

31. Human Sexuality and Marriage

Church of the Nazarene *Manual* (2017-2021)

The Church of the Nazarene views human sexuality as one expression of the holiness and beauty that God the Creator intended. Because all humans are beings created in the image of God, they are of inestimable value and worth. As a result we believe that human sexuality is meant to include more than the sensual experience, and is a gift of God designed to reflect the whole of our physical and relational createdness.

As a holiness people, the Church of the Nazarene affirms that the human body matters to God. Christians are both called and enabled by the transforming and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit to glorify God in and with our bodies. Our senses, our sexual appetites, our ability to experience pleasure, and our desire for connection to another are shaped out of the very character of God. Our bodies are good, very good.

We affirm belief in a God whose creation is an act of love. Having experienced God as holy love, we understand the Trinity to be a unity of love among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, we are made with a yearning for connection with others at the core of our being. That yearning is ultimately fulfilled as we live in covenanted relationship with God, the creation, and loving one's neighbor as one's self. Our creation as social beings is both good and beautiful. We reflect the image of God in our capacity to relate and our desire to do so. The people of God are formed as one in Christ, a rich community of love and grace.

Within this community, believers are called to live as faithful members of the body of Christ. Singleness among the people of God is to be valued and sustained by the rich fellowship of the church and the communion of the saints. To live as a single person is to engage, as Jesus did, in the intimacy of community, surrounded by friends, welcoming and being welcomed to tables, and expressing faithful witness.

Also within this community, we affirm that some believers are called to be married. As defined in Genesis, "a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24) The marriage covenant, a reflection of the covenant between God and the people of God, is one of exclusive sexual fidelity, unselfish service, and social witness. A woman and a man publicly devote themselves to one another as a witness to the way God loves. Marital intimacy is intended to reflect the union of Christ and the Church, a mystery of grace. It is also God's intention that in this sacramental union the man and woman may experience the joy and pleasure of sexual intimacy and from this act of intimate love new life may enter the world and into a covenantal community of care. The Christ-centered home ought to serve as a primary location for spiritual formation. The church is to take great care in the formation of marriage through premarital counseling and teaching that denotes the sacredness of marriage.

The Scriptural story, however, also includes the sad chapter of the fracturing of human desire in the Fall, resulting in behaviors that elevate self-sovereignty, damage and objectify the other, and darken the path of human desire. As fallen beings, we have experienced this evil on every level—personal and corporate. The principalities and powers of a fallen world have saturated us

with lies about our sexuality. Our desires have been twisted by sin and we are turned inward on ourselves. We have also contributed to the fracturing of the creation by our willful choice to violate the love of God and live on our own terms apart from God.

Our brokenness in the areas of sexuality takes many forms, some due to our own choosing and some brought into our lives via a broken world. However, God's grace is sufficient in our weaknesses, enough to bring conviction, transformation, and sanctification in our lives. Therefore, in order to resist adding to the brokenness of sin and to be able to witness to the beauty and uniqueness of God's holy purposes for our bodies, we believe members of the body of Christ, enabled by the Spirit, can and should refrain from:

- **Unmarried sexual intercourse and other forms of inappropriate sexual bonding.** Because we believe that it is God's intention for our sexuality to be lived out in the covenantal union between one woman and one man, we believe that these practices often lead to the objectification of the other in a relationship. In all its forms, it also potentially harms our ability to enter into the beauty and holiness of Christian marriage with our whole selves.
- **Sexual activity between people of the same sex.** Because we believe that it is God's intention for our sexuality to be lived out in the covenantal union between one woman and one man, we believe the practice of same-sex sexual intimacy is contrary to God's will for human sexuality. While a person's homosexual or bi-sexual attraction may have complex and differing origins, and the implication of this call to sexual purity is costly, we believe the grace of God is sufficient for such a calling. We recognize the shared responsibility of the body of Christ to be a welcoming, forgiving, and loving community where hospitality, encouragement, transformation, and accountability are available to all.
- **Extra-marital sexual relations.** Because we believe this behavior is a violation of the vows that we made before God and within the body of Christ, adultery is a selfish act, a family-destroying choice, and an offense to the God who has loved us purely and devotedly.
- **Divorce.** Because marriage is intended to be a life-long commitment, the fracturing of the covenant of marriage, whether initiated personally, or by the choice of a spouse, falls short of God's best intentions. The church must take care in preserving the marriage bond where wise and possible, and offering counsel and grace to those wounded by divorce.
- **Practices such as polygamy or polyandry.** Because we believe that the covenantal faithfulness of God is reflected in the monogamous commitment of husband and wife, these practices take away from the unique and exclusive fidelity intended in marriage.

Sexual sin and brokenness is not only personal but pervades the systems and structures of the world. Therefore, as the church bears witness to the reality of the beauty and uniqueness of God's holy purposes we also believe the church should refrain from and advocate against:

- **Pornography in all its forms, which is desire gone awry.** It is the objectification of people for selfish sexual gratification. This habit destroys our capacity to love unselfishly.

- **Sexual violence in any form, including rape, sexual assault, sexual bullying, hateful speech, marital abuse, incest, sex trafficking, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, bestiality, sexual harassment, and the abuse of minors and other vulnerable populations.** All people and systems that perpetrate sexual violence transgress the command to love and to protect our neighbor. The body of Christ should always be a place of justice, protection, and healing for those who are, who have been, and who continue to be affected by sexual violence. A minor is defined as any human being under the age of 18, unless the age of majority is attained later under a state's or country's own domestic legislation.

Therefore we affirm that:

- **Where sin abounds grace abounds all the more.** Although the effects of sin are universal and holistic, the efficacy of grace is also universal and holistic. In Christ, through the Holy Spirit, we are renewed in the image of God. The old is gone and the new comes. Although the forming of our lives as a new creation may be a gradual process, God's healing is effective in dealing with the brokenness of humanity in the areas of sexuality.
- **The human body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.** We affirm the need for our sexuality to be conformed to God's will. Our bodies are not our own but have been bought with a price. Therefore, we are called to glorify God in our bodies through a life of yielded obedience.
- **The people of God are marked by holy love.** We affirm that, above all the virtues, the people of God are to clothe themselves with love. The people of God have always welcomed broken people into our gathering. Such Christian hospitality is neither an excusing of individual disobedience nor a refusal to participate redemptively in discerning the roots of brokenness. Restoring humans to the likeness of Jesus requires confession, forgiveness, formative practices, sanctification, and godly counsel—but most of all, it includes the welcome of love which invites the broken person into the circle of grace known as the church. If we fail to honestly confront sin and brokenness, we have not loved. If we fail to love, we cannot participate in God's healing of brokenness.

As the global church receives and ministers to the people of our world, the faithful outworking of these statements as congregations is complex and must be navigated with care, humility, courage, and discernment.