

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND THE SEXUALITY CRISIS¹

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Western society is currently experiencing what can only be described as a moral revolution. Our society's moral code and collective ethical evaluation on a particular issue has undergone not small adjustments but a complete reversal. That which was once condemned is now celebrated, and the refusal to celebrate is now condemned. What makes the current moral and sexual revolution so different from previous moral revolutions is that it is taking place at an utterly unprecedented velocity. Previous generations experienced moral revolutions over decades, even centuries. This current revolution is happening at warp speed.

As the church responds to this revolution, we must remember that current debates on sexuality present to the church a crisis that is irreducibly and inescapably theological. This crisis is tantamount to the type of theological crisis that Gnosticism presented to the early church or that Pelagianism presented to the church in the time of Augustine. In other words, the crisis of sexuality challenges the church's understanding of the gospel, sin, salvation, and sanctification. Advocates of the new sexuality demand a complete rewriting of Scripture's metanarrative, a complete reordering of theology, and a fundamental change to how we think about the church's ministry.

WHY THE CONCORDANCE METHOD FAILS

Proof-texting is the first reflex of conservative Protestants seeking a strategy of theological retrieval and restatement. This hermeneutical reflex comes naturally to evangelical Christians because we believe the

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Bible to be the inerrant and infallible word of God. We understand that, as B.B. Warfield said, “When Scripture speaks, God speaks.” I should make clear that this reflex is not entirely wrong, but it’s not entirely right either. It’s not entirely wrong because certain Scriptures (that is, “proof texts”) speak to specific issues in a direct and identifiable way.

There are, however, obvious limitations to this type of theological method—what I like to call the “concordance method.” What happens when you are wrestling with a theological issue for which no corresponding word appears in the concordance? Many of the most important theological issues cannot be reduced to merely finding relevant words and their corresponding verses in a concordance. Try looking up “transgender” in your concordance. How about “lesbian”? Or “in vitro fertilization”? They’re certainly not in the back of my Bible.

It’s not that Scripture is insufficient. The problem is not a failure of Scripture but a failure of our approach to Scripture. The concordance method to theology produces a flat Bible without context, covenant, or master-narrative—three hermeneutical foundations that are essential to understand Scripture rightly.

NEEDED: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

Biblical theology is absolutely indispensable for the church to craft an appropriate response to the current sexual crisis. The church must learn to read Scripture according to its context, embedded in its master-narrative, and progressively revealed along covenantal lines. We must learn to interpret each theological issue through Scripture’s metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. Specifically, evangelicals need a theology of the body that is anchored in the Bible’s own unfolding drama of redemption.

Movement One: Creation

Genesis 1:26–28 indicates that God made man—unlike the rest of creation—in his own image. This passage also demonstrates that God’s purpose for humanity was an embodied existence. Genesis 2:7 highlights this point as well. God makes man out of the dust and then breathes into him the breath of life. This indicates that we were a body before we were a person. The body, as it turns out, is not incidental to our personhood. Adam and Eve are given the commission to multiply and subdue the earth. Their bodies allow them, by God’s creation and his sovereign plan, to fulfill that task of image-bearing.

The Genesis narrative also suggests that the body comes with needs. Adam would be hungry, so God gave him the fruit of the garden. These needs are an expression embedded within the created order that Adam is finite, dependent, and derived.

Further, Adam would have a need for companionship, so God gave him a wife, Eve. Both Adam and Eve were to fulfill the mandate to multiply and fill the earth with God’s image-bearers by a proper use of the bodily reproductive ability with which they were created. Coupled with this is the bodily pleasure each would experience as the two became one flesh—that is, *one* body.

The Genesis narrative also demonstrates that gender is part of the goodness of God’s creation. Gender is not merely a sociological construct forced upon human beings who otherwise could negotiate any number of permutations. But Genesis teaches us that gender is created by God for our good and his glory. Gender is intended for human flourishing and is assigned by the Creator’s determination—just as he determined *when*, *where*, and *that* we should exist.

In sum, God created his image as an embodied person. As embodied, we are given the gift and stewardship of sexuality from God himself. We are constructed in a way that testifies to God's purposes in this. Genesis also frames this entire discussion in a covenantal perspective. Human reproduction is not merely an order to propagate the race. Instead, reproduction highlights the fact that Adam and Eve were to multiply in order to fill the earth with the glory of God as reflected by his image bearers.

Movement Two: The Fall

The fall, the second movement in redemptive history, corrupts God's good gift of the body. The entrance of sin brings mortality to the body. In terms of sexuality, the fall subverts God's good plans for sexual complementarity. Eve's desire is to rule over her husband (Gen 3:16). Adam's leadership will be harsh (3:17–19). Eve will experience pain in childbearing (3:16).

The narratives that follow demonstrate the development of aberrant sexual practices, from polygamy to rape, which Scripture addresses with remarkable candor. These Genesis accounts are followed by the giving of the Law which is intended to curb aberrant sexual behavior. It regulates sexuality and expressions of gender and makes clear pronouncements on sexual morals, cross-dressing, marriage, divorce, and host of other bodily and sexual matters.

The Old Testament also connects sexual sin to idolatry. Orgiastic worship, temple prostitution, and other horrible distortions of God's good gift of the body are all seen as part and parcel of idolatrous worship. The same connection is made by Paul in Romans 1. Having "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom 1:22), and having "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (1:25), men and women exchange their natural relations with one another (1:26–27).

Movement Three: Redemption

With regard to redemption, we must note that one of the most important aspects of our redemption is that it came by way of a Savior with *a body*. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14; cf. Phil 2:5–11). Human redemption is accomplished by the Son of God incarnate—who remains *incarnate* eternally.

Paul indicates that this salvation includes not merely our souls but also our bodies. Romans 6:12 speaks of sin that reigns in our "mortal bodies"—which implies the hope of future bodily redemption. Romans 8:23 indicates part of our eschatological hope is the "redemption of our bodies." Even now, in our life of sanctification we are commanded to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God in worship (Rom 12:2). Further, Paul describes the redeemed body as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) and clearly we must understand sanctification as having effects upon the body (1 Thess. 4:3–4).

Sexual ethics in the New Testament, as in the Old Testament, regulate our expressions of gender and sexuality. *Porneia*, sexual immorality of any kind, is categorically condemned by Jesus and the apostles. Likewise, Paul clearly indicates to the church at Corinth that sexual sin—sins committed in the body (1 Cor 6:18)—are what bring the church and the gospel into disrepute because they proclaim to a watching world that the gospel has been to no effect (1 Corinthians 5–6).

Movement Four: New Creation

Finally, we reach the fourth and final act of the drama of redemption—new creation. In 1 Corinthians 15:42–47, Paul directs us not only to the resurrection of our own bodies in the new creation but to the fact that Christ’s bodily resurrection is the promise and power for that future hope. Our resurrection will be the experience of eternal glory in the body. This body will be a transformed, consummated continuation of our present embodied existence in the same way that Jesus’ body is the same body he had on earth, yet utterly glorified.

The new creation will not simply be a reset of the garden. It will be better than Eden. As Calvin noted, in the new creation we will know God not only as Creator but also as Redeemer—and that redemption includes our bodies. We will reign with Christ in bodily form, as he also is the embodied and reigning cosmic Lord.

In terms of our sexuality, while gender will remain in the new creation, sexual activity will not. It is not that sex is nullified in the resurrection; rather, it is fulfilled. The eschatological marriage supper of the Lamb, to which marriage and sexuality point, will finally arrive (Rev 19:6–9). No longer will there be any need to fill the earth with image-bearers as was the case in Genesis 1. Instead, the earth will be filled with knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY IS INDISPENSABLE

The sexuality crisis has demonstrated the failure of theological method on the part of many pastors. The “concordance method” simply cannot accomplish the type of rigorous theological thinking needed in pulpits today. Pastors and churches must learn the indispensability of biblical theology and must practice reading Scripture according to its own internal logic—the logic of a story that moves from creation to new creation. The hermeneutical task before us is great, but it is also indispensable for faithful evangelical engagement with the culture.