

# What do the Gospels say about sex and sexuality?

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*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.

Those who seek guidance from the Gospels about sex and sexuality may be surprised to discover their relative silence on these matters. Where we moderns are preoccupied with sex, the Gospels seem little interested. Seekers will find these ancient writings to be quite forceful on questions about duties within heterosexual marriage. On questions about people marginalized because of their sexual status, however, they show both compassion and a readiness to affirm their place in the work of God. And one of the strongest themes in the Gospels is the extent to which the requirements of biblical law come under consistent questioning by Jesus himself.

Heterosexual marriage is the “default” sexual relationship in the New Testament. It is not so much argued for as presumed. John’s Gospel reports Jesus’ attendance (and wine-making) at a wedding (John 2:1-11). While this text is frequently used to avow Jesus’ approval of such legal contracts, Jesus expresses neither approval nor disapproval in this story. If anything, the larger example of Jesus’ own life as an unmarried person, coupled with the itinerancy to which he calls his disciples, calls into question the centrality of heterosexual marriage for Christian life.

More forceful directives on the matter of marriage – or, better, on the matter of divorce – can be found in Mark 10:2-12 (with parallels in Mt. 19:3-9 and Lk 16:18). In this frequently cited text, Jesus – in response to a question posed to him by religious men – cites Genesis as the basis for his injunction against divorce. Jesus argues that the joining of the created beings into “one flesh” is an act of God that should not be torn apart by any human being. Here Jesus is not advocating that all should marry; rather, he is arguing against the divorce of those who do. And he is arguing against a practice that, in the ancient world, was overwhelmingly the prerogative of the

husband, and overwhelmingly risky to the economic and social well-being of the wife. Far from prescribing marriage as a legalistic norm for all people, Jesus is, as usual, arguing against interpretations of the law that crush the ones who are most vulnerable.

The question of divorce is accompanied by that of adultery. The Gospels seem to presume the accepted definition of their day, considering as adultery sexual intercourse between any man and a woman who is either betrothed or married to another man as a wife or concubine. Because a wife or concubine became the property of her husband, adultery became a matter of grand theft, and of shaming (thus Absalom rapes David's concubines as a means of shaming him (2 Sam. 16:19-23)). Adultery was thus potentially a capital offense, as is evident in the narrative of the woman caught in adultery in John's Gospel (8:1-11). While Jesus refuses to cast a stone at the woman, he does not endorse adultery. On the contrary, in Matthew's Gospel, at least, he internalizes and intensifies the definition of adultery. Even a man who looks at a woman with lust in his heart could be guilty of adultery (5:27-32). (Ironically, nowhere does Jesus counsel

against male lust toward other men or against any female lust whatever.)

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Closely related to adultery is *porneia*, frequently translated as "fornication." *Porneia* is like adultery, in that it is an action perpetrated by men on women. The difference here is that these women are not married or betrothed to another man. *Porneia* is generally not deemed as serious an offense as adultery. In Deuteronomic law, a man committing such an act with an unattached young woman must marry her and pay her father fifty shekels (Deut. 22:28-29).

The New Testament also uses *porneia* to describe sexual acts with prostitutes. In the ancient world, prostitution was a common, established practice. This was particularly the case in temples of the fertility goddesses of the ancient world. *Porneia* and its cognates all refer to prostitution. A *porneion* is a brothel; to *porneu\_* is to prostitute; a *porn\_* is a prostitute; the *pornikos* was the tax normally paid by brothel-keepers; to *pornoboske\_* is to keep a brothel; the trade of "brothel-keeper" was known as *pornoboskia*; and a man who loved harlots was known as a *pornophilas*. Any translation of *porneia*, then, should include not only "fornication," which has come to take the meaning of any sex outside of the legal contract of marriage, but also a particular association with "engaging in prostitution." The

Gospels say very little about *porneia*, except that it comes out of the heart of a person (Mk 7:21; Mt. 15:19) and can thus defile that person. There is no clear directive about whether what defiles the person is the thought of sex, the desire to exploit another person for sex, or something else.

Given the Gospels' strong stances on divorce and adultery, and to some extent on prostitution, it may come as a surprise that the Gospels show great sympathy for first-century sexual minorities (that is, persons who live outside of reproductive heterosexual marriage). In fact, sexual minorities and sexually marginalized persons figure prominently in positive roles in the Gospels.

Matthew's genealogy (1:1-17) features four women, the only four women in either genealogy of Jesus in the Gospels. All of these women are known for dubious sexual morality: Tamar, who gets pregnant by her father-in-law after playing the prostitute; Rahab, a prostitute and traitor to her nation; Ruth, a foreign woman who "lies down at the feet" of a strange man while he is drunk in order to obtain financial security for herself and her mother-in-law; and the wife of Uriah, who is raped by King David, is forced to marry him, and bears him Solomon.

These four women, along with Mary, whose pregnancy looked for all the world to be adulterous, are the mothers and grandmothers of the Christ.

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Another category of sexual minorities and marginalized people is unattached and/or infertile women. Unattached women were considered to be "loose," whether or not there was any evidence to support that allegation. Infertile women were considered cursed by some sin they had committed. Yet Luke, in a clear parallel with the stories of Sarah and Hannah, holds up barren Elizabeth as one who is righteous exactly in her barrenness. She goes on to become the mother of John the Baptist (1:1-25). All three of the Synoptic Gospels hold up widows - particularly widows who have no sons - as models of faith (Mk 12:42-44; Lk 21:1-3) and as persons for whom Jesus particularly cared (Mt. 7:11-17).

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And Mark shows the clearly unattached Gentile woman, the one he calls the Syrophoenician, in a toe-to-toe argument with Jesus for the life and sanity of her daughter. She not only challenges Jesus, but also wins the argument - even after Jesus dismisses her with the slur "it is not right to take the food of the children and feed it to the dogs" (Mark 7:24-31). Indeed, Matthew's Jesus quips that prostitutes would enter into the kingdom of heaven before the religious leaders of his day,

because the women, at least, believed John. (Mt 21:31-32). The pattern is clear: Unattached and infertile women may have been marginalized in the wider society because of their sexual status, but they play essential roles in the Gospels' vision of the work of God in the world.

On the subject of same-sex sexual activity, Jesus says nothing – either positive or negative. Some scholars have argued that Jesus encounters a same-sex sexual relationship when he is asked to heal the *entimos pais*, the beloved male “servant” or “slave” of the centurion. The *entimos pais* may or may not have been having a sexual relationship with his boss/owner. Such relationships were common at the time, but there is no specific evidence here. When confronted with the request for healing, Jesus cures the slave/servant without comment about or investigation into the nature of the relationship between this centurion and his *entimos pais* (Matt 8:5-13; Lk 7:1-10). Where modern readers might be full of questions, Jesus and the Gospel writers are silent.

Other scholars have detected a hint of homoeroticism in talk of “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” the one privy to secrets to which even Peter has no access and

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to whom Jesus gives over care of his mother after his death (John 13:23, 19:26-27). There is no evidence of any sexual dimension to this relationship. At the same time, though, there is no special effort in the Gospel to explain, clarify, or justify the relationship. Once again, the authors of the Gospels are far less concerned about how such a narrative might appear than we moderns might be if we were to write these narratives ourselves. Questions about same-sex relations simply are not very important to writers trying to

pass on the Good News.

What does concern the Gospel writers is the question of what it means to be a faithful servant of the living God, especially in light of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. All four Gospels were penned in the wake of this catastrophe. In light of such massive destruction, what did it mean to faithfully follow the law? What parts of the law were relevant and what parts had been superceded by events of the recent past, or – in the case of the Jesus movement – by the teachings of Jesus? With these questions in mind, the Gospel writers remember Jesus not as a pious, scrupulously lawful, religious man, but rather as a man in constant conflict with the religious establishment about the meaning and

purpose even of such central tenets as Sabbath and the laws of kashrut. (Cf. Mat 12:1-14; 15:17-19 ; Mk 2:23-3:6; 7:17-23; Luke 6:1-10; 13: 10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:2-18; 9).

The Gospels remember that in the midst of great social chaos, Jesus was asked what the most important law was. He responded, as have Jews for generations before and since, with the words of the great Shema: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And then, without missing a beat, he added a second: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). Perhaps, finally, even on this issue of sexuality, that is all that needs to be said.

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