

The Story *of* Marriage

Park Hill Church

THIS BOOKLET IS DESIGNED AS A RESOURCE FOR
PARK HILL CHURCH, TO OUTLINE WHAT WE
BELIEVE ABOUT MARRIAGE, SINGLENESS, AND
SEXUALITY, AND TO HELP GROUND THIS IN A
VISION OF GOD'S DESIRE FOR THE FLOURISHING
OF OUR CITY AND HIS WORLD. WHILE WE
BELIEVE JESUS'S INVITATION TO THRIVE IN
HIS KINGDOM GOES OUT TO EVERYONE, WE
SPECIFICALLY REQUIRE ALL WHO SEEK TO LEAD
WITHIN PARK HILL CHURCH IN A SHEPHERDING
ROLE (I.E. TEACHING, LEADING A COMMUNITY,
WORSHIP LEADING, LEADING TEAMS, ETC) TO DO
SO IN HOLISTIC AGREEMENT WITH THIS
BOOKLET, IN BOTH BELIEF AND PRACTICE.

Our
Context

Our city is beautifully diverse. San Diego is home to many ethnicities, languages, and cultures, from all around the world. We have a strong military presence (which tends to be associated with conservative values), and we are a well-known LGBTQ+ hub (which tends to be associated with progressive values). We have one of the most diverse refugee populations in the nation in areas like City Heights. The foreign-born population of our city (over 27%) comes from at least 115 countries and territories.^[1] We also have some of our nation's most affluent communities in areas like Point Loma and La Jolla. As San Diegans, this means we bring a kaleidoscopic variety of perspective to our common life together.

For followers of Jesus, a question arises: how can we be a living witness in our city to the covenant love of God as expressed in the Story of scripture? This question is particularly poignant in the areas of singleness and marriage, where the conversations in our culture have become increasingly controversial and confusing for many who love Jesus and want to walk faithfully with God. This question hits especially close to home for our beloved brothers and sisters in Christ who are sexual minorities. ^[2]

Jesus *on*
Marriage

Jesus is our ultimate authority. Our highest goal is to live faithfully to him in every area of our lives. Among his many teachings, Jesus addresses fewer topics with greater clarity than that of sex and marriage. In a famous interaction between Jesus and the religious folks of his day (in Matthew 19), they ask Jesus for his views on divorce. In response, Jesus quotes from Genesis 1 & 2 and frames marriage within the great Story of God's love for the world.

The Story begins and ends with the Marriage (with a capital "M"): the joining together of heaven (God's space) and earth (our space). In the first two pages of the Bible, we find two complementary creation stories (Gen 1v1-2v3 and Gen 2v4-25). These stories tell us that God made heaven and earth to work together. From the beginning, heaven and earth are intended to be the two different-yet-interlocking spheres of God's good creation. As the first two chapters of the Bible unfold, we see many things in God's creation mirroring the complementary nature of heaven and earth. Light and dark are distinctly different yet complementary. In fact, they are incoherent without one another. So are the sea and dry land, day and night, sun and moon, plants and animals, and the list of different-yet-complementary pairs goes on. Within the animal kingdom there is male and female. *The whole creation story leads to the big reveal: the creation of humans in God's own image - male and female, together.*¹³¹

As the human story begins, we discover that marriage is a good gift from a generous God who loves to work for the benefit of his human family (Gen 2v18-25). The chapter ends with the famous poem: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2v24). All of these different-yet-interlocking pairings reach their zenith in the union of the man and the woman. They are clearly meant to reinforce one another and point to the profound reality at the heart of the entire Story: *God (heaven) and his creation (earth) are meant to be together forever.*

Jumping to the end of the Story, we find essentially the same picture. In the last two chapters of the Bible, the ancient author envisions the New Jerusalem descending from heaven like a bride on her wedding day. Here is the symbol of marriage again - male and female joined together - *but now the Church is the bride, and her bridegroom is Jesus Christ himself. This is God's dream come true.* His full healing presence will flood creation once and for all, and he will be with us in perfect union. Heaven and earth were always meant to be together, and one day it will happen at last. Until then, we get a taste of this reality in marriage, the coming together of man and woman, and of Jesus Christ and his Church.

Followers of Jesus begin the marriage conversation with that heaven-and-earth picture in mind. Without this backdrop from Jesus, it's easy to cherry-pick Bible verses about sex and misread them as merely a bunch of ancient rules. Once that happens, it's just a matter of time before the scriptures' teachings are updated to fit the current mood, which often says, "If Jesus was around today, I think he would have said that differently." *But when choosing between what Jesus actually said and what we think he would have said if he was around today, followers of Jesus, by definition, go with the former.* Jesus wasn't making up rules out of thin air to create a purity culture or whatever. Not by a long shot. His vision was way more holistic and life-giving than that. Jesus's teachings invite humanity—whether single or married—to live as present symbols of the future marriage of heaven and earth.

One of Jesus' most famous followers, Paul the Apostle wrote about God's burning desire for this heaven-and-earth union. In Romans 8v18-22, Paul depicts creation as a mother in childbirth, agonizing in labor, desiring her new creation to be born. This is an image of female fertility that is meant to point to the goal of the cosmos. Our world is groaning in suffering, longing for heaven to come, heal, and give birth to New Creation.

This language is rich in imagery drawn from the earliest creation stories. *The image of male and female coming together to bring forth life is an intentional reflection of the great coming together of heaven and earth.* All creation aches for this. And God will be faithful to make it happen.

The *Beauty*
of Covenant

This brings us to what many consider the heart of the Story: *Covenant*. The main focus of the Old Testament is the unique relationship between God and his people Israel - Abraham's family. *From the beginning, God and Abraham talk about their relationship in terms of a marriage, a covenant, and a partnership* (Genesis 12v1-3; 26:3-5). God is like a bridegroom, and Israel is like a bride. This corresponds to Adam and Eve in the garden, and ultimately to heaven and earth at the beginning and end of the Story. This is all intentional. All of these covenant partnerships have an ultimate purpose beyond themselves: they symbolize and foreshadow the ultimate coming together of heaven and earth into God's New Creation on the last day.

From the beginning of the Story, God's people have this innate drive toward the joining together of one man and one woman in marriage. Of course, the Scriptures are full of stories of sinful sexual activity that deviates from the original ideal. Lamech led the way in being the first to "take two wives" (Gen 4v19). Abraham also had more than one wife (Gen 25v1), not to mention his earlier fling with a maidservant (Gen 16v2). Isaac is one of the few patriarchs who seem to have only one wife, though she manipulates and deceives him in the end (Gen 27). Jacob has two wives plus two concubines on the side (Gen 29v15-30v24). The breakdown of marriages in Israel leads to the regulation of divorce and remarriage in the Mosaic law (Deut 24v1-4). By the time we get to David and Solomon, ancient Near Eastern polygamy is in full swing. At first glance it seems the biblical authors are rarely bothered by polygamy, but they always show how polygamy ends in disaster in the narratives.[4] David's adultery is condemned (2 Samuel 11-12) and leads to a divided nation. His son Solomon's tendency to collect foreign wives is seen as a problem (1 Kings 11). Ironically, Solomon, the polygamist of polygamists in the Bible, authored what is probably the brightest reflection of the divine ideal for marital love in written form: Song of Solomon. It's one of the most exquisite pieces of literature in human history. Song of Solomon assures God's covenant community that he takes great

delight in marital happiness and sexual pleasure. Then as Israel's prophets come to a close, God openly declares that he hates divorce as a violation of the marriage covenant (Mal 2v13-16). *Though the Hebrew Scriptures teach the ideal of one man and one woman, several of the major heroes of the Story seem to ignore this ideal completely.*

After reading about all the messy marriages in the Old Testament, it's easy to imagine God ditching the whole idea of male-female covenant monogamy for some updated version of sexual expression. But when we get to the New Testament, we find something surprising (it was just as surprising for Jesus's culture as it is for ours). *Rather than loosening up on the 'one man one woman' marriage teaching from the Old Testament, Jesus doubles down on it.* Jesus is clear in Matthew 5, Matthew 19, and Mark 10 and elsewhere: Jesus is God-With-Us, his kingdom is near, his new covenant is being established forever through his life and work. And Jesus goes back to the beginning, quotes Genesis 1-2, and declares, shockingly:

“In the beginning God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Jesus in Mark 10v6-9)

And equally shocking, Jesus says this about sexuality:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Jesus in Matthew 5v27-28)

Astonishing, to say the least! Jesus's first followers are confused by his clear, strict simplicity, just as many are today. Jesus's first followers ask him how this is supposed to work practically. Jesus explains that this is how God planned it from the beginning. He acknowledges that Moses gave them permission for divorce back in Deuteronomy, but this, Jesus says, was because "your hearts were hard" (Matthew 19v9). *In this moment, Jesus is hinting that his message is the cure for the hardness of human hearts. This is the challenge of the Way of Jesus. He challenges all of us. It's as if he is saying, "Here is the way humans were meant to flourish. If you follow me, we will step into this New Creation reality together."*

For Jesus, human marriage is not an end to itself. It is not an eternal covenant (Matt 22v30). Marriage is a temporary gift for some of us in God's family as we all journey toward our final destiny together - the eternal union of God and his covenant community (Romans 8v19). Contrary to what has often been communicated in modern Western Christian culture, marriage and sex are not the ultimate expressions of human flourishing. After all, Jesus was single! In fact, the Apostle Paul clearly says singleness is an equally (if not more) desirable and honorable gift than marriage in some ways. Make no mistake, both singleness and marriage are gifts.^[5] Both are difficult and beautiful gifts that powerfully reflect God's image in his covenant family.

The Union *of*
Christ and the
Church

With this heaven-and-earth, one-man-one-woman covenant backdrop driving the whole Story, it's no surprise that the Apostle Paul picks up on this idea and translates it into the language of *Christ and the Church*. This is what his famous letter to the Ephesians is all about. Chapter 1 opens with the all-encompassing reality that God's purpose was always to "unite all things in Jesus, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1v10). In chapter 2, this cosmic purpose is symbolized in the unity shared between ethnically diverse "Jews and Gentiles" as "one new humanity" in Jesus (Eph 2v15). Then in chapter 3 Paul refers to this new unified humanity as one "family" with the same "Father." In chapters 4-6 Paul unpacks how this diverse-yet-unified spiritual family is to live in this world that their Father is redeeming. This is where Paul's most famous marriage teaching comes in. *Ephesians 5v21-33 is the theological intersection all biblical questions about marriage must eventually pass through.* In this passage Paul calls human marriage a "mystery" that, when fueled by mutual sacrificial love, actually reveals Jesus Christ's relationship with the Church. Jesus gives his life for his people, and his people respond in gratitude and love. The roles of husbands and wives are modeled on this. *From the mountaintop of Ephesians 5, we can take in the entire Story from Genesis 1-2 all the way to Revelation 21-22.* From this breathtaking view, we can see three unions, each different-yet-interlocking, overflowing into one another:

Union 1 - Individual: marriage between one man and one woman, which points to...

Union 2 - Communal: the deeper relationship between Christ and the Church, which points to...

Union 3 - Universal: God's ultimate purpose for the cosmos: the joining together of heaven and earth—God's New Creation.

As we follow the thread of Jesus's one-man-one-woman teaching through the rest of the New Testament, we find that it isn't just an outdated rule to which some might object based on the latest scientific discovery about human sexuality. Jesus's teaching on both singleness and marriage is always a declaration of faith in the meaning and purpose of God's creation. From the beginning, heaven (God's space) and earth (our space) were created to be the two different-yet-interlocking spheres of God's good creation. God and his creatures belong together. *Human marriage, defined by Jesus as the lifelong covenant union of two sexually-different-yet-equal persons, is a temporary signpost pointing to far a greater cosmic reality—the ultimate union of heaven and earth.* Until then, the privilege of the married couple is to declare this "great mystery" (Eph 5v32) by temporarily incarnating through their own marriage the sacrificial love of God for his joyful people. *Human singleness, as lived by Jesus, is also a temporary signpost that eagerly anticipates our eternal New Creation state—where there will be no such thing as singleness, only complete, loving, equally intimate, whole-person union with one another in God's presence.* Until then, the privilege of the single person is to prophetically call the rest of God's people to embodied faithfulness while living "free from concern" in "undistracted devotion" to the True Bridegroom (1 Cor 7v32-35) until all God's children inhabit True Marriage forever.

While both marriage and singleness are gifts for all God's children to receive (Matt 19v11 & 1 Cor 7v7, respectively), both are also very difficult to live faithfully in our fallen world. *Thankfully, God offers his children an even greater Gift than marriage or singleness: the gracious power of his indwelling Spirit.* As followers of Jesus receive his Gift of grace, we are empowered to live out his vision for human flourishing in all our beauty and diversity.

Conclusion

We realize this booklet may raise all kinds of questions and implications regarding the multifaceted conversations around marriage, singleness, and sexuality. We believe such conversations are best embraced in gritty, flesh-and-blood relationship, submitted to the authority of the scriptures and prayer, together as God's Spirit-driven, diverse-yet-unified family. For Park Hill Church, this means we are committed to growing as a family of endless grace, with the Way of Jesus as our primary call to obedience.

We believe, in agreement with the New Testament, that both marriage and singleness are honored and embraced as equally valuable and mutually edifying gifts within the diverse family of Jesus.

We believe Jesus calls all of us who follow him, gay or straight, married or single, to a sexual ethic in which sex is reserved for the lifelong covenant of marriage between one man and one woman (what is often called the "historic," as opposed to "progressive," sexual ethic), a "one flesh" union between two sexually different persons.

We believe the Way of Jesus is both radically countercultural and beautifully compelling—offering the life-giving alternative to both our sex-obsessed secular culture on one hand and our marriage-obsessed church culture on the other (which are really two sides of the same sex-crazy coin). In this way, the Christian Church becomes the true family humanity longs for by the power of the Spirit.

We believe sex is so much more than our hyper-sexualized culture would have us believe. Sex is not simply a pleasurable, recreational activity between consenting adults. We believe, in agreement with the scriptures, that sex is a whole-person connection between a husband and wife to express, confirm, and deepen marital intimacy and covenant love.

We believe there is no such thing as “casual sex.” In fact, sex is so powerful that the only container strong enough to hold its raw, nuclear force is marriage as defined by Jesus and the scriptures. Thus, biblically, there is no such thing as “sex outside of marriage.” There is only “sexual immorality.”^[6] Any sexual activity outside of this covenant of marriage (adultery, divorce, pre-marital sex, co-habitation, same-sex sexual activity,^[7] pornography, etc) violates Jesus’ call upon those of us who follow him.^[8]

We believe that LGBTQ+ individuals are created in the image of God, loved radically by God, with inherent dignity, value, and worth, with great gifts to bring to God’s world and to the body of Christ, and that Jesus calls all who follow him to honor and treat them as such. We have several LGBTQ+ people who are part of our church, including one of our pastors. We celebrate their gifts, delight in their humanity, and call them brother and sister.

We believe in redemption, that God’s grace is big enough for all of us to enter, whatever our history and wherever we come from, as we turn from our sin toward faithfulness to Christ. Jesus is the Great Lover, who pursues us and makes us living icons of his hope for the world, as we participate in his unbreakable faithfulness, pursuing grace, and covenant love toward us as his Bride.

In San Diego as it is in heaven,

Park Hill Church leadership

SD *RE* CA

[1] SOURCE - TOM K. WONG, PHD AND MIKAYLA SANCHES, SDSU - IMMIGRATION INTEGRATION IN THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO:
[HTTPS://USIPC.UCSD.EDU/PUBLICATIONS/USIPC-IMMIGRANT-INTEGRATION-SAN-DIEGO-FINAL.PDF](https://usipc.ucsd.edu/publications/usipc-immigrant-integration-san-diego-final.pdf)

[2] THE TERM "SEXUAL MINORITY" REFERS TO A PERSON OR GROUP WHOSE EXPERIENCE OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION/ATTRACTION DIFFERS FROM THE MAJORITY OF THE SURROUNDING SOCIETY. PRIMARILY USED TO REFER TO LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, OR NON-HETEROSEXUAL INDIVIDUALS, IT CAN ALSO REFER TO MINORITY GENDER IDENTITIES SUCH AS TRANSGENDER, NON-BINARY, OR INTERSEX INDIVIDUALS. THOUGH AN IMPORTANT CONVERSATION, GENDER IDENTITY IS BEYOND THE SCOPE OF THIS BRIEF BOOKLET ON MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY. [HTTPS://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/SEXUAL_MINORITY](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexual_Minority)

[3] MUCH OF THIS BOOKLET IS BASED ON THE INSIGHTFUL WORK OF WELL-KNOWN CHRISTIAN SCHOLAR NT WRIGHT. AT A 2014 MEETING OF JUDEO-CHRISTIAN GLOBAL LEADERS SUCH AS POPE FRANCIS, RICK WARREN, AND RABBI JONATHAN SACKS, NT WRIGHT GAVE A TALK THAT HE LATER TURNED INTO A 2017 ARTICLE, ENTITLED, WHAT IS MARRIAGE FOR? TRACING GOD'S PLAN FROM GENESIS TO REVELATION. IT CAN BE FOUND HERE:
[HTTPS://WWW.PLOUGH.COM/EN/TOPICS/LIFE/MARRIAGE/WHAT-IS-MARRIAGE-FOR](https://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/marriage/what-is-marriage-for)

[4] IN ATTEMPT TO UNDERMINE THE IDEA OF A BIBLICAL DEFINITION OF MARRIAGE, MANY HAVE RAISED THE "PROBLEM" OF POLYGAMY IN THE BIBLE. BUT HONESTLY, OLD TESTAMENT POLYGAMY IS THE LEAST OF OUR PROBLEMS. SIMPLY PUT - WHEN READING BIBLICAL NARRATIVES, WE MUSTN'T CONFUSE THE IS WITH THE OUGHT. JUST BECAUSE POLYGAMISTS ARE RECORDED IN THE BIBLE DOESN'T MEAN GOD SANCTIONED POLYGAMY. IDOLATERS ARE RECORDED TOO - LOTS OF THEM - BUT THIS OBVIOUSLY DOESN'T MEAN GOD IS NUDGING US TOWARD IDOLATRY. JUST BECAUSE YOU READ ABOUT A PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE DOESN'T MAKE IT A BIBLICAL PRACTICE. THIS IS BASIC BIBLE INTERPRETATION. FOR A FULLER STATEMENT ON POLYGAMY IN SCRIPTURE, SEE PRESTON SPRINKLE'S IS THERE REALLY SUCH A THING AS BIBLICAL MARRIAGE?
[HTTPS://CENTERFORFAITH.COM/BLOG/IS-THERE-REALLY-SUCH-THING-AS-A-BIBLICAL-MARRIAGE](https://centerforfaith.com/blog/is-there-really-such-thing-as-a-biblical-marriage)

[5] THE SCRIPTURES REFER TO BOTH MARRIAGE AND SINGLENES AS GIFTS, DIFFICULT AND BEAUTIFUL, TO BE RECEIVED FAITHFULLY. JESUS CALLS MARRIAGE SOMETHING THAT IS "GIVEN" AND "ACCEPTED" IN MATTHEW 19:11. PAUL REFERS TO SINGLENES AS A "GIFT FROM GOD" THAT HE WISHES "ALL OF YOU (CORINTHIANS CHRISTIANS)" HAD IN 1 CORINTHIANS 7:7.

[6] THE NEW TESTAMENT WORD FOR SEXUAL IMMORALITY IS "PORNEIA." TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THIS, LISTEN TO THE FOLLOWING TEACHING FROM PARK HILL CHURCH, ENTITLED WE ARE NOT OUR OWN (PART TWO)
[HTTPS://PODCASTS.APPLE.COM/US/PODCAST/PARK-HILL-CHURCH-PODCAST/ID1233560281?I=1000495219615](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/park-hill-church-podcast/id1233560281?i=1000495219615). ALSO HELPFUL, THIS BRIEF ARTICLE FROM NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR SCOT MCKNIGHT, ENTITLED, WHAT IS PORNEIA TO A 1ST CENTURY JEW?
[HTTPS://WWW.PATHEOS.COM/BLOGS/JESUSCREED/2014/04/04/WHAT-IS-PORNEIA-TO-A-1ST-CENTURY-JEW/](https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2014/04/04/what-is-porneia-to-a-1st-century-jew/)

[7] WHEN CHRISTIANS TALK ABOUT THE ETHICS OF SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS, THEY TYPICALLY START FROM THE SO-CALLED "CLOBBER PASSAGES" LIKE LEVITICUS 18:22, ROMANS 1:26-27, OR 1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-11. UNFORTUNATELY, THESE PASSAGES HAVE BECOME THE DREADED "CLOBBER PASSAGES" PRECISELY BECAUSE CHRISTIANS BEGIN CONVERSATIONS WITH THEM. INSTEAD OF STARTING WITH, DOES THE BIBLE PROHIBIT SAME-SEX MARRIAGE?, WE NEED TO START WITH THE ULTIMATE QUESTION: WHAT IS MARRIAGE? (WHICH IS WHAT THIS BOOKLET IS ALL ABOUT). FOR MORE ON THIS, SEE PRESTON SPRINKLE'S 2018 ARTICLE, ENTITLED, WHAT IS MARRIAGE?
[HTTPS://WWW.CENTERFORFAITH.COM/BLOG/WHAT-IS-MARRIAGE](https://www.centerforfaith.com/blog/what-is-marriage)

[8] GENESIS 1:27-28; 2:24; MATTHEW 5:27-32; 19:1-12; PROVERBS 2:16-17; EZEKIEL 16:8; MALACHI 2:14-16; 1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-13; 6:12-20; 7:1-6; ACTS 15:20, 29; ROMANS 1:24-32; 13:13-14; EPHESIANS 5:3, 21-33; COLOSSIANS 3:5; 1 THESSALONIANS 4:3; JUDE 7.

