsibility and capacity to speak truth, empowered by the Spirit. Cathi Herrod stated at

Love and Marriage in America'.

28 Alex Vandermaas-Peeler, Daniel Cox, Molly Fisch-Friedman, Rob Griffin and Robert P. Jones, 'Emerging Consensus on LGBT Issues: Findings From the 2017 American Values Atlas', 1 May 2018, www.prri.org/research.

29 John Stonestreet, 'Challenges Facing the Church in 2018: A BreakPoint Symposium', 11 January 2018, <http://breakpoint.org/author/stonestreet>.

the 2018 symposium that the 'lack of a unified voice coupled with so many departing from biblical fidelity hinders efforts to model a different path to a culture in desperate need of clarity, civility, and leadership.'³⁰ Clarity is precisely what our present culture, both locally and globally, needs desperately.

VIII. Conclusion

'Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently' (Gal 6:1). Those who feel isolated in the body of Christ due to their sexual desires need affirmation, not of their temptations but rather of God's grace, mercy, love and redemptive power in Christ Jesus. The church has a mandate to spread the good news and, in doing so, to receive all persons with humbleness and graciousness, regardless of their gender, race or sexual preferences. However, the teachings of the church must never be entangled with cultural practices. God's word never changes and His creation of the family structure is and forever will be according to His will and purposes. Furthermore, the very foundation of human anthropology and human sexuality establishes theological parameters and provides imperative lessons for godly living. If these lessons are ignored within the church, the secular culture will advance its ideology without opposition.

It is essential for the church to guard the family unit and uphold it as an institution that fulfils God's purpose. To accomplish this, God's

whole message, which includes sexuality, must become a vital portion of the church's teaching. Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea, stated, 'We cannot become like God unless we have knowledge of Him, and without lessons there will be no knowledge.'³¹ Human anthropology and human sexuality must be regarded as part of God's creation and lived out in submission to God's will. The following guidelines are offered as a possible plan of action:

1. Prayer and fasting among church leaders of all denominations, with the purpose of recommitting to God's word and for strengthening and encouragement to remain true to the faith (Acts 14:21–24).
2. Humbly confess the infiltration of cultural norms into the church and pledge to renew the covenant to follow the Lord and keep His commands by the grace of God (2 Kings 23:1–3).
3. Empower the church by teaching in spirit and truth, with a focus on forgiveness, redemption, restoration, abiding in Christ, and Christ as our source of life.
4. Focus on understanding that 'the old man' has been crucified with Christ and on the spiritual truth of the new life in Christ Jesus, which does not result simply in modified behaviour but in a new heart and mind, empowered through the

³⁰ Stonestreet, 'Challenges Facing the Church in 2018'.

³¹ Christopher A. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 104.

indwelling Holy Spirit to conform to Jesus rather than to the world. This emphasis is especially powerful for those who are struggling in their own power to change.

5. Put on the full armour of God (Eph 6:10–17) against the lures and enticements of the secular culture, so as to fight against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Be aware of what is acceptable in popular culture so that you can counter it with truth, teaching a spiritual message applicable to living according to God's word.
6. Teach all ages, in an age-appropriate manner; the wisdom of the Lord on theological anthropology and sexuality. Laying a foundation of godly principles in children will give them spiritual armaments against the lies of the world. They will be sanctified by the truth.
7. In teaching and preaching, be ever mindful that the Scriptures should be understood as they point to Jesus (Lk 24:27), the interpretive key to the Bible. Watchman Nee states, 'Any true experience of value in the sight of God must have been reached by way of

a new discovery of the meaning of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus. ... Paul makes everything depend upon such a discovery in Romans 6:6, "Knowing this, our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away, that so we should no longer be in bondage to sin."³²

8. Focus on the peace of Christ Jesus that covers people through their struggles and allow God to work in them according to His timing. Do not impose man's timing on God's work.
9. Do all things in the fruit of the Spirit and allow love to motivate and guide you.

Today's culture is desperate for truth and clarity. The church must maintain the light for which it was called, for believers to follow and for non-believers to ponder and receive. The greatest threat to the church and the family may not be modern culture or even the Emerging Church, but spiritual slumber. There is a saying among our youth that seems very appropriate to this situation: 'Wake up and stay woke!'

³² Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1977). 55–56.