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# Constitution of

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# Elim Bible Chapel

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## ***PREAMBLE:***

Our group was formed in the summer of 1997 as the result of the merging of two congregations.

Arkona Bible Chapel has had a history of approximately 107 years in the Arkona area and was pioneered by lay-workers convinced of the need to evangelize and to meet for worship in the pattern of the New Testament church. Maranatha Bible Fellowship, a gathering of only four years was meeting in neighbouring Watford and was outgrowing its rented facility. It also assembled simply, in the name of the Lord Jesus with the New Testament as its pattern.

After several months of prayer and discussion, the leaders from both congregations felt that it would be to God's glory that the two congregations merge into one and the name Elim Bible Chapel was chosen. It is our desire that like the "Elim" of the Old Testament, this gathering place might be a place of spiritual refreshment and filling to all who come and that it may give continued testimony to the oasis of God's grace in a dry and thirsty world.

Elim Bible Chapel is an independent, autonomous church, not being under the control or direction of any ecclesiastical body. We have no official denominational affiliation other than "Christian Brethren". We recognize the Lord Jesus Christ as our head and his inerrant Word as our guide in all matters of faith and practice.

# **ARTICLE I - PURPOSE**

## **Section 1 - Purpose**

The purpose of Elim Bible Chapel is to provide a nurturing environment where the body of believers may grow in the faith with the goal that biblical Christianity is practiced and the Lord Jesus Christ is proclaimed in our lives.

## **Section 2 - Goals**

### ***A. To Provide a Nurturing Environment***

- i Teaching, admonishing and discipling people with the Word of God so they live and act more like Christ.
- ii Praising, worshipping and remembering so that our focus is united and Christ-centred.
- iii Praying so that we demonstrate our continuous need and dependence on our God.
- iv Fostering fellowship and love among the saints.
- v Giving of our material substance to the glory of God.
- vi Providing leadership for the body.

### ***B. To Practice Biblical Christianity***

- i Allowing God's Word to change and mold us through faith and by obedience to the image of Christ.
- ii Doing good to all men so that they may see and glorify our Father who is in heaven.
- iii Living in such a way that the Christian message is modeled, giving glory to Him.

### ***C. To Proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ***

- i Sharing the Good News both privately and publicly in the power of the Spirit, leaving the results to God.
- ii Initiating and cooperating with evangelistic efforts in and around our community.
- iii Supporting Christian mission endeavors.

## **ARTICLE II - STATEMENT OF FAITH**

### ***The Bible***

The Bible is inspired of God, inerrant in the original documents and of final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

### ***God***

There is one God, eternal, existing in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### ***Jesus Christ***

The Lord Jesus Christ is fully God, born of a virgin and sinlessly perfect. His sacrifice is substitutionary and representative. He rose bodily from the dead and ascended to His Father's right hand where He now ministers as the believer's Great High Priest.

### ***Salvation***

Each member of the human race is fallen, sinful and lost, and rebirth by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential for the salvation of man. Redemption is wholly by the blood of Christ and salvation is by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every believer possesses eternal life and is justified, sanctified and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and by Him is empowered to live a Godly life. The believer is secure for all eternity. However, a believer can, through sin, lose his fellowship, joy, power, testimony and reward and incur the Father's chastisement. Relationship is eternal, being established by new birth; fellowship, however, is dependent upon obedience.

### ***Judgment***

There will be a resurrection of the believer unto eternal life and of the unbeliever unto eternal punishment.

### ***The Church***

The church began with the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and is composed of all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. The local church is composed of believers in a locality who gather in Christ's name for worship, prayer, edification and witness. Government and discipline are divinely outlined in the Epistles as being the responsibility of the local church.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the giver of spiritual gifts for ministry in the church, such as evangelists, pastors, teachers, etc. These gifts are given that believers may be equipped for work in His service and that the church may be built up.

### ***Ordinances***

There are two Christian ordinances: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism signifies that the believer, having died with Christ, is buried with Him and is also risen with Christ to walk in newness of life. The Lord's Supper was instituted by the Lord Himself. In the observance of this supper, believers retell the message of the Lord's death, until His return.

### ***The Return of Christ***

The personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ could occur at any moment. His return will usher in a series of events, the rapture, judgment on unredeemed society, the restoration of Israel to Him as Messiah and an eternal state of blessedness for the redeemed. This truth is an ongoing incentive to holy living and faithful service for every believer.

## **ARTICLE III - MEMBERSHIP**

### **Section 1 - Affiliation Policy**

We recognize that all born again believers are a part of the universal church (the body of Christ). With this fact in mind, we do not have an official church "membership" list. We do however, acknowledge the need for the recognition of the committed core of this local body of believers. These individuals are identifiable by their commitment and accountability to the body at large.(see section 2)

Soon after people begin to attend the functions of Elim Bible Chapel they will be visited by one or two of our elders or someone designated by them. They will discuss with newcomers their relationship with God, the nature of the church at Elim and other matters as they arise. Those who are born again and desire to make Elim Bible Chapel their "church home" are welcomed to participate as members.

### **Section 2 - Expectations of Affiliates**

We anticipate those affiliated with EBC to commit to one another and to the Lord Jesus their:

**Tongue:** to be willing and able to give testimony of their new birth to anyone who may ask or be interested (I Peter 3:15, II Corinthians 5:17-20) - using our words to build up and encourage rather than to tear down and destroy (Ephesians 4:25).

**Time:** that we attend regularly the functions of the church with special attention to:

- the teaching of the Word
- the fellowship of the believers
- prayer
- the breaking of bread (Lord's Supper)

Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:25

**Talents:** using our gifts and abilities for the strengthening of one another and the expansion of His kingdom (Ephesians 4:11-13; I Corinthians 12:4-11)

**Treasure:** using our material resources in a sacrificial way that glorifies Christ and promotes His kingdom (II Corinthians 9:7; Matthew 19:16-30)

**Totality:** submitting our own will to that of our Lord, obeying Him and seeking to put His righteousness and kingdom first (Matthew 6:33). The ordinance of baptism is an initial step of obedience (Matthew 28:18-20).

### **Section 3 - Reconciliation and Church Discipline**

- A.** All who make Elim Bible Chapel their church home are expected to uphold its values and expectations. Failure to do so may lead to church discipline. (Galatians 6:1; I Thessalonians 5:14; II Thessalonians 3:15; I Corinthians 5:1-13; II Timothy 4:2; Matthew 18:15-18).
- B.** Charges or questions of wrongdoing or wrong speaking must be well founded and will be looked into by the church elders. The honour of Christ and His Church is at stake.
- C.** The elders will address their concerns by personal contact on a Scriptural basis. They will:
- i. Seek accurate and objective knowledge of the facts.
  - ii. Proceed (in cases where wrong doing is apparent) in seeking:
    - acknowledgment of sin
    - repentance
    - reconciliation with God and with people (the circle of confession should be as wide as the circle of offense)
  - iii. Persist with patience, courage and gentleness until the longed for goal of reconciliation is realized.
  - iv. Continue communication with the erring one to ensure complete recovery and healing.
- D.** In cases where sinful behaviour persists:
- i. The person in question will be instructed by the elders that if they continue their course of action, they will no longer be considered a part of the fellowship. The person will be given an opportunity to respond before such action is taken.
  - ii. If the above warning is not heeded, nor corrective action taken, then the elders will inform the congregation, providing explanations as deemed appropriate. At this time it will be announced that the erring one has been removed from the fellowship of the local body. Such actions are to be taken in a loving manner with a continuing focus on the desired end of reconciliation.

## **ARTICLE IV - CHURCH GOVERNMENT**

Elim Bible Chapel is a Bible-based, nondenominational church. Therefore, it is our goal to conform to the New Testament in our government and practice, as well as in our teaching. We believe that Scripture provides a well-defined plan and design for local church function and leadership. According to Philippians 1:1, there are three major groups within the local church; Elders (Bishops), Deacons and Saints.

### **Section 1 - Elders**

According to the New Testament the elders, collectively are responsible for the spiritual oversight of the local church. Their job description includes leading, teaching and pastoring the flock.

Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit makes or sets elders (Acts 20:29). The church merely recognizes those already made elders by the Holy Spirit. God has given us two major lists of qualifications (I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-11) which help us to identify those men in whose lives the Holy Spirit has and is working to produce the needed qualities.

Elders are appointed by the existing elders after congregational affirmation and then presented to the congregation in a public meeting. An "Affirmation of Elders" occurs at least every three years.

\* See appendix A - "Affirmation of Elders"

\* See Appendix C - Duties of Elders and Deacons

### **Section 2 - Deacons**

The qualifications for deacons are similar to those for elders except that deacons are not required to teach (Acts 6:1-6; I Timothy 3:8-14). Deacons serve the church by taking care of the physical needs and concerns of the congregation such as building maintenance and finances. The selection process involves a poll of the congregation followed by screening by the present elder board. When accepted, new deacons are introduced to the congregation publicly.

\* See Appendix B - Affirmation of Deacons

\* See Appendix C - Duties of Elders and Deacons



### **Section 3 - The Saints**

Although governed by elders and deacons, the local church could be paralyzed apart from the proper involvement of the "saints", or all believers within the congregation. According to Ephesians 4:12 the saints of the local church are responsible for doing "the work of ministry". They are called to love, serve, encourage, care for, teach and admonish one another. They are also expected to bear one another's burdens and to pray for one another as well as to witness to the lost.

Each believer should view himself as a vital part of the ministry of Elim Bible Chapel.

### **ARTICLE V - OFFICERS**

Elim Bible Chapel is a non-share (nonprofit) corporation registered with the Ontario government. As per government requirements, we have named officers and directors. These people have been named to uphold corporational obligations but do not necessarily bear responsibility in the government of the church.

### **ARTICLE VI - AMENDMENTS**

Concerns regarding the constitution should be brought before the elders by any member of the congregation at any time. Amendments will be at the initiative of the elders but will require 75% approval by affiliates. The congregation will be notified of the intent to amend prior to the meeting.

### **ARTICLE VII - DISSOLUTION**

In the event of dissolution or disassociation of this church, all assets remaining after payment of liabilities shall be disbursed in totality to other Christian organizations agreed upon by the congregation at that time.

### **ARTICLE VIII - FISCAL YEAR & AUDITS**

The fiscal year of the church shall end on December 31 of each year. The treasurer holding office during this period shall be responsible for preparing and presenting to the church all the accounting records of the church for the year. The financial records shall be subject to audits as appointed by the deacons and affirmed by the congregation.

## **SUPPLEMENTAL PAPERS RELATED TO CHURCH ORDER**

*Appendix A -Affirmation of Elders*

*Appendix B -Affirmation of Deacons*

*Appendix C - Duties of Elders & Deacons at EBC*

*Appendix D - Ministry Flow Chart at EBC*

*Appendix E - The Lord's Supper*

*Appendix F - Baptism*

*Appendix G - Male and Female in Scripture*

*Appendix H - Benevolent Fund*

*Appendix I - Weddings*

*Appendix J - Divorce and Remarriage*

*Appendix K – A Theological Summary of Human Sexuality*

## *Affirmation of Elders*

According to the New Testament the elders, collectively bear the responsibility for the spiritual oversight of the local church. Their job description includes leading, teaching and pastoring the flock.

### ***A. Recognition***

Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit makes or sets elders (Acts 20:29). The church merely recognizes those already made elders by the Holy Spirit. The obvious question is how do we know who to recognize? God has given us two major lists of qualifications (I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-11) which help us to identify those men in whose lives the Holy Spirit has and is working to produce the needed qualities. An elder is not necessarily characterized by business success, popularity or education. The primary requirements are his spiritual maturity, wisdom and dedication. Elders should be examples of faithfulness in church attendance, witnessing, hospitality, caring, giving and knowing the Scriptures. He should also be a model husband, father and Christian. He should be someone with whom you could share private problems. He should be someone to whom you would go for Godly counsel. An elder must not only be qualified passively, but must be willing to serve, sacrifice and pay the prices required in shepherding God's flock..

Elim Bible Chapel is led by elders. Additional elders are appointed by the existing elders after congregational affirmation and are introduced in a public meeting. They are to be characterized by the qualities listed in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. An "Affirmation of Elders" occurs at least every three years.

### ***B. Elders' Qualifications***

(I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-11) More than 20 character traits are given in these two primary lists in reference to elders' qualifications. Some of these qualities are: Blameless, one woman man, self-controlled, prudent, well behaved, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, Godly home, spiritually mature, good reputation, not stubborn, not hot tempered, a lover of good, not greedy for money. In addition, the following Scriptures give us much information on the type of men who should be recognized and serve as elders: I Peter 5:1-5; Acts 20:17-30. It may be worth noting that all references to elders are in the masculine gender.

### ***C. Appointment of Elders***

- i The raising up of spiritual leaders involves a blending of Divine activity with human responsiveness. We anticipate this process taking place here at Elim.
- ii God not only raises up leaders, but He causes them to be recognized as such by others. *Moses* - Exodus 4:14-16; 14:31; 19:9; *Joshua* - Joshua 3:7; 4:14; *Samuel* - I Samuel 23:17; 24:20; I Chronicles 17:7; Psalm 18:43-45; *Paul & Barnabus* - Acts 13:1-2
- iii Would you indicate those men you perceive to be the most qualified and able to do the work of elders at Elim Bible Chapel by listing their names below. We are looking for your perception of any and all you would affirm as elders.
- iv The names of the current elders are also listed below. Please indicate beside their name either "reaffirm" or "do not reaffirm" after prayerful consideration. If you have indicated not to reaffirm, the other elders will speak privately with you regarding your concerns.
- v This process will be used a minimum of every three years to both reaffirm the existing elders and to recognize new ones.
- vi A valid affirmation requires a response from 80% of all affiliates and a 60% acceptance of each individual.

*This will not be viewed as an election but as an indicator of what Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church is saying to the body on this matter.*

### ***D. The Elders' Functions in the Local Church***

- i. Feed** = (Poimai-no) = shepherd, teach, pastor; care for flock. The only persons commissioned to pastor according to the New Testament are Christ, Peter and elders. The noun form of the word pastor is used as a title of Christ but of no one else. It is used one time to describe a spiritual gift (Ephesians 4:11).
- ii. Watch over** = (episkopos) = is translated bishop or overseer in the New Testament. The noun form is used five times of local church leaders. Scriptures such as Titus 1:5-7 make it clear that bishops and elders are instructed to bishop the flock in I Peter 5:2 and Actions 20:28. The New Testament speaks of many bishops in one church, and never of one bishop over one or several churches.
- iii. Guard** - the flock against false teachers and teaching (Acts 20:28).
- iv. Admonish** - (I Thessalonians 5:2) Encourage discouraged believers and rescue those who need correction.
- v. Rule or lead** - (I Timothy 5:17; I Peter 5:4). Elders rule not like dictators but rather as shepherds. They lead the sheep rather than driving them. Not as overlords but by their Godly example.
- vi. Pray for the sick** - (James 5:14-15) Both for physical and spiritual healing. (Philippians 1:1)

### ***E. Conclusion***

Elders are responsible for the spiritual guidance and well-being of the local church. All elders share equal authority. They do serve the church differently because they have different gifts.

Hopefully, from the whole body of elders combined, most of our spiritual needs can be met.

## Affirmation of Deacons

### **Deacons**

The word deacon means "one who serves". It follows, therefore, that deacons represent those who serve the local church in such "physical" areas as building, maintenance and finance. The biblical qualifications of deacons closely parallels those of elders with the exception of "apt to teach" which is listed as a characteristic of elders.

I Timothy 3:8-13

*Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.*

*In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.*

*A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.*

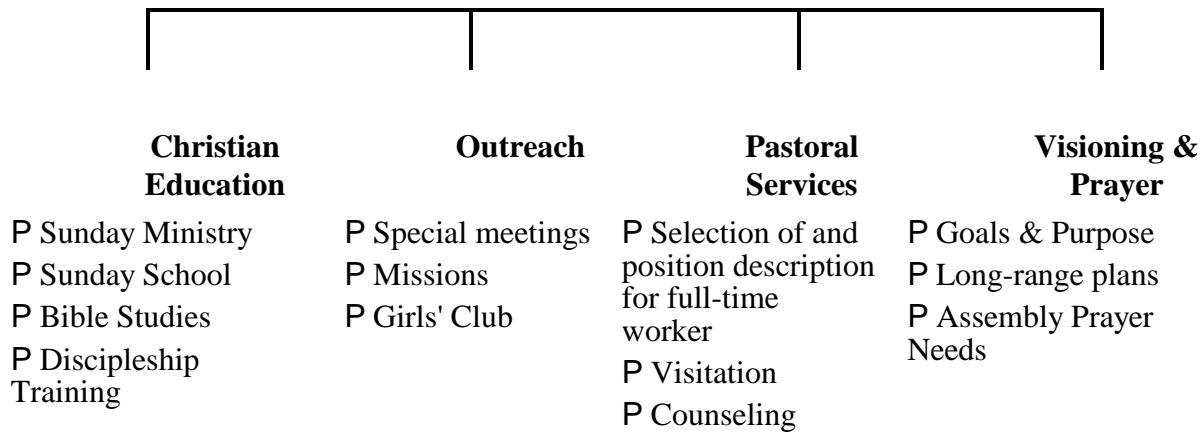
At Elim Bible Chapel deacons will be selected by a congregational poll in which 80% of all affiliates must respond and 60% indicate acceptance of each individual. After elder approval they will then be presented to the congregation and serve for a two-year term after which they will indicate their willingness to serve for an additional two-year term.

The names of the current deacons are listed below. Please indicate beside their name either "reaffirm" or "do not reaffirm" after prayerful consideration. If you have indicated not to reaffirm, the elders will talk to you privately about your concerns. Also, add to the list below the names of those other men that you feel are qualified to serve as deacons.

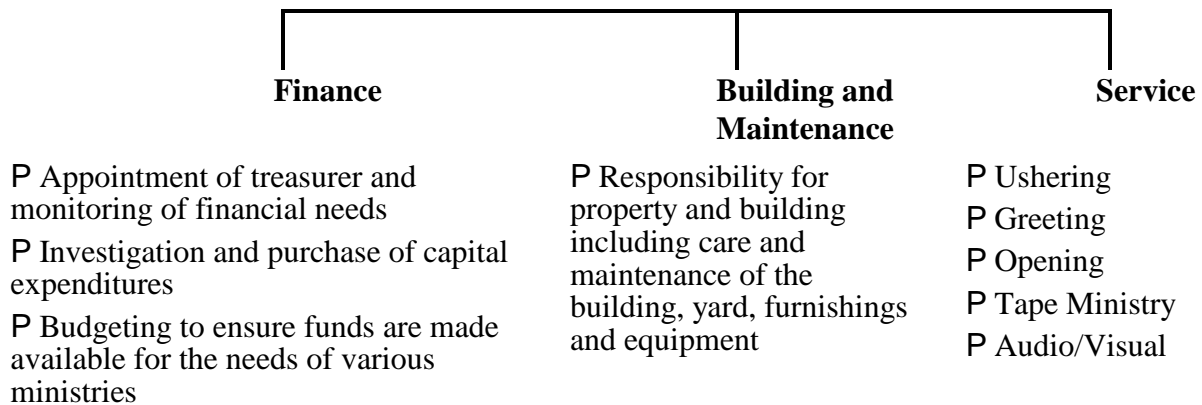
This will not be viewed as an election but as an indicator of what the Lord Jesus, the Head of the Church, is saying to the body in this matter.

# Areas of Responsibilities for Elders and Deacons at Elim Bible Chapel

## ELDERS



## DEACONS



## *The Lord's Supper*

The occasion was the night of His betrayal and the eve of His death. It was a deeply moving scene as Jesus Christ gathered with His disciples for what has come to be known as The Last Supper. Millions from every part of the world instantly recognize the scene when it appears in Christian art. The early believers marked it upon the walls of the Roman catacombs as it was etched into their memory. It was on the night of the Jewish Passover that the Lord Jesus introduced something entirely new. He took a loaf of bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to His disciples saying, "*Take, eat; this is My body. And He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is My blood of the new testament which is shed for many for the remission of sins.*" (Matthew 26:26-28). Two other gospel writers join in the same account (Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20).

### ***Names of the Supper***

It is called the Lord's Supper (I Corinthians 11:20) since He has convened it and He is the principal guest of honour. "The Lord's Table" (I Corinthians 10:21) has a wider meaning and includes all of His provision for His people, not simply the Supper. The feast is called the Communion (I Corinthians 10:16) because there is a common sharing or fellowship with Christ and one another as we partake. It is called the Breaking of Bread (Acts 1:42; 20:7; I Corinthians 10:16) because it reflects the simple manner of an ordinary meal in which the phrase would normally be used. Many speak of remembering the Lord because of His command which was expressed in this way. There are others who have used the expression eucharist, meaning "thanksgiving", since He gave thanks for the elements (Matthew 26:26).

### ***Historical Background of the Supper***

The Lord's Supper was instituted on the night of the Jewish Passover. God's hand had delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt 1,500 years before. At His command they slew a spotless lamb and applied the blood to their doorposts as a protection from judgment about to fall upon the whole land (Exodus 12). Each detail of the feast, ordained for their perpetual observance, had profound significance. It pointed to the great sacrifice, which would truly protect from God's judgment by taking away the sins of the world. God was preparing His own Lamb long before (Genesis 22:8; Isaiah 53:5). Jesus was hailed by John the Baptist as "*the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29). One of His glorious titles is The Lamb (Revelation 5:6, 12). He was the fulfillment of the Passover feasts. "*Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.*" (I Corinthians 5:7). The older



feast was only a shadow of the greater fulfillment to come (Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 10:1).

Every godly Jew faithfully kept the Passover (Matthew 26:17). It was a remembrance of his redemption. On the night of this sacred observance, Jesus introduced the memorial observance of bread and wine. Thereafter, it was to remind believers of His body given and His blood shed for their salvation. It was to become to Christians what the Passover was to the Jews, and would be no less sacred. It replaced the Passover in the eyes of God. Israel had many ceremonies, but the Christian church was given only one collective observance.

The Lord Jesus directly communicated to the Apostle Paul the importance of that which was delivered unto believers for their observance. Jesus said, "*This do in remembrance of Me*" I Corinthians 11:23-25. The Lord's Supper became a regular part of their worship (Acts 2:42, 46). The early church kept the observance once a week as the center of their gatherings (Acts 20:7). It was celebrated on the day of Resurrection. The so-called early church "fathers" or leaders noted that it was celebrated every Lord's Day or Sunday (Justin Martyr and the Didache or Teaching of the Twelve).

## ***Celebration of the Supper***

### ***1. Who May Participate?***

Certainly if the Passover was only for Jews (Exodus 12:43), the Lord's Supper is only for Christians. It was for "His own" that the Lord first instituted the feast. It was the disciples who began to break bread in memory of Him after He was risen. Moreover, the supper is for prepared Christians. Some believers were careless about their spiritual condition when participating and were warned of God's judgment (I Corinthians 11:18-31). The leaders were to exclude those who continue to practice evil (I Corinthians 5:12-13) as well as those holding doctrines which undermine either the gospel or the person of Christ (II John 9:10; Galatians 5:12-13). Stated affirmatively, all who confess Christ as Lord and Saviour and who have a walk consistent with that faith should be welcomed to the Supper.

### ***2. What is the Procedure?***

We have the example of the Lord in His establishment as our principal guide. It seems to have been characterized by simplicity rather than elaborate ceremony. Scripture does not give us a precise outline of how the supper was celebrated. Nor does it indicate what preceded or followed the taking of the bread and the cup. At Elim, we combine remembering the Lord with worship. The reason is that in the Lord's Supper, all of the great benefits of God toward us converge. His power, holiness and mercy, as well as His works on our behalf come to mind as we remember the Lord. Therefore, we begin with songs that remind us of the greatness of our God, then someone shares with us on a great theme from the Word of God, and after that, others chime in with songs, prayers, Scripture readings or praise so that HE is exalted! Since redemption is the high point of God's work on our behalf, remembering Him becomes the climax of our gathering! Any of the men are welcome to offer publicly their praises as the Spirit of God brings rays of truth to their

minds (I Corinthians 4:26-34). After this time of worship and praise, any of the men may bless the bread and cup, passing them to the brothers and sisters.

### ***3. How do we Discern the Lord's Body (I Corinthians 11:29)?***

Certainly we should know the significance of the elements as they testify to the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross when He put away our sins by sacrifice of Himself (Hebrews 9:26). We believe the bread and wine are simple symbols that Christ Himself used to remind us of His body and blood. With prior self-examination (I Corinthians 11:28-32), and in quiet meditation our minds are drawn to remember and discern Him.

### ***4. What do we accomplish by Breaking Bread?***

If we did nothing else, we would comply with the Lord's dying request and show that we love Him by doing so. Together in obedience as believers, we remember Him in accordance with the manner of His choosing, nor ours. We rejoice in the fact that He has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel and we have been included. We share personally and individually as members of the believing community, as we partake of the elements. Our unity is expressed in the one loaf (I Corinthians 10:17). The cup speaks of communion or common sharing (I Corinthians 10:16). We are one with Him, as He is with us, in all that He has accomplished. We share His attitudes as to sin and righteousness. As often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death (I Corinthians 11:26). The feast is a salvation message. The duration is described as "until He comes". Each remembrance has the possibility of being the last one before His return.

## ***Preparation for the Supper***

Preparation for the Passover in the Old Testament involved many things. There was no careless participation. We should be no less prepared.

### ***1. Examination***

True preparation for the Lord's Supper begins with self-examination (I Corinthians 11:28-32). This is to prepare, not preclude the participant. One should first examine his own relationship with the Lord and confess any known sin. Then he should look at his relationship with others (especially other Christians). An attempt should be made to settle problems with other believers before partaking of the feast (Matthew 5:23-24). The Scriptures warn against neglect in the area of self-judgment lest God's judgment come. In the church of Corinth, physical illness and death resulted from being careless in this area.

### ***2. Meditation***

If we have been entertaining ourselves recreationally and conversing on subjects not directly related to the Lord before coming to the feast, our preparation has failed. Reading the Word of God, singing spiritual songs and sharing with believers or family about the Lord Jesus are ways of spending time in preparation for remembering Him. Certainly, we can only bring to Him that which has been prepared ahead of time. David said, "Neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the Lord my God that which cost me nothing" (II Samuel 24:24). Celebrations of the Lord's Supper will be freed from deadening sameness when we have prepared ourselves beforehand.

## Conclusion

Worship is the supreme responsibility and privilege of the believer (John 4:23; Luke 10:41-42). We offer spiritual sacrifices as priests (I Peter 2:5). Regularly remembering the Lord as He commanded should take precedence over recreational activities, family gatherings and other obligations. As a vital part of the believer's priesthood, we have opportunity, during communion, to offer the sacrifice of praise, the fruit of our lips to God (Hebrews 13:15). We present material offerings to God as an act of worship (Philippians 4:17-18). Finally, we should offer afresh our bodies as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2).

*Jesus said, "Remember Me."*

## Baptism

Accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour means that we should begin in all areas to obey and follow Him. Jesus commanded those who would follow Him to be baptized (Matthew 28:19-20). A test of our love for Him is obedience (John 14:21). It follows, therefore, that all believers should obey the Lord in baptism because it is "the answer of a good conscience towards God" (I Peter 3:21).

In the early history of the church, continuing down to this day, Christians obeyed the Lord by being baptized after accepting Him as their Saviour (Acts 2:41). This baptism took place immediately after conversion to Christ, not before. Faith in Christ is a condition of baptism rightly done in the sight of God (Acts 8:36-37). It is therefore called "believers' baptism", as opposed to the practice of baptizing infants or small children prior to their coming to an age of responsible decision. There is no genuine support for infant baptism in the Bible. Neither is there any instance of "confirmation".

Jesus took infants in His arms and blessed them. He received them to Himself. However, neither He nor his disciples ever baptized them. In any event, such an act would not wash away sin, which is only through His shed blood (Hebrews 9:22). Baptism does not:

- save our souls or wash away our sins
- join us to the church as members.

Biblical baptism was by immersion (going completely under the water) (Acts 8:38-39). Baptism is an act whereby we are "buried with Him", as we are told in the Scripture (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12). This burial signified our identification with the Lord Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection, not cleansing (Romans 6:3-5). The Lord died, was buried and rose again in new life with Him (Colossians 3:1-3). In baptism, we symbolically show our passing through death, burial and resurrection with Him by going under the waters and rising out of them again. We symbolize what the Lord Jesus has done for us on the cross after we have confessed Him with our lips publicly as our Lord and Saviour.

Baptism is linked with the Breaking of Bread as the only two symbolic ordinances taught in Scripture. As baptism is our public confession of identification with Christ, the Lord's Supper is our continuing reminder and memorial to Him and to His death.

Have you accepted Jesus as your Saviour and Lord? Are you seeking to walk in obedience to Him? The first step is public confession of Him. The next step is baptism. If you have not been baptized as a believer, it is important that you obey the Lord in this manner. Though salvation does not require it, obedience does (Luke 23:43; Romans 10:9-10).

If you desire to be baptized or have any questions regarding this subject, please approach one of the elders.

## *Male & Female in Scripture*

The Bible speaks of male/female relationships primarily in terms of the family and the Church. The same general principles appear to apply in both settings. Therefore, they will be addressed together, prior to making specific statements regarding the roles of men and women in the Church.

In the beginning, God created. The crown of His creative work was the bringing into being of Adam and Eve: made in the very image of God! (Genesis 1:26-27). These two knew the unfettered joy of being one with each other as well as one with God. Unfortunately, this relationship was short lived. Sin brought not only estrangement between this couple and God, but also introduced a tension between them (Genesis 3:16b). As in the rest of creation, both unity and tension have marked the male/female relationship throughout history.

The modern era knows no change from this historical dilemma. Though there have been many changes, especially for women in the last 40 years, the basic unity/tension aspect of the male/female relationship has changed little. Birth control, smaller families, equal education, equal types of employment and equal rights have all had enormous impact, yet the statement of Genesis 3:16 still remains true.

Throughout Scripture the relationship between men and women is seen at its best in joyful marriage. This relationship is seen as something particularly blessed of God, though not without its share of pitfalls. Even outside of marriage, men and women are seen working together in harmony, as team members in the service of God (Exodus 15:20-21; Micah 6:4; Judges 4:4-10; Luke 8:1-3; Romans 16).

At issue today are the distinctive roles given to males and females as the norm of Scripture. That these are both distinctive and prevalent in the Bible is obvious. The question being raised today is: if, and to what extent should these distinctives be applied in today's family and Church?

We are convinced that God has made males and females different, and that the difference is good! He calls men and women to forsake sin, self, and the world to walk in fellowship with Him. This is our greatest calling, one that occupies every child of God. He further calls men and women to treat one another as co-heirs together of the grace of God. With all dignity, we are to use our gifts in serving one another to the glory of God. In addition to these two callings, there is a third. Men are called to imitate Christ in terms of "headship" in the family and in the Church. Women are called to imitate the Church as it responds to Christ in those same spheres of family and Church. This third "calling" best brings proper fulfillment when the first two callings are being responded to with honesty

and diligence. This calling is not static, nor a rigid, prescribed set of rules; it is rather the harmonious icing on the cake of relationships under God.

How will this third calling be evident? Primarily it will be observed in the extra deference of the women to the men in settings where "authority, ruling or leadership" are practiced (I Corinthians 11, 14; Ephesians 5; Colossians 3; I Timothy 2, 3; I Peter 3). One does well to examine the nature of Jesus' relationship to his followers in the Gospels when considering the meaning of "authority". Similarly, the relationship of the Church as it submits to Christ is best seen in a careful reading of the Epistles.

That men should be called to this role of "headship" does not reflect on any innate male superiority over women any more than God's choice of Israel was a sign of their righteous superiority over other nations. In fact, God told them (Israel) that it was not because of their righteousness that they were chosen, for they were a "stiff-necked" people. Similarly, some men have been spiritually lethargic and have provided lamentably poor imitations of the headship of Christ.

What is headship and how might it be recognized in the Church? The following three points summarize in brief the biblical teaching on this topic.

- i Male Headship: Within the congregation, teaching, leading, and authority are clearly the calling of godly men (I Timothy 2, 3; Titus 1). Women are asked to be willfully submissive to the authority. Often in churches, the problem is not the submissive response of women but rather the refusal of men to lead. It is the task of those who lead to encourage the use of all the gifts given to the Church, whether male or female. Creativity, courage and faith are needed to accomplish this. There should never be a man or woman able to say with justification, "I have a spiritual gift from God, but no suitable sphere in which to use it." Such a statement reflects either a lack of faith or vision on the part of the individual or poor leadership on the part of the Church, or both! Our prayers and best efforts must be given so that such waste does not occur.
- ii Verbal communication is the primary means of using many of our spiritual gifts and is also among the most obvious ways of acknowledging the distinct callings of males and females, under God. How should we respond to the Scriptural statement, "Women should remain silent in the churches" (I Corinthians 14:34)? It is our understanding that this is not an absolute rule, and in fact it is rarely so applied. In its context, this statement is most likely referring to a specific problem in Corinth relating to prophecy or speaking in tongues. Nevertheless, its wider implications should not simply be ignored. Certain kinds of speaking (I Timothy 2) are clearly the specific calling of the men. For this reason and because of the way in which we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we encourage the men to take the vocal leadership in this meeting. In other meetings, women may indeed speak but should stop short of that which would involve teaching, instructing or taking the role of authority. In congregational settings, when the person in charge invites the congregation to respond by sharing concerns, joys, relevant information or in prayer, then both men and women should be free to respond

iii Headcoverings are another way Scripture teaches that the principle of headship can be visibly demonstrated. We receive instruction in I Corinthians 11 regarding the woman's use of a headcovering and the man's nonuse of one. The passage contains reasons that are timeless and theological however there are questions left unanswered such as when headcoverings should be worn. As a congregation we will leave this decision to each individual before God.

Prone as we are to pride and abuse of authority, the Scriptures gently remind us of proper balance; "However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God" (I Corinthians 11:11-12).

The same attitude that allows for difference in roles within marriage, to our ultimate benefit, is also needed in our congregations. The distinctive roles of men and women in marriage are for our mutual profit. The same is true in the Church. The cooperative oneness that brings delight to marriage is needed to bring harmony and oneness in the Church.

**NOTE:** This short paper should not be viewed as an attempt to treat our subject exhaustively. It does reflect our understanding of the relevant passages.



## *Benevolent Fund*

The benevolent fund has been established to provide swift and selected help to those of our church family or with connection to our church family who find themselves in immediate, desperate need of life's essentials (food, clothing and shelter).

In a joint decision, the elders and deacons have made available designated funds for this purpose.

Funds will be dispersed by a committee of three people, including one deacon and one elder, in a discreet and confidential manner.

The following criteria will be followed in making disbursements.

- v a member of the benevolent committee shall be made aware of the need
- v the need must be determined to be genuine by all members of the committee
- v funds may be given outright or used to pay bills at the discretion of the committee
- v gifts will not exceed \$500
- v dispersals will be made with no expectation of repayment
- v the committee will keep records of all transactions

"If anyone has material possessions and sees  
his brother in need but has no pity on him,  
how can the love of God be in him?"

I John 3:17

## Weddings

God is pleased when a man and a woman are joined in lawful marriage before Him in a ceremony upholding this holy covenant. When a Christian man and woman are joined in this matter, Christ is honoured and His special relationship between Him and the church, "His bride" is pictured.

The elders at Elim Bible Chapel wish to uphold the sanctity of this special covenant. We recognize that society has, to a large extent, degraded the marriage vow and the permanence of marriage. Many churches have succumbed to marrying any and all who ask to be married in their church. We feel this trend has contributed to the dishonouring of Christian marriage. For this reason, we have proposed the following guidelines for weddings at Elim Bible Chapel.

- i Christian wedding ceremonies requested by a believing couple affiliated\* with Elim Bible Chapel will be granted provided the building is available and proper pre-marriage counseling can be arranged. (\*An affiliate is a believer who has made Elim Bible Chapel his/her home church and is committed to its work..)
- ii Weddings requested by Christian couples outside of our local fellowship will be granted at the discretion of the elders, provided that the building is available and conditions for the use of the building are met.
- iii Weddings requested by unequally yoked couples (a believer wishing to marry a nonbeliever) will generally be denied. There is a strong biblical warning against marriages of this kind (II Corinthians 6:14-18). Counseling will be offered, if requested, with the goal of helping the couple to step back and consider waiting on the Lord for His guidance and blessing.
- iv Weddings requested by non-Christian couples, even those with some connection to the local fellowship will be discouraged. Unless there is a proper understanding of God and what marriage is in His eyes, the risk of dishonouring Him by performing a ceremony like this in His house is great. Counseling will be offered and biblical principles will be explained. If the pastor (or licensed official of the chapel) agrees to perform their wedding outside the chapel building, this will be accepted.
- v Realizing that each situation is distinct, with varying circumstances and potential repercussions, the elders will meet and make a decision on a marriage request that does not fall clearly into the above guidelines. The final decision in this case will rest with the elders.

July 2001

## *Divorce & Remarriage*

This paper is not intended to be exhaustive, but it does represent the careful deliberation of the Elders' Board. While we recognize each person's situation is unique, we are committed to the belief that the Bible is our guide for faith and practice and that it must inform all aspects of marriage, divorce and remarriage. We are also committed to two fundamental truths: one, God hates any violation of His Word, whether the sin relates to marriage or not; and two, God's grace and forgiveness, when linked with genuine repentance, addresses all sin and transgression. In this spirit we offer a summary of our reflections which apply to all those who are members at Elim Bible Chapel and to those who want to be married at Elim.

### ***Why the Need for Such a Policy?***

#### ***a) The Positive - Affirming Marriage***

Why do we need a policy on divorce and remarriage? Marriage is God's idea! Marriage was instituted by God (Genesis 2:18, 24) and was intended to be a monogamous (Genesis 2:22), heterosexual relationship (Genesis 1:27, 2:22) that involved a formal leaving of one's parents in order to establish a new identity in relation to one's spouse (Genesis 2:24). The concept of leaving one's family to cleave to one's spouse communicates God's desire that marriage be a loving, life-long, permanent commitment that is broken only by death (Mark 10:9; I Corinthians 7:39; Romans 7:2-3).

Within the marriage both husband and wife are expected to carry out their God-given responsibilities (I Corinthians 7:1-7; Ephesians 5:21-33; I Peter 3:1-7) and to recognize that marriage is a profound human expression of the loving relationship between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:32). It follows, then, that a Christian would not knowingly marry a non-Christian (I Corinthians 7:39). For a Christian and a non-Christian to knowingly enter into a committed covenant relationship would be as wrong as to assert that light could be in harmony with darkness or Christ could be in harmony with Satan (II Corinthians 6:14-18).

Finally, we believe that, while common-law relationships are not addressed in Scripture, the spirit and tenor of the Bible and the current cultural climate leads to marriage seen as either church and/or state sanctioned. In summary, a violation of this significant life-long commitment is not God's intent or desire (Malachi 2:16). As a result, we, as a church, need some guiding principles to ensure that this institution, created by God, is valued, respected and affirmed.

#### ***b) The Negative - The Reality of Marital Breakdown***

One obvious reason we need a policy on divorce and remarriage is because marriages are breaking down. We need to recognize that God's desire and intent has not been met throughout history. The Scriptures are filled with examples of sin, transgression and brokenness and they present to us a picture of a Creator who is struggling with His creatures.

*The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that He made man on the earth and His heart was filled with pain. (Genesis 6:5-6)*

Marital breakdown fits into this overall picture. When God ordained marriage it was not His intent that abuse, adultery and desertion would creep in. It was not His intent that separation and divorce would be on the increase. It was not His intent that so much pain would stem from the marital bond. However, we recognize that God specializes in bringing joy out of sorrow, good out of evil and righteousness out of sin. We also affirm that God is a forgiving and gracious God who goes to great lengths to win His people back. As a result, we as a church, need some guiding principles that will address the brokenness of many marriages.

### ***What Does the Bible Teach?***

The first step in developing a pastoral guide on the subject of divorce and remarriage is to determine what the Scripture teaches, looking at passages in their context and applying them in a way that is consistent with the original intent of the author. Leviticus 21:7, 14; 22:13; Numbers 30:9; Deuteronomy 22:19, 29; 24:1, 3, 4; I Chronicles 8:8; Ezekiel 44:22; Isaiah 50:1; Jeremiah 3:1, 8; Malachi 2:16; Matthew 1:19; 5:31, 32; 19:3, 7, 8, 9; Mark 10:2, 4, 11, 12; Luke 16:18; I Corinthians 7:11, 12, 13, 27. One of the key passages in Matthew 19:3-9.

When Jesus was questioned about marriage and divorce by the Pharisees, He replied,

*"Haven't you read," He replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:4-9)*

From this passage we see that marriage was instituted by God and was intended to be lifelong. However, the passage also acknowledges that because of sin and human frailty, some marriages do fail. So while the Pharisees were asking about Moses' command regarding divorce, Jesus responds by saying Moses permitted divorce. The passage they were referring to (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) acknowledges the existence of divorce but it is neither commanded nor approved. In fact, at the core, God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16).

Similar statements about marriage and divorce are found in Matthew 5:31-32, Mark 10:1-12 and Luke 16:18. However, in contrast to the two references in Matthew, the Mark and Luke passages do not include the phrase, "except for marital unfaithfulness."

The Greek word for marital unfaithfulness is 'porneia'. Along with the phrase marital unfaithfulness, it is variously translated as fornication, sexual unfaithfulness, unchastity, adultery, homosexuality, incest, bestiality or sexual sin. In essence, 'porneia' communicates a violation of the covenant of companionship found in marriage through the introduction of a third party. This third party becomes the companion usually, although not always, in a sexual relationship. It is clear that 'porneia' is a particular word with a particular emphasis. Careful readers of the Bible cannot read "any cause" into this word.

However, why does the so-called exception clause (“except for marital unfaithfulness”) only appear in Matthew? There are at least two explanations for this. The Gospel according to Matthew was written to a Jewish audience. Because divorce was a matter of great controversy among the Jews, it is believed that Matthew wanted to restrict divorce among Jewish converts. The exception clause served the dual purpose of holding a high moral standard regarding sexuality and also valuing the institution of marriage as a life-long commitment. A further explanation, which is equally plausible, is that Matthew’s account of Jesus’ life is more detailed than the other four gospels; hence, he includes details that the other three would not emphasize.

Another crucial passage on divorce is found in I Corinthians 7:1-40.

*To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife. To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? ... A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. (I Corinthians 7:10-16, 39)*

In this chapter, Paul answers a number of questions that the Corinthians had about marriage. Paul is, clearly, passing on the teaching of Jesus regarding the permanency of marriage. He recognizes that the ideal is not always achieved, however, and counsels the separated spouse to remain unmarried and leave the door open to reconciliation. In the case of a believer-unbeliever marriage, the Christian is not to divorce their non-Christian spouse unless the spouse is not willing to live with him or her. Again, the overall tone of the passage is not that divorce should be pursued as an easy way out of a difficult marriage but only considered as a last resort when the continuance of marriage is not possible.

What about remarriage? In some cases, the Bible is very clear on remarriage. If a spouse dies, remarriage is permitted.

*For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. (Romans 7:2)*

*So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. (I Timothy 5:14)*

*Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. (I Corinthians 7:8-9)*

But what about remarriage after divorce? In Corinthians 7 where divorce is discussed explicitly, Paul indicates that the Christian person who has been deserted by their non-Christian spouse is “not bound” (I Corinthians 7:15) and that those who marry in this situation: have not sinned” (I Corinthians 7:28).

The topics of divorce and remarriage are intimately tied together in the two passages in Matthew. In other words, the allowance of divorce for ‘porneia’ appears to include remarriage. One commits adultery, according to Jesus, if remarriage occurs when ‘porneia’ is not present.

### ***What is Elim’s Approach to Divorce and Remarriage?***

In a complex and broken world, marital breakdown comes in a myriad of forms. As a result we cannot provide a policy that covers every situation and answers every question. However, we do want to be people of faith who are committed to the centrality of Scripture as our sole authority for all aspects of our lives including divorce and remarriage.

We are also people of faith who are committed to a loving and holy God who, upon repentance, forgives people of their sins. We want our church community to be a place where repentant sinners can find a home and where their gifts and abilities can be utilized for God’s glory.

1. While we recognize that divorce and remarriage are inevitable in a broken world, the elders are committed to doing everything they can to preserve the permanency of marriage by ensuring that:
  - a. requests for marriage or remarriage performed under the auspices of Elim Bible Chapel (in contrast to situations where the church is being rented out) are considered prayerfully within the guidelines of this policy;
  - b. potential as well as current elders and deacons that are married have strong marriages;
  - c. teaching on the subject of marriage and the family occurs, in some format on a regular basis
  - d. teaching on dating, premarital sex, marriage and family issues should be part of the youth curriculum on a regular basis
  - e. all couples who get married at Elim go through a premarital counseling program, either through Elim or elsewhere, that is approved by the elders.
  
2. While we recognize that there are a diversity of positions on the topics of divorce and remarriage held by Godly, Bible-centred people, the elders are committed to three key biblical guidelines based on our understanding of the biblical material described above.
  - a. While divorce appears to be allowed in certain situations, no passage in Scripture commands or requires divorce. It is a concession made by God because of the sinfulness of the human heart. This concession is not an open-ended, divorce for any cause, but one that regulates when divorce and remarriage should occur.
  - b. Divorce, from a biblical perspective, appears to be allowed only in situations of ‘porneia’, or desertion by a non-Christian spouse. However, biblical allowance does not necessitate that divorce must occur.
  - c. Remarriage, from a biblical perspective, appears to be allowed only in situations of ‘porneia’, desertion by a non-Christian spouse or death of a spouse. Again, the biblical allowance does not necessitate that divorce must occur.

3. While we recognize that no policy can capture every situation in detail (i.e. Desertion by a Christian spouse), the elders are committed to a pastoral approach to marriage failure and breakdown that includes the following:
  - a. We would like to interact with those who are experiencing severe marital dysfunction, either on their initiative or our own so we can listen, pray and be helpful by providing support and help within the church community or by making a thoughtful referral to a Christian counselor outside Elim.
  - b. Two elders would like to meet with couples who are contemplating divorce or remarriage after divorce to review their situation in light of the biblical material and this policy.
  - c. With the backdrop of our policy on divorce and remarriage, each situation will be examined carefully and prayerfully, recognizing that we live in a broken world and that the message of Christ's love and forgiveness is for all, including those who are divorced or divorced and remarried.

**A THEOLOGICAL SUMMARY OF HUMAN SEXUALITY  
An InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA Position Paper**

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## **PREAMBLE**

Our culture is changing rapidly. Moral values which were once widely accepted are being challenged even by those within the evangelical church.

The elders of Elim Bible Chapel feel the need to communicate to those of our congregation, as well as the broader Christian community, where we stand on the issues of human sexuality based on the teaching of God's word. What follows is a summary of our views adopted from a document published by Interspersivity Fellowship USA. We gratefully acknowledge their permission to use it in our context at Elim.

Our hope is that this document will:

- Clearly articulate our position on these matters
- Serve as a tool to help instruct members of our church body
- Provide a theological framework on sexuality around which all the leaders in our congregation can unite

## **I. CREATION: GOD'S DESIGN FOR HUMAN SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS**

Let us first consider God's original design. Sexuality is God's idea, his wonderful and beautiful gift intended for our well-being and his glory. From the beginning, healthy human sexuality was designed as a means of intimacy between husband and wife as well as the context for birthing and rearing children in flourishing families.

### **Loving Relationships**

In all of our relationships—friendships, marriage, family, church, and community—whenever we engage in *self-giving* love, we reflect the image of God

The starting point in our understanding of loving relationships is the Trinity, a perfect love that exists eternally within the Godhead. This uniquely Christian doctrine is extremely important to our understanding of human relationships. The three persons of the Trinity are distinct and differentiated, yet one Divine Being. They relate in perfect love that is completely selfless, non-competitive, non-threatening, and self-giving. In an intimate prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus says to the Father, "You have bestowed glory upon me, *because you loved me before the creation of the world*" (John 17:24, italics added).

This loving trinitarian relationship is important because human beings are made in God's image:

So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).

This idea of human beings made in the image of God is a uniquely Judeo-Christian doctrine. It is essential for our understanding of human relationships.

From the beginning, God made us to be relational beings who reflect his character. The only part of the original creation that God declared "not good" was man being alone" (Genesis 2:18). This reveals God's intention for people to live in loving relationship with one another. This love is most commonly expressed by the Greek word *agape*.

This agape love is most fully described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails.

This passage is often used to describe marital or romantic love, but its primary application is to the church as the body of Christ, the family of God. Agape love is most fully demonstrated in the person of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, in his sacrificial, self-giving love for us: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13).

So we see what God's original plan was for human relationships: that we should be characterized by agape love for the well-being and enjoyment of all people. He intended that we should reflect his image as we engage in this kind of self-giving love.

### **Sacred Marriage**

From the beginning, God also had a plan and purpose for human sexual relationships. In marriage, we reflect the image of God in a unique way by joining together spiritually and physically. We were created in God's image as male and female (Genesis 1:27). Both genders together reflect the image of God, both in their distinctness and in their oneness.

The main term that the Creator has used to describe this marriage relationship is "one flesh."

The man said,

"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become *one flesh*. (Genesis 2:23-24, italics added)

This passage describes the establishment of what would later be termed "marriage" as an ordinance of God, not simply a social construct. Notice that it is not just this man and this woman, but it defines a pattern in which men and women would enter into this one-flesh marriage union.

Marriage is defined as a distinctive union between one man and one woman, as husband and wife, in which they covenant with one another to lifelong devotion. In addition, Christian marriage and family is not viewed as an end, but as a means of serving the kingdom of God in this world.

Much later, Jesus affirmed the Genesis 2 definition of marriage. When asked a question about divorce, he first responded with a strong statement about marriage:

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matthew 19:4-6)

In this affirmation, Jesus makes it clear that God is the one who made humans male and female and who established marriage. God is the one who declares that they are one flesh. The husband and wife not only join together but also enter into a relationship in which the Lord is at the center.

Jesus adds the important phrase, "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." Because this is a union formed by God, it is exclusive, sacred, and intended to be lifelong.

Paul also affirms this definition of marriage. Quoting Genesis 2:24, he compares the marriage relationship to that of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). On the one hand, this comparison helps us to better understand the essence of the nurturing relationship between Christ and the Church. On the other, it enables us to see more deeply into the cherished meaning of Christian marriage.

## **Sacred Singleness**

Numerous Christians view singleness as God's long-term calling for their lives, and an opportunity to develop a deeper devotion to God as well as invest more fully in friendships. Others do not necessarily regard their singleness as long-term but remain faithful to God and his kingdom work while they look to the future prospect of marriage. Single Christians celebrate their maleness or femaleness as part of God's creation gift to them. They continue to be devoted friends and to maintain healthy relationships with both single and married people.

Jesus was, of course, single. He lived a complete and fulfilled single life according to the plan of his Father. After Jesus gave some hard teaching about the permanence of marriage, the disciples reflected that it would seem better not to marry. In response, Jesus said that marriage is not for everyone and described a calling for those who choose not to marry for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:12). That is, some are called to lives of celibacy because of their particular role in the kingdom of God and their place in God's world.

The apostle Paul was one such person. A great missionary and tireless worker extending the borders of God's kingdom, he remained single at least for a significant portion of his life. He advised others to remain likewise (1 Corinthians 7:8). Later in the text, because of the "present crisis" to which Paul referred, he recommended that believers remain in whatever station of life they found themselves (7:17, 26-28).

When the church is functioning appropriately as the family of God, single and married people are fully included. Moreover, single people in the church reflect everyone's eternal destinies. Jesus reminded the Sadducees that in the fullness of the kingdom, we will not be married, explaining that "at the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage" (Matthew 22:30).

## **Sexual Union in Marriage**

Sexuality is to be enjoyed in the context of marriage for our well-being and for God's glory. A man and a woman become *one flesh* through sexual intercourse. Marriage is consummated in sexual union: "Now Adam knew [had sexual intercourse with] his wife and she conceived and gave birth to Cain" (Genesis 4:1).

The Hebrew usage of the word "knew" (Adam *knew* his wife) suggests the intimacy of this one-flesh relationship. Physical union is a fulfillment of the spiritual and emotional union that already exists. Sex was designed to be lived out in the context of an intimate emotional, spiritual, and covenantal relationship.

Because marriage is a solemn covenant before God, between a man and a woman, it requires a "sign" of the covenant (Malachi 2:14; see *Marriage as a Covenant*). In the case of marriage, intercourse is the God-given sign. In modern Western culture, we generally wear a wedding ring as the public sign of our marriage vows, our marriage covenant. However, it is in sexual union that the husband and wife say to each other, "We are married; we are one flesh."

Also, from the beginning, it was God's intention that humans should reproduce and fill the whole earth (Genesis 1:28). This is not simply a command to have lots of babies. It was God's intention to fill the whole earth with his glory, with people who would know him. This is still his plan, inherent in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

In Genesis 2, it was made clear that the marriage relationship was to be the means of fulfilling the procreation component of that mandate. Having children was regarded as "good." This is part of God's intended plan for the marriage union. This was God's design for sexuality at creation and remains so.

In spite of this clear and positive biblical teaching, various negative views about marital sexual expression soon crept into the early church (1 Timothy 4:3). This has influenced attitudes in the Church toward sex throughout history, with the Church sometimes viewing sex as a necessary evil, and sometimes identifying it as *the* original sin, or generally as a dirty thing. Others often view Christians as being "against sex before marriage, and within marriage, they try not to enjoy it too much."

Sexual intimacy between a husband and wife is beautiful; it is a sacred expression of what it means to be one flesh—*"bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."* It follows that any sexual expression outside of this special marriage relationship—whether extramarital, premarital, or same-sex union—is a distortion of God's gracious gift.

### **Fidelity**

The consistent intention of God is either to biblical marital faithfulness or to chaste singleness. In both cases, it is a call to a lifestyle void of promiscuity. In the book of Proverbs, men are called to be faithful to their wives. Contrary to modern notions that we have an indisputable right to seek sexual fulfillment in any manner possible, God calls us to monogamous lifetime relationships and emotional faithfulness.

In poetic language, Proverbs lovingly appeals to young men to avoid the lures of the adulteress and to maintain fidelity to their own wives:

May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer— may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love. Why, my son, be intoxicated with another man's wife? Why embrace the bosom of a wayward woman? (Proverbs 5:18-20)

This fatherly advice and wisdom is a call for the husband to rejoice in his own wife all of his days, to find satisfaction in her body, and to be captivated by her devotion. The same advice applies to the wife (Ephesians 5:33).

In modern Christian weddings, vows are made promising fidelity in all kinds of circumstances. These words usually include *"for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy or in sorrow, as long as we both shall live."* These are powerful words and bold promises that take into account the reality of aging and the possibility of sickness or an accident that causes one partner to be unable to engage in sexual activity. These vows are the stipulations of the marriage covenant and stand in contrast to selfish ambition.

## **II. THE FALL: NOT THE WAY IT IS SUPPOSED TO BE**

What we have considered so far describes the beautiful, harmonious, joyful expression of relationships and human sexuality as God intended it. But the world we live in does not conduct itself that way.

We live in a world where the common experience of sexuality is broken and distorted to some extent, sometimes to the extremes of manipulation, abuse, and violence. There is a striking difference between "knowing" one's spouse and using, abusing, or neglecting one's spouse. We have a sense that it is not intended to be this way. How did we drift so far from the Creator's grand design for human relationships? How did we move from self-sacrifice to self-gratification? How did we move from meaningful sexual intimacy to casual sex?

The Fall is described in Genesis 3. It was an assertion of human will in opposition to the Creator. The result of this fall from grace—this "foul revolt" as described in Milton's *Paradise Lost*—is almost beyond comprehension. Every area of life is affected, especially human relationships, resulting in shame, enmity, hostility, accusation, broken relationships with the Creator, broken relationships among people, and death.

The devastating consequences of the Fall in the experience of human sexual behavior are also far-reaching. People have distorted God's marvelous gift of sex in every way imaginable. Scripture speaks against premarital sex (1 Corinthians 7:9; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8), sexual promiscuity and prostitution (1 Corinthians 6:13-18; Proverbs 6:25-26), and any form of distortion of God's original intention for sex (1 Timothy 1:10; 1 Corinthians 6:9; Romans 1:27; Leviticus 18–20).

## **Sexual Abuse**

One result of the Fall is that violence has become associated with sex. The occurrences of assault, exploitation, misuse of power, trafficking, rape, and other forms of abuse are particularly disturbing sexual distortions of God's design. Among developed countries, the U.S. has one of the highest occurrences of rape.

It is hard to imagine something that is further removed from God's original intention—that sexual expression should emanate from a loving, affectionate relationship in the context of marriage.

The Bible views sexual assault upon a woman, man, or child as a particularly heinous crime in society. The Mosaic Law code views this as a crime worthy of capital punishment and recognizes the innocence of the victim, protecting the victim from retaliation (Deuteronomy 22:25-27). In one of the darker periods of Israel's history, a Levite's concubine was raped by the men of Gibeah of the tribe of Benjamin. The result was an all-out civil war resulting in the near annihilation of the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 19–20).

As Christians, we must counter a culture of rape and abuse, protecting the innocent, seeking justice for perpetrators, and calling people back to God's sacred design for human sexuality.

## **Divorce**

When God first established marriage, he made it clear that this was designed to be a lifelong binding covenant between a man and a woman. But divorce continues to be a present reality in our society, with no-fault unilateral divorce permitted in most states.

Divorce has devastating consequences for the home, society, and the Church. It creates trauma for children as well as economic instability, and often has negative health and psychological effects. The breakdown of marriages should make our hearts ache and move us to renew our efforts to strengthen them.

Due to sin and hardness of heart, the Bible makes some provision where divorce may be permitted (though never promoted). Moses made an exception in the law (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). His was not a command but a concession (as Jesus later made clear). The cause for divorce was "uncleanness," which meant either marital unfaithfulness or deception as to premarital virginity. In these situations, a "certificate of divorce" was permitted. Some have suggested that this was an act of mercy, so that the divorced party (in this case, the woman) would have the freedom to remarry and not become economically destitute.

The practice of divorce became too common among the Hebrew people of the Old Testament period. The prophet Malachi laid out the complaint that God had against his people:

It is because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. (Malachi 2:14)

This passage is significant because it reveals God's heart for the plight of the woman in Israel's society. It also serves as a reminder that marriage is a covenant, before God, that is binding between the husband and wife.

By the first century, divorce in Greek and Roman society had become commonplace, even fashionable. Some rabbis adopted a permissive view: any and every cause could serve as grounds for divorce—poor cooking, sloppy housekeeping, or simply "if she finds no favor in his eyes" (Rabbi Hillel). Other rabbis (Shammai) held to a strict view: divorce was only permitted in cases of adultery. It was not only considered immoral but also cruel to cast out an innocent wife, leaving her socially destitute.

Jesus treated the subject of divorce in a way that is consistent with Moses:

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?"

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

"Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?"

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery." (Matthew 19:3-9)

The single exception—sexual immorality—implies that a breach in the marital covenant has taken place. Jesus used the broader term *porneia* that applies to any kind of sexual immorality, not the specific term for adultery, but in this context the clear implication is that there has been marital unfaithfulness. In addition, the most natural reading is that this exception clause applies to the entire sentence (Matthew 19:9), so that where divorce is permitted, remarriage is also permitted.

The Pharisees came to Jesus with a politically charged question: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (Matthew 19:3), echoing the more permissive rabbinic views. Contrary to this approach, Jesus took a very restricted view—only one cause, adultery, is a legitimate reason for divorce. But instead of first dealing with the exception, he dealt with the general rule: from the beginning God made marriage as a permanent union. In a parallel passage, Mark 10, Jesus made this rule reciprocal to the wife "if she divorces her husband." This is a radical teaching, since in Jewish culture the man alone had the option of divorcing his wife.

Sexual immorality is the one act that violates and makes a mockery of the marriage covenant and the one-flesh relationship. Even in this case, divorce is *permitted*, but not *commanded*, as the Pharisees intimated. There is still hope for a marriage when infidelity has occurred, but it is a long journey to rebuild the trust that has been lost. From a pastoral viewpoint, we should always first seek to preserve the marriage. Hosea was told to return to his wife even though she had been a prostitute (Hosea 3:1).

In dealing with special problems arising in the early church, the apostle Paul added further teaching about marriage and divorce in 1 Corinthians 7. In the case of two believers who were married, he appealed to them that they should not leave one another. If one spouse were to separate, they should remain unmarried and seek reconciliation (7:10-11).

But in the Corinthian church, there were cases when two non-believers had been married, and one became a follower of Jesus. If the unbeliever was willing to remain in the marriage, Paul instructed the believer not to seek divorce (7:12-14). But if the unbeliever *abandoned* the marriage, the believer was not "bound" in such cases. That is, while the believer ought not to seek divorce, neither should the believer contest the divorce initiated by the unbeliever. "God has called us to live in peace" (7:15). Since the believer was no longer bound in such cases, we take it that the believing spouse was free to remarry. The same terminology is used in Romans 7:1-4, where in the case of death, the remaining spouse was no longer bound to the marriage.

How far should this teaching about *abandonment* extend? Does it apply, for example, to cases of physical and psychological abuse? As a backdrop, we must consider the instructions for husbands to love, cherish, and nurture their wives, and for wives to respect their husbands ([Ephesians 5:28-33](#); [1 Peter 3:7](#)). This is the model description of a healthy Christian marriage. Physical and psychological

abuse are serious violations of marital responsibility, and are in some cases, we believe, tantamount to abandonment.

To sum up, Scripture consistently teaches that marriage is intended to be a lifelong commitment. But because of sin and hardness of heart, there are exceptional cases where divorce and remarriage are permitted. While acknowledging that these issues are complex, and confessing that none of us perfectly meets God's standards, we seek to hold marriage in high honor and to be faithful to biblical teaching.

### **Premarital Sex**

From a theological viewpoint, what happens when an unmarried couple engages in casual sex? They are taking God's sacred gift of sex and stealing pleasure without commitment, engaging in what is intended to be the consummation of a lifelong marital commitment.

Sexual monogamy within the context of unmarried cohabitation also falls outside the bounds of biblical sexual practice. Cohabiting is certainly on the rise in America. Ironically, those seeking security and companionship through cohabitation often find themselves insecure and uncertain about the future (see *The Defining Decade* by Meg Jay and *Sexual Freedom* by Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen).

To describe such premarital or non-marital behavior, the Scriptures use the words "sexual immorality"—or, as mentioned before, the Greek word *porneia*. It is regularly included in the New Testament lists of sins of the flesh (1 Corinthians 6:18; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8).

Even Christian couples will sometimes try to make the case that they privately consider themselves married to their sexual partner. But marriage is not a private decision between two people. It is a public declaration, a societal institution, and an ordinance of God, where public vows are made before a community.

Jesus recognized the difference between marriage and living together when he compassionately confronted the Samaritan woman: ". . . you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband" (John 4:18). Paul also addressed this issue in 1 Corinthians 7:9: "It is better to marry than to burn with passion." This statement would be illogical if a person could have it both ways—could have their sexual passions fulfilled without entering into marriage.

Unmarried young people who consciously choose to wait for a sacred sexual union in marriage deserve our support. We affirm single men and women who have remained chaste, whether viewing singleness as God's long-term calling for them or while waiting for marriage. We urge others who are sexually active to repent and return to God's design for sexuality and marriage.

Paul instructed Timothy: "*Treat . . . the younger women as sisters, with absolute purity*" (1 Timothy 5:2). What if young men and women were to view each other first and foremost as brothers and sisters? Far from abusing and exploiting one another, they would desire one another's sexual purity. They would treat the other with respect and gentleness. Those pursuing marriage would wait for the full marital blessing that God intended for their sexual fulfillment in a committed covenant relationship.

### **Lust**

The source of adultery begins in the heart. Taking another person to bed in thought is also a violation of the person made in God's image.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed the issue of lust by expanding the command against adultery to include "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully" (Matthew 5:27-28). He was not discounting the seventh commandment but rather going to the core of the matter. His disciples must move beyond the external righteousness of the Pharisees to a posture of humble confession and purity of heart.

Lust is clearly a step beyond attraction. It is usually not the first look but the second covetous stare. Temptation becomes lust when we imagine others as sex partners. The impulse to use them—or an image of them—for our own gratification dehumanizes them, transforming them into objects.

Jesus said, "Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). The point that Jesus makes about lust is twofold: (1) God is concerned about our hearts, our thought-lives, not just our actions; and (2) sexual sin is something that begins in the heart and must be dealt with there.

Scripture does not teach that temptation is sinful. Jesus was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (Hebrews 4:15). We need not feel defeated because we feel an attraction or are tempted. In fact, in our sex-charged culture, with sexual images commonplace, there is hardly anyone who does not struggle with sexual temptation at some level. But this does not give us an excuse to yield to temptation. In every circumstance, God is able to provide an acceptable means of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13; James 1:12-15).

### **Adultery**

Marital faithfulness was God's design for husbands and wives, but this standard was quickly violated. The seventh commandment states: "You shall not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). The word "adultery" is a technical word that refers to a married person engaging in sex with someone other than their spouse; thus, it involves the sexual sin of violating the marriage covenant and results in havoc to the marriage, the family, and the community.

The book of Proverbs again speaks poignantly:

Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes.  
For a prostitute can be had for a loaf of bread, but another man's wife preys on your very life.  
(Proverbs 6:25-26)

The act of adultery begins with a lustful heart and roving eyes. The results are deadly. The eye is one medium of temptation and lust; the body is the vehicle of committing sin. Peter speaks of corrupt men of his day: "With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood" (2 Peter 2:14).

This sin is specifically prohibited within the list of sexual sins in Leviticus 18:20: "*Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife and so defile yourself with her.*"

Adultery is a sin not only against one's spouse, but also against God himself. When Potiphar's wife tried to entice Joseph to sleep with her, he responded, "How . . . could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9). After his affair with Bathsheba, David confessed to God: "against you . . . have I sinned" (Psalm 51:4).

### **Pornography**

Pornography is a major vehicle for lust, turning another into an object—or conjuring up an imaginary person—for one's personal pleasure. Pornography undercuts marital trust and can lead to dissatisfaction with one's current or eventual marriage partner.

Romance novels and movies can also provide opportunities for fantasizing about an idealized person who possesses all the qualities that a spouse is lacking. The entertainment industry normalizes destructive sexual lifestyles. The rapid increase of "online liaisons" is also devastating for marriages.

Compulsive masturbation, which is often associated with these practices, is another distortion of God's intentions for genuine marital sexual intimacy—bonding two people into a one-flesh relationship of self-giving service. In contrast, compulsive masturbation values only self-satisfaction, is inherently selfish, and is devoid of real intimacy. Whether married or single, it leaves a person isolated and often full of shame.



## Same-Sex Relationships

All are made in God's image (Genesis 1:26) and included in Jesus' command to love our neighbors (Mark 12:31). Many of us have relatives and friends who are same-sex-attracted. We may experience same-sex attraction ourselves.

Regrettably, many Christians have not loved same-sex-attracted people as we ought. Too often, we have responded with exclusion and caused them shame or remained silent when hatred has been expressed toward them. We humbly own our past failures and offer genuine love.

At the same time, Scripture is very clear that God's intention for sexual expression is to be between a husband and wife in marriage. Every other sexual practice is outside of God's plan and therefore is a distortion of God's loving design for humanity.

This tension—between humble, loving relationships on the one hand, and a biblical sexual ethic for Christians on the other—is very challenging. It requires us to address three distinct areas: attraction, identity, and behavior.

### Attraction

It is important to distinguish between attraction and sexual behavior. Jesus was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Presumably, this included the experience of sexual attraction. Sexual attraction, whether opposite-sex or same-sex, is clearly not sin, unless it turns into lust or improper sexual behavior (Matthew 5:27-28). Certainly, not crossing over the line into temptation is something we all struggle with. Specifically relating to same-sex attraction, the late apologist John Stott put it this way: "We . . . distinguish between a homosexual inclination . . . and homosexual physical practices" (*Same-Sex Partnerships?*).

Some devout believers are same-sex-attracted but seek to remain celibate (see Wesley Hill's *Washed and Waiting* and Michael Ford's *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen*). They merit our praise. We can fail them by (1) acting as if we have it all together and are not broken in our own sexuality; (2) encouraging them to act unbiblically on their desires; or (3) condemning same-sex attraction as sin.

### Identity

Our culture pushes us to sexualize our identities, that is, to define ourselves primarily as sexual beings. While sexuality is a gift from God, it is not the chief quality that characterizes us as humans, and certainly not as Christians. Our chief identity is that we are people made in God's image. As Christians, our central identity is found in our union with Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:4-6; Romans 6:4-5; Romans 8:1).

In fact, it is problematic to assume that all people view their sexual identity as central. To say that someone has a same-sex attraction does not describe their full identity, though it may be a significant shaping factor in their experience of life. Our sexual attractions—whether opposite-sex or same-sex—do not describe the most important things about us, such as our values, hopes, dreams, or spiritual convictions. As Jenell Williams Paris argues, sex is not the "big deal" that our society has made it to be (*The End of Sexual Identity*).

Like all Christians, believers with same-sex attraction should be afforded the opportunity to discuss how their sexuality affects their hopes for the future, their struggles with temptation, and their repentance from sin. These conversations can, in fact, be an important aspect of discipleship, helping to center their lives in Christ and find his call.

### Behavior

Scripture teaches that same-sex sexual activity is outside of God's will in the same way that heterosexual pre- or extra-marital sexual activities are. This teaching resounds from the strong and consistent affirmation throughout the Bible that the unique context for sexual practice is between a man and a woman in marriage. Jesus himself reaffirms the creational intent for marriage between a man and a woman (Mark 10:2-9).

This paper is not the place to address every biblical passage forbidding same-sex sexual activity. For further reading, see InterVarsity's paper, "Responding to the LGBT Movement: A Theological Statement." See also the list of resources in the "Recommended Reading" section at the end of this paper. Further, we encourage inductive, communal Bible study around issues of human sexuality, beginning with the following passages:

- Genesis 1–3
- Mark 10
- Matthew 19
- 1 Corinthians 6
- 1 Timothy 1
- Leviticus 18–20

The most extensive treatment of same-sex behavior in Scripture is found in Romans 1:18-32. The relevant verses are:

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (vv. 26-27)

The passage begins with a universal indictment by a righteous God against all manner of human rebellion against his general revelation in the creation. Instead of worshiping the Creator, humans have worshiped the created thing, mainly themselves. They have exchanged the truth of God for a lie. Humans have consistently suppressed the truth, and as a result, their hearts have become darkened, their desires sinful, and their actions degraded. In all of this, humanity is said to be without excuse.

Besides exchanging the glory of God for idols and the truth of God for a lie, some exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. The word "natural," in Paul's writing, hearkens back to creation and God's original intent for sexuality, part of the natural law that God built into the universe (Romans 2:14; Romans 11:24; Galatians 4:8).

The term "unnatural" suggests a deviation from the natural order of creation in Genesis 1–2. As John Stott points out, this behavior is described as an *exchange*—"women *exchanged* natural sexual relations for unnatural ones" (27). Therefore, although some would say that their homosexual activity is "natural" (i.e., consistent with their desires), Paul would argue that it is unnatural because it is not consistent with God's original intent for sexuality.

Some have argued that the people in view here are those with a natural opposite-sex attraction who choose to practice homosexual behavior. However, this behavior seems to result from women following their "inflamed . . . lust" for one another (Romans 1:27), which connects desire to behavior. The words "natural" and "unnatural" are used with a variety of meanings in Greek and Roman literature. But the phrase "contrary to nature" or "unnatural" (Greek: *para physin*) in this passage clearly refers to a rebellion against God's natural order rather than acting contrary to one's own nature (see "The Meaning of 'Nature' in Romans 1 and Its Implications for Biblical Proscriptions of Homosexual Behavior.").

Others have argued that what is in view in this passage is pederasty, since it was so common among the elite in the Greek and Roman world for men to have both a wife and a boy to fulfill their sexual desires. This view argues that Paul was condemning the exploitation of youth by pedophiles. There are at least two obvious problems with this view. One is that there is no hint of adult sex with children in this passage; rather it is men with men, women with women. There is another Greek word, *paiderastia*, which was used in pagan literature to describe the love of boys, and Paul does not use this term nor does the word appear in the New Testament. Second, the mention of lesbian sex, between two women, makes it highly unlikely that pederasty is in view, since this was not the common ancient pagan practice among women and girls.

Still others have suggested that the sexual practice here has to do with temple prostitution. However, there is no reference to temple prostitution or ritual sex in this passage. Despite the earlier mention of idolatry and false worship, there is no implication of temple prostitution. The pagan practice of male and female temple prostitution was a fertility rite, in which Israel, in disobedience, also occasionally engaged, and was strongly condemned for (Deuteronomy 23:17; 1 Kings 14:24). For a more thorough treatment of Romans 1, see Richard B. Hays's *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

Finally, our commitment to the authority and entire trustworthiness of Scripture means that we interpret specific texts such as this in light of the whole body of Scripture—without imposing preconceived conclusions. All attempts to interpret Romans 1 must be read in light of how Paul consistently advocates for sexual expression exclusively in the context of God's intended marriage union between a man and a woman (Romans 7:2-3; 1 Corinthians 7:5-7; Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8; 1 Timothy 3; 1 Timothy 5; Titus 2), which is consistent with the testimony of both the Old and New Testaments.

We conclude, therefore, that God's loving intention—seen in the clear teaching of Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments—restricts sexual expression to a committed marriage relationship between a husband and wife.

Christian community must be a place where all are welcome to "come as you are" to be transformed by the gospel. With a humble posture toward our own failures, we must be a community of grace toward people with all kinds of attractions. We must find our identity in union with Jesus Christ, in submission to Scripture, and in sexual integrity. As a community that practices radical obedience to God, all of us—same-sex-attracted, single, and married—commit ourselves to Scripture's vision of marriage. With these foundational commitments we can be the kind of community that offers the good news of redemption to all, bringing our gifts to bear on God's mission in the world.

### **III. REDEMPTION: REDEEMING SEXUALITY**

We live in a broken world. Many—both Christians and non-Christians—are sexually shattered, defeated, and hopelessly caught in the cycle of bad choices. Some are trapped in sexual addictions, crippled by guilt, damaged by sexual abuse, and wondering if there is a way out.

The good news is that Jesus sets people free and delivers them from defeat. He is the One who restores and redeems. He is the One who loves us with an everlasting love.

Of course, there are many non-believers who are living sexually active lives—perhaps with multiple partners—who do not see this as a problem. They do not feel broken or trapped. They may feel that it is the Christian who is really trapped.

However, the Bible counsels that when we violate God's standards, we will eventually reap the consequences. They may come after some time, but eventually this way of life will be shown for the empty, shallow, dead end that it is. Even those who reject Christian morality often struggle with debilitating guilt because of violating the moral laws that God has built into his universe.

By God's grace, and through the power of Jesus' death and resurrection, we can experience God's healing. In turn, we can offer this healing to others who suffer from sexual brokenness. The rewards of living lives in this manner are great. When we live this way, we are experiencing what God intended for us; we are most fully human. We are living in harmony with God's purposes, have an inner peace, and live in integrity with others.

By the word of Jesus, we can offer hope to those who wish to be liberated from destructive patterns of behavior: "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). Sometimes this healing is instantaneous. For others, it involves a long process of counseling, and the Christian community is

immensely important to provide a supportive, healing environment. In other cases, full healing will come only at the restoration of all things at the end of time. We affirm that God's grace and power are available to all.

After King David was crushed with guilt for committing adultery, he genuinely repented. As a result, he found cleansing, forgiveness, and even restored joy (Psalm 51:7-12). This grace is available for us today. Through the blood of Jesus, we can have "our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience" (Hebrews 10:22). The promise of an unburdened conscience is one of the greatest practical benefits of redemption in Christ Jesus.

Through the resurrection of Jesus, we can experience the power of transformed lives and the means of overcoming temptation. Sin does not have to rule over us. Sexual temptation is not our master (1 Corinthians 10:13; Romans 6:12; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5).

We may struggle with particular temptations for long seasons. C. S. Lewis notes with regret in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* that the temptation of lust never really left him. But God does not intend for these temptations to defeat us (James 1:13-15), but rather for them to purify us and bring us to maturity (James 1:2-4). Temptations provide a daily opportunity to confess, repent, and remember the gospel, surrendering joyfully to the righteousness that God credits to our account through the price Christ paid on the cross.

Scripture reminds us that we have an enemy, the devil, who *is* out to defeat us. He "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). We must be vigilant, but never fearful. Satan can be resisted by the One who is greater—Jesus, who stands by our side. "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them [evil spirits], because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Satan is "the accuser of our brothers and sisters" (Revelation 12:10). When we hear negative messages in our minds—such as "you will never change" or "you are still the same old person"—we know that this is not from God, but from the enemy. God's word to us is: "you are mine; you are pure; you are a new creation in Christ. With me all things are possible."

Perhaps the most amazing passage in Scripture regarding sexual healing is found in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (italics added):

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified* in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

The Corinthian church was made up of these very kinds of "wrongdoers." They were sexually immoral and greedy—thieves, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers. Paul was no stranger to these realities. Yet he speaks of this in the past tense—"this is what some of you were." But not anymore! You are a new creation in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul himself was converted from being a "blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man" (1 Timothy 1:13), and God's grace was poured out on him.

Likewise, today's Church comprises forgiven, transformed sinners of all kinds. God has redeemed us. There is tremendous hope in Paul's statement above: there is forgiveness, there is cleansing, and, there is the promise of complete restoration. Jesus is able to give us back our lives, just as he did with Mary Magdalene, Zacchaeus, the prostitute who washed his feet with her tears, Peter after his denial, and the Samaritan woman with five former husbands who was living with a man to whom she was not married.

We are called to live in a new kind of kingdom community, a radical alternative to the way of this world. We are told to hold marriage in high honor, to love our spouses as our own flesh (Ephesians 5:28).

In relating to those of the opposite sex, we treat men as brothers and women as sisters. In the family of God, we desire to protect the sexual and spiritual well-being of others (Romans 12:10). When we live in this way, we demonstrate the presence of God's kingdom breaking into this world through our relationships.

Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. (1 Timothy 5:1-2)

Jesus died to give us back our lives—life in all its fullness—as he intended in creation, and made possible through his redemptive work on the cross and his victory over death.

#### **IV. RESTORATION OF ALL THINGS**

Of course, even as Jesus' followers, we do not always live according to God's kingdom values. There is an "already but not yet" nature to our present experience of the kingdom. Still tempted by the world, the flesh, and the devil, we sometimes yield to these temptations. It is comforting to remember that God is always ready to forgive. He extends his grace to the humble and repentant (James 4:6).

One day, at the end of this age—in the new heaven and new earth—God will restore all things to be as he intended in the original creation:

"God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' . . . Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. (Revelation 21:1-4, 27)

In this restored heaven and earth, all of our brokenness, all of our waywardness, all confusion, distortion, and rebellion will be transformed, because "when Christ appears, we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). At last, our relationships will be fully pure, honest, whole, and healthy. We will know God for who he is, for he himself will live among us. All will be light, all will be love—our joy will be full.

But even now, because of Jesus, there is strength in our struggles, victory in our temptations. He has promised never to leave us—nothing can separate us from his love (Hebrews 13:5; Romans 8:37-39). And through the Holy Spirit, we receive hope when we feel hopeless, help when we feel helpless, cleansing when we feel dirty.

Christian discipleship is therefore not so much a matter of being pushed into conformity with an ideal set of standards. Rather, it is a matter of being joyfully pulled into our certain futures in God's restored kingdom. It is the experience of living now, in part, what we will one day be fully, in glory.

When Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation: the old is gone, the new is here" (2 Corinthians 5:17), he is stating a new reality. Those of us who are in Christ are part of that new movement of God, that new kingdom, which God has already put in motion. By God's grace, we are the signals of that new creation that is already breaking into this world and rolling on toward the new heaven and new earth where all is made right.

What we are seeing is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy:

"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.  
See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." (Isaiah 43:18-19)

## **V. OUR CHANGING CULTURE**

In our rapidly changing culture, we recognize that questions of human sexuality are often connected with gender and identity. We are committed to understanding these evolving issues.

As one example, we are appointing a task force to examine the implications of transgender identity. Pastorally, how should we respond to people who are transgender? First, we acknowledge that it is not sinful to have feelings of ambivalence or aversion to one's birth gender. Nor do we respond with disbelief or impatience. We recognize the difficult social realities they face and commit to a response of love and respect.

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