

Pastoral Letter
The Bible and Human Sexuality
Dr. Tom Ricks
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Dear Greentree Spiritual Family,

By definition, a pastoral letter is any open letter from a pastor to his or her congregation. In this general sense, any note the congregation as a whole has received from me on any topic would fall under this heading. However, in the strict sense of the term, a pastoral letter in the Protestant tradition tends to be fairly infrequent and it addresses a specific opportunity, concern or topic. From that narrower perspective, this is the first pastoral letter I have written to the congregation of Greentree Community Church in the 17 years and 5 months I have been pastor. In other words, it's pretty rare!

The topic of this letter, *The Bible & Human Sexuality*, is not new but it certainly is one of intense debate. Beyond the emotion surrounding the issue, there is also great confusion. Pastors such as England's Steve Chalke or America's Rob Bell, who consider themselves evangelical, are in support of gay marriage while the late atheist Christopher Hitchens expressed that gay marriage was someone wanting, "the worst of both worlds" (*The Faith of Christopher Hitchens*; Larry Taunton, Nashville, Thomas Nelson Books, p. 118). (Hitchens was not against homosexuality, far from it, but the notion of gay marriage perplexed him.)

Renowned Pastor John Piper has spoken emphatically against same sex marriage while the largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States, one that birthed such stalwart theologians as Charles Hodge, B.B. Warfield and J Gresham Machen, now celebrates homosexuality as biblical and a lifestyle to be embraced.

Social media cries, "bigot, homophobe and intolerant" whenever someone even hints at the notion that practicing homosexuality may not be a morally neutral or healthy choice. Universities across the nation and those who consider themselves the voice of intellectualism scoff at and attack any individual, corporation or state that questions the wisdom of promoting same sex attraction and/or gender modification.

Along with these challenges, the church is faced with giving spiritual guidance to a generation that has never known a world without advanced technology. Ideas can travel around the globe in an instant. Images that even twenty years ago were found only through adult bookstores and difficult to access are now at the fingertips of most 10 and 11 year-old children with an ipad or cell phone. Expressions of aberrant sexual behavior such as incest, bestiality and pedophilia are becoming more accessible by the day.

In the midst of all this noise and angst stands the church of our Lord Jesus Christ - in its most natural form, the local congregation. Here at Greentree Community Church, we are 500-600 souls seeking to "know Jesus Christ, serve him in joyful obedience, and make him known by growing disciples, planting churches, and renewing communities." We find ourselves asking some deeply difficult questions – questions that most of us never imagined we would be asking in our lifetime:

- How do we make sense of the radical cultural shifts regarding human sexuality we have seen in the last 25+ years?
- What does the Bible really say about human sexuality?

- Should the church speak out about this or stay on the sidelines? What business is it of ours how other people choose to identify and express their sexuality?
- Should pastors perform gay marriage ceremonies at Greentree? Should we welcome gay couples into our congregation?

While not exhaustive by any stretch of the imagination, this letter will offer some biblical direction for us as we consider this crucial topic.

Outline

1. The Bible and Human Sexuality
2. Christians and Same Sex Attraction (SSA)
3. Engaging Our Culture on the Topic of Human Sexuality
4. Application
5. Technology Tips for Parents of Teenagers
6. Bibliography

1. The Bible and Human Sexuality

It must be noted from the outset that my view of the 66 books of the Old and New Testament that make up the Bible is evangelical and reformed. This is true of all our pastors, elders and deacons at Greentree. You can find a more thorough explanation of this view in the “What We Believe” section of our website, but it is important to mention a sentence or two here. We believe that the Bible is the inerrant and infallible Word of God and as such it is truth. We do not believe it contains truth or speaks to truth, we believe it is the living Word of God and is therefore completely true. With this in mind, the Bible has final authority on all matters upon which it speaks. Followers of Jesus do not seek advice from scripture or consult scripture as if we were hoping to pick from the best of many options. Rather, we submit our lives to it as completely as God enables us. In practical terms, we look at our society and culture through the lens of scripture, not vice versa.

This being said, what does the Bible say about human sexuality?

The Bible is very clear about the cosmos and all it contains including this earth and all humanity. Genesis 1 and 2 describes at a macro and micro level the creative activity of God. God has created all things, including humankind, which also means our sexuality. Why did God give us the ability for physical sexual expression?

26 Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” 29 And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was

so. 31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. Genesis 1: 26 - 31

A few important points to note here:

- Immediately after creation “God blessed them.” This means God was overjoyed with humanity and his heart was full of love for us. He wanted only the best for his people.
- His first command to humanity is sexual, “Be fruitful and multiply.” As part of his blessing, he knew sexual expression would be fulfilling and beneficial.
- God then gives a series of other gifts, each one building upon the next, all for the blessing of mankind. One gets the picture of wise and loving parents giving their children perfect gifts with great joy and satisfaction.
- Upon completion, God says what he has done is “very good.” This includes the gift of our sexuality / sexual expression.

In Genesis 2, we find a detailed picture of how this unfolded:

18 Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” ... 21 So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of
Man.”

24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Again, a few observations are in order:

- God has created us for relational intimacy and friendship; it wasn’t “good” for the man to be alone.
- While the song of Adam sounds a bit archaic to our ears, in the ancient Hebrew the picture we get is a sexually aroused man full of love and passion for his new partner. It’s as if Adam is saying to God, “Thanks, Lord, could you excuse us now so we can enjoy our honeymoon night?”
- Adam also rightly sees the intention of God for his sexual expression, with his wife alone, in the commitment of marriage. “Leaving father and mother and holding fast to his wife” in order to become “one flesh” speaks of the holistic relationship that accompanies marriage as created by God.
- Their intimacy was as yet untainted by sin, so they fully enjoyed each other without an ounce of inhibition. They were naked but without shame!

In summation, first we see from Genesis 1 and 2 that God is the author of human sexuality and he has given it to us as an amazing gift to be enjoyed in the context of a marriage relationship between a man and a woman. Sex in marriage is one of the blessings of God. Many in the church have erroneously pictured human sexuality as dirty or at least highly inappropriate when nothing could be further from

the truth! God thought of all the blessings he could give us and sexual expression in marriage was one he joyously bestowed on his children.

The second observation we must make from scripture is this: God as a perfect and good God is the author of our human sexuality; therefore, he alone determines how it should and should not be used. When God puts parameters on sexual expression, they are there to bless us. The guidelines are there to bring us life, not rob us of fun or suppress a fuller expression of our sexuality.

In short, any sexual relationship outside of marriage between a man and a woman committed to each other for life is unhealthy and harmful for us. Here are just a few examples:

- Exodus 20:14 - sexual relationship with someone to whom you are not married when you are married (adultery)
- Exodus 22:19 - bestiality
- Leviticus 18 - incestuous sexual relationships, homosexuality, bestiality
- Deuteronomy 22:13-30 - rape, adultery, incestuous sexual relationships
- Romans 1- heterosexual relationships outside marriage, homosexuality (men and women)
- 1 Corinthians 6:9-20 - heterosexual relationships outside marriage, homosexuality, adultery, prostitution
- Revelation 2:8ff - Jesus condemns any and all sexual expression apart from a husband and wife in marriage as evil and harmful. Sexual immorality is a term that covers both heterosexual and homosexual activity.

On the positive side of the topic, the scriptures, including Jesus' own words while here on earth, commend human sexuality as a gift of God given for enjoyment and blessing between a man and a woman in marriage:

- Matthew 19:1-6 - Jesus affirms both marriage and human sexuality expressed in the context of marriage between a man and a woman.
- Ephesians 5:22ff - The Apostle Paul affirms marriage and reiterates the importance of a man leaving his father and mother and holding fast to his wife; "Holding fast" is biblical language for sexual expression inside the marriage relationship between a man and a woman.

Therefore, we can conclude from scripture that God is the creator of our sexual expression and has given it to us as a gift to be enjoyed in the context of his loving direction. Any deviation from his parameters is an act of rebellion against our maker and brings us harm.

2. Christians and Same Sex Attraction (SSA)

From the late 1970's until today, the church of Jesus in America has struggled with the question of homosexuality, same sex attraction and, more recently, gay marriage. It must be admitted up front that we have handled this issue poorly. Primarily, the church has erred in one extreme or the other.

- The church has, in many instances, loudly condemned homosexuality, SSA and gay marriage as a sin greater than any and all other sins. This has led those who struggle with SSA to keep silent out of shame. Both gays and lesbians have felt completely unwanted / unwelcomed in the church. All of this has been done in the name of Christian Orthodoxy.
- Conversely, many churches have ignored scripture's clear teaching that homosexual expression on any level is sinful. These congregations have welcomed its practice along with

gay marriage and transgender lifestyles as completely healthy and within normative behavior for disciples of Jesus.

Clearly neither of these responses is biblically correct nor honoring to God nor helpful to those for whom Jesus died.

First, it should be stated that SSA and the practice of homosexual behavior are not the same thing. Being tempted to sin is not the same thing as sin, which is why Jesus taught us to pray “lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:13). Being tempted to steal something is not the same thing as actually taking it. You may be tempted to gossip about someone else, but instead you prayerfully hold your tongue and avoid sinning. James 1:12-15 gives us an excellent understanding of how temptation and sin are related but not identical. Temptation, if indulged leads to sin, which ultimately leads to death, but nowhere does the Bible say temptation is sin.

Why have Christians agreed with this in every area of life except SSA? Why is this temptation met with such angst within the church that those for whom this is a temptation are shamed into silence and therefore condemned to face the struggle on their own? Wesley Hill’s excellent work on this subject, *Washed and Waiting*, is well worth the read for every disciple who wants to follow Jesus in this matter. At the end of this paper, I will offer some “next steps application” for us, but suffice it to say the church (us) is culpable for not helping our brothers and sisters who are tempted in this area of life.

The question, therefore, is asked and answered, “Can a believer in Jesus be tempted by SSA?” Yes! Should the church cast this temptation in a different light and shame into silence and isolation any for whom it is a struggle? God forbid!

Second, it should also be noted that besides making this temptation something more than we should, the church has also been guilty of turning a blind eye to other sexual sin that is just as destructive to us and offensive to God. While practicing homosexuality seems to take center stage as the sin of all sins, the church ignores many other heterosexual sins. Why are we not as strident about couples engaging in sex prior to marriage or someone who is tempted and sins by having a heterosexual one-night stand? To be blunt, how can Christian parents condemn homosexuality and then tell their children that living together before marriage and engaging in sexual intercourse is not so bad, something akin to test driving a car?

Many in the homosexual community are incredulous about this hypocritical double standard, as well they should be! I have already cited Revelation 2 where Jesus condemns sexual immorality across the board. Why do we, his disciples, draw a distinction that he clearly does not allow? On the contrary, we should be biblically consistent in what scripture identifies as sin and be equally consistent in helping all followers of Jesus deal with temptations.

At the same time, churches that claim to follow Jesus and endorse homosexual behavior as healthy and good in the eyes of God are also sinning. Jesus makes this emphatically clear with his warning in Luke 17:1-2:

Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.

The church of Jesus Christ is not free to rewrite scripture or teach something contrary to God’s revealed, propositional truth. We are not called to be inclusive at the expense of truth. Tolerance (defined as accepting a sinful behavior as good in the eyes of God) is not a virtue, it is spiritually

criminal. Churches that ignore God's Word because they want to be "welcoming" have an inappropriate understanding of scripture and too high a value of themselves. We are not the Christ, Jesus is, and as our Lord he calls us to follow him at all costs, not adapt to the world in order to be accepted.

3. Engaging Our Culture on the Topic of Human Sexuality

While helping our brothers and sisters in Christ who struggle with SSA is vitally important, it is not the only calling Jesus has given us. We are to be salt and light in our communities, offices, schools and neighborhoods. How do we engage in the larger cultural conversation in a way that honors Jesus and loves our neighbor as ourselves?

First, I believe scripture makes it clear that our highest calling is to share the gospel of Jesus with those who do not know him (Matthew 28:18-20). While we cannot accept a gay or transgender lifestyle as godly, our focus should not be to point out sexual immorality, any more than to make greed, hatred, bigotry or any other sin condemned by the Bible our main focal point. If we are going to follow Jesus, our posture must always be to seek out the lost in genuine care for them and respect for our mutual humanity.

It is important to note that the religious people of his day accosted Jesus for spending time with "sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes" (Matthew 21:31-32, Mark 2:15-16). Current day disciples would do well to take note of this. We tend to retreat into the church, surrounding ourselves only with fellow believers who see the world as we do. Jesus was welcomed and sought out by people who had been told that God did not love them and there was no room for them at his table.

Why is there so much anger and animosity between the homosexual community and the church? There are a couple of reasons to consider. First, we must acknowledge that many homosexuals have been badly mistreated by those claiming to be Christians, leaving them feeling hated for their sexual expression. When this happens, we look more like the Pharisees of Jesus' day than his disciples. Another reason is that as believers we cannot abandon biblical authority in this matter which is deeply offensive to some and they walk away feeling judged and found lacking.

If we love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, our natural lifestyle will be to love our neighbor as ourselves. We cannot and should not change God's Word concerning what constitutes sexual sin, but neither should we ignore his command to love with the unconditional love Jesus has given us. If we want to be Christ-like, our human relationships will reflect his priorities. We won't lead with arguing about sexual issues; rather we will get to know others, building genuine friendships with warmth and humility.

Sam Allberry, a pastor who struggles with SSA, was asked how disciples should interact with the gay community:

Because of the expectation gay friends will have about how Christians will respond to them, we need to make every effort to let them know that we are for them and not against them. This will at least involve taking time to get to know them well and listening carefully to their story. We need to love them more than their gay friends do, and we need to love them more than they love their homosexuality (p 81).

It strikes me that this is just what Jesus did. He loved people unconditionally and then gave them something more to love than their sinful choices ... him!

Next, beyond creating true friendships and pointing folks to Jesus, I believe we must stand firm in our biblical convictions on human sexuality. In doing so, we will join every other generation of Christians as being “counter-cultural,” meaning we will not accept a norm just because people claim it to be so. To the believer, truth is not subjective. It is not whatever a particular society wants it to be. Truth is God-centered and God given, without apology or negotiation.

This being said, let me be clear, there is a huge difference between standing on God’s truth and being self-righteously judgmental towards others. Note Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. 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.

Now if your reaction in reading these verses is, “See, Tom, it’s right there! Those terrible homosexual people will not get to heaven,” then let me say with all humility, you are missing the point of the gospel of Jesus Christ and have an overwhelmingly insufficient view of your own sin. What should jump out at all of us is the small sentence, “And such were some of you.”

Disciples of Jesus are called to judge with discernment. We are to understand the difference between godliness and sin, unrighteousness and righteousness. This is what it means to be counter-cultural. However, we are never, never, never called to sit in self-righteous judgment of another human being.

I believe we can stand out apart from the culture on such issues as homosexuality or transgender lifestyles AND be winsomely gracious. I have homosexual friends who would read this paper and respond, “Yep, that’s what Tom believes when it comes to the Bible and the issue of human sexuality.” However, I hope and pray they would also say, “And isn’t it odd that he is a good friend to someone with whom he has such a stark difference of opinion.”

4. Application

Everyone knows I’m big on the application of God’s Word to our everyday lives. We don’t study the Bible just to know more, we study it because it is God’s gift to us along with salvation in Jesus, so that we know how to live in this life as the beginning for life in the next! With that in mind we must ask and answer some questions of application:

- We must become better students of scripture in order to have a clear understanding of what God says about human sexuality. I understand that unbelievers won’t see the Bible in the same way as Jesus’ disciples, but this does not mean that we should not study it carefully in order to have a solid grasp of God’s teaching. I have read several social media postings in the last 12-24 months from disciples of Jesus who seem to have completely discarded what the Bible says about human sexuality. Promoting the notion that same sex marriage is godly shows either a complete disregard for the Bible’s teaching or a fundamental ignorance of biblical texts.
- We must be biblically consistent in every question about human sexuality. Francis Schaeffer wrote in a letter to a friend about how Christians must respond to those who struggle with SSA, “We may cry with them concerning this, but we must not let the self-pity get too deep, because an unmarried girl who has strong sexual desires, and no one asks her to marry, has the same problem. In both cases it is surely a part of the abnormality of the fallen world” (p 195). When we treat one group’s struggle with sexual temptation as worse than another’s, we go

beyond scripture and create a false standard. Schaeffer was correct in calling us to a biblically consistent response.

- There is a great challenge for Christian parents, children ministry leaders, and older student ministry staffs to help our younger disciples understand the spiritual danger of pornography, “sexting” and the cultural acceptance of unhealthy sexual expressions that are being endorsed by educators in many of our classrooms (starting as early as grade school). You will find some practical advice in the section below called “Technology Tips for Parents of Teenagers.”
- We must be primarily biblical, not primarily political. By this I do not mean that Christians should not vote or that believing politicians should lay aside their faith or convictions. Instead, they should apply God’s Word to their work the same as a doctor, police officer, teacher, business executive or pastor. What I do mean is this ... the question of human sexuality is first and foremost a spiritual one. When we move the conversation into the arena of which party voted for this or that, or which candidate agrees or disagrees with our position, we muddy the conversation and end up creating walls of hostility instead of avenues for building friendships.
- “Where sin increased, grace abounded that much more” (Romans 5:20). The Apostle Paul reminds his readers that their sinfulness was met and overmatched by the grace of God. The new life they had in Christ Jesus was due to God’s unending and unlimited grace for them. Our church must be full and overflowing with this love. Our welcome to anyone and everyone should contain no man-made boundaries. The question should not even need to be asked, “Is a gay or transgender person welcome at Greentree?” Is a liar, a cheat, a gossip, an overbearing parent, a Sabbath breaker, a sexually active heterosexual unmarried couple, a child who disrespected his / her parent on the way to church, an alcoholic or drug user welcomed at Greentree? Every sinner in the world is welcome at Greentree!
- “God has not given us a spirit of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:7). We must not let fear of what others think of us or laws our government may or may not pass drive our position on human sexuality. Will pastors of Greentree Community Church perform same sex weddings? No, this is not possible according to God’s Word. Will some, perhaps even many, hate us because of this? More than likely, yes. Could we someday lose our tax-exempt status as a nonprofit religious entity because of our submission to God’s Word? Perhaps. Is the day coming when pastors will be fined or imprisoned for refusing to marry same sex couples? Maybe not in my lifetime, but I believe that day will eventually arrive in the USA. Will we live in fear of any of these potential outcomes or change our stance because of them? Most certainly not.

In conclusion, the swirling public conversation on human sexuality isn’t going away any time soon. Believers must be equipped with a thorough knowledge and application of God’s Word in order to honor him and love others well. We can never accept what the Bible identifies as sin as godly, good or morally neutral. We must also refuse to live fear-based or self-righteous lives that offer no care to this lost and broken world. Our empathy for those struggling with the difficult issues of human sexuality must be matched with a deep and abiding trust in the Lord Jesus. Only then will we be able to love without condition all whom we engage for the sake of his gospel!

Only By His Grace,



Dr. Tom Ricks
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5. Technology Tips for Parents of Teenagers

- Educate yourself about what social web sites are available and relevant to teenagers. For example, Snapchat is a site that students use to send pictures that disappear after 30 seconds. Most are innocent but not always. Also familiarize yourself with the texting acronyms (Google - “text acronyms”).
- Check your child’s electronic devices regularly. This includes text messages. Let them know that you are checking. Do not allow them to have a private password. Look for new websites as well as a pattern of deleted history.
- Teach proper use of social media and all electronic devices. For example: “Don’t post anything while you are angry. Don’t post anything that you would be embarrassed if I read it. Be aware that colleges will be looking at your social websites to check on character.”
- Schedule times when the screens are put away in another room (homework time, sleeping time etc.).
- Realize that students are exposed to a lot more at a much younger age. Try not to overreact. You want your child to be able to discuss this with you.
- Talk to your child about bullying. If anyone is saying mean or untrue things about them, teach them not to respond and instead to bring it to you. Most schools have a no tolerance policy and are used to dealing with this.
- Remember that you own the phone or computer. Using the device is a privilege not a right and can be taken away or turned off. Do not believe your child when they say that you are invading their privacy and no other parent does this.

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