

Elder Statement on Biblical Standards For Marriage, Singleness and Sexual Practice

Introduction

In this statement we outline our church's position on a number of important topics related to marriage and sexuality. However, this discussion is not just about divorce or premarital sex or gay marriage—although we do address those controversial issues. It is rather first and foremost an exposition on the wonder and beauty of our sexuality and God's design for its full expression within a marriage. It's about celebrating and affirming the differences among us and encouraging each individual to honor God with his or her sexuality within the parameters and boundaries for purity that He has established. In a culture that tells us that seeking pleasure is the highest virtue, it's about putting sexuality in its proper perspective, not as an essential element of happiness or fulfillment, but as a wonderful privilege and responsibility that should never be abused or dishonored. And, it is about the very counter-cultural idea that followers of Jesus submit willingly to God's direction with regard to our sexual expression, aspiring to be faithful and obedient to Him even when doing so requires sacrifice. We believe that this document accurately reflects biblical teaching on this sensitive topic and we resolutely stand with Jesus and his loving call to purity.

As in all matters, we consider Scripture to be the basis of our beliefs related to marriage and sexuality, and we see throughout the Old and New Testaments that God uses marriage and sexual imagery to illustrate the intimacy He wants us to experience with Him (Ezek 16:8; Hos 2:14-20; 1 Cor 6:17; Rom 7:1-6; Eph 5:21-33).¹ We also see that God does not view either marriage or singleness as an inherently favored status—both have advantages and disadvantages. Moreover, both sexual expression and celibacy can help us in our pursuit of spiritual intimacy and holiness, depending on the person and the circumstances (1 Cor 7:32-35). In addition, we see that God has clearly defined the situations within which sexual activity is consistent with His design and purposes. Specifically, God reserves sexual intimacy for marriage, which according to Scripture is an interdependent, exclusive, and lifelong commitment between a man and a woman who are likeminded in love and faith. In every other relational circumstance or stage of life, God's call is to remain celibate. Behavior that is incompatible with God's design for sexual intimacy does not lead to the truest and best life for any human being. We are quick to add that although many have succumbed to the lure of various sexual sins, God's grace is assuredly and freely offered to anyone wishing to claim it. Despite the pain or shame we may feel, God's redemptive power is always stronger than the destructive force of our human recklessness.

We recognize that the church has not always stewarded well the balance of biblical truth with loving grace and acceptance in areas relating to sexuality. Sadly, it has been far too common in

¹ The conclusions reached in this document are based on a broad and thematic interpretation of Scripture. Scripture citations are provided in places to help direct the reader to verses in the text where the information being presented is addressed.

the Christian church to place undue emphasis on scriptural definitions of sinful behaviors and lose sight of the outrageous love, forgiveness, and inclusiveness that Jesus brought for all the children of God. This has caused undue judgment, exclusion, and shame for people struggling to follow God's creation design for sexuality. As followers of Jesus, we challenge all people to God's biblical standards with a spirit soaked in grace and an awareness of the confusion and brokenness that is rampant in our fallen world. At Willow, our hearts break for people challenged by and struggling with God's call to purity. None of us are without sin and we all struggle to live lives that measure up to God's standards. No matter your struggle, we honor your journey and welcome you to join us at Willow so that together we can seek to follow Christ. It is our intention to boldly speak the truth of God on these matters while extending a radically loving hand of grace and inclusion to each and every person as a child of God so that those seeking to find Christ will not be hindered and those seeking to grow in Christlikeness will be spurred on.

Based on our interpretation of Scripture and much prayerful consideration, we hold the following beliefs, which are further explained and elaborated upon below:

- WE BELIEVE . . . all people are made in God's image, have turned away from Him, and are all offered unconditional love and acceptance through Jesus Christ
- WE BELIEVE . . . we are called as children of God to holiness and the pursuit of intimacy and communion with God the Father through the work of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit
- WE BELIEVE . . . that sex within God's design is always a mirror of His oneness involving the whole person uniting a man and woman into "one flesh"
- WE BELIEVE . . . God's design for marriage beautifully reflects his holy character and the interdependent community—the "oneness"—that eternally exists within the Trinity
- WE BELIEVE . . . for those who marry, sexual expression is a gift from God given to them—and only to them—to solidify and enhance their covenant relationship
- WE BELIEVE . . . marriage is a lifelong, exclusive, and interdependent relationship between a man and woman in which both, sometimes as individuals and sometimes as partners, participate in God's redemptive purposes in this world
- WE BELIEVE . . . at some point in all our lives—and for others of us all our lives—we experience singleness, and those eras can be a gift from God allowing for focused participation in God's work in our lives and His redemptive purposes in this world
- WE BELIEVE . . . violations of the marriage covenant and sexual expression outside its bounds stand in contrast to the love-infused Kingdom of God Jesus came to bring and are prohibited by Scripture
- WE BELIEVE . . . God's grace, forgiveness, and capacity to redeem is far greater than any human shortcoming and as His followers we love and embrace each and every person as a treasured child of God while relating His truth with the same love and grace we have each received so undeservedly

Creation, Holiness and Sexuality

Our God is a holy God (Exod 15:11; 1 Sam 2:2; Isa 6:3) which means that God is intrinsically pure and without sin or “shifting shadow” (James 1:17). He can be counted on to always do right, and be right. Scripture teaches that because God is holy and desires fellowship with His creatures we are called to be holy just like Him (Lev 11:45, 19:2; 1 Pet 1:13-16). We are to pursue holiness in all we do (Heb 12:14; Eph 4:24; 2 Cor 7:1) and to keep ourselves from succumbing to the harmful practices that hold people captive (Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 2:11). The work of Jesus Christ on the cross and the dynamic of the Holy Spirit living within us empower us for this endeavor. We don’t pursue holiness to court his favor, but rather receive his favor—his forgiveness for our decidedly unholy character and actions—and then pursue holiness because of His prior gracious acceptance. The result of this pursuit of holiness is a greater intimacy and communion with God, the very thing for which we were created. In that state, we know and are known by our Heavenly Father, and experience here on earth a taste of the Kingdom of God.

When God created humans he created us to be divine image bearers (Gen 1:26-27). This suggests that we are like God in a way not unlike a child is like a father. We know that God is infinite and sinless and we are finite and sinful, however our role as image bearers reminds us that despite these clear differences, we do have things in common. One element we have in common with God is that once we were created, we were diversified into male and female creations (Gen 2:18-25). In this way, we were created to mirror and resemble the distinction yet the interdependence in the divine union of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Gen 1:26). While Scripture notes our unity in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28) we do have unique gendered roles to play in God’s creation, i.e. mothers, fathers, husbands, wives. Our diversification as male and female, and thus our sexual identity, is part of God’s good creation plan. Our sexuality is a part of who we are, not what we do. An analysis of how we are to steward our sexuality is an analysis of how we are to steward our creatureship bearing the image of God.

God’s Design for the Marriage Union

Immediately after God diversified human beings as male and female (Gen 2:22) He gave us the gift of the opportunity for marital partnership between men and women:

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”

—Genesis 2:24–25

One flesh...naked and unashamed. These biblical descriptors summarize the intellectual reality and intention behind sex. But sex is much more than a cerebral experience. Such sterile language does not sufficiently capture the whole-body experience that sex actually is. That is precisely why this topic is so important to our lives as human beings and followers of Jesus Christ. It is core to our identity. It is biologically the very source of the propagation of our

species. And socially, spiritually, as well as personally, it is perhaps the place of our greatest wounds, shame and dysfunction.

The “one flesh” description is the basis of all proper understanding of how sex is to function. It is a foundational principle; both the Old and New Testaments as well as Jesus himself use the “one flesh” phrase when talking about it (Genesis 2:24; Mark 10:8; Ephesians 5:31). In addition, one-flesh sex takes place where both partners are “naked and unashamed”. That is only possible where love and security are at the foundation of the relationship. To be seen without covering or pretense—to be *naked*—is at the very heart of what it means to be intimate. Sex is meant to be expressed only in such a relationship. It does not create security or intimacy, it supports and amplifies the love and intimacy already existing. Attempts to use sex to create those elements of a relationship actually have the opposite affect: we become more ashamed, not less so, and feel used or cheated when our bodies are demanded without our souls being treasured as well.

Sex therefore is by God’s design, at its very core, a unifying act. It brings two into one. Theologically, such oneness has important parallels. When the famous Old Testament passage declares, “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one...” (Deut 6:4) it does not use the Hebrew word for “one” that signifies singularity (*yacheed*). Rather, the text employs a Hebrew word that means unity (*echad*). When Adam and Eve are told in Genesis that they will become “one flesh,” the text uses that same word for unity (*echad*) rather than the word for singularity (*yacheed*). Just as God, the Trinity, is one God in three Persons (*echad*), so people in marriage are one flesh in two persons (*echad*). That profound parallel is of supreme importance when we seek to understand God’s intention for a healthy and life-affirming expression of our sexuality.

The above word study leads us to conclude that, by God’s design, sexual expression mirrors God’s own oneness. It further implies sex is essentially relational, rather than impersonal. It is not a mere bodily experience (though many people engage in sexual options that reduce it to that) but involves the whole person. It must take place only in a relationally stable, committed environment—the context of monogamous marriage. In that setting, sexual expression reaches its highest ideal; any other context not only robs sex of this possibility, it robs the people involved of their dignity, freedom and lasting joy.

Throughout Scripture, marriage as modeled by Adam and Eve is affirmed and celebrated (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:5-6; Eph 5:31)—it is the norm, the quintessential marital relationship, against which all other forms of partnering are compared and contrasted. The characteristics of marriage modeled by Adam and Eve show us the key elements of God’s design for marriage. Adam and Eve were likeminded in love and faith, demonstrating God’s plan for marriage as a partnership of equals (“evenly yoked” as 2 Cor 6:14 puts it), which allowed them to thrive. This theme of spiritual likemindedness as a condition for a God-honoring marriage is repeated throughout Scripture including Old Testament warnings to Israelites not to intermarry with pagan nations (Deut 7:3; Josh 23:12; 1 Kgs 11:2) and in the teachings of Paul concerning the complexities of mixed faith marriages (1 Cor 7:12-16; 2 Cor 6:14).

God's design is that the marriage union be *lifelong*. Scripture upholds the permanence of marriage noting that a man will leave his family and be united to or cleave to his wife (Gen 2:24). Jesus taught that while a man and a woman may still be two people after they are married, they possess a "oneness" that binds them into a single entity (*echad*) that has enormous spiritual significance. To underscore this, He noted that no one should separate those whom God has joined in marriage (Matt 19:5-6; Mark 10:8-9). Paul also addressed the permanence of marriage comparing the marriage union to the permanent union between Christ and his Bride, the Church (Eph 5:22-33). Paul taught that marriage is a covenant relationship and that covenants are irrevocable (Rom 11:29). God's intent for individuals who choose to marry is that the union will last a lifetime, so it breaks His heart when divorce dissolves the commitment they have made to one another (Mal 2:15-16; Matt 19:6). Therefore, those who enter into a marriage covenant should do so humbly, selflessly, and intentionally in the spirit and attitude of Christ (Phil 2:1-5).

God's design is that the marriage union be *exclusive*. The cleaving of husband to wife (Gen 2:24) suggests uniting with each other at the expense of all others. To say, "I do" with one means to say, "I won't" with everyone else. Just as God's covenant with Israel was monogamous, so our covenant marriage relationship is designed to be exclusive. Jesus upheld the marriage vows of each spouse in his teaching affirming that each spouse is to love, honor, and cherish the other in all circumstances (Mark 10:2-12). Similarly, Paul spoke of a godly love, mutual respect, and constant fidelity among spouses (1 Cor 7:1-16, 25-40; Eph 5:21-24; Col 3:18-25). The whole of Scripture makes clear that marriage is set apart by God to be respected, cherished, and protected (Heb 13:4).

God's design is that the marriage union be *between a man and a woman*. The creation plan for marriage is a reunion of the man and woman that God previously diversified (Gen 2:22-24). Scripture makes clear that God created us man and woman (Gen 1:27) and that a man is to leave his parents (Gen 2:24) and unite or cleave to his wife in marriage (Gen 2:24). Our gendered character is part of our true humanity and this joining of man to woman in marriage is upheld in Scripture as a holy act of God (Matt 19:6). Although no marriage is perfect, the examples we see in Scripture of healthy marriages support this characteristic including the marriage of Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 4) and the marriage of Jesus' parents Mary and Joseph (Matthew 1-2, Luke 1-2). Song of Solomon is a beautiful book celebrating the sensuality that is rightfully present between a loving husband and wife. Paul's letter to the church in Rome affirms God's creation plan for marriage between a man and a woman (Rom 1:24-28).²

Lifelong, exclusive marriage between a man and a woman is a means for us to participate in God's redemptive purposes. As creatures created for fellowship with our holy Creator, we are to

² As already noted, Jesus expressly affirmed that marriage was between a man and a woman (Matt. 19:5-6; Mark 10:8-9). Although Jesus did not expressly address the question of same-sex sexual activity, he did not overturn any of the prohibitions on sexual practices set forth in the Old Testament. Further, the Jewish culture's unambiguous stance that sexual activity should be limited to a man and woman united in marriage made the need for Jesus to teach on same-sex sexual activity unnecessary. In contrast, the culture that Paul encountered necessitated that Paul explicitly address same-sex sexual activity in his teaching.

first seek God's kingdom in all we do (Matt 6:33; Luke 12:31; Deut 4:29; Col 3:2). While doing so, men and women in marriage unions have the opportunity to experience some unique gifts from God. Marriage affords us the opportunity to participate in procreation (Gen 1:28). Marriage also allows us to exercise joint stewardship over God's creation (Gen 1:26, 28). Marriage is a means for us to experience an earthly covenant partnership. Marriage is not simply a casual commitment or a simple promise (1 Cor 11:11), rather it is a covenant relationship between a man and a woman (Mal 2:14) and between each marriage partner and God (Prov 2:17). The covenant of marriage mirrors both God's covenant love for Israel (Gen 17:7) and Christ's love of the Church (Eph 5:32; Rev 19:7). Marriage also allows us to experience human intimacy in a sexual union (Gen 2:24). Scripture teaches that this sexual intimacy is a good and wholesome gift given by God that is meant to be enjoyed (Prov 5:18-19; 1 Tim 4:3-5). The denial of the gift of sexual intimacy in marriage is not virtuous or noble (1 Cor 7:3-5). Human sexuality requires careful stewardship. When we experience sexual intimacy, we are uniting in ways that we do not fully understand (1 Cor 6:15-17) and having physical experiences that have consequences for our souls (1 Cor 6:18-20).

God's Design for Singleness

Scripture teaches that God assigns some of us to be married and others of us to be single (and we are all single for at least part of our lives). Singleness can be an opportunity to participate with great personal focus in the redemptive purposes of God. The Apostle Paul holds singleness in high regard mostly because it has fewer distractions from spiritual matters than married life. In other words, single people have the "gift" of availability—they have more time and energy to promote the kingdom of God (1 Cor 7:7, 32-34). In the Old Testament, the material blessings of marriage and family were often viewed as evidence of God's favor and blessing. For this reason, marriage was the norm in the Old Testament times and singleness was seen as a lack of God's favor. In the New Testament, we are fully blessed in Christ with or without marital and other worldly blessings. Paul described it this way: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." (Phil 4:12). This realization, that we are complete in Christ whether married or single (or rich or poor, etc.), affirms that a life without sexual expression is not deprived or incomplete—any more than Jesus, who was fully human like us, was deprived or incomplete in his singleness. Rather, it affirms God's high view of singleness and makes clear that singleness is part of God's plan for some that enables them to participate most effectively in His redemptive work.

Neither marriage nor singleness is a preferred state. Paul goes so far as to call singleness a "gift" wishing that all believers could have this gift as he has it (1 Cor 7:7). Jesus also affirmed the gift of singleness when he taught the validity of choosing to remain unmarried for the sake of the kingdom of God (Matt 19:11-12)—a choice he himself made. Part of God's plan for singleness includes non-intimate opposite gender relationships. These are a healthy and necessary part of a life of singleness and a part of God's creation plan in creating us male and female. It should be noted that not all single people are necessarily *called* to singleness. Some

are single just for now; and God's will for them is to be married someday. Scripture teaches that in this state of preparation for marriage, we are to be patient, prayerful, and faithful to the Lord (1 Cor 13:4-7; Rom 12:9-13; Gal 5:22).

As we strive for sexual purity and holiness while single, Scripture does offer us instruction. Just as in marriage, those in a state of singleness are above all else called to be holy (Lev 11:45). While our desire for intimacy is indeed acknowledged (1 Cor 7:1-2), Scripture clearly reserves sexual expression for marriage and demands celibacy from our singleness (1 Cor 6:12-20). Our bodies are meant for the Lord (1 Cor 6:13; Rom 6:12-14) and as believers we steward our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19). Our bodies are to be handled with the care and intentionality that we would handle holy things. God's plan for celibacy in singleness calls us to treat our bodies in such a way that we foster intimacy and dependence on Him (1 Thess 4:3).

Distortions of and Departures from God's Plan for Purity

In our call to holiness as God's creatures, we are to control our bodies and our desires (1 Thess 4:3-5). However, we live in a broken world where God's creation plan has been distorted by sin. This has corrupted every dimension of human life including our sexuality. Our culture endorses pleasure seeking in our sexuality regardless of the form it takes. Additionally, our sexuality informs our identity and view of self. This helps explain why issues related to sexuality can be a highly sensitive and highly emotional challenge for many. While we are fully equipped for this struggle by the power of the Holy Spirit, our alienation from God and from each other causes us to not always choose the path towards holiness. In these situations we see violations of God's plan for purity and departures from God's plan for human sexuality.

Adultery

Adultery is the betrayal of the "one flesh" marriage vow introduced in Genesis 2:24. God's plan is that marriage is exclusive, and adultery defiles the marriage union by violating this exclusivity. In the Old Testament, adultery was clearly and strictly forbidden by the seventh of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18). Marriage was the proper domain for sex, and no other context for it received God's blessing.³ Scripture in many places also shows that adultery

³ At that time, adultery included sexual activity between a married woman and any man other than her husband. Adultery also included sexual activity between a married man and any other married or engaged woman. That it appears "legitimate" for a man to engage in sex with an unengaged woman (Exod 22:16-17; Deut 22:28-29) is technically not so, for the man must make restitution to the woman's father and possibly also take her as his own wife. Sex outside of marriage for men or women is thus always morally "wrong", given the compensation due. As Jesus pointed out, some of the Old Testament law reflects God's concession to hard hearts—his mercy—more than the highest good for humans (Matt 19:8). But the whole of it upholds God's holy standard despite the few places it puts limits on rather than completely abolishes wrongdoing. (Regulations concerning slavery are similar. Because slavery is not God's ideal, laws about it are a temporary concession, regulating for a time rather than fully removing this inequity brought about by human fallenness.)

is damaging to everyone involved—harming even those not directly involved (Prov 6:23-35; 7:6-27)—and that adultery brings with it God's judgment (Jer 23:11-14; Ezek 22:11; Mal 3:5). In the New Testament, Jesus expanded the Old Testament definition of marital fidelity to include emotional fidelity including the call to sexual purity in our thoughts and imaginations (Matt 5:27-28). Marriage faithfulness means keeping emotional boundaries healthy so that the sanctity of our relationship with our spouses is preserved. Sexual transgressions and adultery can therefore go beyond the bounds of physical intimacy and appear in private activities or emotional affairs with others. Striking the delicate balance between grace and consequence we see Scripture teach that adultery requires repentance if one is to be included in the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10).

Divorce and Remarriage

Divorce is the intentional termination of a marriage union while remarriage is the subsequent formation of a marriage union after divorce. It is clear from Scripture that God's plan for marriage is that it be lifelong (Matt 19:6) and when marriages end in divorce it breaks God's heart (Mal 2:16). The Old Testament made concessions for divorce as an accommodation to the effects of the Fall. These concessions allowed a man to divorce his wife for nearly any reason as long as he formally provided for her a certificate of divorce (Deut 24:1). Jesus made clear that this was not God's original design for marriage (Matt 19:4-8). Jesus restored God's original design for marriage thus revoking the divorce concession granted to Israel in the Old Testament (Matt 5:31-32; 19:9). Jesus taught and upheld God's original creation plan for marriage prohibiting divorce except for cases of unfaithfulness (sexual immorality). Paul further sought to clarify what constituted justifiable divorce by teaching that spousal abandonment and abuse are valid causes for divorce (1 Cor 7:10-16). Divorce for unjustified reasons can constitute adultery because God sees through the adulterous intention if trying to legitimize an affair by first following the letter of the law and getting a divorce before coming together—perfectly “legal” to an onlooker but nonetheless sinful.

Jesus and Paul both teach that remarriage is valid if indeed the divorce is valid. In Matthew 19, Jesus notes that remarriage in the case of an invalid divorce is actually sinful (despite the outward legality of the marriage). But the reverse is also true: If the divorce is valid, then remarriage must be acceptable just as it was in commonplace Jewish custom. Paul uses the example of an unbelieving spouse leaving his or her spouse noting that in this situation they “are not bound” (1 Cor 7:15). Paul means that the innocent party is “not bound to the marriage” and this includes women or men equally. This language echoes words directly from Jewish law on divorce: “Not bound” means that an innocent person, i.e. the man or woman who was abandoned or abused or betrayed through unfaithfulness without having committed similar acts themselves, is free to remarry. A divorced person may also remarry in the following limited circumstances: The believing spouse has been deserted by a non-believing spouse or the former spouse has remarried or died (Matt 5:31, 32, 19:4–6; Mark 10:12; Luke 16:18; 1 Cor 6:16, 18).

Divorce is the tragic result of what becomes of our humanity when it loses the fight against sin and brokenness. Whenever a marriage fails, we should mourn it as tragic. There should, however, be no error so grave that it cannot be forgiven; no mistake beyond the reach of grace. Likewise our God is a God of renewal and restoration. In some cases, this means restoring a marriage to its original partnership. In other cases, it means that remarriage is an opportunity for renewal and hope to get it right the second time having learned valuable lessons from one's former mistakes.

Extramarital Sexual Intimacy

Intimacy of any kind is to be pursued thoughtfully and reverently, and the Bible never views sexual intimacy as a casual expression to be allowed between any two (or more) consenting adults. Scripture teaches that sexual expression is reserved for the marriage union as described above. To pursue sexual intimacy outside of a marriage commitment is called "immorality" throughout the Bible (Matt 15:19; 1Cor 5:1, 6:12; 2Cor 12:21). This includes sexual activity of any nature: immorality is not just intercourse, but all of the varieties of sexual stimulation and arousal that people can engage in. In a highly sexualized culture like ours, this may seem like an exceedingly difficult teaching as it requires some to refrain completely from sexual activity, either for a time or throughout their lifetime. When considered, however, in the context of the self-control and sacrifice and surrender that God asks of us, and indeed that Christ modeled for us, this call to self-denial does not seem nearly as severe. As described in the Singleness discussion above, celibacy should not be viewed as punishment or deprivation, but rather as a call to purity and obedience to God.

Because sexual activity outside of marriage is prohibited by Scripture and God intended for marriage to be between a man and a woman, it follows that sexual activity between members of the same gender is not compatible with God's design. While the Old Testament commentary on same sex sexual activity may be addressing sexual violence and sexual activity related to cultic idolatry, the New Testament speaks clearly to this issue. In Romans 1 Paul takes the Old Testament prohibition on same sex sexual activity out of its cultural context of violence and idolatry and puts it in the context of God's creation order and the New Covenant of Christ (Rom 1:26-27). In Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth he is careful to note that both the initiating party in same sex intimacy (*arsenokoitai*) and the passive or compliant party (*malakoi*) are operating outside the directives of the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10). In similar fashion, in Paul's first letter to Timothy, he notes the immorality of both heterosexual and homosexual sexual activity that is outside of God's planned design (*pornoi* and *arsenokoitai*) (1 Tim 1:8-11). The church at Corinth's principled, yet loving, expression of this truth to its community represents a wonderful example of the beauty and power of redemption. The church welcomed those who had previously engaged in the immoral behaviors described by Paul, and some of them eventually experienced conversion and were transformed into devoted followers of Jesus (1 Cor 6:11).

It is important to distinguish between sinful tendencies and sinful practice. One may be inclined to theft or violence or addiction— but the more important question is whether one acts on those

inclinations. The same is true of sexual morality. What we do with the tendencies inside our hearts defines us morally. To have same-sex attraction is quite different from seeking same-sex partners or viewing same-sex pornography and acting out. In all areas of our lives, we are all called to choose either God's perfect desires for us or to follow our own easily mislead desires. By God's strength and grace, our church has members and attenders who experience same-sex attraction yet are committed to celibacy. At Willow we are committed to loving, supporting, and coming alongside anyone struggling to choose God's counter-cultural stance of purity.

Sexual activity between a man and a woman outside the bounds of marriage is also prohibited by Scripture. This includes all sexual expression, not just intercourse, as discussed above, and also the practice of cohabitation outside of marriage. Scripture teaches that we are to avoid sexual temptation (1 Cor 10:13; Jas 1:12-15), that we are to avoid the appearance of sin (Gal 5:19-21; 1 Thess 5:22), and that we are not to hinder each other's obedience to and intimacy with Christ (Mark 9:42; Rom 13:10, 14:13). Living together without being married goes against all of those injunctions. Additionally, the patience and self-control in choosing not to cohabit serves to prepare us for the responsibilities and necessary self-discipline that makes a marriage work (Mal 2:15; Matt 5:5-7; Rom 12:9-12; 1 Cor 13; Gal 5:22).

Solitary Distortions

Because God's creation plan for human sexuality is that we experience sexual activity within an interdependent marriage union, solitary arousal through pornography or explicit literature are violations of God's plan. Sometimes, using pornography becomes a substitute for sexually connecting with one's spouse, leading to separation rather than closeness where sex is concerned. In addition, pornography almost always depicts violations of God's creation design for human sexuality including exploitative and distorted views of women and sexual intimacy. This inaccurate depiction has a destructive effect on the viewer. Jesus goes so far as noting that cultivating impure sexual thoughts toward another person, even where there is no physical contact with that person, is a sin against God's design (Matt 5:27-28). So while we may not engage in actual sexual contact with another human being, dwelling on a fantasy that includes either a real person or a mere graphic depiction of someone short-circuits the oneness with a spouse that God wants sex to foster.

Polygamy

Polygamy is the practice of having more than one spouse (typically a man having more than one wife). Scripture read in its entirety makes clear marriage is designed to be a union between only one man and one woman. The Bible story begins with a prototypical marriage between one man and one woman—Adam and Eve (one groom and one bride). And, in the last book of the Bible, the story ends with a marriage between one "man" and one "woman"—Jesus, the groom, and his Bride, the Church. Note that we are collectively called his *Bride*, not his *Brides* (as if he were bound to us as a man with multiple partners) lending strong evidence a plural marriage to Jesus (polygamy) is repugnant to God. In the Old Testament, polygamy is merely—perhaps reluctantly—regulated but not commended (also like divorce or slavery) while the New

Testament offers no examples of polygamy. Despite the occasional practice of polygamy among the rich and powerful (rarely among the average man), the Old Testament on numerous occasions references the monogamous nature of the relationship between God and Israel (e.g. Ezra 9-10, Isa 54:5-10, Ezek 16, Hosea). These passages, along with the Genesis Adam and Eve archetype lend compelling support to the conclusion that marriage was always meant by design to be exclusive. As we see in Revelation, our Lord's eternal union with us is cast in monogamous rather than polygamous metaphor, further evidencing the divine approval of this marital arrangement and no other.

Grace

All people were created by a holy God who loves them and delights in them (Ps 149:4). None of us is outside the reach of this divine love. He is our Heavenly Father and as an earthly father loves his children to the finite capacity of his love, God loves all of us with the limitlessness of His holy love. We have been created to love God in return (Deut 6:5) allowing God to have deep and loving fellowship with all of us as His creation.

Out of love God has called us to be holy just as He is holy in order to facilitate the closest and most intimate fellowship with Him. We are called to steward the image of God created in each of us by striving for holiness not simply out of obedience but because our loving Father knows what is best for us. He knows that our pursuit of holiness is a pursuit of knowing and being known by Him. Our sexuality is part of that holiness, part of who we are, and part of how God created us. We are to steward our bodies and our sexuality pursuing purity that facilitates intimate communion with our loving Heavenly Father.

Our challenge is that we all live in a fallen and broken world where the order of creation is no longer intact. Evil runs rampant in our world clouding and confusing the purposes of God. It has infected every human heart and has stained our moral innocence so that we all choose sin and alienate ourselves from relationship with our Creator (Col 1:21; Rom 3:23). Our sinful nature through the lens of our hedonistic culture allows our sexuality, part of how we were created, to appear as a casual tool designed for our immediate pleasure and gratification. In the most extreme perversions, evil causes our sexuality to be viewed as a tool for power, control, and manipulation. With sin distorting our view of our sexuality, we can easily cause great damage to each other and can unintentionally destroy our spiritual intimacy with God. Our fallen and depraved nature is so severe that Scripture makes clear that we are not capable of saving ourselves (Rom 7:21-24).

But God's love for all people - no exclusions - is so boundless that he has enacted a plan to rescue us from evil, which is present in the world and present within each of us. He longs to restore everything back to the way it was: a perfect, sinless creation that includes our full and complete intimacy with Him. Through God's covenant relationship with Israel He promised to send a Savior. Through the fulfillment of that promise culminating in the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection and ascension to heaven, God flooded our broken world with grace

and mercy. The chasm between our holy God and fallen humanity is now spanned by the bridge of infinite grace. This grace and forgiveness is available to anyone who chooses to accept God's offer of rescue through Jesus. Our old sinful natures are washed clean and we are made new creations in Christ (1 Cor 6:11; Titus 3:5; 2 Cor 5:17).

Christ has established His Church to accomplish His redemptive work in this world. We as the church are to live out this mandate with unity having our differences subsumed by our common love, grace, and acceptance in Christ Jesus. We believe that all people deserve and desire to know God's love in an intimate relationship with Him. We graciously honor the journey of all people seeking to follow Christ and God's plan for human sexuality knowing that doing so enables us to realize our full relational potential with our Father. God's remedy to sin's deception allows us to see our sexuality as God intended it and allows us to steward it pursuing holiness and communion with Him. As we all support each other in this pursuit, we do so full of grace knowing that no sin in this world is beyond the loving hand of God offering every one of us restoration through Christ Jesus (Rom 8:35-39). We at Willow Creek Community Church deeply desire to increasingly be a community of people whose arms are opened wide to anyone seeking the love and grace of Jesus Christ. We rejoice with all of heaven when people who are broken and confused because of our fallen world are wrecked by the love and grace of God, and choose to accept God's gift of divine rescue and restoration.