

Healthy Relationships & Sexuality

(Statement of Ethos – revised 16/03/23)

Healthy Relationships are fruit of following Jesus together – rooted in the love of God

God's immense and unfathomable love for us is where we begin: the ground of our being and of all that it means to be human – including our sexuality and its expression. To help us understand this, the Bible gives us the rich and beautiful idea of **covenant love**, in which God binds himself to his people to do them good and to never forsake them. Such love inspires and enables our love.

COVENANT LOVE & COMMUNITY

The church is a **covenant community**, in which we experience and respond to the love of God, and learn to love one another.

As a **Baptist church**, we call people into God's covenant love through **baptism** and **membership**. We offer these to all who turn to God in repentance and put their faith in Jesus Christ and follow him (Acts 2: 38–39), seeing them both as vital for all apprentices in love (aka disciples).

In preparing people for baptism and membership, we recognise that while our **core beliefs** are the same, we have diverse views on some matters of faith and practice. These include how we read and understand the Bible, as well as different convictions on a range of ethical issues relating to money, sex and power. We seek to hold our differences with humility and generosity, not allowing them to become barriers to those who are finding faith among us. Our shared endeavour is to create an environment where each of us can work out what it means to follow Jesus (Phil. 1:12-13), within strong bonds of friendship (1 Thess. 5:11, Heb. 10:24-25).

We feed and nurture our life together through Bible reading and teaching, friendship (aka fellowship), worship and the celebration of communion (Acts 2:42).

We encourage all members in a full and joyful participation in the church community and God's mission in the world (Rom. 12:3-8, 1 Pet. 4:10). Every gift is needed. All are encouraged to serve, according to character, maturity and gifting, and guided by the wisdom and discernment of those set apart to lead in the church. For leadership team roles, special attention is paid to the biblical criteria for overseers in the church (1 Tim. 3:1-13 & Titus 1:5-9), as well as what will best serve the wellbeing of the church community.

It is our shared calling and commitment to learn and grow in the way of Jesus, in all areas of life (Col. 3:17). To this end, we pledge to make known and to practice clear biblical values for strong, loving relationships – including how our sexuality is both valued and expressed.

LOVING SEXUALITY

Sexuality is a gift of creation and a wonderful ingredient to being human. We are committed to pursuing healthy sexuality in our life-together, undergirded and guided by the following relational values:

- **KINDNESS** – Healthy relationships are characterised by kindness (Colossians 3:12-14, Romans 12:9-16).
- **PERSONHOOD** – We are made in God's image (Gen. 1:27). Here is our essential identity, loved by God and precious. In loving community there is no place for the objectification or control of others. (Rom. 13:10). Our safeguarding policy commits us all to keep each other safe – especially children and adults at risk.

- **FAITHFULNESS** – Sexual desire and chemistry come with being human; their expression/acting upon them should always seek to honour and protect our commitments (e.g., friendship or marriage) and our kinship in Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 5:1-2).
- **RELATIONSHIP** – Sexual desire is meant to be expressed within loving relationship. Non-relational sex moves against the Creator’s will and all that is good for us – e.g., casual sex and pornography, areas that need to be addressed as a community and pastoral care given (Gal. 6:1-5).
- **INTIMACY** – In healthy relationships, intimacy keeps pace with commitment (Song of Songs 8: 4–12). The deepest sexual intimacy is to be enjoyed within the strongest commitment: within a life-long, loving union established through vows made publicly.
- **FORGIVENESS** – Everyone slips and there is forgiveness for sexual sins as much as for non-sexual sins, e.g., acts of greed, selfish ambition and dishonesty, where there is repentance. (1 John 1:9).
- **GOD’S WORK IN US** – We are all ‘work in progress’ - e.g., many of us do not yet live free of our possessions (Luke 12:33) or struggle to widen our circles to include the poor and marginalised (Luke 14:12).

We seek to make these things known in a way that all can take hold of and apply to their lives, through preaching and teaching, pastoral care and spiritual friendships – for all ages and all stages of life.

SINGLENESS

Outside of the church, being sexually active is a cultural norm/expectation today. Living the Jesus way as singles, where intimacy keeps pace with commitment, and the deepest intimacy is kept for the strongest commitment, is a tough call and we must be ready to offer the friendship, support and encouragement needed to fulfil it (1 Tim. 4:16) – especially for those who know a call to life-long celibacy. The church has not always been the most nurturing environment for singles – something we need to work on.

MARRIAGE

The Bible gives us a rich and beautiful vision of marriage as a form of covenant love that joins a man and a woman in a one flesh union and creates a context for self-giving love to grow and children to be nurtured, a wonderful work of God that actually points to the joining of heaven and earth. (Gen. 1:26-28 & 2:21-25, Mark 10:1-9, Eph. 5: 25-33, 1 Cor. 7:1-16 & Rev. 21:1-5)

It is our privilege to prepare couples for marriage and to conduct a wedding for them, with care to follow through on the friendship and support we pledge as a community.

Some of our members hold the view that while the biblical vision of marriage is cast as a male-female union, all the good of marriage can be pursued and enjoyed by a same-sex couple, and that such unions should be recognised and celebrated as marriages. Other members hold the conviction that the complementarity of one man and one woman is vital to what makes a marriage. Given our different views on this, we cannot, in unity, conduct a wedding for a same-sex couple, but we **can** together warmly receive same-sex couples into our community, valuing their love and commitment to one another (Phil. 4: 8), and encouraging them in following Jesus.

WHEN VOWS ARE BROKEN

We recognise that despite even the best support from family and friends, vows are broken and sometimes beyond repair.

We will love, guide and support those couples whose relationship is in crisis, as well as those separating or seeking divorce. We are ready to prepare divorcees for marriage supporting them in a healing journey, believing that new beginnings are possible by God’s grace.