

Sanctified Sexuality

A Position Paper of the Free Methodist Church – USA

Introduction

God's Gift of Sexuality

Sexual intercourse is God's gift to humanity, for the intimate union of a man and woman within marriage. In this relationship, it is to be celebrative (Hebrews 13:4). Marriage, between one man and one woman, is therefore the only proper setting for sexual intimacy. Scripture requires purity before and faithfulness within and following marriage.

With deep compassion for persons who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, and especially those who have been mistreated and marginalized in various settings, the Free Methodist Church encourages its congregations to practice welcoming hospitality and embracing lovingkindness toward all who desire to worship among us. We will be a people who offer ourselves as agents of Jesus' grace and love to others – all others. We will trust the Holy Spirit to convict people of their sin, to enliven hope of transforming possibilities, and then to lead people to God's best for their lives.

(From 2019 Book of Discipline, Par. 3311 A).

Commitment to the Biblical Story

Free Methodists shape their lives according to the biblical story that reveals and empowers the life of God's people. According to that story, God created the world "very good," (Genesis 1:31, see also verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). This means that the world, its creatures, ecosystems, and people functioned and interrelated exactly as God intended. Within *that* world God made the human beings male and female and gave them to each other. God provided for their union — such that the two became "one flesh" — as bearers of God's image, governors of God's world, and as agents of God's blessing in the world (Genesis 1:26-28, 2:24). The male and female together as one flesh provided God-given care and leadership for the world. Together they blessed the world as they ruled and reproduced new generations of human beings who would do likewise. At least, that was God's plan.

Within that plan, the male and the female found mutual delight and profound partnership in their one another relationship. The man exclaimed: "This one is bone from my bone, and flesh from my flesh! She will be called 'woman,' because she was taken from 'man'" (Genesis 2:23 NLT). The writer then observes: "This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one" (Genesis 2:24 NLT). And then: "Now the man and his wife were both naked, but they felt no shame" (Genesis 2:25 NLT).

In these brief verses, we find important features of God's design and plan for the human beings. Each finds fulfillment with and in the other. Though each is an individual, their one-flesh union makes them more together than alone and qualifies them to assume their role in God's world. That they are "naked and without shame" suggests the transparency, intimacy, love, freedom, and beauty of their life together. The union was sexual but so much more. Their intercourse both consummated and nurtured their love; expressed and enhanced their intimacy; and would bear fruit both by mirroring God's presence and care in the world, and by producing children.¹

Because we shape our lives according to the biblical story, we are compelled by that story to recognize the normative character of God's very good design for humanity, created as male and female. Throughout the history of God's people—as broken and fallen as it may be—and despite the passing of millennia, the varied cultural settings, and every other contingency within its unfolding, the union of male and female remains the plan of God for human life and families according to our Scriptures.²

Moreover, Jesus' positive affirmations and teachings (e.g., Matthew 19:4-6 with parallels), as well as the teachings of the earliest communities of Jesus' followers (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7; Ephesians 5:31-33 in context) bear the same witness. Of particular note, this "very good" creation-design for male and female becomes a primary image used by Israel's prophets to describe God's relationship with Israel (e.g., Hosea; Isaiah 50:1,2; 54:4-8; Jeremiah 3; 31; Ezekiel 16). The early church, in turn, embraced this imagery to describe the relationship between God and God's people in Christ, the church (Ephesians 5:22-33; see also Matt. 25:1-13). Throughout the story, how a transcendent God who is not like humanity may still be one in love and communion with God's people finds illustration in the Genesis account of the male and female becoming one flesh (see for example Genesis 2 with Ephesians 5). Finally, this same imagery inspires the Revelation's finale when, again, two become one, when God and humankind become one as celebrated at the wedding feast of the Lamb and His bride (Revelation 19:1-9; compare also Jesus' use of this imagery in His parables such as Matthew 22:1-14).³

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1. *This is literally accurate. There are no exceptions and no hints of other ways or alternative paths, though there is acknowledgment of varied sexual expressions and experiences. This is what compels our understanding, rather than verses, passages, and commands that prohibit differing sexual experiences and relationships.*
 2. *Note: we are arguing for a creation-model of marriage and sexuality without even noting prohibitions against certain sexual expressions or relationships. We lift up a good and beautiful vision of human personhood and sexuality.*
 3. *We understand human sexuality in terms of creation's grand design for human persons whose union blesses the world in multiple ways—reflecting the full image of God, ruling/governing the world together, receiving and multiplying blessing in the world, and reproducing their own kind who will do likewise. We envision as full correspondence as possible with this vision for human life and their role in the world. Sexuality is central to this.*

The Complex and Compounding Catastrophe of Human Rebellion on Human Sexuality

Sadly, humans rebelled by doing the one thing God prohibited (Genesis 3:1-6). Immediately, they and their relationships began to change. Not least, the man and the woman felt shame over their nakedness and sought to cover themselves from each other, and then to hide from God's presence (Genesis 3:7-10). In the wake of their rebellion the man and the woman would continue to have sexual relations but not as before. She would yearn for him while he would rule over her (Genesis 3:16). As a result of their sin, the man and the woman would often vie with one another or use one another in hopes of experiencing the intimacy, transparency, love, and freedom that were once their norm.⁴

Worse, as the biblical story unfolds, we read of the corruption of human sexuality, relationships, and bodies. Both men and women, and their sexuality, become commodities. Soon we learn about multiple wives and concubines, as well as secular and sacred prostitution. We encounter rape as a feature of war and among the spoils of war. And we read episodes of unbridled lust mixed with violence, even among Israel's royalty. Over time, the cultures reflected in the biblical story elevate sexual experience to idolatrous levels. Indeed, an idolatrous understanding of sexual experience persists to our own day, distorting the values, expectations, and relationships in the societies of our world. Among the tenets of an idolatrous valuing of sex are the following:

- Human health and thriving require and demand being sexually active; and preclude celibacy as a reasonable option for some.
- Human identity and emotional well-being are based on sexual attraction and expression;
- Human rights and justice demand sexual expression and satisfaction, assuming it is consensual;
- Human sexuality is a function of individual self-expression and determination;
- Human relationships may be enhanced by variation and experimentation in sexual experiences; and
- Human worth and value are often based on the knowledge, prowess, and frequency of sexual activity.

In the daring new worlds fashioned by human self-determination, there is plenty of nakedness but little intimacy and less love. There is often no shame other than what follows a failure to be sexually experienced and active. There is plenty of hiding from others, self and God. At best, these worlds — including our world — offer a parody of human flourishing that was the norm in the very good world God intended.

As a people who shape their lives by the biblical story, we must assess the idolatrous elevation of sex and its consequences in the light of God's creational intent. When we do, we see that all human beings have fallen short of their original God-given glory and this profoundly threatens our humanity, our sexuality, our families, and our relationships more generally. All of us have fallen short and all of us must face the threat. All of us stand in need of God's rescuing and transforming grace, not least for the sake of our sexuality.

⁴. *She longs for a relationship that ceased to be the norm with its oneness, openness, and intimacy. He will position himself above her, no longer beside, and rule over her. Breaking the union creates space or vacuum that will be filled, not least by power and its abuse.*

God's Rescuing and Transforming Plan

Throughout the biblical story, God makes covenant and then takes action to express the rescuing and transforming grace we and our world need. God calls and then works through the people of Abraham and Sarah, as well as the children of Israel—the people chosen as God's redemptive partners to bring blessing and life to all people. Sadly, though, the chosen people were themselves subject to the same consequences of human sin. Yet, a faithful remnant survived crushing defeat by their enemies, estrangement and exile among the nations, and a hopeful return to their homeland to wait for the time when God's Messiah would come.

Surprisingly, when the time was right, God entered into the biblical story by becoming one of us, and by giving self in loving service and sacrifice. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the Creator God took action as the Redeemer who rescues and renews the world and its peoples. Jesus our Messiah invites all people to become His disciples, to embrace His way of life, and to partner with Him in the ongoing renewal and restoration of the world. As Jesus did in the days of His ministry in Israel so He does in our day. He calls us to set aside our former way of life and to follow Him in a life of "cross-bearing." "Cross-bearing" accepts Jesus' death as the basis for a new way of life. "Cross-bearing" means identifying with Jesus in His self-sacrificial dying, leaving one way of life behind. And "cross-bearing" anticipates resurrection power so that we may walk in newness of life, reflecting the likeness of Jesus and joining Jesus in continuing ministry in the world. Our response to Jesus' call leads to forgiveness of sin, freedom from the obsessions and preoccupations of selfish living, and personal and relational transformation.

Responses Flowing from Jesus' Ministry and Good News

The FMC's response to the challenges of a culture that disagrees with biblical understandings of the human person and human sexuality must flow from the ministry of Jesus and the good news He brings. Whether the culture advocates for a rejection or redefinition of marriage, a liberation of sexual expression from marriage altogether (however defined), or the legitimacy of multiple forms of sexual expression as may be desired by consenting adults, or some other view and practice — we ground our responses in the character, teachings, and ministry of Jesus. Therefore, we call all people to join us in cross-bearing discipleship following Jesus' lead.

From the biblical story that brings us to Jesus, we affirm the original creation of human beings in the divine image, as male and female, and as designed for one flesh union in marriage — which God intended to reflect the love, intimacy, beauty, and freedom of God. Though we have all fallen far short of such original glory and goodness, we will all be judged finally by how we have responded to Jesus' call to discipleship, not according to the particular forms of sin *we* have chosen compared with others. In fact, according to the biblical story, Jesus saves, in His own time, by the convicting work and transforming power of His Spirit, and most often in the community of others who are also being saved from their sin and its impact upon their lives.

Since Jesus' way is the remedy God offers us, whatever particular sin grips us most firmly, our responses to alternate sexual views, practices, and relationships must align with the Spirit of Jesus' person and ministry. We can be "correct" but then corrupt or counter the impact of the truth by a spirit contrary to Jesus' Spirit.

In Conclusion

Therefore, we will trust the Holy Spirit to convict people of their sin, sexual or otherwise, to enliven hope of transforming possibilities, and then to lead people to God's best for their lives. We will be practitioners of Jesus' grace and welcome toward people. In our welcome we must follow Jesus to the margins and boundaries where people often find themselves alienated, sadly at times through words and actions of those who profess to follow Jesus. As a church we reject such words and actions and offer a community of Jesus' followers who do not give up on others or ourselves. Even if change comes slowly or differently than we expected, still we walk in the way of Jesus, practice His grace and love, and confidently wait for the wholeness Jesus promises and will surely effect.

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And authorized by the Board of Bishops of the Free Methodist Church – USA

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