

A Reformed-Presbyterian Understanding of Human Sexuality

God is a God of love who comes to us, offering us the gift of a new and meaningful life through Jesus Christ. We know and understand who God is through Jesus and can best know Christ through Scripture and through its interpretation by the church. We believe that God has given us God's Spirit to enliven and empower us to be God's followers in the world. We believe that our lives are to be used in thanksgiving to God by loving God, one another, and ourselves.

Thus, a Reformed-Presbyterian understanding of sexuality begins with a belief in a God of love that has created us as sexual beings to relate to one another in love. We believe in educating young people so they can learn about all aspects of sexuality, including the physical aspects, the emotional aspects, the beliefs and values we hold that inform our sexuality, and the appropriate ways to make decisions about our sexuality. All of this knowledge helps us live out our sexuality in love and thanksgiving to God.

We begin the explanation of our understanding of sexuality with the Bible. The Bible is our basic textbook because it describes God's faithfulness to us. Some things we need to remember about our biblical faith include the following:

1. We believe in a personal, transcendent God who is the self-sufficient Sovereign of all being. Based on God's attributes of justice, righteousness, holiness, and love, God determines what is right and just in creation.
2. Through the law in the Old and New Testaments, God has specified what is right and wrong. All of God's commands undergird and reinforce the objective moral universe. God holds us accountable as moral stewards of creation.
3. Men and women are unique as God's image bearers. Like God, we are personal, moral, and spiritual beings, capable of an intimate relationship with God and with other human beings.
4. Christian ethics founded on biblical principles will try to avoid the following dangers: legalism (belief that Scripture is merely a rulebook containing moral proof texts); situationalism (belief that there are no moral absolutes but that situations dictate what is right and wrong); and intuitionism (belief that moral knowledge is an exclusively internal and subjective experience).
5. A biblical ethic on human sexuality needs to include the following precepts:
 - a. Norms or standards are revealed by God in Scripture. In every situation we must ask, What does the Bible teach?
 - b. Situations in history progress under God's guidance. In every situation we must ask, What would honor God?
 - c. Existential motivation is prompted by the Holy Spirit. In every situation we must ask, How do I (we) respond?

We are forgiven sinners, and, guided by the Holy Spirit, we can use our sexuality as God intended. Norms, context, and motivation are essential to moral Christian sexual activity.

Seven biblical and theological principles provide guidance and support for understanding our sexuality.

1. God created us and gave us the gift of our sexuality.
2. God created us for life in community.
3. Our church is a community of love.
4. Our church is a community of responsibility.
5. Our church is a varied community.
6. Our church is a community of forgiveness.
7. God gives us responsibility for our own decisions.

Each of the foregoing theological affirmations is highlighted below. In standard Reformed-Presbyterian fashion, each affirmation begins with Scripture, is followed with a quotation from a theological document, and is then briefly explained in contemporary language.

We have stated the theological affirmations in a positive way. Sexuality is a good and positive part of our lives as intended by God. In order for our sexuality to be a good part of our lives, it must be used responsibly.

To belong to the church means to share in the values of the church. On the one hand, we have boundaries; on the other hand, we must each make decisions for ourselves. Thus, within the community, there is room for us to move about. This freedom allows for the variety that exists within the Reformed/Presbyterian family.

The guiding principles that define our community are love, responsibility, and forgiveness. Within the boundaries of the church, there is freedom, but this freedom is bounded by love and responsibility. There is always the possibility of the irresponsible use of our sexuality. When this happens, we are still a part of the church and are called to confession and forgiveness within the bounds of the church.

God Created Us and Gave Us the Gift of Our Sexuality

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over . . . the earth." So God created humankind in [God's] image, in the image of God [God] created them; male and female [God] created them. . . . God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Genesis 1:26, 27, 31a)

For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works. (Ephesians 2:10)

God made human beings male and female for their mutual help and comfort and joy. We recognize that our creation as sexual beings is part of God's loving purpose for us. God intends all people . . . to affirm each other as males and females with joy, freedom, and responsibility. ("A Declaration of Faith," ch. 2, lines 80–84, 87–88)

God has created . . . male and female and given them a life which proceeds from birth to death in a succession of generations and in a wide complex of social relations. . . . Life is a gift to be received with gratitude and a task to be pursued with courage. (The Confession of 1967, 9.17)

God created us and called us very good. God did not create us as spirits. God did not create us as bodies. Instead, God created us as total persons—body and spirit. And this entire creation, God called very good.

Not only did God create us, God created us to be God’s very own image in the world. All that we are—including our bodies, including our sexuality—is God’s gift to us.

Our sexuality is our way of being male or female in the world. Our sexuality is basic and affects our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Because God calls our sexuality good, because it is God’s gift to us, and because we are made in the image of God, we can feel good about our sexuality.

God Created Us for Life in Community

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8–10)

God made us for life in community. (“A Declaration of Faith,” ch. 2, line 61)

The new life takes shape in a community in which men and women know that God loves them and accepts them in spite of what they are. (The Confession of 1967, 9.22)

God created us to be together. From the very beginning, God’s purpose was for us to be together—with God and with one another.

One word to define this togetherness is “relationship.” A relationship is how we describe the connection between two people. The connection might be the result of birth; we have particular relationships with our parents, brothers, and sisters. The connection might be the result of feelings and commitments; we have particular relationships with acquaintances, friends, and partners. God creates us with a basic need to form relationships with others. Our relationships are answers to the loneliness we feel, and they give our lives meaning.

Another word to define the togetherness that God has in mind for us is “community.” A community is a group of people who join one another. You are a part of many communities—your neighborhood, your town or city, your own particular group of friends, your church. God created us to be together in communities, which can give meaning and identity to our lives.

The very heart of what it means to be in the image of God is to be in community—joined with God and with one another. When we gather in God’s name, we are God’s

community, the church, in the world. In the church, we learn to be who God created us to be. We find our identity with God and one another in the church.

Our Church Is a Community of Love

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. . . . Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7–8; 11–12)

And one of them, a lawyer, asked [Jesus] a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:35–40)

Q. 42. What is the sum of the Ten Commandments?

A. The sum of the Ten Commandments is: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves. (The Shorter Catechism, 7.042)

We are created to be in community, in relationship, with God and with one another. Above all else, God has loved us, does love us, and will love us faithfully. In the same way, we should love God and one another.

The summation of the law by Jesus—to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself—indicates that the love of oneself is included in the love of others. Clearly, our sexual attitudes and relationships should be motivated by love both for our neighbors and for ourselves. Our sense of identity and our way of acting should affirm others as well as affirm ourselves and should respect others as well as respect ourselves. We are to be concerned for others' needs and feelings without discounting our own.

Because we are total persons, we express our maleness or femaleness in all our relationships. Physical intimacy progresses from the simple affirmation of a handshake or hug to the total intimacy of marriage. Different levels of physical intimacy are appropriate to different kinds and stages of relationships. Often in a relationship, we find ourselves asking what is appropriate. One way to determine the appropriateness of the physical expression of our sexuality is by evaluating the level of committed and faithful love in the relationship.

Our Church Is a Community of Responsibility

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22–23a)

[God] has told you . . . what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

We believe that we have been created to relate to God and each other in freedom and responsibility. We may misuse our freedom and deny our responsibility by trying to live without God and other people or against God and other people. Yet we are still bound to them for our life and well-being, and intended for free and responsible fellowship with them. (“A Declaration of Faith,” ch. 2, lines 66–73)

The church, as the household of God, is called to lead men [and women] out of this [sexual] alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ. Reconciled to God, each person has joy in and respect for his [or her] own humanity and that of other persons. (The Confession of 1967, 9.47)

Sexuality is a good and positive part of our lives created by God. In order for our sexuality to continue to be a good part of our lives, it must be used responsibly. Some people define responsible sexuality by saying that certain actions are wrong and others are right and that responsible behavior is simply a matter of following these rules. At the other extreme, some say deciding for yourself what is right and wrong is an individual matter.

Our understanding of responsible sexuality is not found at these two extremes. We are a part of a community of faith. Joined together, we read and study God’s Word, pray and listen for God’s guidance for us, study the beliefs of our church in the past, and then, being guided by all this, we make statements together that express our beliefs. Presbyterians do take definite stands on issues. At the same time, we uphold the right of each person to maintain the dignity of his or her own conscience in the light of Scripture.

To belong to the church means to share in the values of the church. The guiding principle that defines the church is love. Within the boundaries of the church, there is freedom, but this freedom is bounded by love. We are free to use our sexuality, and yet we are limited in this freedom because of our commitment to God to live a life of love and obedience. We care about the effects of our actions on others as well as on ourselves. Therefore, our sexuality is to be expressed lovingly, responsibly, and obediently.

We know we are expressing our sexuality lovingly, responsibly, and obediently when we work for love and justice in the world. We also know that God’s Spirit is present when there is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. We can be sure that we are acting responsibly when we keep God’s Spirit as the guide of our lives.

Our Church Is a Varied Community

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we are all made to drink of one Spirit. . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:12–13, 27)

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

The young need to see in the church role models of both sexes who communicate by life, even more than by words, the goodness of our femaleness and maleness and the equal opportunity of both for service, responsibility, and authority in the life of the church. They need to see the varied responsible ways in which one can live out one's maleness and femaleness and be helped to affirm the goodness of their own sexuality. ("The Nature and Purpose of Human Sexuality," lines 469–475)

The many ways in which people choose to live out their relationships include casual acquaintances, friendship, and marriage. In all our relationships, we are to relate to one another lovingly and responsibly.

Some people remain single all their lives. They have friendships and close loving relationships without necessarily having sexual intercourse. Sometimes people are widowed or divorced and must renew friendships and other relationships as a single person. Marriage is a covenant of love and responsibility in which a couple makes a commitment of faithfulness. Sexual intercourse is the ultimate expression of this mutual and lasting covenant. Some people choose to become parents, making commitments to love, protect, and support their children.

The ways we live out our relationships are influenced by many factors: our families, our friends, our early sexual experiences, and the sex education we receive. Other factors that influence us are the economic, racial, and ethnic groups to which we belong and the community in which we live. Sometimes we live out our relationships in sexist ways—stereotyping males and females and assigning them superior or inferior status simply because they are males or females. Sometimes we live out our relationships in racist ways—stereotyping groups of people simply because of their race or ethnicity. In our own church, we have held and sometimes still hold sexist and racist views. To avoid these views, we must embrace the diversity within our community and strive toward a good, positive, and healthy view of our sexuality as God has intended.

Whether we are children, youth, or adults; single, divorced, married, or widowed; male or female; heterosexual or homosexual; and whatever our economic status or racial/ethnic heritage, we are all loved by a God who is faithful and just.

Our Church Is a Community of Forgiveness

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. (Luke 6:37–38)

When we fail each other as parents or partners, we are called to forgive each other as God forgives us and to accept the possibilities for renewal that God offers us in grace. ("A Declaration of Faith," ch. 2, lines 106–109)

The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by [people] when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time. (The Confession of 1967, 9.47)

We have all misused our sexuality. There are times when we have not used our sexuality responsibly. There are times when we have not been grateful for the gift of our sexuality. There are times when we all have fallen short of the high calling God has for us, including the use of our sexuality. This is called sin. When this happens, we are still a part of the church and called to confession and forgiveness within the bounds of the church.

We can be grateful that the church is a community of forgiven people, not an exclusive circle of the morally pure. In our church, we can honestly acknowledge our sins. God's forgiveness makes such honesty possible and helps us to change our lives to reflect God's love. God's Holy Spirit enables us to change and guides us. Rather than rejection and condemnation because we have fallen short of God's intention and our own best aspirations, in the church we can experience forgiveness and receive help in living out our sexuality. We are then even more willing to forgive the failings of others because we have experienced God's love in such abundance.

God Gives Us Responsibility for Our Own Decisions

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1–2)

If the people of the church are to be given the resources to live out their lives responsibly as sexual beings, the enabling leadership of the church must . . . assist people in their problems of identity and moral choice. This assistance will, however, have deprived people of the chance to grow and of the need to wrestle with their own choices if it consists predominantly of handing out prescriptions and passing judgment. What is more, the counsel of the church will be sought more if people see in its stance not only a convinced perspective that orients its approach but also a willingness to recognize the complexity of sexual problems, the possibility of conscientious disagreement on moral decisions, and the opportunity for renewal of life for forgiven sinners. (“The Nature and Purpose of Human Sexuality,” lines 689–700)

In our decision making, we are instructed by God's Word to us. We are to be influenced by our Christian beliefs. We are aware of other influences: what our friends believe, how we feel, and what we have learned about our sexuality. We need to learn to sort out those different factors, because some may be sexist, racist, or the result of pressures from others.

The guiding principles that define the church are love, responsibility, obedience, and forgiveness. Keeping these principles in mind and exploring their meanings within our community will lead us to make responsible decisions for our own lives.

To talk about how we make decisions for ourselves and how we communicate those decisions to others is important. Our decisions, based on love, responsibility, and forgiveness, are discovered in relationship with God, with one another, and with ourselves.