

PASTORAL ADVICE ON HUMAN SEXUALITY SYNOD ESCONDIDO 2024

Synod Escondido 2024 adopted the following motions, recorded in Article 90 of the Minutes of Synod, regarding the Report of the Study Committee on Human Sexuality:

That Synod refer the Study Committee Report, with its appendices, to the churches for study.

That Synod ... adopt the "Biblical and Confessional Statements on Human Sexuality" and the "Affirmations and Denials on Human Sexuality" in the study report as Pastoral Advice, pursuant to the Regulations for Synodical Procedure, Appendix D, Section 2.

That Synod ... publish the adopted Pastoral Advice on the federation website.

This is the Pastoral Advice which has been adopted. May the Lord bless the churches through its use.

Biblical and Confessional Statements on Human Sexuality

Article 1: Creation

At creation God made two sexes, "in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:26-27). The purpose of our creation in the image of God is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, as male and female (Deut. 6:5). God commanded that we use the excellent qualities with which he made us in true righteousness and holiness, in body and soul, as male and female, for his own glory, as we exercise dominion over the earth. We were created to find fulfilment in the will of God as he determines how we are to live for his glory (Belgic Confession Articles 12 and 14).

Article 2: Biological Sex

God commands all people to glorify and enjoy him forever as he created them, either as male or female (1 Cor. 6:20). It is contrary to nature and to the will of God for anyone to attempt to change his or her biological sex. God designated his creation of male and female as good and as something that belongs to the natural order (Gen. 1:31; Ps. 100:3). To introduce gender as a new category of personhood, wholly unrelated to the biological category of sex, in pursuit of a different sexual identity, is unnatural to the created order and harmful to the purpose for which God made humanity. Any attempt to reverse God's creation of male and female due to fallen thoughts or self-perceptions is an act of rebellion and a gross distortion of God's creative handiwork in specifically forming us for his own glory (Rom. 1:21-27; Belgic Confession Article 14).

Article 3: Marriage

God established the institution of marriage at creation, bringing together the man and the woman and blessing marriage as a state honorable to all (Gen. 2:18). Marriage is designed to be a lifelong, covenantal union between one man and one woman (Mark 10:6-9). Co-habitation, being unequally yoked (2 Cor. 6:14), same-sex unions, etc., are contrary to what God instituted at creation and a direct violation of his will. From creation, the purpose of marriage is that a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh, living together for life in mutual harmony and love (Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:21-25). In marriage, God provides a proper setting for a husband and wife to enjoy each other in the physical and relational desires he gave to them (Heb. 13:4). Further, through marriage God increases the human race through the institution of the family, enriches society by providing an orderly function, provides training of children in the knowledge and fear of the Lord, and generally advances his kingdom (Gen. 1:26-28). Marriage also is designed to represent the mystery of Christ and his church. Husbands and wives are

called to honor the union of marriage as God has ordained, and therefore man has no right to change or unbiblically separate this union (Matt. 19:6; Eph. 5:25; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 41).

Article 4: Sin

In the fall of man into sin, we rebelled against God's creation order through the instigation of the devil, plunging ourselves into ruin through the obeying of sinful desires contrary to God's law (Genesis 3). The fall has so affected humanity that even the desires of our hearts have become distorted and fallen so that not even our hearts can be trusted, as we are prone to be carried away by various passions (2 Tim. 3:6). We sin when we entertain and practice the sinful desires of our hearts (Jas. 1:14). All impure thoughts and desires, prior to our acting upon them, are considered to be sin in God's eyes (Matt. 15:18-20). God is angry with the sinful desires we are born with as well as the sins we personally commit, and he has declared that he will punish with a just judgment, both now and in eternity, all sin against his holy law (Rom. 1:18ff; Belgic Confession Article 15).

Article 5: Redemption

Jesus Christ has announced in the gospel that all who repent and believe the gospel are freely granted the forgiveness of all sins, including sexual trespasses, as he cancels the record of our debt, covers our guilt, and grants and credits to us the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if we had never sinned nor been a sinner (Col. 2:13-14; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 23). Christ's death, burial, and resurrection have set us free from slavery to any form of sexual sin (Rom. 6:1-14; Heidelberg Catechism QA. 8). As new creatures in Christ, we are called to live with a renewed desire to reckon ourselves as dead to our old ways of sexual immorality and alive to God in pursuing a sexually pure life for his glory (1 Thess. 4:3; Belgic Confession Articles 17 and 24; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Days 5, 6, 7, 32, 33).

Article 6: Identity

In our redemption God recreates us into the image of Jesus Christ through union with him (Rom. 8:29), giving us a new identity in Christ. We are salt and light in this world, separated from identifying with the desires, passions, and practices of the old man. Our sinful desires no longer define us or constitute our identity. Any pursuit in establishing an identity through sinful desires is expressly forbidden by God's law. In union with Jesus Christ, we are to be satisfied in God's love as his adopted children. To invite that which is profane into our holy union with Christ is incompatible with a new life in Christ, and therefore we are called to flee all forms of sexual immorality in the Christian life (1 Cor. 6:15-20; Rom. 6:15-20; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 33; Canons of Dort II, Article 8).

Article 7: Repentance and Sexual Purity

As new creatures in Christ, we are called to confess our sins and eagerly turn away from all forms of sexual sin, and we are to seek to walk in the newness of life. God has promised that he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness, and he will forgive all of our sexual trespasses when we come to him with a broken and contrite heart (Psalms 32 and 55; 1 John 1:8-2:2). Believers who continue to struggle against sexual sins should trust in Christ's forgiving mercies, and by the strength of the Holy Spirit given through the means of grace, strive to walk in the newness of life. Genuine repentance involves the dying-away of the old self by hating and fleeing all forms of sexual immorality, and the rising-to-life of the new self by finding delight in leading a sexually pure life (Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 33). Since fleeing sexual immorality is the will of God for our sanctification, the Christian should pursue a life of sexual purity to show that he is thankful to God for his salvation. The Holy Spirit is committed to strengthening the Christian's walk as one battles against the sinful nature (1 Thess. 4:3; Gal. 5:16; 1 Cor. 10:13; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 41).

Article 8: Pornography and Self-Gratification

Pornography seeks to stimulate the lustful desires of the sinful flesh, through the bodily senses, by the use or distribution of images, videos, or other media representations. Pornography use is often associated with masturbation. Pornography use and solo sex are sins against one's own body and the will of God. Pornography ruins the sexual intimacy intended for marriage (1 Cor. 6:16, 17); it strips sex of its significance (Gen. 2:24), habituates sexual selfishness (1 Cor. 7:3-4), and encourages and rewards lust (Matt. 5:28). Pornography also dehumanizes men and women, promotes abuse especially of women, advances other forms of sexual immorality, creates idols in society to the harm of our neighbors, and degrades the mind into darkness. Coupled with pornography use, habitual self-stimulation impedes proper sexual performance. The use of pornography is expressly condemned as a way of serving the lusts and passions of the old man and is incompatible with the new life in Christ (Matt. 5:28; 1 Cor. 7:9). God's children must reject "all unchaste actions ... thoughts, [and] desires" (Heidelberg Catechism QA. 109; cf. Eph. 5:3,4) and control our bodies in holiness and honor (1 Thess. 4:4).

Article 9: Husbands and Wives

Husbands and wives are to model in marriage the love that Christ has for his church. Husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies, nourishing and cherishing them (Eph. 5:25, 28-29); practicing headship modeled on that of Christ (Eph. 5:23); not being harsh with their wives (Col. 3:19); living with their wives in an understanding way; and showing honor to them as a fellow heirs of Christ (1 Pet. 3:7). Wives are to submit to their husbands in everything as to the Lord (Eph. 5:22, 24) and as is fitting in the Lord (Col. 3:18). Both husbands and wives are to treat each other according to the "one another" passages of Scripture (e.g., Eph. 4:1-2, Col. 3:12-13), including showing loyalty, kindness, understanding, tenderness, humility, self-control, sexual purity, love, patience, encouragement, self-denial, contentment, seeking the other's good, and avoiding abusive and manipulative behavior. In this way, husbands and wives model before all the love and purity that is intended to be enjoyed in marriage (Eph. 5:22-33; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Days 39 and 41).

Article 10: The Family

Christians testify to our culture when the family is maintained to the glory of God. In our families, Christ should be made the center of our homes through love, humility, and patience toward one another, godly discipline of children, the regular reading of Scripture, heartfelt prayer, and family worship, removing all things spiritually harmful from our homes, and making Lord's Day worship a priority together (Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 39).

Article 11: Singles

Singles are called to honor the Lord in the situation that God has called them. Singles who desire marriage are called to holiness, contentment, and prayer, trusting the Lord in every circumstance of his providence, waiting upon his provision of a spouse (while using godly means to pursue marriage), and finding delight in the Lord who makes us fulfilled whether as single or married. Christians who believe they are gifted with singleness are called to holiness and contentment, giving undivided devotion to the Lord, while remaining open to God's will to provide a spouse and change one's desire for marriage (1 Cor. 7:17).

Article 12: Training Children and Young Adults

In the training of children, parents should model before their children a loving relationship, holding marriage in high honor as God designed it. Parents are called to speak to their children, in a way appropriate and sufficient to their maturity, about biblical sexuality and proper sexual conduct as designed for marriage. Parents should be active in guarding their children from all forms of sexual immorality and pornography, since they promote a different sexual ethic than what God made good in creation. This duty includes overseeing their use of technology and social media. Both children and young adults honor their parents by maintaining sexual purity and chastity and refraining from pushing their parents to accept the ungodly sexual norms of the culture (Eph. 6:1-4; Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 39).

Article 13: Christian Witness

As Christians find themselves living in a world where sexual sin is normalized, maintaining sexual purity is a crucial part of their Christian witness. Believers should respond by speaking the truth in love about sexual sin, repentance, and faith in Christ, giving witness to the deliverance God has given us from our own sins, and performing acts of kindness. Christians should not neglect those mastered by sin outside of the church (1 Cor. 5:9-10). The body of Christ should similarly not avoid those who struggle in the pursuit of repentance of sexual sin. Instead, with a spirit of compassion, they should “bear each other’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1-2). By our godly living, we should seek to win our neighbors over to Christ (Heidelberg Catechism QA. 86; John 13:35; Belgic Confession Article 24; Canons of Dort II, Article 5).

Affirmations and Denials on Human Sexuality

A. Honoring God’s Supreme Authority Over Human Sexuality

We affirm:

1. That the Word of God is God’s revelation of his infallible rule for faith and life (Belgic Confession Article 5).
2. That the Word of God is true, perfect, and complete in everything it teaches, including on matters of human sexuality. All things taught contrary to the Bible must be rejected (2 Tim. 3:16; Jas. 1:21-24; Belgic Confession Article 7).
3. That the Word of God teaches as godly and right the disobedience of earthly authority when this authority demands others to violate the revealed will of God (Acts 4:19-20; Acts 5:29; Belgic Confession Article 36).

We deny:

1. That any person, group of people, organization, or governmental entity has the authority to redefine God’s created institution of marriage or his created order of human sexuality, or to declare sinful desires and attractions as good, or to bind the consciences of Christians, or to compel actions contrary to the Bible, our Reformed Confessions, and the following Affirmations and Denials (Rom. 13:1-7; Belgic Confession Article 36; URC Doctrinal Affirmations on Marriage #15).

B. Male & Female Sexual Identity

We affirm:

1. That God made two biological sexes at creation: male and female, created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:18).
2. That attempts to change or identify as having a sex other than the biological sex God created is a sinful act of rebellion against God’s creative handiwork (Gen. 2:7; Ps. 100:3).
3. That knowingly using pronouns or language that identifies an individual as having a sex other than the biological sex God created is condoning such sinful rebellion and is not speaking the truth in love to our neighbor (Eph. 4:15; Ex. 20:16).
4. That the fall has impacted the biological creation such that some people may be biologically indeterminate as that sex (e.g., “intersex”); nevertheless, these deficiencies do not negate the objective categories of persons being created male or female.

We deny:

1. That gender is a legitimate category wholly unrelated to the two distinct biological sexes which God created.
2. That physiological sexual anomalies or psychological distortion of sexual identity can change the God-ordained order of the two biological sexes made at creation.
3. That sexual identity is mutable and that we have the prerogative to identify ourselves as something other than how God made us as either male or female.

C. Marriage & Sexual Relations

We affirm:

1. That marriage is designed to be a lifelong, monogamous, covenantal union between one biological man and one biological woman (Prov. 2:17; Mark 10:6-9; Eph. 5:22-33; Gen. 2:18-25; Matt. 19:4-6; Church Order of the URCNA, Ninth Edition, Article 48; URC Doctrinal Affirmations on Marriage #10).
2. That sexual relations are reserved for the marriage bond between one biological man and one biological woman (Prov. 5:18-19, URC Doctrinal Affirmations on Marriage #5).

We deny:

1. That any sexual desires in or outside of marriage which are contrary to the moral law of God are acceptable (Rom. 1:24-27; 1 Cor. 5:1).

D. Original Sin, Desire, & Temptation

We affirm:

1. That God made us holy and happy, but – accepting the lie of the devil – we have robbed ourselves of these blessings by obeying sinful desires (Gen. 3:16-19; Ps. 14; Rom. 3:10-18).
2. That when temptations come from without, being tempted is not sin, unless we enter into the temptation. But when the temptation arises from within, it is our own act and is rightly called sin (Gen. 39:6-12; Matt. 4:1-10; Jas. 1:14).
3. That Christians have the duty to increasingly put sin to death in their lives, which includes the sinful lusts and desires of the heart. Although one may not formally engage in a sinful outward act, even entertaining any desire contrary to God's law is sin itself. The new man in Christ is to pursue righteousness and holiness, having been set free by the grace of Christ (Col. 3:5-17; Eph. 5:3ff; Heidelberg Catechism QA. 88-90; cf. Westminster Larger Catechism QA. 99:5,6).
4. That sinful thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, or predispositions arising in us prior to and apart from a conscious act of the will are still sin, since they proceed from a corrupt nature (Matt. 15:19; Jas. 1:15; Heidelberg Catechism QA. 6-8).
5. That such sinful thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, or predispositions that arise from our corrupt nature, as well as our actual sins, are deserving of God's condemnation and require our repentance (Rom. 7:14-25; Gen. 3:16; Heidelberg Catechism QA. 10).
6. That proper sexual thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, or predispositions for the other sex are natural and good, but are sinful when these are exercised outside the bonds of marriage (Matt. 5:28; Heidelberg Catechism QA. 10).

7. That sexual thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, or predispositions for the same sex are unnatural and heinously sinful, even if not entertained or acted upon (Rom. 1:24-26; cf. Westminster Larger Catechism QA. 151).
8. That identifying oneself according to the sinful sexual ideologies of the sexual revolution (e.g., “gay Christian,” “trans-Christian/transgender-Christian”) is contrary to God’s command to repent of sexual sin and believe the gospel (Rom. 1:24-26; Rom. 12:2).

We deny:

1. That impure, though unchosen, sexual thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, or predispositions are acceptable.

E. Gospel Witness & Restoration

We affirm:

1. That through repentance and faith in Christ we are granted forgiveness of all our sexual sin, whether arising from our original corruption, thoughts, words, or deeds (Rom. 1:16,17; Heb. 10:10).
2. That the gospel promises to free us from slavery to any form of sexual sin and makes us new creatures in Christ with a desire to pursue a sexually pure life to the glory of God (Rom. 6:11; Eph. 1:7-14).
3. That Christ by his Spirit enables Christians to begin to live according to all the commandments of God, including the command for sexual purity (1 Thess. 4:3-8; Heidelberg Catechism QA. 114).
4. That the church is called to rejoice in the repentance of those who have been guilty of committing sexual immorality. When they turn to faith in Jesus Christ, we are to embrace them in the household of God as loved and forgiven fellow believers (Luke 15:11-32; John 21:15-19).
5. That the church is to show the love of Christ in a deliberate and discerning manner to any and all people. As Christ our Lord applied the truth to differing people in different contexts, applying the moral law to the sins practiced in his time, so the church must follow his example (John 8:1-11; John 4:16-17; Matt. 23:27).
6. That Christian compassion does not mean justifying any sin or ignoring potential dangers posed by those who commit heinous sins against God’s created order (1 Cor. 5:1-8). Additionally, a repentant sinner must accept reasonable consequences to ensure the protection of the vulnerable, especially when past sin has put the vulnerable at risk.

We deny:

1. That sinful thoughts, desires, attractions, orientations, and predispositions are immutable characteristics constituting a person’s identity.
2. That sinful thoughts, desires, attractions, and predispositions will be totally eradicated in this life, since we remain sinners saved by grace (Gal. 5:16-17; 1 John 1:8-2:2; Heidelberg Catechism QA. 62, 114-115).
3. That impure thoughts and disordered desires arising in us prior to and apart from a conscious act of the will, which some have called concupiscence, are innocent and an excuse to not fight against sin or to yield to it.
4. That repentance and healing negate ongoing accountability intended to protect the vulnerable.