

If the church accepts homosexuality, what is to keep us from accepting other sins like adultery, incest, bestiality, and sex with children? Don't we have to draw the line somewhere?

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This question raises a legitimate concern that all Presbyterians ought to take seriously: if we accept one form of sexuality that is sinful, what's to keep us from accepting other sinful forms of sexuality? Yet while the question is legitimate, the assumption behind it may not be. For the question assumes that one form of sexuality – namely heterosexuality expressed within the context of marriage – is nonproblematic while other forms are sinful. But if the Reformed tradition teaches us anything, it is that sin pervades every part of our lives – including all our sexual lives. Or, said more directly, there are *no* sinless expressions of sexuality.

And here, examples from divorce and adultery to pornography are so easy that we need to get beyond them without forgetting them. Think, instead, about all the frustrating awkwardness of trying to know what one's lover is thinking and trying to please him or her without asking mood-shattering questions; all the vulnerable embarrassment we feel in exposing our bodies to others; all the maddening frustration of unfulfilled or – perhaps even worse – partially fulfilled desire; all the absurd psychological games we play with ourselves, our lovers, or those we hope may one day be our lovers; all the selfish motivations that are so likely to drive human actions while intimate; that abrupt realization that sex and intimacy and orgasms may be absolutely splendid but sometimes seem hardly worth the trouble it takes in getting to them. Where do all these feelings come from if not from a deep sense that what sex is and what we imagine sex should be aren't the same? What do all these examples point toward if not sin? How could any of us be so filled with *hubris* as to think that our sexuality is sinless sexuality?

From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

So while the concern behind the initial question is legitimate, it needs to be reframed: If we recognize sinfulness in all sexual relations, how are we to distinguish between those that the church finds room for and those that the church rejects? Or, to frame that question a bit more theologically: Given that God created us in love and for love but that all of us have sinned by attempting to deny, refuse, contort, or abuse that love, how are we, as the church, to engage sinners and sins? Framing the question theologically in this way opens it up to the church's rich, deep, and broad vocabulary for thinking about engaging sin and sinners: the vocabulary of sin and grace, justification and sanctification, gospel and law. Using this vocabulary is neither automatic nor easy, and its use leads to neither automatic nor easy answers. However, if the church is to think as a church rather than some other type of gathering of persons, it is vital that it speak through its native theological language. Toward that end, let me make two initial – and initiating – comments about what I understand God to be doing in dealing with sin and what I believe the church is called to do in response.

First a word on justification. For those within the Reformed tradition, God's work of redemption must be the starting point for our thinking about sin and grace. The witness of the New Testament is that God deals with sin by being born as one of us, living with us and teaching us, dying for us, and being resurrected that we might have new life and, eventually, so that we might become like God. *Or*, said differently, God deals with sinners neither by accepting us nor by damning us but by redeeming us because we cannot redeem ourselves. The one who could condemn all of us has chosen to redeem us instead. In God's desire for us, he used the cross and the empty tomb to restore intimacy with us.

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And all this happens to us in our bodies. Redemption does not remove us from our bodies, but restores them to us so that we can use them for the purposes for which they were created: to glorify God and enjoy God forever. Whatever moral lessons we sinners might learn from God's great act of justification and no matter how much we might disagree about those lessons in their particulars, it seems to me that the way we deal with ourselves and other sinners ought to bear some coherent relation to the way God has chosen to deal with sinners: with an eye toward neither acceptance nor damnation, but redemption.

Second, a word on sanctification. If it is true that the purpose for which we are embodied is to glorify God and enjoy God forever, then that purpose pervades all the ways we use our bodies – including the ways we use them sexually. It follows that the purpose of sex isn't procreation or intimacy per se – though those things are gifts that may come with sex – but a way in which we work with God because God is working in us so that we might become closer to God. In sanctification, we learn to trust our bodies to the one who is sovereign Lord of them – and to refuse to trust our bodies to anyone or anything other than God. Said differently, having sex – theologically understood – should, like all other acts by which we relate to others, become a way we learn to express through our bodies the desire God feels for us and has created us to feel for each other. And this desire, at least according to Scripture and the Reformed tradition, is a desire shaped by and revealed in publicly affirmed, non-breakable covenants of mutual love. (This is, I think, the very reason that the church has, can, and must continue to relate sex to marriage and the reason the church, like Jesus, should be deeply troubled about far-too-easy understandings of marriage and the far-too-common event of divorce.)

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All of which returns us to the legitimacy of the initial question. For while thinking of some expressions of sexuality as sinful and others as not sinful is an error, we are right, I think, to recognize that some sinful expressions of sexuality are far more problematic than others because while all expressions of sexuality fail to live up to their primary purpose, some expressions cannot live up to that purpose because they stand in opposition to it. Or, to say that more affirmatively, some expressions of sexual desire at least begin to mirror the way God expresses divine desire – and thereby

become part of the process by which we learn to become holy – while others do not. Since God has expressed God's desire for us by covenanting with us, so our sexual lives ought to conform to covenantal patterns of commitment. Since God has made these covenants public, so the covenantal patterns of our sexual lives ought to be public. And since God's desire for us is that "we will be like him for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2), so our sexual lives ought to be shaped by visions of mutuality and equality.

Where desire is allowed to come and go without commitment, where it must remain private, where it cannot be mutually expressed: these expressions of sexuality actively inhibit our ability to participate in our sanctification. These

criteria clearly exclude the kinds of sins – adultery, incest, pederasty, bestiality – that some fear would necessarily follow on acceptance of covenanted same-sex relationships. Where desire can be publicly expressed in binding covenants of mutual love: there we find persons learning to use their bodies to love God