

# Gender, Sexuality, and Gospel Ministry in 2015

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Today we are addressing a subject that is dominating the cultural, political, and spiritual conversations of our nation. Human sexuality, gender, and the nature of marriage have been front and center with the recent Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage in all fifty states. This decision changes the cultural landscape of our nation. If there was ever a time for clarity on these issues in the church, it is now. Unfortunately, in the time of most critical need, some are going wobbly, even among evangelical Christians. There are whole denominations and leading churches that are following the cultural trend toward gender choice, sexual freedom, and marital redefinition.

Our own state dominated the national news this spring with the RAFRA debacle. This isn't just an issue for liberal Europe or liberal America, it touches down-home Hoosiers too.

This message will be heard by different sets of ears today. Some ears will hear this primarily politically. Other ears will hear this parentally as you have adult children in sexual lifestyles that disappoint you. Some ears will hear this very personally. You have struggled with same-sex attraction or someone you love does and those relational loyalties shape your perspective.

I'm going to quickly sketch the biblical basis for manhood and womanhood, marriage and sex, before spending more time on homosexuality and same-sex marriage.

## What is a Man? What is a Woman?

The old joke was that to tell the difference between a boy and a girl you had to look in their genes. G-e-n-e-s. But today that is less funny as gender identities are being disconnected from biological gender or genitalia. Look at this as one of many indications of this trend: Bruce Jenner's decision to identify as a woman has been lauded as a great and defining moment for our country. The Olympic Men's Decathlon Gold medal winner's transgender choice was hailed by ESPN as the most courageous athletic moment of the last year. This sounds bewildering if we don't understand where all this comes from and why human nature wants so badly to rid itself of these gender and sexual definitions.

*"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."* (Genesis 1:26-27)

God purposed in creating the human race that we would first bear his image or his likeness. This is not physical likeness but primarily moral and spiritual. *The imago dei* is God's gift to us—self-awareness, moral reasoning, and spiritual meaning. We are so different from the animal and plant world—at least most of us.

But notice how and why God created us in his image. *"So God created man in his own image...male and female he created them."* (Genesis 1:27) Human gender was purposed by God to reflect his own likeness. This is not to say that God is either male or female or both male and female. Rather, it ties both manhood and womanhood to the nature of God. Since

God is the most glorious and awesome being in the universe, our gender reflection of his glorious personhood is also glorious and sacred. To be a man is a great and holy privilege. To be a woman is a great and holy privilege. Remember, God steps back from all his creation including human gender and says, *It's all very, very good!* With that God sanctions and elevates the male and female gender and each one's unique sexual identity.

Adam had male plumbing and was a man. Eve had female plumbing and was a woman. Both are sacred and very good.

## What is Marriage?

If gender is based on the character and creative purpose of God, what about marriage? How about we ask Jesus? Some guys did once. They asked him to define what marriage is.

*"And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?' He answered, 'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."* (Matthew 19:3-6)

There is so much to say here but for our subject today, please see WHERE Jesus went to define marriage. He went right back to Genesis. Back to the beginning. Back to God's purpose for it from the start. Here you have the Son of God with the right to define or redefine marriage simply by his own word. But he doesn't do that. He gets his definition from Scripture and from creation.

There is a gap of thousands of years between Adam and Eve and Jesus. We see in this that time or cultural feelings or beliefs don't change what marriage essentially is. In fact, what Jesus says here is in the context of a cultural redefinition of marriage. They had redefined the marital covenant and the terms by which divorce could happen. Jesus doesn't say, *Well, the winds of change are blowing and we need to stay relevant.* His answer is decidedly countercultural.

Also, see that Jesus connects the male with [*husband*] and the female with *wife*. Those are not interchangeable roles or definitions. Jesus says that **marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman which redefines them by covenant as one**. This was so radical for the times that the disciples asked him to clarify if he really meant to say marriage was as covenantally bound as they thought he said. He doubles down. The disciples' response is classic as they realize how serious Jesus viewed marriage. *"If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry."* (Matthew 19:10)

To be clear, God made marriage and defines marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman. If I had more time, I could take you to Ephesians 5 and to what marriage points to. Gender reflects God's nature and marriage reflects the relationship between Jesus and the church, and is therefore, sacred. It is unchangeable even as the Christ/church relationship is unchangeable and eternal.

## What about Homosexuality?

While certainly not a main theme or even a minor theme of the Bible, the Bible doesn't blush when it talks about homosexuality. There are five main texts that deal with same-sex sexual relations.

<i>Genesis 19</i>	<i>The judgment on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah</i>
<i>Leviticus 18:22, 20:13,</i>	<i>The Holiness Code of sexual ethics</i>
<i>Romans 1:18-32</i>	
<i>1 Corinthians 6:9-10</i>	<i>One in list of vices/acts of the flesh</i>
<i>1 Timothy 1:9-10</i>	<i>One in list of vices/acts which the law condemns</i>

One thing is clear, whenever the Bible speaks of homosexuality, it does so in a condemning way. There is not one verse in Scripture that celebrates gay sex or encourages God's people to condone it.

Yet, there are many biblical scholars and pastors who either sympathize or endorse homosexuality. You might say, *how can that be?* You would be surprised at the eloquent way they can explain it.

How? By primarily explaining the ancient practice of homosexuality as being different from today or at least different from the long-term committed relationships of today. They would say the Bible condemns the older men taking advantage of younger men in relationships. Paul condemns exploitive gay behavior. Or he condemns the promiscuous type, but doesn't condemn two people of the same sex in a loving, long-term relationship. There are intellectual and educated people that argue those very points persuasively. Many liberal denominations and pastors have found the arguments convincing and have endorsed same-sex marriage. Some have ordained openly gay pastors and ministers. We shouldn't underestimate the momentum of this movement in Western society. They are established in academia, Hollywood, media, and other elite and culturally powerful positions.

Have you ever sat back and thought, why is this a big deal? Why is this suddenly all that the culture and media seems to want to talk about? Perhaps you are dismayed to hear me speaking about it. Why was there the explosive outrage at Indiana's RAFRA law back in April? Why is Caitlin Jenner idealized? Why is it so important to quickly redefine millennia of human history's practice of marriage?

*"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." (Romans 1:18-20)*

The Apostle Paul makes an incredible statement here regarding the nature of created things. He says there is a connection between creation and the character of God. God's nature is seen in the complexity, simplicity, beauty, creativity, size and scope, interdependence, and functionality of the world around us. The natural world, by design, reflects what God is like. It is enough of a witness to God's character that at the final judgment nobody can claim, *you didn't tell me!* All will be without excuse.

This appeal to natural law or "general revelation" is where Paul begins. The visible world and its designed purposes says what God intends and what God is like. Creation tells of its

Creator. We know quite a bit about da Vinci by his paintings and the Beatles by their music and your momma by her cooking. But what does man do with this knowledge of God?

*"For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened." (Romans 1:21)* Man's response to God's revelation of himself is not worship or thanksgiving. Rather, man's fallen nature revolts against God and the result is a series of devastating "exchanges."

*"Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." (Romans 1:22-23)* Rather than worshiping the invisible God of whom creation speaks, man worships creation itself and exchanges the glory of knowing God for the emptiness of deriving meaning from money, sex, and rock-and-roll. The result is God giving us what we want.

*"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen." (Romans 1:24-25)*

Man trades God-worship for thing-worship, trades purity for impurity, trades honoring God with our bodies for dishonoring God with our bodies. Trading the truth for a lie, then trying to derive meaning from that lie. This exchange has far reaching consequences as it takes us further and further from the blessing of God's design for us. Enter sexuality.

*"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error." (Romans 1:26-27)*

Man takes his no-God ideological starting point to its moral conclusion. Where does it lead? If heterosexuality is a reflection of God's nature and if marriage is a reflection of God's purpose for the sexes, and if our sexual expression is to be an act of worship, then the disconnection of these things from the character of God will lead to sexual "exchanging." Homosexuality is not what God is like. This passage describes the sexual conclusion when man untethers his self-understanding from God. Untether from God and "husband" and "wife" are arbitrary terms. The terms, "Father" and "mother" are freedom limiting. Heterosexual sexual union in a covenant marriage is traded for complete sexual freedom with male or female, husband or wife, bisexual partner, threesome, etc.

Yet, why such vitriol today on this issue? Why not simply let it be? Why are the polls changing? Because while not everyone identifies as gay, the majority of America does not want God's law on heterosexual sex either. To embrace the goose is to embrace the gander. The real idol here is sexual freedom. That sexual god is enshrined in our culture and Americans generally don't want God or the Ten Commandments meddling with their freedom, whether straight or gay.

## What about...

### Same-sex attraction?

This deserves more time, but I think it's important that we see moral distance between temptation to sin and sin itself. Was Jesus tempted sexually? I believe he was, if he was tempted in every way like us yet was without sin. This temptation might be the number one human temptation. Yet he was innocent. Tempted but innocent.

Same-sex attraction is certainly the result of the Fall, but then so is wanting to have sex with anyone not your spouse. Brokenness comes in many shattered forms. As we lovingly labor to help people exchange the lie for the truth, we shouldn't be surprised that these temptations linger. Same-sex attraction is not itself a sin. Acting on it is. How can we help as a church those who struggle in this way? Sam Allberry is a pastor with personal experience here. In his book, *Is God Anti-Gay?* he gives us some advice:

1. *Make it easy to talk about*
2. *Honor singleness*
3. *Remember that church is family*
4. *Deal with biblical models of masculinity and femininity, rather than cultural stereotypes*
5. *Provide good pastoral support*

### Caring for and loving homosexual friends and family?

I have answered this question over the years by encouraging family members to treat it like you would any other sin in someone's life. You wouldn't endorse your son's drug addiction or struggle with porn but you would love them anyway, right?

Too often this sin and struggle is treated like the plague and the family member with a same-sex attraction feels alone right when they need family and Christian community the most.

### The church's response?

This area tests our understanding of the gospel and whether we are broken over our own sin. It's easy to be the Pharisee praying in the temple thankful you are not like the tax collector or homosexual.

I remember 25 years ago when I was in college, I attended a large, nationally-known pretty stiff-type evangelical church. It had a reputation for being influential. Their pastor was a rather young guy named Ed Dobson. Back in the late '80s and early '90s, HIV and AIDS were really big news. Magic Johnson shared his HIV diagnosis and it made huge headlines. Ed Dobson began to minister to the gay community of the city by offering to sit and talk and pray with anyone dying of AIDS in the city's hospitals. This was quite scandalous in this respectable, button-down church.

I was in the service when Ed Dobson said he had received a letter that week from a concerned church member who said, "*Pastor, if you keep this up we are going to have homosexuals attending our church.*" I'll never forget him looking up and saying, "*That's right, we will, and they can join all the other liars, cheats, and adulterers we already have here.*"

I don't think anyone wrote him any more letters. What did that moment do at that church? It reminded them of what the gospel says about all of us. For our church to have any effective gospel witness among people struggling in any of these categories, they have to sense our own mourning over our own sin. We don't affirm the sin but we can offer the grace of God to the sinner. Offer it with the love that Jesus offered the sexually sinful of his day, with whom he ate, talked, and cared for.

I reached out to a man in our church who has struggled for years with same-sex attraction. He is a member of our church in good standing and has found victory over it. I asked him, if you could say anything to Bethel Church about this, what would you say? Here is what he wrote,

*"On the topic of same-sex attraction, I would love for Bethel Church to understand that sexual brokenness is a result of sin, and that it leads to sinful behavior, but that **being broken is not sin**. I think this makes sense to us when we think about someone battling heterosexual lust, but it becomes scary to think the same thing of someone who battles same-sex attraction. Unfortunately, this all-too-common fear is one of the greatest hurdles that people like me will face on the road to healing, because fear prevents fellowship. Here, I thank God for Celebrate Recovery. That community has been so great for my healing because it never forced me to dwell on how evil I am, but rather helped me to let Jesus show me the roots of my sin and the nature of my brokenness. What I found is that my same-sex attraction is essentially an identity crisis lived out in idolatry, and that the solution is worship. My healing has come from Christ through fellowship, and I have hope that as Christ wipes away fear, others like me will find similar healing."*

There is the hope which is only found in the gospel of Jesus. If we compromise on what sin is, we compromise on what the gospel is. Let's be a church that, like Jesus, is full of grace and truth.

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