

A Statement on Sex, Marriage, and Family

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Sex, marriage and family are gifts of God in which to rejoice. Their essential goodness cannot be obscured by any crisis of our time.

As traditional moral codes are being challenged, there is a profound struggle to formulate bases of ethical judgment which have meaning for contemporary men and women. Powerful forces of social change, joined with discoveries in the medical and life sciences, influence all aspects of human existence. The church is concerned not only with specific issues and controversies, but with the basic Christian understanding of human sexuality.

Human Sexuality

Who are we? We are responsible persons made in the image of God. God created male and female, making sexual interdependence serve the divine intention for life-in-community. Scripture portrays us as relational beings whose true humanity is realized in faith and love with God and neighbor.

True humanity is violated by sin, which is our broken relationship with God and each other. This alienation expresses itself in all facets of life, including sex, marriage, and family. At the same time God works in these broken relationships, healing and freeing the forgiven to devote their efforts to the well-being of others.

Human sexuality is a gift of God for the expression of love and the generation of life. As with every good gift, it is subject to abuses which cause suffering and debasement. In the expression of human sexuality, it is the integrity of our relationships which determines the meaning of our actions. We do not merely have sexual relations; we demonstrate our true humanity in personal relationship, the most intimate of which are sexual.

Marriage

Christian faith affirms marriage as a covenant of fidelity—a dynamic, lifelong commitment of one man and one woman in a personal and sexual union. While hereafter in this report the phrase "covenant of fidelity" is employed, and we recognize it as expressing a key insight about Christian marriage, in biblical language, it may also be helpful at times to express the same emphasis in other terminology through such a phrase as "mutual commitment to lifelong faithfulness" as a substitute for a "covenant of fidelity." Marriage is not simply a legal transaction which can be broken when the conditions under which it was entered no longer exist. It is an unconditional relationship, a total commitment based on faithful trust. This union embodies God's loving purpose to create and enrich life. As the needs of the partners change, the covenant of fidelity must be renewed by God's grace and continually reaffirmed by husband and wife.

This view transcends the civil understanding of marriage as a legal contract. A marital union can be legally valid yet not be a covenant of fidelity, just as it can be a covenant of fidelity and not a legal contract. Such a covenant is also to be distinguished from an identification with the

marriage pattern of any particular culture, from the idea that an established structure is normative for all times, and from the legalistic notion that because two people have had sexual intercourse they are bound together forever. The existence of a true covenant of fidelity outside marriage as a legal contract is extremely hard to identify.

Marriage is ordained by God as a structure of the created order. Thus the sanction of civil law and public recognition are important and beneficial in marriage, as checks against social injustice and personal sin. The marriage covenant, therefore, should be certified by a legal contract, and Christian participants should seek the blessings of the church.

The relationship between husband and wife is likened in Ephesians 5:21-23 to the relationship between Christ and the church. This depicts a communion of total persons, each of them living for the other. As with the covenant between Christ and the church, the promise of fidelity is fundamental. Therefore, Christians regard marriage as a primary setting in which to live out their calling from the Lord.

However, many persons are single for varied reasons. There should be no exaltation of either the single or the married state, one over the other. It is a matter for gratitude when the conditions of life make possible free and open choices.

Family

The family has the function of nurturing human beings in relationships which are rich with creative possibilities. It provides the surrounding in which persons enhance rather than exploit one another, in which mistakes may be made and forgiveness realized.

The family appears in many forms in different times and places. It develops in response to the need of men, women, and children, whether married or unmarried, for a primary relationship in which they may have a sense of intimacy and belonging. There is no greater challenge today than in the family, for it is intended by God to be that basic community in which personhood is fostered. The family should not become centered on itself, but should be seen as a base from which its members move out to participate in society.

Ethical Decision

The Christian's ethical decisions are made in the context of the relationships with God and other persons. Christians act knowing that we daily need God's forgiveness. Under God's grace, however, we are freed to choose how best to serve one another in Christian love.

We Christians need more than love to guide us. In making decisions we should recognize that we and the other persons with whom we act are unique men, women, and children with particular gifts and responsibilities, living in particular places and relationships. Furthermore, we draw our guidance and strength from the Christian revelation, bringing to each situation the benefits of the accumulated wisdom and supporting community of the church.

Human life must be regulated by just laws because humans are finite and sinful. Such laws, enacted by reason and enforced by power, can never be the direct expression of Christian love. Nevertheless, Christians as citizens and the church as institution should join with others in advocating and supporting just laws. In the process, however, it is not proper for any church to impose its sectarian views on the general community.

Some Current Issues

The following statements are not to be thought of as categorical laws or "Christian" solutions to the problems involved. Nor are they intended to furnish easy answers to hard questions. They are offered as guidance to pastors and laity in their ethical decision-making.

1. Some Issues Related to Sexual Expression

Within the realm of human sexuality, intercourse is a joyful means of giving oneself in the mutual expression of love. It is within the permanent covenant of marital fidelity that the full potential of coitus to foster genuine intimacy, personal growth, and the responsible conception of children is realized.

Because the Lutheran Church in America holds that sexual intercourse outside the context of the marriage union is morally wrong, nothing in this statement on "Sex, Marriage, and Family" is to be interpreted as meaning that this church either condones or approves premarital or extra-marital sexual intercourse.

Scientific research has not been able to provide conclusive evidence regarding the causes of homosexuality. Nevertheless, homosexuality is viewed biblically as a departure from the heterosexual structure of God's creation. Persons who engage in homosexual behavior are sinners only as are all other persons--alienated from God and neighbor. However, they are often the special and undeserving victims of prejudice and discrimination in law, law enforcement, cultural mores, and congregation life. In relation to this area of concern, the sexual behavior of freely consenting adults in private is not an appropriate subject for legislation or police action. It is essential to see such persons as entitled to understanding and justice in church and community.

Sexual exploitation in any situation either personally or commercially, inside or outside legally contracted marriage, is sinful because it is destructive of God's good gift and man's integrity.

The church recognizes the effects of social environment and cultural traditions on human behavior. It seeks, therefore, to respond understandingly to persons who enter into relationships which do not demonstrate a covenant of fidelity.

2. Some Issues Related to Marriage

It is the quality of interpersonal relationships within marriage that is the concern of the church. A covenant of fidelity can be broken in reality whether the union terminates formally through legal action or displays external solidarity. In ministering to persons affected by a broken covenant the church is called to assist them to perceive their problems more clearly and, hopefully, to experience forgiveness and reconciliation.

If the outcome is formal dissolution of the marriage, the church should continue to minister to all persons involved. To identify the legal action of divorce as sinful by itself obscures the fact that the marital relationship has already been mutually undermined by thoughts, words, and actions. Although divorce often brings anguish to those concerned,

there may be situations in which securing a divorce is more responsible than staying together.

When the question of the remarriage of a divorced man or woman arises, the church and the individuals themselves will do well to concentrate upon the potential of the new rather than the collapse of the former marriage. A clear understanding of the dynamics which led to the breakdown of the first union helps a person prepare more adequately for the second. A divorced man and woman, of course, should fulfill all legitimate obligations to the members of the broken family.

A shared Christian faith contributes to the strength of a marriage. Even more marriage and family provide a primary setting for Christian nurture and maturity. Before a man and woman enter into an interfaith marriage, each should strive to understand and respect his own faith and the faith of his partner. They should become intelligently informed about factors which can cause special difficulty.

Theologically, marriage between persons without reference to racial and ethnic differences and backgrounds is a witness to the oneness of humanity under the one God, and as such should be fully accepted in both church and society.

3. Some Issues Related to Conception Control

The ethical significance of the use of any medically approved contraceptive method within a covenant of marital fidelity depends upon the motivation of the users. A responsible decision for or against having a child will include evaluation of such factors as the health of the potential mother, a reliable prognosis concerning the health of a possible child, the number and spacing of other children, the family economic circumstances, and the rapid growth of population. People have a right not to have children without being accused of selfishness or a betrayal of the divine plan; and every child has a right to be a wanted child.

All persons are entitled to receive from governmental and voluntary agencies information about conception control.

4. Some Issues Related to Abortion

In the consideration of induced abortion the key issue is the status of the unborn fetus. Since the fetus is the organic beginning of human life, the termination of its development is always a serious matter. Nevertheless, a qualitative distinction must be made between its claims and the rights of a responsible person made in God's image who is in living relationships with God and other human beings. This understanding of responsible personhood is congruent with the historical Lutheran teaching, and practice whereby only living persons are baptized.

On the basis of the evangelical ethic, a woman or couple may decide responsibly to seek an abortion. Earnest consideration should be given to the life and total health of the mother, her responsibilities to others in her family, the stage of development of the fetus, the economic and psychological stability of the home, the laws of the land, and the consequences for society as a whole.

Persons considering abortion are encouraged to consult with their physicians and spiritual counselors. This church upholds its pastors and other responsible counselors, and persons who conscientiously make decisions about abortion.

5. Some Issues Related to Family Life Education

There is need for competent education to understand sexuality and to prepare for courtship, marriage, and family.

This kind of education properly begins in the home, where parents teach their children not only by words but by their actions and expression of feeling. But children and young people also learn from other sources, such as peer group, books, movies and television, which often convey incomplete or distorted information. Parents have the right to expect help from the church in their roles as educators in sex, marriage, and family, particularly in relating their Christian convictions to this task.

The church supports responsible family life education in the public school, so long as religious and moral commitments are respected. Helping young people grow into mature men and women is so important that every possible resource must be involved, including competent, voluntary agencies. But it is the public school that can furnish an education reaching most children and young people. Family life education in the school should include parents in its planning and execution. It should also offer courses for them, coordinated with those their children are taking.

The task of education in sex, marriage, and family requires that the home, the church, and the school prepare themselves for effective fulfillment of their appropriate roles.

A Call

The Lutheran Church in America calls upon its pastors to reinforce the covenant of fidelity in their liturgical leadership, preaching, teaching, and counseling. It calls upon its members to study this statement and the booklet, *Sex, Marriage and Family: A Contemporary Christian Perspective*; and to give support to one another amid the painful ambiguities of making ethical decisions relating to sex, marriage, and family. It calls upon its agencies of education and social service to develop specific plans for helping synods and congregations incorporate the major emphases of this statement into their lives. It calls upon the church, both as a corporate body and as individual members, to witness to the civic community in behalf of just laws and policies affecting sex, marriage, and family, and in behalf of legislation that will improve the economic and social conditions which influence the lifestyles of people.