



GREAT LAKES CATECHISM
ON MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY



To my sisters and brothers at Fourth Reformed Church, the North Grand Rapids Classis, the Regional Synod of the Great Lakes, and the Reformed Church in America,

Grace and peace to you.

As the covenant people of God, we are called to make disciples of Jesus and bear witness to the kingdom of God. If we are going to make disciples, we have to teach those within the church what it means to follow Jesus in concrete ways. If we are to bear witness to God's kingdom, we must be able to explain to those outside the church why we live the way that we do.

In our time, there is great confusion both inside and outside the church about matters of marriage, family, and sexuality. In the broader culture, the sexual revolution continues to work itself out. In our churches, the sexual revolution unfolds as well, though at a slightly slower pace than the rest of the culture. This is a matter of great concern, for Scripture and the Reformed confessions clearly teach that being the people of God is not merely about beliefs in our heads but the daily practices of our bodies.

We have often failed, however, to articulate clearly and winsomely the biblical teaching on matters of sexual ethics. We have simply said "don't do it!" outside the context of marriage, without articulating the meaning of our bodies, of marriage, of singleness, or of children. No wonder that Christians and non-Christians alike struggle to make sense of Christian teaching and practice on these matters!

In light of this situation of confusion inside and outside the church, this catechism is offered as a basic teaching tool to help all members of Christ's body better understand the biblical teaching on marriage, family, and sexuality. It is not meant to be an exhaustive explanation of these complex issues but a succinct, clear foundation on which we can continue to build. It is also *for the church*. Though Scripture expresses God's will for all people, we recognize that we should not expect non-Christians to follow a path of discipleship (1 Cor. 5:9-10). Rather, we are called to preach the gospel of grace and live lives marked by the good works that flow from gratitude.

This catechism is entitled the "Great Lakes Catechism" because it was developed as a resource and teaching tool at the encouragement of the Executive Committee of the Synod of the Great Lakes. It is my hope and prayer that it will serve the church well.

Blessings,

Dr. Branson Parler

Grand Rapids, Michigan

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1 Q: Is human sexuality a good thing or not?

A: It is good! We see in Scripture that God created us male and female as part of the creation order, that our sexuality is an inherent part of being human, and that our sexuality is part of what God calls “very good” in the beginning.¹

Moreover, God created man and woman as full partners, together bearing God’s image² and together receiving God’s blessing and call to “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth, and subdue it. rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that lives on the ground.”³

2 Q: But isn’t the body or the “flesh” the root cause of our sin and temptation?

A: Certainly not! Our sin problem is not ultimately a body or sex problem; it is a heart problem— we do not desire God as we should and so we desire other things in a way we should not.⁴

3 Q: May we then look to our bodies and sexual desires to learn what is right?

A: No. Our expressions of sexuality are distorted and twisted by sin. Sin warps us in many ways, including our desires, thoughts, and actions pertaining to our sexuality.

Because our sexuality is affected by the fall, we should not act on our desires, inclinations, or thoughts without first testing them by what Scripture teaches is honorable, right, pure, and lovely.⁵

4 Q: So Scripture is the source from which we learn what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in our sexual lives?

A: Yes. Scripture is the infallible rule for our lives.⁶ This means that we look to it to understand who God is and who we are called to be as God’s people.

¹ Gen. 1:31

² Gen. 1:27

³ Gen. 1:28

⁴ Jer. 17:9; James 1:14-15

⁵ Phil. 4:8

⁶ Belgic Confession, art. 7.

In this world, we are called to test all teaching about marriage and sexuality
by Scripture,
and we must not put human writings,
custom or tradition,
the majority opinion,
the thinking of our own time and place,
or even past decisions of the church,
above the truth of God,
For God's truth is above everything.⁷

5 Q: Who should we consider our family?

A: Though many may consider their biological family their first family,
Jesus teaches us that those who are his disciples,
who are united by one Lord and one baptism into God's covenant people,
should be considered our primary family.

6 Q: Does this mean our earthly families are unimportant?

A: No. In fact, Scripture teaches us that we are to honor our parents,⁸
and that we should faithfully love our spouses and children.⁹

Nevertheless, we are called to seek first the kingdom of God.¹⁰
God's mission and vocation must shape all my relationships.
Though earthly families are good and a blessing,
they may become an idol if we make them our ultimate priority or loyalty.
All earthly loyalties and obligations,
including those of family,
must be subject to the lordship of Jesus.

7 Q: Since marriage and family are good, is it necessary to be married?

A: No. During his earthly ministry,
Jesus showed us that true human fulfillment does not need to include marriage or sex.
Yet, the life of Jesus most certainly included close, intimate relationships
with those he called family.

⁷ Belgic Confession, art. 7.

⁸ Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:1.

⁹ Eph. 5:21-6:4

¹⁰ Matt. 6:33; Matt. 12:46-50.

8 Q: But why do many people in my church expect young adults to get married and raise a family?

A: The goal for all Christians is not marriage,
but, whether married or single,
to live decent and chaste lives.¹¹

In the beginning, God blessed marriage and he calls many Christians
to live out their discipleship in the context of marriage.
Nevertheless, Christians sometimes idolize marriage and family
and promote the unbiblical teaching
that a person can only find fulfillment and happiness
in the context of a marriage and family.

However, this expectation is contrary to Scripture,
which teaches that many Christians will be unmarried,¹²
whether through choice or circumstance,
and that they live a true, fully human life,
as our Savior did.

9 Q: How then should we view the single, celibate life?

A: Singleness can serve as a sign and reminder to married people
that our most basic calling is to seek first the kingdom of God,¹³
not our earthly families.

In addition, the single person's life points us ahead to the life to come,
when we will neither marry nor be given in marriage.¹⁴

10 Q: Why did God institute marriage between man and woman?

A: Though many see marriage simply as
a path to personal fulfillment, happiness, or self-realization,
or a relationship that may be dissolved if they are dissatisfied,
Scripture teaches that God instituted marriage between a man and woman
as a sign of Christ and the church,¹⁵
as a state of mutual help for life's journey,¹⁶
as a relationship in which married Christians are sanctified,¹⁷
and in order to provide for the continuation of the human race¹⁸
and the raising of children into a life of faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁹

¹¹ Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 108.

¹² 1 Cor. 7:29-40.

¹³ 1 Cor. 7:33-35; Matt. 6:33.

¹⁴ Matt. 22:30

¹⁵ Eph. 5:31-32

¹⁶ Gen. 2:18

¹⁷ John 13:34; Gal. 5:13; Phil. 2:3; Eph. 5:21; 1 Pet. 5:5; 1 Cor. 7:4-5; Gal. 6:2; 1 Thess. 5:11.

¹⁸ Gen. 1:28; Ps. 127:3

¹⁹ Deut. 6:4-9

11 Q: Should we view the duties and obligations of marriage and family as a hindrance to the truly spiritual life?

A: No. When properly understood, we see that
faithful devotion to one's spouse
and faithful care of one's children
are not merely 'earthly' or 'natural' matters
but are in fact key elements of a faithful walk with Christ.²⁰

Furthermore, the married person is a sign and reminder to single people that,
just as a husband or wife has obligations to their spouse and family,
so we all have obligations to the family of God.

12 Q: What is the meaning of sexual union?

A: God created man and woman to be able to unite not only our bodies,
but our very lives and selves as husband and wife.

In marriage, husbands and wives give themselves completely to one another,
and the one-flesh sexual union embodies the fact
that these two persons are no longer two, but one flesh.²¹

13 Q: But isn't sexual union just a physical act?

A: No. It is certainly more than that.

In fact, when we reduce sex to a merely physical or biological act,
we end up reducing other image-bearers of God
to mere objects to be used.

We see this abuse and hatred of our neighbor all around us,²²
in pornography,
prostitution,
rape,
promiscuity,
cohabitation apart from marriage,
and sexual union outside of the covenant of marriage.

14 Q: How, then, should we understand sexual union?

A: Sexual union is a part of the total giving of oneself—
body and soul, indeed one's whole self—
to one's spouse,
just as God in Christ gave himself completely to his bride, the Church.²³

²⁰ Eph. 5:21-6:4

²¹ Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:7-8; 1 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31

²² Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 5.

²³ Phil. 2:5-8;

And just as God is a faithful God who gives himself to us in covenant,²⁴
so sexual union is a covenantal act
that commits one to faithful, lifelong love to one's spouse.²⁵

Sexual union is also meant to be a free act, entered into without coercion,
but freely and graciously,
as God in Christ freely and graciously loves us.²⁶

And finally, God created husband and wife so that
they fruitfully participate in the miracle of new life.²⁷
Just as God's life and creativity brought us forth,²⁸
so children are not to be seen as a nuisance or impediment
to the marriage relationship
but as gifts of God,²⁹
disciples to be raised in the training and instruction of the Lord.³⁰

15 Q: Does Scripture limit marriage and sexual union to a husband and wife?

A: Scripture consistently teaches that the difference
between a woman and man in marriage is essential
to properly represent, symbolically, Christ and the church,
to the one-flesh act of sexual union
and one-flesh relationship of covenantal marriage,
and for the bringing of children into the world.

In Scripture, bodies matter.

We are saved by the body of Christ, broken for us,
and his blood, shed for our sins.
Without Christ's body, we cannot be saved.

Furthermore, in the sacraments, we see that the material elements matter.

God does not merely give us grace through invisible means
but gives us visible signs and seals,
which are not empty and hollow signs
but which have their truth in Jesus Christ,
without whom they would be nothing.³¹

²⁴ Ex. 34:6-7.

²⁵ Mal. 2:16.

²⁶ Rom. 8:32.

²⁷ Gen. 1:28; Ps. 139:13-14

²⁸ Gen. 2:4-7, 18-22; Job 10:8-9.

²⁹ Ps. 127:3-5; Gen. 21:1; Gen. 30:22; 1 Sam. 1:19; Ps. 139:13-14

³⁰ Eph. 6:1-4; Deut. 6:4-9.

³¹ Belgic Confession, art. 33.

In a similar way, bodies matter in marriage,
which is defined in part by the sexual difference
of male and female, who together—body and soul—bear the image of God
and symbolize Christ and the church.

Thus, marriage is not defined merely by the will or desire of any individual
but by the recognition that our Creator and Redeemer God has instituted marriage
to take a certain form, with certain kinds of bodies:

“A man leaves his father and mother
and is united to his wife,
and they become one flesh.”³²

16 Q: Does Scripture really condemn all same-sex sexual activity?

A: Yes. Scripture consistently and categorically

condemns sexual activity between persons of the same sex as immoral.

Genesis 1-2 presents the male-female relationship as God’s design for marriage.

The Torah given by God to Israel teaches that same-sex sexual activity is wrong.³³

Jesus re-affirms the teaching of Genesis on marriage,
that marriage is between a man and woman.³⁴

The early church condemns same-sex sexual activity
when they condemn “sexual immorality,”
a term that points back to Leviticus 18 and encompasses all forms of sexual
sin,³⁵

and the New Testament writers re-affirm the sexual ethics of Torah,
including specific condemnations of incest, adultery, and same-sex sexual
activity.³⁶

17 Q: Does the Bible especially condemn same-sex sexual activity above other sins, sexual or otherwise?

A: No. Scripture never singles out same-sex sexual activity
as a worse sin than others.

18 Q: What should characterize our attitudes and actions toward those who are same-sex attracted, whether inside or outside the church?

We must first remember that there is a difference between being same-sex attracted,
and acting sexually on that attraction.

Just as there is a difference between being attracted to people of the opposite sex,
And acting sexually on that attraction.

³² Gen. 2:24

³³ Lev. 18:22

³⁴ Matt. 19:1-10

³⁵ Acts 15:19-20

³⁶ 1 Cor. 5:1-2; 1 Cor. 6:9-20; 1 Tim. 1:10

Furthermore, though Scripture condemns sexual sin, it also condemns
all forms of mockery,
degrading words and thoughts,
economic oppression,
abuse, threats, and violence
against anyone based on their sexual identity or activity.³⁷

Anyone involved in such behavior must repent
and walk in obedience to Jesus' command to love.

19 Q: What about those who fail to keep fully Scripture's teaching on marriage and sexuality? How should we view them?

A: We must first remember that "they" are us!³⁸

We are all sinners
saved by God's extravagant grace.

We must therefore see all people with the eyes of Jesus,
who looks on us with compassion.

We must also remember that we should not expect people who are not disciples of Jesus
to act as though they are.

Indeed, Scripture teaches us that we should expect to interact and associate
with those who are idolaters and sexually immoral
as part of our daily life in this world.³⁹

But as disciples of Jesus, we are also called
to teach, rebuke, correct, and even discipline one another,⁴⁰
for we know that without discipline,
we dare not call ourselves the church of Jesus Christ.⁴¹

And we do not love one another in this way merely
for the sake of following the rules or keeping human traditions
but because God's life-giving Spirit empowers and equips us
for a life of faith and gratitude,⁴²
for which we were made and to which we are called.

³⁷ Belhar Confession, art. 4. Luke 6:31; Lev. 9:9-18; Prov. 6:16-19.

³⁸ Romans 2:1-4

³⁹ 1 Cor. 5:9-10

⁴⁰ Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:11-13; 2 Cor. 2:5-11.

⁴¹ Belgic Confession, art. 29.

⁴² Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 32 & 33.