

March 1, 2016

Dear Riverside Church,

Before stating our beliefs about a very sensitive and important topic, we want to explain the basis from which we build those beliefs and our heart for you as a child of God.

In the Bible's account of creation, God describes each sequential part as being "good," but after finally creating a man and woman in the image of God, and commanding them to "be fruitful and multiply," God describes creation as being "very good" (Genesis 1). Furthermore, love poems in the Bible (e.g., Song of Songs) celebrate sexual intimacy between a married man and woman with a level of detail that many find surprising! We believe that human sexuality and the covenant relationship of marriage are "very good" because they were created in God's image. Our sexuality and the covenant relationship of marriage are intended to be a reflection of the perfect love and commitment shared by God in the Trinity. We have a God-given longing to receive love and acceptance from others. The love and acceptance we receive from other humans, even though imperfect and flawed, is meant to direct us to the perfect love and acceptance we can only receive from God. This is good news for everyone! God offers us a perfect love and acceptance that far exceeds even the best sexual intimacy that we can experience in life. God's perfect love and acceptance can also heal and redeem the very worst hurts, emptiness, and loneliness that we can possibly experience in life.

The reality of evil in this world is plainly obvious. The Bible teaches that all evil has resulted from the combined and complex effects of evil forces and evil human actions, which is called sin. We believe that all people sin (1 John 1:8-10). Christians simply acknowledge our own sin and that we can only be made right with God's help by following Jesus. Jesus was known for welcoming and loving people who sin. At Riverside, we aim to follow the example of Jesus. We do not judge that one type of sin makes someone more a "sinner" than another type of sin. Riverside is a safe place where we are honest about our sin, we share our struggles, and we welcome difficult questions, including those involving our sexuality. One of the most difficult questions is, why would God call something a sin that may seem natural to us? There are actually many things God calls sinful that feel natural or seem normal in our culture. At times, we have all been "offended" to find out that something we have done or identified with was called sin by God. No one wants to think of oneself as a sinner. However, living in a world where evil is pervasive, we can be misled by our personal desires, cultural norms, and societal pressures. Every day we are bombarded by many different and potentially confusing ideas about human sexuality from our friends, advertising, media, and religion. With these confusing messages in mind, we have prepared this statement to clearly explain our beliefs on sexuality and marriage.

We anticipate that this statement will, for some, raise honest and difficult questions. We welcome your questions and will provide opportunities for further dialogue. For others, we hope this statement will promote a greater desire to live out our sexuality in the image of God. We also commit to provide ample resources in the form of teaching, counseling, and community support.

In Christ,

The Elders of Riverside Church

Riverside Church Statement on Sexuality and Marriage

We, the body of believers at Riverside, believe that we love and serve a God who is constant in His character, even as we live in a culture whose beliefs about sexuality are fluid and changeable. The purpose of this statement is to explain what we believe to be God's desire for human sexuality as revealed in the scriptures in a way that is filled with love, truth, compassion, and grace. Throughout the scriptures, God has revealed His desires for the expression of our sexuality. In His goodness, He designed us and created us as both physical and spiritual beings. We don't have all the answers as to why some feel a sexual orientation that is different than others. What we do know is that God understands every struggle we encounter, and He has a good plan for our sexuality. He knows us intimately, and invites us to also know Him intimately. Because of His love and mercy, God teaches us through His Word how we are to express our sexuality in ways that are holy, beneficial, and life-enhancing. The following pages articulate our understanding of God's desire for us in the areas of sexuality, singleness, and marriage. Our hope is for Riverside to be a place where we welcome everyone, walk alongside each other, and humbly serve God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Together, we want to follow Jesus, love people, and impact the world.

God's Intentions for Human Sexuality

- God created humans in His image as male and female. He declared this creation, including our sexuality, to be "very good."¹
- Both men and women have been gifted with unique sexuality and characteristics that reveal the nature and character of God. We should accept and use our created sexuality with humility, thanksgiving, and service to God.²
- The Bible advocates two sexual behaviors for a follower of Jesus: a life-long covenantal marriage between one man and one woman or sexual celibacy.
- God created marriage as the life-long union of one man and one woman joining together exclusively as "one flesh," loving sacrificially, enjoying each other physically, and bringing forth life in the form of spiritual growth/fruit, and often, new human life. Marriage is meant to reflect the loving, life-creating, and everlasting union of Christ and his church.³
- Sexual celibacy (refraining from sexual activities) is mandated by God for every unmarried believer. Celibacy is a choice that reflects the single person's desire to follow Christ and obey His commands, whether for a season or for a lifetime. Singleness allows an individual the opportunity to offer their entire being to the pursuit of God and His Kingdom mission in this world.⁴

¹ Gen. 1:26-31

² Gen. 1:27, 5:2; Isa. 64:8; Ps. 139:13-18, Eph. 2:10

³ Gen. 2:18-25; Mal. 2:15; Matt. 19:4-6; 1 Cor. 7:2-6; Eph. 5:21-33

⁴ 1 Cor. 7:7-8, 25-27, 32-35, 40; Matt. 19:12

The Effects of Brokenness on Sexuality

- All people are born into a sinful world and suffer the consequences of that brokenness. Images, voices, biology, and experiences both around us and inside of us constantly war between the Spirit (pure desires in pursuit of God) and the Flesh (misguided desires in pursuit of self-interests).⁵
- Many believe the lie that pursuing sexual desires apart from God's intentions will bring happiness, fulfillment, and peace. While sin may bring momentary pleasure, it ultimately leads to pain and death both spiritually and physically.⁶ Lasting fulfillment, joy, and peace come only from pursuing God and His Kingdom.⁷
- Temptations to pursue sexual relationships outside of God's desires come from the effects of sin and brokenness in the world. This brokenness is manifested in our culture through peer-pressures, genetics, hardships, personal desires, and curiosity, among others.⁸
- Sexual sin is biblically set apart from other forms of sin because it is an offense against both God and (usually) another human, as well as one's own body. Sexual sins harm us intimately and differently than other sins.⁹
- Sexual sins are both spiritually and relationally harmful because they oppose God's desire for human sexuality, hinder healthy/committed relationships, and reveal a distorted reflection of God's image in us and a distorted view of God's image in others.¹⁰
- Sexual sins described in the Bible include lusting after images (pornography) or individuals, sexual activity outside of a marriage covenant, same-sex pursuits, unbiblical divorce, sexual relations with family members, and nonconsensual, forced or predatory sexual behaviors.¹¹
- Confusion in sexual orientation and gender identity is often a result of our broken world and not necessarily a result of personal sin; however, lust or sexual activity outside of marriage is always sinful. God's standard for marriage has never included same-sex unions.¹²
- God's original design for marriage was instituted at creation and has never changed. Before the coming of Christ, God tolerated divorce and polygamy amongst his people because of the effects of sin and brokenness, which included a culture at that time where a single woman was vulnerable to suffer even greater evils. When Jesus entered our world as a sexually created human being, he exemplified a sinless life and called God's people back to the original marriage covenant of one man and one woman for life. The New Testament church encouraged believers, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to overcome the world's broken standards and live with a higher commitment to God's standard for marriage.¹³

⁵ Rom. 3:23, 5:12, 7:15-20, 8:5-25; Gal. 5:17

⁶ Job. 20:4-5; Prov. 2:16-19; Rom. 6:20-23, 8:6; 1 Cor. 6:12-20

⁷ Jn. 14:27; Gal. 5:22-23

⁸ Mk. 7:20-23, Jas. 1:12-15

⁹ 1 Cor. 6:13-20, Rom. 1:26-27

¹⁰ Prov. 5:1-23; Mal. 2:14-16; 1 Cor. 6:12-20

¹¹ Mal. 2:14-16; Matt. 5:27-28, 32; Mk. 10:11-12; Rom. 1:26-27, 13:13

¹² Matt. 19:4-8; Mk. 10:6-9; Heb. 13:4, Jud. 1:7

¹³ Matt. 19:4-8; 1 Tim. 3:2,12

Sexuality in Christ's Church

- We all have sinned in many ways and deserve both punishment and eternal separation from God, but Jesus's death and resurrection allows us to be reconciled to God and to live a new life where we actively pursue righteous living rather than sinful living.¹⁴
- When believers in Christ sin sexually or otherwise, God lovingly calls us to turn back to Him in repentance, bear His discipline, accept His forgiveness, allow the Holy Spirit to change us, and continue to trust in the saving grace of Jesus to renew our hearts and minds.¹⁵
- Sexual temptation is not itself sin, as Jesus was tempted yet lived without sin. Sin occurs when we yield either our mind or body over to temptation rather than yielding our mind and body fully to God our Father, Jesus the Word, and the Holy Spirit.¹⁶
- The Holy Spirit resides in the body of a Christian, uniting us into the Trinity and making us holy priests of our God. As believers, our bodies belong to the Lord. We are instructed to run away from all types of sexual immorality and to use our physical bodies to join in Christ's work.¹⁷
- Every believer has been graciously called out of sin and darkness into the light of Christ, so we are to love all people deeply, following the example of Jesus who ministered to and gave his life for all people living in or struggling with sin.¹⁸
- We cannot support or affirm sexually sinful practices, but we adamantly oppose mistreatment, contempt, or demeaning speech toward anyone living in or struggling with sexual immorality, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual or other.¹⁹
- Our concern and empathy for those among us who face the difficulty of same-sex attractions, sexual addictions, temptations, and/or marital troubles compel us to walk alongside each other with genuine love and honest relationships. We encourage repentance, faith, and behavior that follows the clear, divine teachings of scripture because following the Holy Spirit through God's Word is the only path that offers abundant life.²⁰
- We accept the God-given gift of being born male or female with humility, trusting the truth of God's Word in the midst of sometimes confusing and broken gender experiences in this world. We cannot support or affirm alterations by appearance or medical intervention that attempt to form an identity of the opposite sex.²¹
- Single believers are integral parts of the church body who face unique opportunities and challenges, which Christ recognizes and rises to meet. While celibacy is at times a special gifting from God, more often, singleness is decided for an individual by current circumstances. Whether due to choice, circumstance, divorce, death of a spouse, or same gender attractions, celibacy is an honorable position in life to be deeply respected, carefully considered, gratefully appreciated, and supported by the church.²²

¹⁴ Rom. 3:23-24; 6:15-18; 2 Tim. 2:22; 1 Jn. 1:5-10

¹⁵ Ps. 51:10-12; Act. 2:38; 2 Cor. 7:9-11; 1 John 1:5-10; 2 Pet. 3:9

¹⁶ 1 Cor. 10:13; Heb. 4:14-16, 4:15; Jas. 1:12-15

¹⁷ 1 Cor. 5:9-13, 6:13-20

¹⁸ Matt. 9:10-12; Jn. 15:12-13; Rom. 5:6-8; 1 Cor. 5:9-13

¹⁹ Rom. 12:9-18; Jas. 3:8-10, 17-18; Gal. 5:22-23

²⁰ Matt. 9:10-12; Jn. 8:4-11; Rom. 12:9-18

²¹ Gen. 1:27; Matt. 19:4

²² 1 Cor. 7:32-35

Marriage and Divorce in the Church

- Marriage is a unique representation of the love, faithfulness, and life-giving relationship between Christ and His church. Marriage in the church consists of one male believer and one female believer faithfully committed to each other until the death of one releases the other from the covenant. Married believers should love each other unconditionally and diligently work together toward oneness in all aspects of life as they submit to the Holy Spirit and follow the teachings of Christ.²³
- Believers should only pursue or marry a person who follows Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior. Love for Christ is never to take second place to a human relationship.²⁴
- God sees two united believers as one flesh before Him. Divorce severs this oneness, creating pain and brokenness instead of the love and unity God desires. Therefore, God hates all divorce, and Jesus taught that this sacred vow should not be broken.²⁵ While God detests divorce and its devastating effects, He does not hate divorced people but continues to offer love and grace to them.²⁶
- Christian spouses should do everything in their power through Christ to not separate, but if separation does occur, faithfully strive toward reconciliation.²⁷ In cases of spousal abuse, we recommend seeking immediate safety, Christian counseling, adhering to local laws, and prayerfully considering next steps.
- A spouse who commits adultery or practices sexual immorality violates the "one-flesh" covenant. Though divorce often results from this breach of covenant, a violated marriage does not have to end in divorce. God can heal brokenness and create new life in any relationship.²⁸ The offended spouse will be wise to seek Godly counsel, pursue reconciliation with a repentant spouse, and prayerfully submit to God by fully yielding to the direction of the Spirit.
- Believers are to remain faithful to a non-believing spouse who is committed to the marriage as their presence brings holiness to the household and can lead their family to salvation. However, if a non-believing spouse willfully leaves or requests divorce, then a Christian may allow them to go.²⁹
- While God hates all divorce, he also acknowledges the reality that it will occur at times because of the hardness of human hearts. God recognizes a broken covenant as severed.³⁰
- Believers who have suffered through the death or divorce of a spouse should earnestly seek God and Godly counsel before seeking remarriage. Followers of Jesus are encouraged to practice a celibate life, focusing on Christ's eternal kingdom before seeking remarriage.³¹

²³ Matt. 5:32, 19:9; Lk. 16:18; Mal. 2:14-16; 1 Cor. 7:8-16

²⁴ 2 Cor. 6:14; 1 Cor. 7:39; Matt. 6:33; Lk. 14:26

²⁵ Mal. 2:16; Eph. 5:31-32

²⁶ Rom. 5:6-11, 8:38-39; Jer. 31:3

²⁷ 1 Cor. 7:10-11

²⁸ Matt. 19:8-9, Jas. 5:16; Jer. 3:6-14

²⁹ 1 Cor. 7:12-16

³⁰ Mal. 2:14-16; Jer. 3:8; Matt. 19:8; Mk. 10:9

³¹ 1 Cor. 7:8-11, 32-35, 39-40

- Biblical grounds for remarriage (other than the death of a spouse) are debated amongst Christians (including Riverside Elders). We recommend faithfully seeking the scriptures, submitting to the Holy Spirit, as well as asking Riverside Pastor(s) and elders for guidance.³²
- God acknowledges remarriage as a new covenant to be honored to the fullest after either death or divorce severs the prior marital covenant.³³ Remarried believers should be completely faithful to their current marital covenant while resting confidently in Christ that past sins are covered by confession and through His sacrifice. Jesus's resurrection serves as a promise that we can receive forgiveness, restoration, and new life in Him.³⁴

Conclusion

God is calling all believers to passionately honor Him rather than seeking fulfillment through sex, self, or others. Our goal is to draw close to God and trust Him for ultimate pleasure and fulfillment. Both married and single believers are equally important parts of the body. Active community and friendships with other believers can be a tremendous force of good for all those seeking to follow Jesus. As a community of brothers and sisters united in Christ, loving each other deeply, and living in the power of the Holy Spirit, the church honors, supports, and encourages both life-long marriage and sexual celibacy.

If you have questions about this statement or biblical sexuality, please feel free to seek further discussion with an elder, home group leader, or keith@riversidecommunity.org.

³² Matt. 19:8-9; Mk. 10:10-12; Rom. 7:2-3; 1 Cor. 7:15; Matt. 5:32

³³ Jer. 3:1, 14; Jer. 31:31-34; Rom. 7:2-3

³⁴ Jer. 31:31-34; 1 Jn. 1:9; 2 Cor. 5:17-21