

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

### VOLUME 1

#### H. ETHICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

## Human sexuality: three key issues

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A background paper (at Section 3H) is available at <http://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr/> and a bible study series on the topic for use in congregations is available at <http://www.lca.org.au/services-resources-training/study-guides/>

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### PREFACE

This paper presents the position of the Lutheran Church of Australia<sup>1</sup> on three key issues in the field of human sexuality: marriage, being single, and homosexuality. The paper has been prepared as the LCA's response to some of the complex issues surrounding human sexuality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

Within the area of human sexuality several matters have arisen. As with other churches it is vital that the LCA address the issues emerging from high rates of divorce and cohabitation. There is an increasing need to acknowledge that issues surrounding singleness are significant for many people, and to respond to changing attitudes surrounding homosexuality, both outside and inside the church, including the growing acceptance and legalisation of same sex marriage. Some Christians now simply accept homosexual behaviour as a fact of life. Others try to affirm the value of individuals without affirming certain behaviours. Others believe that the churches have been wrong about the implications of the scriptures on these matters.

The LCA's doctrinal position in these areas remains unchanged, but the Church is eager to acknowledge and address a range of issues that have arisen. The Church wishes not only to state what it regards as the witness of the Bible concerning human sexuality, but also to explain it. It also seeks to identify other ways of understanding the scriptures and engage

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<sup>1</sup> Referred to in the paper either as the LCA or the Church.

<sup>2</sup> Together with a more comprehensive background paper, this summary paper is designed for study and discussion by members of the LCA, members of other churches, and the wider community.

with them honestly and respectfully. Finally, the Church wishes to suggest how it might care for those for whom these issues are a personal reality.

This paper's focus on three items only—marriage, being single and homosexuality—means that significant areas have not been addressed, such as the increasing sexualisation of the young, pornography, and paedophilia, to mention only three. These and other social realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century deserve extensive, separate investigation and considered theological and pastoral reflection.

## HUMAN SEXUALITY

Sexuality is God's good gift to humanity. All people receive the blessings of God's gift of sexuality. God's people believe that this gift is enjoyed to the full when they follow his word and live faithfully.

Since God creates human beings male and female, all people are by nature sexual beings, and their sexuality affects them deeply. Therefore Christians need to keep listening to the scriptures and being formed by them as they discuss issues pertaining to human sexuality.

Genesis 1 teaches that all people are created in the image of God, and each person is created male or female. Because the fullness of humanity involves both male and female, people experience their humanity both as individuals and in relationship with others. Genesis 2 describes the complementary relationship of male and female and God's intention for sexual intimacy within marriage. This is reinforced and clarified in other parts of the Bible.

Genesis 3 shows that as a result of sin God's good gifts have been marred, including the gift of sexuality. This applies also to Christians, who also struggle with problems in the area of sexuality because of their sinful nature. Christians therefore cling to their redemption in Christ Jesus, pray for the help of the Holy Spirit to live as in God's presence, and long for the restoration of God's creation.

## MARRIAGE

### **A Lutheran understanding of marriage**

Marriage is the union of a man and a woman, to the exclusion of all others, publicly and voluntarily entered into for the whole of life (Gen 1 and 2; Matt 19:3–9; 1 Cor 7:10,11,39).

Marriage is God's good gift to humanity through creation, given to Christians and non-Christians alike. The gift of marriage has three main parts: life-long love and fidelity between husband and wife, the enjoyment of sexual intimacy within the context sanctioned by God, and the potential privilege and challenge of bearing and raising children.

Marriage is a divine order created by God for the good of humanity. A couple's entry into the covenant of marriage (Prov 2:17) is sealed by their vows and their promises of life-long fidelity. It is not their love that keeps the marriage bond intact but the marriage bond that sustains their love. When God established the order of marriage he imbued it with the power of creation as a blessing for couples and by extension a blessing for the whole community.

Marriage belongs to the realm of creation and is one of the primary ways God structures human society to protect and provide for people. It is right therefore that the state, not the church, is responsible for devising the regulations that surround it, such as legal

requirements for a valid marriage, property laws, child protection policies and regulations governing separation and divorce. However, church members will not comply with legislation that conflicts with the will of God for marriage.

For the people of God in Christ Jesus, marriage is more than just a gracious provision of God in creation. Christian couples normally begin their marriage hearing the word of God, making their vows to each other in the presence of God, praying together and being prayed for, and receiving the blessing of God. Joined together by God, their union with each other is a union in Christ, a bond in the Spirit. This spiritual dimension of Christian marriage is reflected in Ephesians 5 where the apostle describes marriage as a 'great mystery' that he applies 'to Christ and the church' (vs 32). The self-giving love of Christ is the model for selfless love in marriage (vss 21–30). It is also in Christian marriage that we are to 'bear with one another and ... forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven [us], so [we] also must forgive' (Col 3:13). Christians are urged to marry fellow Christians; however, in marriages where one partner is not a believer, the Christian can still bring much blessing by their godly life and faithful prayers, which can win over the unbelieving spouse 'without a word' (1 Pet 3:1). Christian couples live out their marriage blessing by living together in faith and love, so that their marriage reflects the union of Christ with his bride the church.

### **Marriage breakdown**

God's intention for marriage is that it be lifelong. Those who have made marriage vows are expected to stay faithful to their spouse until death separates them; as Jesus says, 'What God has joined together, let no one separate' (Matt 19:6). Nevertheless, marriages break down and Christians get divorced. Even though the New Testament permits divorce on certain grounds (Matt 5:32; 19:9; see also 1 Cor 7:15), God's will is most fully lived out when couples who experience conflict live in repentance and forgiveness. At the same time, the LCA can never condone abusive relationships, and places a high priority on protecting victims of abuse from harm, when conflict between a husband and wife becomes excessive. As for those who divorce, and those who seek to remarry after divorce, it is vital that they deal responsibly with any issues arising from their previous marriage.

### **Cohabitation and de facto marriages**

On the one hand, marriage is an estate given by God. On the other hand, the state may legitimately regulate the ways through which marriage is entered and the laws surrounding and protecting those who enter into marriage. Thus the requirements of the Marriage Act will determine whether or not a couple is legally married. These include fulfilling the necessary requirements and procedures for the marriage and having it conducted by an authorised celebrant in the presence of at least two adult witnesses. With these things in mind, Christians who want to live together as husband and wife will seek to comply with the requirements of the state. The Church asks cohabiting Christian couples, with those pastorally supporting them, to reflect on the precise nature of their relationship in the light of the will of God and then either move towards separation or into the full commitment of marriage. This will also provide an opportunity for the congregation and the couple's immediate communities to celebrate, bless, pray for and uphold their union.

### **Same-sex marriage?**

While marriage's attendant rites and ceremonies may vary with time and place, the state does not establish marriage. It reaches back to its divine origins within creation. There God instituted marriage as the union between a man and a woman; but the way it is enacted is a matter for the state. Theologically speaking, therefore, a same-sex 'marriage' is not only contrary to God's design, but it does not have the fundamental features that give

marriage its unique quality. While a same sex union may be based on love and promises of long term commitment, it is not an estate given with creation and embedded in the fabric of society. Unlike the union of a man and a woman, it is not the natural way for bringing children into the world and thereby perpetuating the human community. To use the word 'marriage' for same-sex partnerships would be to use the same name for things that are in fact different.

The definition of marriage, as far as the Church is concerned, must conform to God's intention as revealed in scripture. The LCA acknowledges the right of the state to set up a register of civil unions between people of the same sex and to accord them legal recognition and rights; but it does object to calling such a union 'marriage'.

## SINGLENESSE

All people experience singleness at various stages of their life. Jesus, Paul and the Lutheran confessional writings teach that singleness is a good and God-pleasing state (Matt 19:10–12; 1 Cor 7:6–8, 32–40; Augsburg Confession XXIII, 38). Therefore it is important not to present marriage as if one must marry in order to please God, or as if it is the only good way of life.

### **Singleness as a holy vocation**

For Christians, the single state is a holy calling, no less than the calling of marriage. But single Christians are not bound to a spouse, and therefore, as both Jesus and Paul state, they are free to devote themselves to the things of the Lord in ways that married people cannot (Matt 19:10–12; 1 Cor 7:32–35). Jesus goes so far as to say that those who choose celibacy are a sign and foretaste of the coming age (Matt 19:12; see Matt 22:30). Single Christians can also appreciate in a special way the biblical truth that their dignity and personhood is grounded first and foremost in their identity as people who have been created and redeemed by God.

It is also true that the single life brings with it specific trials and temptations. Some find that without the presence of a spouse they can be tempted to retreat into a self-centred existence, ordering their world to suit themselves and only themselves. In addition, the duty of all Christians to live chaste lives has particular challenges for singles. They cannot engage in the sexual intimacy which God reserves for marriage (Eph 5:3–5; Col 3:5; 1 Cor 6:9–13). They are called to live free of sexual immorality (1 Thess 4:3–8).

### **The single person in relationship**

Dealing with loneliness is often a significant issue for single people (Gen 2:18). The Church can work to ensure that single Christians give and receive deep friendship and support. These relationships should embody, in their own way, the same virtues as a good marriage, such as self-giving love, commitment, chastity, forgiveness, and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22,23). Single and married people may also support each other. Singles can enrich marriages by their friendship and encouragement to remain faithful. Married couples can use their relationship as a secure base from which to offer Christian hospitality and fellowship to those who are single.

## HOMOSEXUALITY

The Bible does not speak of sexual orientations in the way that contemporary society does. But there are a number of passages that address the matter of same-sex behaviour, and all of them present a consistent message that it is not in accord with God's intention (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:26,27; 1 Cor 6:9–11; 1 Tim 1:8–11). This interpretation has remained undisputed in the church until the last decades of the 20th century.

Christians should acknowledge that we all struggle with temptations to sin, and should show understanding towards those who struggle with this kind of temptation. Christians should refrain from judging, but instead show the graciousness that comes from the gospel.

Leviticus 18:22 says 'you shall not lie with a man as you do with a woman' (see also 20:13). Throughout the biblical era, Israel and the church consistently held that homoerotic conduct was evidence of the moral bankruptcy of the pagan world. Some have questioned the relevance of these passages for today's church, but there is little doubt that Paul draws on the language of Leviticus in his prohibitions of homosexual behaviour in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10.

A key biblical witness regarding same-sex sexual activity is found at Romans 1:26,27. The argument of Romans 1 is that the unbelieving world worshiped the creature rather than the creator. God therefore passed judgment by delivering humanity up to its own desires and hence to futility, foolishness and self-degrading behaviour. The first consequence is sexual impurity in general (Rom 1:24). Another consequence is unnatural sexual relations (vss 26,27). The apostle Paul writes:

God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse (Greek: the natural use) for unnatural (what is against nature); and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (1:26,27)

Paul employs the words 'males' and 'females'—usually translated 'men' and 'women'—echoing the words of Genesis 1:27 that God created humanity in the image of God, both male and female. Thus when the apostle speaks of 'nature', he means nature as God intended it. Therefore same-sex conduct, including that of females, is 'against nature', out of step with God's design, and part of humanity's rebellion against the creator. The apostle then goes on to mention many other manifestations of human rebellion against God (Rom 1:28–32).

Same-sex behaviour, characterised by the Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, is one of the lifestyles said to be inconsistent with the new life in Christ, as described in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11 and 1 Timothy 1:8–11. The word *malakoi*, used at 1 Corinthians 6:9, had the general meaning of 'soft'. When used of men it was a pejorative term meaning unmanly, and was used of the passive participant in a male-male sex act. The other word, *arsenokoitai* (1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10), means literally 'males who lie [sleep] with males'. This word draws on the Greek translation of Leviticus 20:13 where the phrase 'lying with a male' (*meta arsenos koitēn*) appears. Thus Paul affirms the Old Testament prohibition of male-male sexual acts.

### Engagement with other views

The LCA has consistently taught that same-sex activity is contrary to God's will. In recent decades, however, a number of questions about this teaching have been raised which deserve to be addressed.

#### 1. Is the Old Testament prohibition of homosexual activity addressed only to ancient Israel, so that it no longer applies today?

It is said that the laws of ancient Israel have to be understood in light of the concerns they sought to address. Maybe the prohibition of homosexual practice (Lev 18:22; 20:13) had to do with Israel's concern that nothing stand in the way of the Lord's command to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth' (Gen 1:28). Maybe the Levitical

legislation reflected a priestly concern for the integrity of creation and a well-ordered life in community. It is claimed that ancient Israel drew up its laws out of a concern for purity to secure a healthy and disciplined community in a fragile world. Therefore, it is said, if the concern behind the prohibition can be met in different ways, the prohibition itself may be removed.

However, even though the laws and decrees in Leviticus 18–20 are addressed to Israel, they are intended for all people. This is made clear by the use of the term ‘humankind’ (*hā’ādām*, Lev 18:5) for the addressee of the legislation. The earlier inhabitants of Canaan were expelled from the land for breaching these laws (Lev 18:24–30). Furthermore, the prohibition of homosexual activity is surrounded by sanctions against practices that the nations and religions of the world have invariably shunned, because prohibitions based on natural law are deeply embedded in the human heart. Finally, the prohibition relating to homosexual practice at Leviticus 18:22 is written in the form of an absolute and permanent prohibition, the same form that is used for the ten commandments.

**2. Does the death penalty for homosexuality (Lev 20:13) indicate that the indictment of homosexuality belongs to a bygone age?**

For the sake of consistency, it is said, if homosexual practice is to remain an offence, so must its punishment, capital punishment. But the fact that certain practices referred to in Leviticus no longer attract the death penalty in most countries in no way mitigates the offence. The New Testament church is not bound to Old Testament penalties such as capital punishment, but it is bound to the prohibition of homosexual behaviour because that belongs to the natural law written on the hearts of all people (Rom 2:14,15), and that law was not revoked by Jesus.

**3. But isn’t this how God made me? Doesn’t that make it natural?**

When Paul talks about acts according to nature or contrary to nature in Romans, he has in mind nature in the sense of God’s original and ongoing purpose for creation, not nature as it is tainted by sin. Sadly we must all face the fact that, even though Christ has broken the power of sin, we are still subject to the effects of sin. Thus the fact that we desire something does not automatically make it morally acceptable. Therefore, even if it could be proved beyond dispute that same-sex attraction is genetic and that people are born that way, this would not automatically make the behaviour right. God expects us to take responsibility for our actions and to refrain from sexual intimacy outside of marriage. As God’s children by rebirth in baptism, we are called to lead a holy life even as Christ has made us holy.

**4. Don’t the biblical writers only speak against unequal, abusive and promiscuous relationships, rather than loving committed relationships?**

It is true that many male-male sexual acts in the ancient world occurred in unequal relationships. However, Paul may have avoided the normal terminology for specific behaviours, like pederasty (that is, relations between a man and a boy), to ensure that his prohibition was as all-encompassing as possible. The terms he used are broad enough to cover all same sex acts. A wide range of sexual activities was practised in the Greco-Roman world, and not all of them were coercive or promiscuous. There were also loving committed relationships between same-sex couples in Paul’s day. He would have been aware of this, and yet he still writes the way he does in Romans 1. Therefore we cannot say that the New Testament prohibition of same sex behaviour is aimed at something altogether different from the loving committed relationships that we know of today.



**5. If homosexuality is wrong, why didn't Jesus speak against it?**

Jesus did not have to speak against it since he could take the Old Testament prohibition as a given. More than that, Jesus affirmed God's original design in creation: 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female"' (Matt 19:4). There are also other forbidden things that Jesus did not need to speak against (Lev 18:21), because people knew they were wrong. In general, Jesus could assume that his listeners shared the typical Jewish aversion to same-sex conduct. If he had wished to abolish the Old Testament teaching on this matter, he would have made his intention clear and his new teaching would have been recorded in the gospels.

**6. But why does all this matter anyway? Aren't we freed by the gospel?**

The gospel does indeed free us—but not to do as we like. It frees us to lead holy lives in accordance with God's commandments. The law remains as a beacon in the life of the believer, describing what life in the gospel looks like. After proclaiming the gospel in Romans 3–5, Paul then asks in chapter 6 whether it is possible to go on sinning. He replies, 'By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?' (6:2); and he concludes, 'So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions' (6:11,12). The gospel cannot be used to trump God's commandments; rather, it empowers us to lead our lives in conformity with them.

**HUMAN SEXUALITY: PASTORAL CARE**

The paper now offers some guidelines on pastoral care with respect to human sexuality for all Christians. The Church is called to care pastorally for people including all those whose desires or life circumstances make them vulnerable.

Christ is the first pastoral carer for his people and leads us to renewed life in mind and body (Rom 12:1,2). The LCA seeks not only to teach in accordance with the scriptures, but also to care for and guide people as they seek to bring their sexuality into conformity with their Christian faith. Pastoral carers will encourage their communities to welcome all people and advocate on behalf of those who suffer discrimination. No one should be excluded from the Church simply on the basis of their sexual orientation.

Pastoral carers will uphold each person's God-given identity as someone who is made in God's image and as a co-heir with Christ through the gospel. They will help people to understand that it is their relationship with God, rather than their sexuality, that is the basis of their identity. Pastoral carers will be intercessors. They will welcome honest conversation about the realities of people's lives, listening compassionately and praying for them persistently.

Pastoral carers will help Christian people turn away from all kinds of sexual immorality. They will use the Bible as the basis for teaching, and they will trust that God's word will do its work. They will refrain from making hasty judgments in the often complex realities of life. On the other hand, they will lovingly seek to discern the appropriate word of law and gospel, challenging the hard-hearted and comforting the repentant with forgiveness through Christ. They will assure people that experiencing temptation is not the same as giving in to it. They will help those who are not yet ready to hear God's Word at least to order their lives as well as possible according to reason. This could include counselling them towards fidelity in relationships and away from any actions that are exploitative or that present serious risks to physical health.

Pastoral carers will speak God's word of forgiveness through Christ. They will proclaim Christ as the one who joyfully receives sinners in mercy, remembering that the Spirit-filled absolution has power to transform lives. They will encourage those who feel alienated to receive God's grace in worship so that they may lead a holy life.

Pastoral carers will understand the importance of social support. They will ensure that people enjoy the friendship of the body of Christ, and they will assist in finding particular help and services for those who need them.

## CONCLUSION

This paper is presented with the prayer that it will contribute to a loving and respectful conversation under the authority of God's word. We hope that it will serve the Church and all who read it as together people listen to this word, with the prayer that the Spirit would transform the personal and corporate lives of all people to the glory of God.