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HUMAN SEXUALITY FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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I. Position of the Church

Sexuality is elemental in human beings. It encompasses all that we are when we say "I am female" or "I am male." Physical attributes, including genitals, are an integral part of our sexual identity; however, sexuality is not just physical. It includes all thinking, feeling, acting and interacting that is derived from our maleness and femaleness.

This sexuality enriches human relationships in ways that are basic to God's own nature (Gen. 1:27). Furthermore, it offers human beings partnership with God in holy creation and re-creation (Gen. 1:28)

In their enjoyment of these privileges concomitant with sexuality, God's people are to be responsible. The church identifies love and covenant as two guidelines for sexual responsibility. Furthermore, the church holds to the teaching that sexual intercourse, which can be the most intimate expression of sexuality and the bonding of human relationships, belongs within heterosexual marriage.

The church maintains an attitude of openness and willingness to evaluate specific issues related to sexuality. Moreover, the church recognizes that highly personal issues are best resolved in the confidentiality of a private setting with pastor, counselor, or family rather than in the open debate of conferences and council meetings. Seeking the guidance of Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and responsible contemporary research, the church continues to study and search for the mind of Christ in dealing with the complexities of responsible sexuality.

II. Biblical Perspective

The significance of sexuality is evident in scripture. In the Genesis 1 account of creation, sexuality is one of the first human attributes to be identified: Male and female God created them (Gen. 1:27). Other distinguishing characteristics--race, stature, intelligence--are omitted. The lifting up of sexuality in this concise account of human origin suggests how basic sexual identity is.

In Genesis 2, sexuality is associated with companionship and completeness. The first reference to humans in this chapter is neither masculine nor feminine. The Hebrew word *adham* (verse 7), translated "man" in English, is a collective noun undifferentiated by gender. In this state, *adham* was lonely. Then another type of human was made from *adham*. Only then is one human called *ish*, a masculine noun meaning "man," and the other is called *ishshah*, a feminine noun meaning "woman." *Adham's* problem of loneliness was remedied by the separation of humankind into two sexes and by the intimacy they experienced together. This creation of *ish* and *ishshah* and the ensuing companionship culminates the Genesis 2 account of creation.

As revealed in Genesis 3, this dual sexuality can exacerbate the discordant, testing, rebellious nature of man and woman. Adam and Eve allowed themselves to be seduced by the serpent and its offer of forbidden fruit. The freedom they exerted in choosing evil rather than good resulted in their separation from each other and from God. Immediately they "knew" they were naked and they were ashamed. They were thrust into a world of conflict with all of creation, even with each other (Gen. 3:6-24).

Human experience substantiates and vitalizes these biblical revelations about sexuality. We rejoice in God's creation of two sexes, *ish* and *ishshah*. Despite "the fall" and the conflict we experience, we do not prefer an absence of sexuality. Brokenness can be healed. By God's grace we discover anew that femaleness and maleness enrich and complete our personhood.

Yet while sexuality is an important component of our being, it is not paramount. Paul urged his readers to keep perspective. His emphasis was on the new life in Christ, not on sexuality. He wrote: "...there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Our oneness in Christ supersedes the old human distinctions and inequalities including race, economic status, and sex. Paul gave enough attention elsewhere to sexuality to make it clear that he did not ignore this subject. Yet, sexuality was not his foremost concern.

Likewise, sexuality was not central for Jesus. Although Jesus briefly addressed a few issues related to sexuality--adultery, marriage, divorce, and celibacy--these were not the emphases in his teaching. When asked to identify the greatest commandment, he named two: "Love God and love neighbor" (Mark 12:28-30). For Jesus, love was primary in all human relationships; sexuality was secondary.

Our society is preoccupied with sexuality. The repression of sex in earlier generations has been replaced now by an obsession with sex. One result is that increasing numbers of people expect too much of sexual intercourse. Performance is stressed over relationship, resulting in personal frustration and interpersonal strain. Christian values are ignored. Sex rather than God becomes the center of life.

Even the church loses perspective, although in a different way. To prepare and to consider a denominational statement on human sexuality creates anxiety. Such statements are called "monumental" by some and "the most controversial issues the church has faced in a generation" by others. If these appraisals are true, the church has overreacted. Alarmists fail to remember that generations come and generations go, but the Lord remains forever (Psa. 90:1-2). Sexual misuses and abuses are serious sins; however, they are not the only sins. There is no reason to become tense and condemnatory about sexual abuses out of proportion with numerous other sins that are equally serious. For the sake of the world, for the unity of the church, and for the benefit of our personal health, this is a timely moment in history to keep sexuality in perspective.

III. Biblical Guidelines For Sexual Morality

In order for sexual experiences to be complete and appropriate in God's sight, persons need to make choices based upon the counsel of the Scriptures and also of the church. Two key biblical words relating to the morality of sexual experiences are love and covenant.

A. Love

The English word love has two antecedents in the Greek language, *eros* and *agape*, which are crucial to the understanding of sexual morality.^[1,2] *Eros* is the love that grows out of one's own need to love and to be loved. It is the love that fulfills one's dreams and desires. It is the impulse toward life, union, creativity, and productivity. It is the selfactualizing drive affirmed in Genesis 1 where God created male and female and told them to be fruitful and multiply. It is the satisfying union affirmed in Genesis 2: "The two shall become one flesh."

Sexual attraction is a dynamic of *eros*, but *eros* is more than the mere sensation of physical pleasure. A preoccupation with techniques in our society strips *eros* of its tenderness and delight. The human body--its sensations, its beauty, its capability--is not to be disparaged. The whole body is a marvelously designed gift from God. It is to be enjoyed and utilized. But the body is not to be separated from the soul. Lovemaking is most fulfilling when it is a comfort to the body and the soul. This blending of physical pleasure and spiritual intimacy is *eros* at its best.

The Song of Songs affirms romantic love emphatically and delightfully. It is the unashamed, sensual, joyful poetry of two youthful lovers. The poem romantically describes the lips, eyes, and hair of the lovers. The man tells the woman he loves her because her love is sweet (4:10-11). He desires her because he finds her beauty attractive. She loves him because his body and his speech are desirable (5:11-16). They love each other because each brings to the other a gladness and a fullness of life. Very early, the book was viewed as an allegory by the Jews as Yahweh's love for Israel, and by the Christians as Christ's love for the church. This interpretation influenced the book's acceptance into the canon and has inspired Christian thought through the centuries. Still, the book itself contains no clue that it is meant to be understood allegorically. We must also be ready to read it as it stands: an appropriate celebration of the *eros* that leads to and finds its consummation within marriage. The Song of Songs affirms the *eros* that is a valued aspect of the human nature God created.

Agape is an equally significant dimension of love. *Agape* is unrestrained compassion for another. It is selfless giving. It is a generous responsiveness to another's needs beyond any gain for oneself. It is the love of 1 Corinthians 13 that is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful, nor arrogant or rude, does not insist on its own way, is not irritable or resentful, does not rejoice in the wrong but rejoices in the right (13:4-6). The ultimate expression of *agape* is to lay down one's life for the sake of another (John 15:13). The prototype of *agape* is Jesus' giving his life on the cross.

Eros is of the order of creation, a God-given gift to our human nature. *Agape*, on the other hand, is of the order of redeeming grace, the gift of the covenanting God to covenanting people. Even so, *eros* and *agape* are gifts of God and part of his plan for humanity. Neither is to be despised. Indeed, it is only when romantic love is constituted of both that it can be said, "Lo, it is very good."

B. Covenant

Christians need more than love to guide them in decision-making. Love is nebulous. Moreover, we are susceptible to self-deception, particularly in moments of sexual excitement and desire. At such times the claim of love is to be tested by actual commitment that gives content to the declaration of love. Such commitment disciplines, protects, and nurtures love relationships. Christians need covenant as well as love to guide them.

Covenants abound in biblical history, shaping relationships and undergirding community. These covenants take many forms. Some are written; many are spoken. Some are unilateral promises without obligations upon the recipient; others are conditional with specified terms. Some covenants are between equals; others are between a superior and a subordinate.

Since no single model exists, it is difficult to describe biblical covenants precisely. Characteristics present in some are absent in others, but despite these variations, several elements of biblical covenants can be identified.

Biblical covenants were generally *public*. They were not private agreements isolated from community. Even God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses were not merely individualistic. They were major covenants affecting and including the whole community for many generations. To acknowledge these communal ties, the covenants were generally confirmed by formal acts--a sign, a ritual, a recognizable verbal formula--visible or audible to the community. The rainbow was a sign of God's covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:12). Circumcision was a sign of God's promise to Abraham (Gen. 17). The "blood of the covenant," splashed over the altar and over the people, signified God's covenant with Moses (Exod. 24:5-8). In the New Testament, the bread and the cup symbolize the new covenant the covenants that are the foundation of the people's life together.

Biblical covenants are *pious*, reflecting Israel's sense that covenants are grounded in God. Sometimes God initiates the covenant as a primary participant. Other times God is only indirectly involved. For example, people make covenants between themselves but seal them with an oath. The oath implies religious sanction. Thus, being faithful to God implies being faithful to the covenant.

Biblical covenants are permanent. Sometimes this expectation of permanence is challenged by changing circumstances and bitter disappointments, yet the promise is not withdrawn. For example, the Davidic covenant that the throne of Israel would remain forever in the line of David's descent did not collapse with the Exile (586-538 B.C.). Instead there emerged new hope for a future king who would be the son of David. Furthermore, when terms of the covenant are violated, broken relationships and misery result. In such circumstances the old covenant may be dissolved by God and a new beginning offered (Jer. 31:31-34). Despite these vicissitudes in covenantal relationships, the common understanding is that covenants last forever.^[3]

Finally, biblical covenants often presuppose pilgrimage. Abraham, Moses, and David were adventurers. God's covenants with these men pointed beyond their present realms of living to a destination--to a nation, a land, and a kingdom not yet fully reached. Jesus and his disciples were travelers. Initially, Jesus beckoned them to a journey, "Follow me...." Later, he commissioned them to another journey, "Go into all the world...." He promised them, "...I am with you always..." (Mark 1:17, Matt. 28:19-20). His promise was a covenant: He said he would be with them in their journeys. Such covenants have unfolding qualities. They foster adventure, newness, and surprise.

Pilgrims accept a code of conduct for their journey. Sometimes the code is specific and direct about behavioral expectations. (The Holiness Code in Leviticus 17-26, the Deuteronomic Code, or Zacchaeus' promise to Jesus in Luke 19:8). Covenants set limits. Yet the spirit of the covenant is to nourish relationships, not regiment them. Covenants, unlike contracts, offer fidelity that exceeds specification: "You will be my people; I will be your God" (Jer. 31:3b, Hosea 2:23).

The influence of covenants upon sexual behavior and relationships within Israel is evident. Unlike much contemporary, popular literature, the Bible is not primarily a story about lovers and their disconnected affairs. Rather, it is an account of families and marriages and continuing loyalties. To be sure, there are many lapses in covenantal faithfulness. This reality does not diminish the significance of covenant in the life of Israelites: rather it underscores their need for a new covenant that incorporates not only law and judgment but also

grace and renewal.

C. The Church's Guidance

In contemporary life we are often hesitant to make covenants. There are many reasons for that hesitancy. We make hasty, unwise commitments and find ourselves entangled in painful relationships. We say, "Never again." We are motivated by self-interest, convenience, and momentary pleasure at the expense of long-range rewards. We resist the responsibility of longterm commitment. We want to be autonomous, with little obligation to the community. For all these reasons we may resist making covenants, choosing instead agreements that are tentative.

The result is that in contemporary life we lack the sense of belonging and the covenantal structure that helps a relationship endure through periods when emotion is not a sufficient bond. We lack a sense of being part of a purpose and a people that extends far beyond our individual lives. It is time for the church to speak assertively of covenant, of belonging and loyalty.

To apply biblical covenant to sexuality in the modern world does not require the church to formulate a comprehensive code to cover all eventualities and contingencies. Ours is a complex and changing world. Differing family patterns, changing male and female roles, effective contraceptives, overpopulation, and the science dealing with human sexual behavior are among the phenomena that represent new dilemmas and choices profoundly affecting sexual relationships.

In addressing these realities the church must avoid undercutting individual discretion, eliminating personal responsibility for growth, and stifling the work of the Spirit among us. Yet within the covenant community, there is need for general guidelines, Bible study, and frank conversation.

In a society in which people are purported to "have sex more but enjoy it less," the time has come to reconsider the importance of both love and covenant. There are no easy answers about how to apply love and covenant to some of the real-life situations in which people find themselves. Is the church willing to struggle with these issues even when answers are not always clear? The struggle will be unsettling and difficult, but the outcome may enhance morality, not diminish it, and contribute to a fuller, more human life for all persons.

IV. Implications for Human Sexuality

Much research on the subject of human sexuality is being done by physical and social scientists. For the church, however, scriptural guidance and biblical scholarship must be brought to bear upon that scientific information in order to come to an adequate understanding of the implications of human sexuality for our day.

Some specific concerns related to human sexuality have been dealt with in recent Annual Conferences: birth control,^[4] pornography,^[5] male and female roles,^[6] abortion,^[7] marriage,^[8] artificial insemination,^[9] and divorce.^[10] It would be repetitious to dwell again on these issues.

Major issues that have not been dealt with by recent Annual Conferences include (1) sexuality for single persons, (2) homosexuality, and (3) marital fidelity. Sexuality for single persons is an area of rapidly changing mores in our society. Homosexuality is discussed now more openly than ever before in modern history. The difficulties of maintaining marital fidelity are compounded by current social stresses and continuing silence within the church on sexuality.

A. Single Persons and Sexuality

More than one-third of the adults in our society are single-unmarried, divorced, or widowed. Our biblical faith affirms singleness as a meaningful lifestyle. The lifestyles and teachings of both Jesus and Paul are models of

singleness. Jesus placed singleness on a par with marriage (Matt. 19:12). Paul felt that in terms of an undivided allegiance to Christ, being single had some advantages (I Cor. 7:1-9, 24-40).

Fullness of life for single persons depends upon certain conditions. Family is important but may exist in different forms in different times and places. However, the endurance of the family reflects the need of people, whether married or unmarried, for a primary relationship in which personhood is fostered, loneliness is diminished, and closeness and belonging are experienced. Jesus cherished his family of faith as much as his biological family (Matt. 10:35-37; 12:49). His example should spur the church toward being a spiritual family to one another in the fellowship.

Furthermore, every adult needs significant friends of the opposite sex. Jesus had female friends. His friendship with Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, was especially close. It was a friendship not just of chores, convenience, and function, but also of warm conversation and closeness (Luke 10:38-42). Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18; 1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:3) and Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) were especially important to Paul in his work. St. Francis of Assisi had a very close female companion, Sister Clara, whose friendship was invaluable especially in his later years. These all are helpful models of a nurturing friendship between persons of opposite sex, a friendship not involving sexual union. Such intimacy is an affirmation of maleness and femaleness and addresses basic human needs for wholeness of personhood among single people.

1. Biblical Insights

Although the Scriptures do not deal extensively with the sexual behavior of single persons, some boundaries are established. In the Old Testament, certain types of premarital sexual activity are punishable (Deut. 22:13-21, 23-29). In the New Testament, Paul teaches that union with a prostitute is immoral because that act inseparably joins two persons (1 Cor. 6:12-20). Paul also specifically addresses the unmarried and the widowed who find it difficult to control sexual passion (I Cor. 7:2, 9, 36-38). Paul advocates marriage for such persons, implying that sexual intercourse is to be practiced within marriage.

2. The Church's Response

The requirement of celibacy for singles is a thorny issue that the church faces. Our current social circumstances heighten the difficulties. Physical maturation has accelerated three years in one generation. A girl now reaches puberty at 11 or 12 years of age and a boy at 13 or 14 years. Moreover, the median age at first marriage is later than ever before: 23 years for men and 21 years for women. The 10-year span between sexual maturity and marriage creates a difficult situation in which to preserve chastity, a situation different from the biblical era.

Premarital sexual relationships, especially among teenagers, are creating many problems in our society. Sexually active adolescents experience conflict in determining their values. Emotional and psychological development is impaired, at times irreversibly. Suicide is sometimes a factor. Teenage pregnancy, venereal disease, and permanent sterilization are occurring in epidemic proportions. Often these problems are the inevitable result of a society that is seductive and permissive, and promotes freedom and pleasure above responsibility and long-term satisfactions. This society and all too often a negligent church have failed to provide moral support to those many youth who do have values and seek to live by them.

The teen years should be used to mature socially and emotionally, to learn the skills of communication and problem-solving, and to express sexual identity in nongenital ways. These experiences contribute to the maturity that is necessary in order to learn what love really is, to find a compatible partner, and to establish a covenant that is sound and lasting. The church believes that these principles are still valid in our time.

The engagement period should be a time for the couple to share about families, dreams, goals, habits, likes, dislikes, past experiences. It is the time to develop common interests and good communication patterns.

Christian persons in dating relationships should resist the strong desire for full sexual expression and the pressures of the media and culture for sexual exploitation.

Also in contemporary society there are rapidly increasing numbers of previously married single adults. A higher divorce rate, an extended life expectancy, and the preponderance of women over men in the middle and upper age brackets are among the factors leading to this increase. Many of these persons have experienced sexual intercourse within marriage, but such experience is no longer available to them. Some of the problems that exist in our contemporary world when singleness is a matter of circumstances rather than choice did not exist in such proportions in the biblical world. It is incumbent on our society and the church to acknowledge these problems and to seek solutions.

The church counteracts the cultural emphasis on sexual self-indulgence by teaching the benefits of self-discipline and the positive aspects of a life of commitment and fidelity. In a time of casual love making and pleasure seeking, covenants provide structure that sustains us in the fluctuating joys and pains of authentic relationships. Ongoing loyalties give continuity to our lives. The marks of covenant include mutual respect, public vows, lifetime accountability, and religious sanction. The church teaches that sexual intercourse belongs within the bonds of such love and covenant.

The church as a covenant community encourages single people, as well as married people to speak of their needs and concerns including sexuality. In the continuing interchange of ideas and feelings, the church seeks to be more evangelical and caring than condemnatory.

B. Homosexual Persons and Sexuality

The Church of the Brethren never has dealt officially with the issue of homosexuality. The time is here to examine openly this matter that profoundly affects the lives of millions of homosexual people and their families.

1. Misunderstandings About Homosexuality

Misunderstandings and unnecessary fears about homosexuality abound. Contrary to popular opinion, most homosexuals are not flagrantly promiscuous and do not engage in offensive public behavior. Male homosexuals are not identifiably "feminine" and lesbians are not characteristically "masculine." Teachers with homosexual orientation are often suspected of influencing pupils toward homosexual behavior but most sexual offenses reported between teacher and pupil are heterosexual in nature. For most practicing homosexuals, sexual activity is a proportionate part of their lives. Most of the time they engage in pursuits common to all.

2. Causes of Homosexuality

The causes of homosexuality are not definitely known. Is it inborn or learned? No one has the definitive answer. What is known is that people do not simply decide to become homosexual; it is more complex than that.

Some recent research suggests that the predisposition for homosexuality may be genetic. Other research suggests that certain types of family pathology produce a higher incidence of homosexuality. However, such research has not been sufficiently extensive or scientific to be conclusive. It is generally agreed that the homosexual orientation usually is formed early in life. From 5 to 10 percent of the population is said to be primarily homosexual in orientation.^[11]

A significant percentage of people have occasional homosexual interests and/or experience but are not exclusively homosexual. Perhaps the majority of people are somewhere on the continuum between exclusive

homosexuality and exclusive heterosexuality.

3. Biblical Insights

The Bible refers directly to homosexual conduct seven times. Genesis 18- 19 and Judges 19 are narratives. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are prohibitions in the Holiness Code. Romans 1:26 ff, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:10 are excerpts from epistles.

Genesis 18-19

The attempted homosexual assault by a mob of men is mentioned in the story about the decadence and subsequent destruction of the city of Sodom. Such offensive behavior was not the only sin of this wicked city. Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jesus point to Sodom's self-indulgence, arrogance, inhospitality, and indifference to the poor. Thus, in its own later interpretations of the episode at Sodom, the Bible does not dwell on homosexual sins of the city in the way that more recent interpreters do. Nevertheless, sexual misconduct, particularly assault, is an important element in the story about Sodom's sin and destruction (2 Pet. 2:4-14, Jude 7).

Judges 19

The Judges 19:22-26 account of an incident at Gibeah is strikingly similar to the Genesis 19:4-8 account of the mistreatment of guests at Lot's house in Sodom. Since the stories are so similar, what one decides about the meaning of one passage would apply also to the other.

Leviticus 18:22; 20:13

Leviticus denounces male homosexual acts decisively in two almost identical texts. However, some difficulty arises in interpreting these verses because of their context. The Leviticus proscriptions against homosexual acts are intermingled with statutes that forbid the planting of two kinds of seed in one field, wearing garments made of two kinds of material, and trimming the edges of a man's beard (Lev. 19:9, 27). Another statute mandates executing children who curse their parents (Lev. 20:9). The church does not enforce all laws from this section of Leviticus (i.e., the Holiness Code, chapters 17-26). Some interpreters inquire: "Upon what basis does the church select one law for enforcement, but ignore other laws?" The key is to examine the overarching principles of the total Bible. Does the rest of scripture, particularly the New Testament, reaffirm the laws from the Holiness Code that denounce male homosexual acts? To that question we now direct our attention.

Romans 1:26-27

The first chapter of Romans states that both lesbianism (the only mention of female homosexuality in the Bible) and male homosexuality are manifestations of the corruption that arises from idolatry (Rom. 1:23-27). The lust and unnaturalness of the homosexuality described in this passage are examples of how distorted life becomes when people worship and serve created things rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25).

The persons described in this chapter "gave up natural relations for unnatural" (verses 26-27). This phrase connotes that homosexual behavior is the willful acts of persons who had previously engaged in heterosexual relations. Not all homosexuality can be described this way. Some persons never experienced what Paul calls "natural relations" because their orientation (genetic or conditioned) is homosexual. This circumstance opens the question: Does Paul consider all kinds of homosexuality idolatrous, or does he mean to denounce only those kinds of homosexual behavior described in this passage? The one thing that is clear in this passage is that Paul considers the behavior of those who exchange heterosexual for homosexual relations to be "unnatural" and sinful.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11, 1 Timothy 1:9-11

1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy list a series of sins all of which are condemned. Both of these lists include the Greek word *arsenokoitia* which is a form of sexual immorality. But, *arsenokoitia* is an obscure word. A comparison of English versions reveals that *arsenokoitia* is variously translated to mean heterosexual male prostitution, or sodomy, or cultic homosexuality, or all forms of homosexual activity. Apparently, there are overtones of lust and cultic prostitution. Again the question arises in the minds of some whether Paul in naming *arsenokoitia* means to denounce all forms of homosexual behavior.

In summary, seven passages forcefully denounce a variety of homosexual behavior: rape, adultery, cultic prostitution, and lust. These scriptures do not deal explicitly with some contemporary questions about various forms of homosexuality, about homosexuality as an orientation, about the onset of homosexuality prior to the age of moral accountability, and about genetic and/or environmental predispositions.

While the seven direct references in the Old and New Testaments are often isolated as the focal point of an interpretation of the biblical teaching about homosexuality, these texts are best understood within the larger framework from which the Bible approaches sexuality in general. This overarching framework, identified in the opening sections of this paper, upholds heterosexuality as the reflection of God's image (Gen. 1:27) and as the culmination of creation (Gen. 2:18-25). It is in union with a sexual opposite that male and female find fulfillment as persons and identity as a family. While some modern distinctions about homosexuality are missing in the Scriptures, homosexual behavior is considered contrary to the heterosexual norm that runs throughout scripture.

Jesus reinforced the unified biblical view of human sexuality. He upheld the sanctity of heterosexual marriage, reciting from scripture God's original intention in creation: "Have you not read that He who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one?' So they are no longer two but one" (Matt. 19:4-8). Thus, Jesus affirms that heterosexual marriage is the pattern for sexual union God intended from the beginning.

This biblical affirmation of heterosexuality does not automatically exclude every other choice of sexual expression or nonexpression. Although Jesus is clear about the biblical norm, he is not categorical. In the same passage in which he upholds the sanctity of marriage (Matt. 19:3-12), he acknowledges, "not every one can receive this precept, only those to whom it is given." He then identifies some persons for whom heterosexual union is not possible: some because of factors of birth; others because of what has been done to them; and still others because they choose not to marry for the sake of the kingdom. Thus Jesus does not prescribe heterosexual marriage for every person.

4. The Church's Response

The Church of the Brethren upholds the biblical declaration that heterosexuality is the intention of God for creation. Nature, in the very functional compatibility of male and female genitalia, confirms this biblical revelation that males and females are meant for each other. This intimate genital contact between two persons of opposite sexes is not just a physical union; it also embodies the interlocking of persons. This intimate companionship is heterosexuality at its fullest. It is the context for the formation of family.

Some persons, for reasons not fully understood, experience a romantic attraction for persons of the same sex. Some of these persons claim Christ as Lord and are actively involved in the life of the church. They need the active support and love of the church as they struggle with God's plan for their lives.

In ministry to homosexual persons, the church must guard against oversimplifying Christian morality. Instead the church should endeavor with Christian love and with gentle evangelistic skill to offer redemptive help. Proof texts, condemnation, and a sense of guilt will not empower change. Rejection isolates homosexual persons from the church. It frequently results in a preoccupation with and intensification of the very

inclinations their accusers deplore. The power of the Gospel incorporates an acceptance of persons who seek forgiveness for their sins and who strive to be disciples of Jesus Christ. It is this non-accusatory acceptance that sets people free from guilt, depression, and fear. When we are saved it is not because we are without sin but because our sins are not held against us by God's grace. We are made whole through God's righteousness, not ours (Rom. 3:21-4:5).

In relating to homosexual persons, the church should become informed about such lifestyle options as the following.

Celibacy, refraining from sexual activities, is one alternative that homosexuals and bisexuals choose. The scriptural teaching on celibacy for heterosexuals provides a model for this lifestyle. Celibacy ought to be voluntary and not a requirement (1 Tim. 4:1-3). Those for whom celibacy is a gift and a special calling (Matt. 19:11-12; 1 Cor. 7:6-7) are to be honored and supported.

Conversion to a heterosexual orientation is another option. For many homosexual persons, however, this choice is extraordinarily difficult and complex. For some it is impossible. The church must seek to create a climate for hope, for praise of God, for renewed effort, for claiming and exploring the heterosexual dimensions of being. Thus the Good News is shared with homosexual persons who seek to convert to heterosexuality. Yet not all are set totally free of homosexual feelings and urges. For some, impulses diminish, mindsets change, the grip of homosexuality is broken, and affectional and physical attraction to the opposite sex can begin.

Covenantal relationships between homosexual persons is an additional lifestyle option but, in the church's search for a Christian understanding of human sexuality, this alternative is not acceptable.

There are special ways in which the church can extend Christ-like comfort and grace to homosexual and bisexual persons. These include:

- welcoming all inquirers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior into the fellowship of the church. This welcome and the resources of the church are made available by the grace of God who calls us as repentant sinners to be partakers of the faith. Some guidelines for the church's response and for discipleship have been delineated;
- intensifying efforts to understand how genetic makeup and childhood experiences have influenced the development of sexual orientation and behavior;
- challenging openly the widespread fear, hatred, and harassment of homosexual persons;
- engaging in open, forthright conversations with homosexuals. When we stop alienating one another and instead venture toward understanding, some fears disappear and interpersonal relationships become more honest;
- advocating the right of homosexuals to jobs, housing, and legal justice;
- stating clearly that all antisocial, sexually promiscuous acts are contrary to Christian morality;
- giving strong support to persons who seek to be faithful to their heterosexual marriage covenant, but for whom this is difficult because of struggles with homosexuality.

Fortunate are persons who learn not to be afraid of their feelings and thoughts and can accept these components of their sexuality within disciplined bounds. Discovering that God has good use for these dimensions of our lives helps to defuse unacceptable impulses. We all, whether homosexual or heterosexual, have desires and drives that need to be channeled appropriately to avoid sin and to center our sexuality in right relationships.

C. Married Persons and Sexuality

The Christian faith affirms that heterosexual marriage is the intended culmination of sexuality. Sexual

intercourse, the most intimate of human relationships, belongs within heterosexual marriage. Within the covenant of lifelong fidelity, married couples learn to enjoy this full-bodied, full-spirited union. Furthermore, it is this loyal, loving partnership that is most conducive to the responsible conception of children.

Marriage fidelity is a matter of spirit and emotion as well as body (Matt. 5:28). Our sexuality, a sacred trust from our Creator, is too powerful and too elemental a force to be treated lightly or casually. Sexual activity that embraces spirit, emotion, and body is just as valid when engaged in for pleasure as for procreation. Such pleasure will be found as much in receiving as in giving. The need to care in consistent ways about the well-being of one's spouse is essential. The desires and needs of each must be paramount in a mutual relationship. Demands and satisfactions designed to meet the needs of one partner to the exclusion of the satisfactions and needs of the other will only erode the act of intercourse and cause mutual trust and respect to disintegrate. True mutuality exists when the spiritual, emotional, and physical hungers of both persons are satisfied. Each has a responsibility for such mutual fulfillment.

Sexual intercourse between two persons who are bound by love and covenant can foster the most intimate and intense kinds of communication. At that moment--unlike any other--those two do truly become as one. Unfortunately, even within the context of marriage this is not always so. Sexual relationships, of every expression, become destructive of the Creator's design when used in self-centered ways. Sexual activity within the context of marriage can sometimes be as exploitative and selfish and destructive as sexual activity outside of marriage. This happens when sexual relationships are:

- used only to gratify personal desires,
- used as a weapon,
- withheld as punishment,
- proffered as reward,
- demanded unilaterally, or
- used as a cover-up for personal inadequacies.

In any such case, marital sexual activity is just as immoral as the misuse of sex outside of marriage. Sexual relationships ought to be a wholly fulfilling link between two affectionate people from which they emerge unanxious and satisfied.

When genuine communication exists between spouses, they will be able to tell each other about their needs and what brings them pleasure and satisfaction, without inhibition or embarrassment. It is destructive to a marriage relationship (at every level but especially in regard to sexual matters) to assume that one should instinctively know what the needs and desires and satisfactions of the other are. The risk is that expectations will not be met and one or both of the parties will feel rejected and unloved. Once those seeds of rejection take root they produce grudges, resentments, and hostility. Demanding that your mate automatically understand and fulfill your needs is a most unreasonable expectation. It is important to communicate those needs, desires, and satisfactions both verbally and nonverbally without embarrassment.

Compassion is also an essential component of satisfying sexual relationships. "Making love" is a term often used for sexual intercourse even though sometimes "love" is the missing ingredient. Intercourse without expressed feeling and caring is empty or worse. It is exploitative and selfish. Love that is communicated through the intimacies of sexual intercourse is a love that goes beyond words; indeed, is often verbally inexpressible and is, therefore, expressed through the act itself.

The importance of sexual fidelity is not to be underestimated (1 Thess. 4:2-8, Heb. 13:4). Unlike less easily recognized aspects of fidelity, sexual faithfulness is identifiable. Marriage partners know when they are sexually faithful, at least as far as overt behavior is concerned. Being loyal in this overt way may help couples learn to be faithful in other aspects of their lives together.

The covenant of faithfulness does not preclude meaningful relationships with persons other than the marriage partner. Indeed, such friendships are to be cherished. However, if these ties move beyond friendship and become amorous, the intimate relationship outside of marriage will need to be terminated. Adultery is one of the most serious temptations faced by married persons.

1. Biblical Insights

The old covenant forbids adultery. The seventh commandment in the Decalogue (Exod. 20:14 and Deut. 5:18) is concise: "You shall not commit adultery." The exact nature of adultery, however, is somewhat obscure in the old covenant. For men, adultery was often narrowly defined as sexual intercourse with the wife of a fellow Israelite (Lev. 18:20; 20:10; Deut. 5:21,22:22, Exod. 20:17). Polygamy, concubinage and perhaps secular harlotry were allowed the married male but not the married female (Gen. 16:14, 30:1-13; 38; 2 Sam. 5:13). The double standard was evident. The rights of the male were paramount and the restraints against his sexual relationships were primarily to protect the rights of other Israelite men: the father, the betrothed, the husband.

In the new covenant, this double standard for adultery disappears. When a group of men caught a woman in adultery and inquired whether she should be stoned to death, Jesus appealed to the conscience of the men regarding their own sins (John 8:1-11). Jesus applied the prohibition of adultery to husbands and wives on an equal basis (Mark 10:1-12). Marriage, as understood by Jesus, was intended by God from the beginning of creation to be the indissoluble union by two persons (Mark 10:8-9).

Moreover, for Jesus, adultery was a matter of attitude as well as action (Matt. 5:28). He taught in the Sermon on the Mount that lust is adultery. Lust is not a passing fantasy but an untamed craving. Unless *eros* is infused and counterbalanced with *agape*, attitudes become adulterous.

Paul taught that sexual relationships are not just physical acts but deeply interpersonal experiences. It was Paul's view that even a sexual relationship that was intended to be highly casual involved a mystical union (1 Cor. 6:16).

Although adultery is a sin, neither Jesus nor Paul suggests that it is unforgivable. Jesus did not condemn the adulteress, though he told her, "Go, sin no more" (John 8:11). Paul wrote about believers whose former immorality had been washed away (1 Cor. 6:11). Quite clearly, adultery is perceived to be a violation of the marital union. But by God's grace, sexuality though defiled, can become again what it was intended to be.

2. The Church's Response

Amidst changing values and relaxed morality, the church should continue to speak out against adultery as well as other threats to the marriage covenant. Casual acceptance of sexual relationships outside of marriage is a part of our society and is reflected to us by our media. The church, however, should continue to hold up in its teachings the image of marriage as the permanent, spiritual, physical, and emotional bonding between a man and a woman, modeled upon God's everlasting covenant with his people (Gen. 12) and Christ's eternal union with the church (Eph. 5).

D. Family-Life Education

Quality education is needed to attain an understanding of sexuality and a competence in family relationships. This education begins in the home where parents teach their children not only by word but also by conduct and expression of feeling. This is the proper forum for teaching morality. The importance of confining sexual intercourse to marriage takes root in daily contact with nurturing, caring adults who teach and model this behavior.

However, given the severe stresses and strains of the family in our society, parents need the church's support and assistance in conveying Christian attitudes on sexual morality. The church should provide biblical and theological guidance on sexuality.

Education for family life is appropriate also within the public school. It is needed to supplement instruction in the home and church. Public school instruction should include information about the body, sex organs, and the reproductive system, but the emphasis should be on values and relationships. Teachers who are responsible for this task should be well trained and themselves be worthy models of mature and responsible sexuality. The church supports responsible family-life education in the public school as long as the religious commitment of all students and residents of the community is respected.

Parents should keep themselves informed about the content of family-life education courses in which their children are influenced, and use that educational experience to foster open discussion of the topic of sexuality with their children. Parents should also be acquainted with the content of such courses for the purposes of continuing dialogue with school officials. In such dialogue parents should clarify their Christian principles to insure that their own ethical values are not undermined.

Family-life education will not solve all sex, marriage, and family problems. The task requires the coordinated efforts of home, church, and school.

V. Conclusion

Sexuality is God's good gift. It is a spoilable gift. Who among us does not regularly need God's grace to restore this gift that we have abused so that it again beautifies and deepens human relationships? These problems that arise for ourselves and our generation are to be faced and confessed, but this need not turn our attitude toward sexuality into a tangle of negatives. God's grace is real. Sexuality remains for us, as it was for *adham*, God's antidote for human loneliness and the answer to the human need to have a counterpart, to be one with someone, and to be in love.

Action of the General Board: At its March 1983 meeting the General Board voted to approve this position paper for presentation to the 1983 Annual Conference.

Curtis W. Dubble, Chairman
Robert W. Neff, General Secretary

Action of 1983 Annual Conference: The report from the General Board was presented by Guy E. Wampler, Jr., the chairperson of the General Board's study committee for the topic, HUMAN SEXUALITY FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE. In attendance were the other members of the Board's study committee: Doris Cline Egge, James F. Myer, Mary Sue Rosenberger, and Clyde R. Shallenberger. *The delegate body of the 1983 Annual Conference in a 2/3 majority vote adopted the paper on HUMAN SEXUALITY FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE as a position paper with one amendment* which is incorporated in the preceding wording of the paper.

Footnotes:

1. Barclay, William, *Letters to Galatians and Ephesians*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954; p.54. In addition to *eros* and *agape*, there are two additional Greek words for love: *philia* which refers to the warm but nonromantic love we feel for those close to us and *storge* which refers especially to the love between parents and children.
2. Nygren, Anders, *Agape and Eros*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953. The separation between the words *eros* and *agape*, *eros* having to do with love involving the needs of self and *agape* having to do with love involving the needs of other persons, has been in vogue since the publication of this book. It

is not clear that this neat, sharp distinction can in fact be sustained either in the New Testament or in Hellenistic literature. However, the perspective commonly called *eros* is definitely in the biblical tradition even if the word is not.

3. Roop, Eugene, "Two Become One Become Two," *Brethren Life and Thought*, Vol. XXI, No.3, Summer 1976; pp.133-137. An analysis of the expectation of permanence with covenants and yet the possibility of new covenants.
4. *Minutes of the Annual Conference, 1955-64*, "Family Planning and Population Growth," (1964), p.328.
5. *Minutes of the Annual Conference, 1965-69*, "Theological Basis of Personal Ethics," (1966), p. 118.
6. *Minutes of the Annual Conference, 1975-79*, "Equality for Women in the Church of the Brethren," (1977), p.340.
7. *Minutes of the Annual Conference, 1970-74*, "Abortion," (1972), p.227.
8. *Minutes of the Annual Conference, 1955-64*, "Divorce and Remarriage," (1964), p.320, and *Minutes of the Annual Conference, 1975-79*, "Marriage and Divorce," (1977), p.300.
9. *Minutes of the Annual Conference, 1955-64*, "Family Planning and Population Growth," (1964), p.328.
10. *Minutes of the Annual Conference. 1955-64*, "Divorce and Remarriage," (1964), p.320 and *Minutes of the Annual Conference 1975-1979*, "Marriage and Divorce." (1977), p.
11. Kinsey, Alfred C.; Pomeroy, Wardell B.; Martin, Clyde E.; and Gebhard, Paul H., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male and Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1948 and 1953.

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