



WILLOW CREEK
COMMUNITY CHURCH

The Elder Statements

of Willow Creek Community Church

Updated as of January 1, 2017

“An elder...must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught...[to] encourage others by sound doctrine.”

Titus 1:6-9 (NIV)

Preface

Introduction

The Elder statements of Willow Creek Community Church summarize the core of our beliefs and interpretations. Elder statements combine biblical integrity and guidance to solve issues that may arise in our church.

Biblical Basis and Guidelines

These statements are biblical, pastoral and communal, with a focus on leading and edifying the local body of believers.

WE BELIEVE the Bible is the inerrant Word of God;

WE BELIEVE in upholding our theological beliefs, to love, support and come alongside anyone who seeks to follow Christ;

WE BELIEVE the local church is the hope of the world.

These statements address the following topics and issues:

Avoiding Business Conflicts

Baptism

Discipline

Marriage, Singleness and Sexual Practice

Prayer

Protecting Minors and Vulnerable Adults

Reconciliation

Stewardship and Giving

Women and Men in Community

Avoiding Business Conflicts

Introduction

Mutual trust and respect are essential to both interpersonal fellowship and in business transactions, but the church is often not the appropriate environment for these two types of relationships to intersect. Should Willow Creek attendees in communities or sections do business together? Business relationships may exist within the church as long as conflicts of interest between business dealings and the purposes of Willow Creek are avoided. No Willow Creek attenders, especially those in leadership positions, should use church resources or assets to further their own businesses.

Biblical Basis and Guidelines

Jesus' cleansing of the temple as recorded in Matt. 21:12-16; Mark 11:15-18 and John 2:13-16 include references to other biblical passages (Isa. 56:7, Jer. 7:11 and John 2:16), which establish the church as "a house of prayer" for worship and spiritual service, not a place for making financial gain.

Simply put, unless approached by an attender, staff members and church leaders should not solicit anyone in the church to sell, market or promote business products or services. By avoiding this practice, we can keep our message clear and unequivocal that the church's mission is to develop fully devoted followers of Christ.

Examples may include:

- Passing out business cards or fliers on Willow Creek property or at any church-sponsored event;
- Using Willow Creek mailing or phone lists for business purposes;
- Using employment or leadership affiliation with Willow Creek to influence a business relationship;
- Using church equipment or supplies, such as the telephone, stationery, copier or postage for outside sales.

If a Willow Creek attendee requests a business service from another attendee, this will be considered an exception to these guidelines *provided* the business dealing is based on a

mutual agreement by both parties and the business relationship between them is completely independent of their Willow Creek affiliation and does not utilize any church resources.

Special Guidelines for Persons in Leadership

Scripture consistently calls leaders to the highest standard of ethical conduct and reminds them to soberly consider their influence as an example in the body. Everyone in a leadership position at Willow Creek needs to be careful and diligent when dealing with people.

Examples may include:

- Using the utmost integrity to protect both their own and Willow Creek's reputation;
- Avoiding inappropriate use of leadership influence for business purposes by setting clear boundaries between business dealings and his or her Willow Creek leadership role;
- Wherever necessary to avoid confusion, disclosing to all persons solicited outside the church that the business engagement or opportunity is separate and distinct from his or her Willow Creek leadership responsibilities;
- Educating and promoting adherence to these guidelines with all persons under his or her direct influence and actively discourage any solicitation activities within the church.

Conclusion

Willow Creek must remain a safe and welcoming community for spiritual seekers to explore the claims of Christ and for believers to grow without the potential distraction of business dealings at church. Elders acknowledge the possibility of God-honoring business dealings; however, the ultimate concern is to protect the bride of Christ, the purity of her witness and the spirit of peace and unity that should properly prevail at Willow Creek Community Church.

Baptism

Introduction

When people consider the topic of baptism, they often ask one of two questions. The first is a very basic one: What is the spiritual significance of baptism? The second has to do with traditions from the past, specifically pre-conversion baptism. The issue in that case is: Why be baptized as an adult believer if I was baptized as a baby?

While recognizing other churches have the right to practice infant baptism if it conforms to their theologies, Willow Creek Community Church understands the Bible teaches only professing believers qualify for baptism.

Biblical Basis and Guidelines

Scriptural teaching on baptism may be summarized as follows:

- Baptism is an act of obedience to the command of Christ, fulfilled by individuals who subject themselves to His sovereignty.
- Baptism symbolizes the spiritual cleansing through divine forgiveness and newness of life experienced by believers by virtue of their identification with Christ in His death and resurrection.
- Baptism provides an opportunity for believers to make a formal profession of their faith before the church.

Although the old-covenant practice of infant circumcision is sometimes adduced as a rationale for infant baptism, the biblical definition of the functions of circumcision and of baptism shows those two institutions fulfilled different purposes in their respective covenants. The equation is never made in the Bible between the circumcision of male infants in the old-covenant and the baptism of Christ-following believers – much less of infants – in the new-covenant through Jesus Christ.

However, Willow Creek Community Church encourages Christian parents to present their child for the ceremony of dedication, whereby God's blessing is formally invoked upon the child and parents publicly commit themselves to raise the child in accordance with the teachings of the Bible.

The Elders require that children be in grade 6 or older to be baptized.

Willow Creek Community Church offers the options of baptism through both sprinkling and immersion, on the basis of a sacramental view of the ordinances whereby their value lies in the symbolism they convey and in the faith of the participants, rather than the nature or amount of the elements used (bread and wine for Communion, and water for Baptism).

Specific Passages Concerning Baptism

At Willow Creek, the Bible is the source of our beliefs, including our views on baptism. A few key passages can help us see what purpose baptism plays in the life of a believer.

In Matthew 28:19 (NASB) Jesus commands His followers, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”* Baptism is the means by which disciples of Christ are identified. Because Christ commanded it, Christ followers willingly submit to baptism.

In passages such as Acts 2:41, 8:12 and 10:47–48, it is evident the act of baptism came after an individual’s decision to trust Christ for salvation. It was an outward sign of something that occurred in the person’s life (usually quite recently). No one would dream of being baptized unless he or she made a decision to identify with Christ. And no one else could make that decision for him or her. The New Testament records the baptisms of adults who were believers, but never of infants. Baptism can’t give a person anything, spiritually speaking; It can only signify something that has already happened.

In Romans 6:1–11, the Apostle Paul explains how Baptism by immersion identifies the believer with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Going under water symbolizes Christ’s death while emerging from the water illustrates His resurrection. Although the immersion mode of Baptism best illustrates the work of Christ, this passage does not mandate how much water should be used. The value of the sacrament of baptism is in the life and heart of the believer, not in the amount of water used. Because of this, Willow Creek affirms both sprinkling and immersion as acceptable methods of baptism.

The Wedding Illustration

One way to grasp the meaning of baptism – as well as what it does not mean – is to imagine a wedding. The bride and groom stand side by side before the church. They take turns promising “‘til death do us part.” This bride and groom do not look any different on the outside but in a few moments they will be married – united for life by invisible cords. In order to signify that unseen union, the bride and groom exchange rings. These bands of gold tell the world they are now married. A permanent change has happened to them.

Now imagine an unmarried couple is watching. They decide they want to be married, too. So they give each other rings right where they sit. No public commitments, no vows made, just the symbols of union exchanged. As they walk from the church, their hands, like those of the bride and groom, bear the accepted token of lifetime love. But only the couple that has made a public commitment to each other is really married.

The point is obvious. Symbol is not substance. Marriage depends on a public commitment, not on bands of gold. The same is true of becoming a Christian. What may outwardly

identify you as a believer does not make you one. The wedding rings do not marry the couple. They are fitting symbols, but without the reality of commitment, a ring – like baptism – is void of meaning. Therefore, you must choose Christ, and you must choose baptism, for the sacrament to have the meaning intended by the Bible.

Of course, you do not have to be baptized to have Christ, any more than you must exchange rings to be pronounced man and wife. But if the inner commitment to trust Christ alone for salvation has been made, then the outward symbol of baptism should be as valued and as visible as the gold ring on a newlywed's finger.

Infant Baptism

If the purpose of baptism is to publicly identify a new believer in Jesus Christ, the question may be asked, "Why are so many people baptized as babies?"

In the Bible, we find parents bringing their children to Jesus. He held them, prayed for them and told His disciples to welcome them. But He did not baptize them, and He did not tell anyone else to baptize them. Baptism is appropriate only for those who have made a personal decision to trust Christ alone for their salvation. If you were baptized as a child, it was no doubt the intent of your parents that you would one day be a follower of Christ. Your baptism as an adult can be viewed as the fulfillment of your parents' wishes. It in no way repudiates or disrespects the baptism you received as a child.



Discipline

Introduction

One of the most difficult decisions we will ever make as individual believers and as the Body of Christ is how we will respond to moral failure in a leader or teacher. How should we react to the disappointment, sadness, and anger we feel when a leader makes sinful choices that seemingly tear down the very things we are working so hard to build? How do we practically cope with the organizational disruption and the loss of that leader's personal and ministry credibility? What role does grace play and the knowledge that nothing, even our sinful choices, can separate us from the love of God and his redemptive power? How do we do our best to restore a fallen leader and still preserve the credibility of the entire ministry and the purity of the gospel message? How is trust restored?

The following is a summary of a study of Scripture by the Elders that takes into consideration the needs of the leader or teacher, the needs of innocent third parties and the protection of the ministries and reputation of Willow Creek.

Biblical Basis and Guidelines

The pages of Scripture speak honestly and consistently about the sinfulness of man against a Holy God. Since the first sin in the Garden of Eden, man's propensity has been to hide from God and others in order to cover the shame and embarrassment of his sin. In spite of being new creatures in Christ, Christians still struggle with sin as a testament to our fallenness and need for the sanctifying work of Christ in our lives. Paul expresses this struggle between our old and new nature in Romans 7:18 and 19 when he exclaims, *"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good but cannot carry it out."*

In contrast to this natural propensity to hide and rationalize sin, God says that sin should be acknowledged, confessed, and brought under the light of truth (Ephesians 5:11, Psalm 51). Through repentance, defined as a willful turning away from sin, we can be reconciled to God through Christ and receive forgiveness from those we have offended (1 John 1:8-10, Ezekiel 18:30-32). We all experience this cycle of sanctification in our daily walk with Jesus Christ and continually require the operation of repentance, confession and the receipt of grace from God and others when we sin (Proverbs 28:13, Psalm 32:5 and Psalm 41:4).

But the Bible calls for an additional remedy when sin occurs in the life of a leader or teacher. The Bible speaks of a "stricter standard" for leaders and teachers because their higher visibility and influence more greatly affects the conduct of the whole church and its

various forms of outreach (James 3:1). We hold the members of our staff to these standards because our staff has the responsibility and privilege to lead and teach the congregation through their lives and activities.

The biblical process for resolving issues of sin in the life of a leader or teacher includes appropriately specific public acknowledgement of the sin to defined circles of people who were directly impacted by the leadership or teaching of that leader or teacher. In 1 Timothy 5:20, Paul states that, *“Those [elders/leaders] who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that others may take warning.”* This practice of appropriate public disclosure serves to remind a ministry that godly character is the foundation for leadership and teaching. In addition, the holiness and credibility of the ministry is preserved and increased through the reminder of the consequences for violating biblical principles.

The consequence of failure to publicly acknowledge sin in a recognized leader or teacher is to allow rumors, gossip and false information to seriously erode the credibility of the ministry. Information and misinformation regarding the sin eventually surfaces that contradicts excuses or contains half-truths designed to “protect” the leader but is at the expense of the ministry.

In addition, sin is heartbreakingly hurtful to those third parties who are closely impacted by the sin but are innocent of any wrongdoing themselves. One of the most difficult decisions for the Elders is how to obey Scripture and protect the credibility of the ministry while offering love and compassion to those innocently hurt by sin. We have found that in most cases, despite our best efforts, there simply is no way to completely avoid or mitigate for everyone involved all of the pain that sin brings because sin, by its very nature, is destructive and hurtful to those in and around it. In this case, we have tried diligently in light of all the facts and circumstances, to protect and share the burden of those who are innocently hurt by sin.

Next, the Elders have committed to “Tell the whole truth to whom the whole truth is due” (R.C. Sproul). Great care has been taken to determine with as much precision as possible exactly what is “the whole truth” and “to whom the whole truth is due” in order not to subject the ministry involved or any innocent third party undue and preventable embarrassment, gossip, or condemnation. We trust that the receivers of this information will be wise and confidential pursuant to the communication guidelines found in Ephesians 4:29-32 and Matthew 18:15 and resist the temptation to gossip or destructively criticize anyone involved. We believe disclosure of appropriate levels of information to these circles upholds the biblical standards stated above, takes into consideration the level of leadership that was violated, protects as much as possible the interests of the innocent and preserves the credibility of the Willow Creek ministry.

Finally, it is our hope that all impacted will humbly keep in mind their own propensity to sin, remember the words of Colossians 3:13 and Ephesians 4:32, and make a willful choice to extend forgiveness and yet understand that the rebuilding of trust may take a longer period of time.

As leaders and teachers we must make every effort to avoid putting any obstacles to salvation in anyone's way so that no fault could be found in the ministry or in our leadership. In 2 Corinthians 6:1-10, Paul defends the credibility of his ministry by asserting that it was based on virtues such as purity, knowledge, holiness of spirit, genuine love, and truthful speech. We seek to advance the cause of Christ in the same way. Likewise, when a leader or teacher falls to sin we must seek restore him or her gently as far as we are able in accordance with Galatians 6:1, 2.

This statement is instructional to those to whom the whole truth is due:

We ask that you pray for those involved, for the ministries where they served and Willow Creek Community Church, as we seek to overcome these events and press on to the tasks ahead.



Marriage, Singleness and Sexual Practice

Introduction

In this statement, we outline our church's position on a number of important topics related to marriage and sexuality. However, this discussion is not just about divorce or premarital sex or gay marriage—although we do address those controversial issues. It is rather first and foremost an exposition on the wonder and beauty of our sexuality and God's design for its full expression within a marriage. It's about celebrating and affirming the differences among us and encouraging each individual to honor God with his or her sexuality within the parameters and boundaries for purity that He has established. In a culture that tells us that seeking pleasure is the highest virtue, it's about putting sexuality in its proper perspective, not as an essential element of happiness or fulfillment, but as a wonderful privilege and responsibility that should never be abused or dishonored. And, it is about the very counter-cultural idea that followers of Jesus submit willingly to God's direction with regard to our sexual expression, aspiring to be faithful and obedient to Him even when doing so requires sacrifice. We believe that this document accurately reflects biblical teaching on this sensitive topic and we resolutely stand with Jesus and His loving call to purity.

Biblical Basis and Guidelines

As in all matters, we consider Scripture to be the basis of our beliefs related to marriage and sexuality, and we see throughout the Old and New Testaments that God uses marriage and sexual imagery to illustrate the intimacy He wants us to experience with Him (Ezek. 16:8; Hos. 2:14-20; 1 Cor. 6:17; Rom 7:1-6; Eph. 5:21-33).¹ We also see that God does not view either marriage or singleness as an inherently favored status—both have advantages and disadvantages. Moreover, both sexual expression and celibacy can help us in our pursuit of spiritual intimacy and holiness, depending on the person and the circumstances (1 Cor. 7:32-35). In addition, we see that God has clearly defined the situations within which sexual activity is consistent with His design and purposes. Specifically, God reserves sexual intimacy for marriage, which according to Scripture is an interdependent, exclusive, and lifelong commitment between a man and a woman who are likeminded in love and faith. In every other relational circumstance or stage of life, God's call is to remain celibate. Behavior that is incompatible with God's design for sexual intimacy does not lead to the truest and best life for any human being. We are quick to add

¹ The conclusions reached in this document are based on a broad and thematic interpretation of Scripture. Scripture citations are provided in places to help direct the reader to verses in the text where the information being presented is addressed.

that although many have succumbed to the lure of various sexual sins, God’s grace is assuredly and freely offered to anyone wishing to claim it. Despite the pain or shame we may feel, God’s redemptive power is always stronger than the destructive force of our human recklessness.

We recognize that the church has not always stewarded well the balance of biblical truth with loving grace and acceptance in areas relating to sexuality. Sadly, it has been far too common in the Christian church to place undue emphasis on scriptural definitions of sinful behaviors and lose sight of the outrageous love, forgiveness, and inclusiveness that Jesus brought for all the children of God. This has caused undue judgment, exclusion, and shame for people struggling to follow God’s creation design for sexuality. As followers of Jesus, we challenge all people to God’s biblical standards with a spirit soaked in grace and an awareness of the confusion and brokenness that is rampant in our fallen world.

At Willow, our hearts break for people challenged by and struggling with God’s call to purity. None of us are without sin and we all struggle to live lives that measure up to God’s standards. No matter your struggle, we honor your journey and welcome you to join us at Willow so that together we can seek to follow Christ. It is our intention to boldly speak the truth of God on these matters while extending a radically loving hand of grace and inclusion to each and every individual as an infinitely valuable person created in the image of God so that those seeking to find Christ will not be hindered and those seeking to grow in Christlikeness will be spurred on.

Based on our interpretation of Scripture and much prayerful consideration, we hold the following beliefs, which are further explained and elaborated upon below:

- WE BELIEVE all people are made in God’s image, have turned away from Him, and are all offered unconditional love and acceptance through Jesus Christ;
- WE BELIEVE we are called as children of God to holiness and the pursuit of intimacy and communion with God the Father through the work of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit;
- WE BELIEVE sex within God’s design is always a mirror of His oneness involving the whole person uniting a man and woman into “one flesh;”
- WE BELIEVE God’s design for marriage beautifully reflects His holy character and the interdependent community – the “oneness” – that eternally exists within the Trinity;
- WE BELIEVE for those who marry, sexual expression is a gift from God given to them – and only to them – to solidify and enhance their covenant relationship;
- WE BELIEVE marriage is a lifelong, exclusive, and interdependent relationship between a man and woman in which both, sometimes as individuals and sometimes as partners, participate in God’s redemptive purposes in this world;
- WE BELIEVE at some point in all our lives – and for others of us all our lives – we experience singleness, and those eras can be a gift from God allowing for

focused participation in God's work in our lives and His redemptive purposes in this world;

WE BELIEVE violations of the marriage covenant and sexual expression outside its bounds stand in contrast to the love-infused Kingdom of God Jesus came to bring and are prohibited by Scripture;

WE BELIEVE God's grace, forgiveness, and capacity to redeem is far greater than any human shortcoming and as His followers we love and embrace each and every individual as an infinitely valuable person created in the image of God while relating His truth with the same love and grace we have each received so undeserved.

Creation, Holiness and Sexuality

Our God is a holy God (Exod. 15:11; 1 Sam 2:2; Isa 6:3) which means that God is intrinsically pure and without sin or "shifting shadow" (James 1:17). He can be counted on to always do right, and be right. Scripture teaches that because God is holy and desires fellowship with His creatures we are called to be holy just like Him (Lev 11:45, 19:2; 1 Pet 1:13-16). We are to pursue holiness in all we do (Heb. 12:14; Eph. 4:24; 2 Cor. 7:1) and to keep ourselves from succumbing to the harmful practices that hold people captive (Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 2:11). The work of Jesus Christ on the cross and the dynamic of the Holy Spirit living within us empower us for this endeavor. We don't pursue holiness to court His favor, but rather receive His favor—His forgiveness for our decidedly unholy character and actions—and then pursue holiness because of His prior gracious acceptance. The result of this pursuit of holiness is a greater intimacy and communion with God, the very thing for which we were created. In that state, we know and are known by our Heavenly Father, and experience here on earth a taste of the Kingdom of God.

When God created humans He created us to be divine image bearers (Gen 1:26-27). This suggests that we are like God in a way not unlike a child is like a father. We know that God is infinite and sinless and we are finite and sinful, however our role as image bearers reminds us that despite these clear differences, we do have things in common. One element we have in common with God is that once we were created, we were diversified into male and female creations (Gen 2:18-25). In this way, we were created to mirror and resemble the distinction yet the interdependence in the divine union of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Gen 1:26). While Scripture notes our unity in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28) we do have unique gendered roles to play in God's creation, i.e. mothers, fathers, husbands, and wives. Our diversification as male and female, and thus our sexual identity, is part of God's good creation plan. Our sexuality is a part of who we are, not what we do. An analysis of how we are to steward our sexuality is an analysis of how we are to steward our likeness to the image of God.

God's Design for the Marriage Union

Immediately after God diversified human beings as male and female (Gen 2:22) He gave us the gift of the opportunity for marital partnership between men and women:

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”
Genesis 2:24–25

One flesh...naked and unashamed. These biblical descriptors summarize the intellectual reality and intention behind sex. But sex is much more than a cerebral experience. Such sterile language does not sufficiently capture the whole-body experience that sex actually is. That is precisely why this topic is so important to our lives as human beings and followers of Jesus Christ. It is core to our identity. It is biologically the very source of the propagation of our species. And socially, spiritually, as well as personally, it is perhaps the place of our greatest wounds, shame and dysfunction.

The “one flesh” description is the basis of all proper understanding of how sex is to function. It is a foundational principle; both the Old and New Testaments as well as Jesus himself use the “one flesh” phrase when talking about it (Genesis 2:24; Mark 10:8; Ephesians 5:31). In addition, one-flesh sex takes place where both partners are “naked and unashamed”. That is only possible where love and security are at the foundation of the relationship. To be seen without covering or pretense—to be *naked*—is at the very heart of what it means to be intimate. Sex is meant to be expressed only in such a relationship. It does not create security or intimacy; it supports and amplifies the love and intimacy already existing. Attempts to use sex to create those elements of a relationship actually have the opposite affect: we become more ashamed, not less so, and feel used or cheated when our bodies are demanded without our souls being treasured as well.

Sex therefore is by God’s design, at its very core, a unifying act. It brings two into one. Theologically, such oneness has important parallels. When the famous Old Testament passage declares, “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one...” (Deut. 6:4) it does not use the Hebrew word for “one” that signifies singularity (*yacheed*). Rather, the text employs a Hebrew word that means unity (*echad*). When Adam and Eve are told in Genesis that they will become “one flesh,” the text uses that same word for unity (*echad*) rather than the word for singularity (*yacheed*). Just as God, the Trinity, is one God in three Persons (*echad*), so people in marriage are one flesh in two persons (*echad*). That profound parallel is of supreme importance when we seek to understand God’s intention for a healthy and life-affirming expression of our sexuality.

The above word study leads us to conclude that, by God’s design, sexual expression mirrors God’s own oneness. It further implies sex is essentially relational, rather than impersonal. It is not a mere bodily experience (though many people engage in sexual options that reduce it to that) but involves the whole person. It must take place only in a relationally stable, committed environment—the context of monogamous marriage. In that setting, sexual expression reaches its highest ideal; any other context not only robs sex of this possibility, it robs the people involved of their dignity, freedom and lasting joy.

Throughout Scripture, marriage as modeled by Adam and Eve is affirmed and celebrated (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:5-6; Eph. 5:31)—it is the norm, the quintessential marital relationship, against which all other forms of partnering are compared and contrasted. The characteristics of marriage modeled by Adam and Eve show us the key elements of God’s design for marriage.

Adam and Eve were likeminded in love and faith, demonstrating God's plan for marriage as a partnership of equals ("evenly yoked" as 2 Cor. 6:14 puts it), which allowed them to thrive. This theme of spiritual like-mindedness as a condition for a God-honoring marriage is repeated throughout Scripture including Old Testament warnings to Israelites not to intermarry with pagan nations (Deut. 7:3; Josh 23:12; 1 Kgs 11:2) and in the teachings of Paul concerning the complexities of mixed faith marriages (1 Cor. 7:12-16; 2 Cor. 6:14).

God's design is that the marriage union be *lifelong*. Scripture upholds the permanence of marriage noting that a man will leave his family and be united to or cleave to his wife (Gen 2:24). Jesus taught that while a man and a woman may still be two people after they are married, they possess a "oneness" that binds them into a single entity (*echad*) that has enormous spiritual significance. To underscore this, He noted that no one should separate those whom God has joined in marriage (Matt 19:5-6; Mark 10:8-9).

Paul also addressed the permanence of marriage comparing the marriage union to the permanent union between Christ and His Bride, the Church (Eph. 5:22-33). Paul taught that marriage is a covenant relationship and that covenants are irrevocable (Rom 11:29). God's intent for individuals who choose to marry is that the union will last a lifetime, so it breaks His heart when divorce dissolves the commitment they have made to one another (Mal 2:15-16; Matt 19:6). Therefore, those who enter into a marriage covenant should do so humbly, selflessly, and intentionally in the spirit and attitude of Christ (Phil 2:1-5).

God's design is that the marriage union be *exclusive*. The cleaving of husband to wife (Gen 2:24) suggests uniting with each other at the expense of all others. To say, "I do" with one means to say, "I won't" with everyone else. Just as God's covenant with Israel was monogamous, so our covenant marriage relationship is designed to be exclusive. Jesus upheld the marriage vows of each spouse in His teaching affirming that each spouse is to love, honor, and cherish the other in all circumstances (Mark 10:2-12). Similarly, Paul spoke of a godly love, mutual respect, and constant fidelity among spouses (1 Cor. 7:1-16, 25-40; Eph. 5:21-24; Col 3:18-25). The whole of Scripture makes clear that marriage is set apart by God to be respected, cherished, and protected (Heb. 13:4).

God's design is that the marriage union be *between a man and a woman*. The creation plan for marriage is a reunion of the man and woman that God previously diversified (Gen 2:22-24). Scripture makes clear that God created us man and woman (Gen 1:27) and that a man is to leave his parents (Gen 2:24) and unite or cleave to his wife in marriage (Gen 2:24). Our gendered character is part of our true humanity and this joining of man to woman in marriage is upheld in Scripture as a holy act of God (Matt 19:6).

Although no marriage is perfect, the examples we see in Scripture of healthy marriages support this characteristic including the marriage of Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 4) and the marriage of Jesus' parents Mary and Joseph (Matthew 1-2, Luke 1-2). Song of Solomon is a beautiful book celebrating the sensuality that is rightfully present between a loving

husband and wife. Paul's letter to the church in Rome affirms God's creation plan for marriage between a man and a woman (Rom 1:24-28).²

Lifelong, exclusive marriage between a man and a woman is a means for us to participate in God's redemptive purposes. As creatures created for fellowship with our holy Creator, we are to first seek God's kingdom in all we do (Matt 6:33; Luke 12:31; Deut. 4:29; Col 3:2). While doing so, men and women in marriage unions have the opportunity to experience some unique gifts from God. Marriage affords us the opportunity to participate in procreation (Gen 1:28). Marriage also allows us to exercise joint stewardship over God's creation (Gen 1:26, 28). Marriage is a means for us to experience an earthly covenant partnership. Marriage is not simply a casual commitment or a simple promise (1 Cor. 11:11), rather it is a covenant relationship between a man and a woman (Mal 2:14) and between each marriage partner and God (Prov. 2:17). The covenant of marriage mirrors both God's covenant love for Israel (Gen 17:7) and Christ's love of the Church (Eph. 5:32; Rev 19:7). Marriage also allows us to experience human intimacy in a sexual union (Gen 2:24). Scripture teaches that this sexual intimacy is a good and wholesome gift given by God that is meant to be enjoyed (Prov. 5:18-19; 1 Tim 4:3-5). The denial of the gift of sexual intimacy in marriage is not virtuous or noble (1 Cor. 7:3-5). Human sexuality requires careful stewardship. When we experience sexual intimacy, we are uniting in ways that we do not fully understand (1 Cor. 6:15-17) and having physical experiences that have consequences for our souls (1 Cor. 6:18-20).

God's Design for Singleness

Scripture teaches that God assigns some of us to be married and others of us to be single (and we are all single for at least part of our lives). Singleness can be an opportunity to participate with great personal focus in the redemptive purposes of God. The Apostle Paul holds singleness in high regard mostly because it has fewer distractions from spiritual matters than married life. In other words, single people have the "gift" of availability—they have more time and energy to promote the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 7:7, 32-34). In the Old Testament, the material blessings of marriage and family were often viewed as evidence of God's favor and blessing. For this reason, marriage was the norm in the Old Testament times and singleness was seen as a lack of God's favor. In the New Testament, we are fully blessed in Christ with or without marital and other worldly blessings. Paul described it this way: "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." (Phil 4:12). This realization, that we are complete in Christ whether married or single (or rich or poor, etc.), affirms that a life without sexual expression is not deprived or incomplete—any more than Jesus, who was fully human like us, was deprived or incomplete in His singleness. Rather, it affirms God's high view of singleness and makes clear that singleness is part of God's plan for some that enables them to participate most effectively in His redemptive work.

² As already noted, Jesus expressly affirmed that marriage was between a man and a woman (Matt. 19:5-6; Mark 10:8-9). Although Jesus did not expressly address the question of same-sex sexual activity, he did not overturn any of the prohibitions on sexual practices set forth in the Old Testament. Further, the Jewish culture's unambiguous stance that sexual activity should be limited to a man and woman united in marriage made the need for Jesus to teach on same-sex sexual activity unnecessary. In contrast, the culture that Paul encountered necessitated that Paul explicitly address same-sex sexual activity in his teaching.

Neither marriage nor singleness is a preferred state. Paul goes so far as to call singleness a “gift” wishing that all believers could have this gift as he has it (1 Cor. 7:7). Jesus also affirmed the gift of singleness when He taught the validity of choosing to remain unmarried for the sake of the kingdom of God (Matt 19:11-12) – a choice He Himself made. Part of God’s plan for singleness includes non-intimate opposite gender relationships. These are a healthy and necessary part of a life of singleness and a part of God’s creation plan in creating us male and female. It should be noted that not all single people are necessarily *called* to singleness. Some are single just for now; and God’s will for them is to be married someday. Scripture teaches that in this state of preparation for marriage, we are to be patient, prayerful, and faithful to the Lord (1 Cor. 13:4-7; Rom 12:9-13; Gal 5:22).

As we strive for sexual purity and holiness while single, Scripture does offer us instruction. Just as in marriage, those in a state of singleness are above all else called to be holy (Lev 11:45). While our desire for intimacy is indeed acknowledged (1 Cor. 7:1-2), Scripture clearly reserves sexual expression for marriage and demands celibacy from our singleness (1 Cor. 6:12-20).

Our bodies are meant for the Lord (1 Cor. 6:13; Rom 6:12-14) and as believers we steward our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). Our bodies are to be handled with the care and intentionality that we would handle holy things. God’s plan for celibacy in singleness calls us to treat our bodies in such a way that we foster intimacy and dependence on Him (1 Thess. 4:3).

Distortions of and Departures from God’s Plan for Purity

In our call to holiness as God’s creatures, we are to control our bodies and our desires (1 Thess. 4:3-5). However, we live in a broken world where God’s creation plan has been distorted by sin. This has corrupted every dimension of human life including our sexuality. Our culture endorses pleasure seeking in our sexuality regardless of the form it takes. Additionally, our sexuality informs our identity and view of self. This helps explain why issues related to sexuality can be a highly sensitive and highly emotional challenge for many.

While those who trust in Christ are fully equipped for this struggle by the gift of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, our alienation from God and from each other causes us to not always choose the path towards holiness. In these situations, we see violations of God’s plan for purity and departures from God’s plan for human sexuality.

Adultery

Adultery is the betrayal of the “one flesh” marriage vow introduced in Genesis 2:24. God’s plan is that marriage is exclusive, and adultery defiles the marriage union by violating this exclusivity.

In the Old Testament, adultery was clearly and strictly forbidden by the seventh of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:14; Deut. 5:18). Marriage was the proper domain for sex, and

no other context for it received God's blessing.³ Scripture in many places also shows that adultery is damaging to everyone involved—harming even those not directly involved (Prov. 6:23-35; 7:6-27)—and that adultery brings with it God's judgment (Jer. 23:11-14; Ezek. 22:11; Mal 3:5).

In the New Testament, Jesus expanded the Old Testament definition of marital fidelity to include emotional fidelity including the call to sexual purity in our thoughts and imaginations (Matt 5:27-28). Marriage faithfulness means keeping emotional boundaries healthy so that the sanctity of our relationship with our spouses is preserved. Sexual transgressions and adultery can therefore go beyond the bounds of physical intimacy and appear in private activities or emotional affairs with others. Striking the delicate balance between grace and consequence we see Scripture teach that adultery requires repentance if one is to be included in the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

Divorce and Remarriage

Divorce is the intentional termination of a marriage union while remarriage is the subsequent formation of a marriage union after divorce. It is clear from Scripture that God's plan for marriage is that it be lifelong (Matt 19:6) and when marriages end in divorce it breaks God's heart (Mal 2:16). The Old Testament made concessions for divorce as an accommodation to the effects of the Fall. These concessions allowed a man to divorce his wife for nearly any reason as long as he formally provided for her a certificate of divorce (Deut. 24:1). Jesus made clear that this was not God's original design for marriage (Matt 19:4-8).

Jesus restored God's original design for marriage thus revoking the divorce concession granted to Israel in the Old Testament (Matt 5:31-32; 19:9). Jesus taught and upheld God's original creation plan for marriage prohibiting divorce except for cases of unfaithfulness (sexual immorality). Paul further sought to clarify what constituted justifiable divorce by teaching that spousal abandonment of a believing spouse by a non-believing spouse is a valid cause for divorce (1 Cor. 7:10-16). Divorce for unjustified reasons can constitute adultery because God sees through the adulterous intention if trying to legitimize an affair by first following the letter of the law and getting a divorce before coming together— perfectly "legal" to an onlooker but nonetheless sinful.

Jesus and Paul both teach that remarriage is valid if indeed the divorce is valid. In Matthew 19, Jesus notes that remarriage in the case of an invalid divorce is actually sinful (despite the outward legality of the marriage). But the reverse is also true: If the divorce is valid, then remarriage must be acceptable just as it was in commonplace Jewish custom. Paul

³ At that time, adultery included sexual activity between a married woman and any man other than her husband. Adultery also included sexual activity between a married man and any other married or engaged woman. That it appears "legitimate" for a man to engage in sex with an unengaged woman (Exod. 22:16–17; Deut. 22:28–29) is technically not so, for the man must make restitution to the woman's father and possibly also take her as his own wife. Sex outside of marriage for men or women is thus always morally "wrong", given the compensation due. As Jesus pointed out, some of the Old Testament law reflects God's concession to hard hearts—his mercy—more than the highest good for humans (Matt 19:8). But the whole of it upholds God's holy standard despite the few places it puts limits on rather than completely abolishes wrongdoing. (Regulations concerning slavery are similar. Because slavery is not God's ideal, laws about it are a temporary concession, regulating for a time rather than fully removing this inequity brought about by human fallenness.)

uses the example of an unbelieving spouse leaving his or her spouse noting that in this situation they “are not bound” (1 Cor. 7:15). Paul means that the innocent party is “not bound to the marriage” and this includes women or men equally. This language echoes words directly from Jewish law on divorce: “Not bound” means that an innocent person, i.e. the man or woman who was abandoned or betrayed through unfaithfulness without having committed similar acts themselves, is free to remarry. A divorced person may also remarry in the following limited circumstances: a non-believing spouse has deserted the believing spouse or the former spouse has remarried or died (1Cor 7:10-16, 39).

Divorce is the tragic result of what becomes of our humanity when it loses the fight against sin and brokenness. Whenever a marriage fails, we should mourn it as tragic. There should, however, be no error so grave that it cannot be forgiven; no mistake beyond the reach of grace. Likewise our God is a God of renewal and restoration. In some cases, this means restoring a marriage to its original partnership. In other cases, it means that remarriage is an opportunity for renewal and hope to get it right the second time having learned valuable lessons from one’s former mistakes.

Extramarital Sexual Intimacy

Intimacy of any kind is to be pursued thoughtfully and reverently, and the Bible never views sexual intimacy as a casual expression to be allowed between any two (or more) consenting adults. Scripture teaches that sexual expression is reserved for the marriage union as described above. To pursue sexual intimacy outside of a marriage commitment is called “immorality” throughout the Bible (Matt 15:19; 1Cor 5:1, 6:12; 2Cor 12:21). This includes sexual activity of any nature: immorality is not just intercourse, but all of the varieties of sexual stimulation and arousal that people can engage in.

In a highly sexualized culture like ours, this may seem like an exceedingly difficult teaching as it requires some to refrain completely from sexual activity, either for a time or throughout their lifetime. When considered, however, in the context of the self-control and sacrifice and surrender that God asks of us, and indeed that Christ modeled for us, this call to self-denial does not seem nearly as severe. As described in the Singleness discussion above, celibacy should not be viewed as punishment or deprivation, but rather as a call to purity and obedience to God.

Because Scripture prohibits sexual activity outside of marriage and God intended for marriage to be between a man and a woman, it follows that sexual activity between members of the same gender is not compatible with God’s design. While the Old Testament commentary on same sex sexual activity may be addressing sexual violence and sexual activity related to cultic idolatry, the New Testament speaks clearly to this issue.

In Romans 1, Paul takes the Old Testament prohibition on same sex sexual activity out of its cultural context of violence and idolatry and puts it in the context of God’s creation order and the New Covenant of Christ (Rom 1:26-27). In Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth, he is careful to note that both the initiating party in same-sex intimacy (*arsenokoitai*) and the passive or compliant party (*malakoi*) are operating outside the directives of the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10). In similar fashion, in Paul’s first letter to Timothy, he notes the immorality of both heterosexual and homosexual sexual activity that

is outside of God's planned design (*pornoi* and *arsenokoitai*) (1 Tim 1:8-11). The church at Corinth's principled, yet loving, expression of this truth to its community represents a wonderful example of the beauty and power of redemption. The church welcomed those who had previously engaged in the immoral behaviors described by Paul, and some of them eventually experienced conversion and were transformed into devoted followers of Jesus (1 Cor. 6:11).

It is important to distinguish between sinful tendencies and sinful practice. One may be inclined to theft or violence or addiction— but the more important question is whether one acts on those inclinations. The same is true of sexual morality. What we do with the tendencies inside our hearts defines us morally. To have same-sex attraction is quite different from seeking same-sex partners or viewing same-sex pornography and acting out. In all areas of our lives, we are all called to choose either God's perfect desires for us or to follow our own easily misled desires. By God's strength and grace, our church has members and attenders who experience same-sex attraction yet are committed to celibacy. At Willow, we are committed to loving, supporting, and coming alongside anyone struggling to choose God's counter-cultural stance of purity.

Scripture also prohibits sexual activity between a man and a woman outside the bounds of marriage. This includes all sexual expression, not just intercourse, as discussed above, and also the practice of cohabitation outside of marriage. Scripture teaches that we are to avoid sexual temptation (1 Cor. 10:13; Jas 1:12-15), that we are to avoid the appearance of sin (Gal 5:19-21; 1 Thess. 5:22), and that we are not to hinder each other's obedience to and intimacy with Christ (Mark 9:42; Rom 13:10, 14:13). Living together without being married goes against all of those injunctions. Additionally, the patience and self-control in choosing not to cohabit serves to prepare us for the responsibilities and necessary self-discipline that makes a marriage work (Mal 2:15; Matt 5:5-7; Rom 12:9-12; 1 Cor. 13; Gal 5:22).

Solitary Distortions

Because God's creation plan for human sexuality is that we experience sexual activity within an interdependent marriage union, solitary arousal through pornography or explicit literature are violations of God's plan. Sometimes, using pornography becomes a substitute for sexually connecting with one's spouse, leading to separation rather than closeness where sex is concerned. In addition, pornography almost always depicts violations of God's creation design for human sexuality including exploitative and distorted views of sexual intimacy and of others who are created in the image of God.

This inaccurate depiction has a destructive effect on the viewer. Jesus goes so far as noting that cultivating impure sexual thoughts toward another person, even where there is no physical contact with that person, is a sin against God's design (Matt 5:27-28). So while we may not engage in actual sexual contact with another human being, dwelling on a fantasy that includes either a real person or a mere graphic depiction of someone short-circuits the oneness with a spouse that God wants sex to foster.

Polygamy

Polygamy is the practice of having more than one spouse (typically a man having more than one wife). Scripture read in its entirety makes clear marriage is designed to be a

union between only one man and one woman. The Bible story begins with a prototypical marriage between one man and one woman – Adam and Eve (one groom and one bride). And, in the last book of the Bible, the story ends with a marriage between one “man” and one “woman”—Jesus, the groom, and His Bride, the Church. Note that we are collectively called His *Bride*, not His *Brides* (as if He were bound to us as a man with multiple partners) lending strong evidence a plural marriage to Jesus (polygamy) is repugnant to God.

In the Old Testament, polygamy is merely – perhaps reluctantly – regulated but not commended (also like divorce or slavery) while the New Testament offers no examples of polygamy. Despite the occasional practice of polygamy among the rich and powerful (rarely among the average man), the Old Testament on numerous occasions references the monogamous nature of the relationship between God and Israel (e.g. Ezra 9-10, Isa 54:5-10, Ezek. 16, Hosea). These passages, along with the Genesis Adam and Eve archetype lend compelling support to the conclusion that marriage was always meant by design to be exclusive. As we see in Revelation, our Lord’s eternal union with us is cast in monogamous rather than polygamous metaphor, further evidencing the divine approval of this marital arrangement and no other.

Grace

A holy God created all people; He loves them and delights in them (Ps 149:4). None of us is outside the reach of this divine love. He is our Heavenly Father and as an earthly father loves his children to the finite capacity of his love, God loves all of us with the limitlessness of His holy love. We have been created to love God in return (Deut. 6:5) allowing God to have deep and loving fellowship with all of us as His creation.

Out of love God has called us to be holy just as He is holy in order to facilitate the closest and most intimate fellowship with Him. We are called to steward the image of God created in each of us by striving for holiness not simply out of obedience but because our loving Father knows what is best for us. He knows that our pursuit of holiness is a pursuit of knowing and being known by Him. Our sexuality is part of that holiness, part of who we are, and part of how God created us. We are to steward our bodies and our sexuality pursuing purity that facilitates intimate communion with our loving Heavenly Father.

Our challenge is that we all live in a fallen and broken world where the order of creation is no longer intact. Evil runs rampant in our world clouding and confusing the purposes of God. It has infected every human heart and has stained our moral innocence so that we all choose sin and alienate ourselves from relationship with our Creator (Col 1:21; Rom 3:23). Our sinful nature through the lens of our hedonistic culture allows our sexuality, part of how we were created, to appear as a casual tool designed for our immediate pleasure and gratification. In the most extreme perversions, evil causes our sexuality to be viewed as a tool for power, control, and manipulation. With sin distorting our view of our sexuality, we can easily cause great damage to each other and can unintentionally destroy our spiritual intimacy with God. Our fallen and depraved nature is so severe that Scripture makes clear that we are not capable of saving ourselves (Rom 7:21-24).

But God’s love for all people - no exclusions - is so boundless that He has enacted a plan to rescue us from evil, which is present in the world and present within each of us. He longs to restore everything back to the way it was: a perfect, sinless creation that includes

our full and complete intimacy with Him. Through God's covenant relationship with Israel He promised to send a Savior. Through the fulfillment of that promise culminating in the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection and ascension to heaven, God flooded our broken world with grace and mercy. The bridge of infinite grace now spans the chasm between our holy God and fallen humanity. This grace and forgiveness is available to anyone who chooses to accept God's offer of rescue through Jesus. Our old sinful natures are washed clean and we are made new creations in Christ (1 Cor. 6:11; Titus 3:5; 2 Cor. 5:17).

Christ has established His Church to accomplish His redemptive work in this world. We as the church are to live out this mandate with unity having our differences subsumed by our common love, grace, and acceptance in Christ Jesus. We believe that all people deserve and desire to know God's love in an intimate relationship with Him. We graciously honor the journey of all people seeking to follow Christ and God's plan for human sexuality knowing that doing so enables us to realize our full relational potential with our Father. God's remedy to sin's deception allows us to see our sexuality as God intended it and allows us to steward it pursuing holiness and communion with Him.

As we all support each other in this pursuit, we do so full of grace knowing that no sin in this world is beyond the loving hand of God offering every one of us restoration through Christ Jesus (Rom 8:35-39). We at Willow Creek Community Church deeply desire to increasingly be a community of people whose arms are opened wide to anyone seeking the love and grace of Jesus Christ. We rejoice with all of heaven when people who are broken and confused because of our fallen world are wrecked by the love and grace of God, and choose to accept God's gift of divine rescue and restoration.

Prayer

Introduction

Prayer is intimate communication with our Heavenly Father. It enables believers to live out a fruitful and closely connected relationship with Jesus (John 15:5-8). We believe God's power is reflected in the lives of people who pray.

During His life on earth, Jesus' days were filled with leading, teaching, serving and healing His followers. He rarely had time to Himself; crowds followed Jesus everywhere. Yet, He made time in prayer with His Heavenly Father a priority. *"Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed."* (Mark 1:35). The elders' extended "Statement on Theology of Prayer, Disease and Supernatural Healing in the Ministry of the Local Church" is available upon request.

Biblical Basis and Guidelines

"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). Jesus encourages us to pray in an ongoing, persevering manner. The Bible records people praying in private and in corporate gatherings. Praying groups of people are integral to the building of God's Kingdom.

We believe God meets with us in a special way through prayer.

Through prayer, we speak to God directly anytime, anywhere, for any reason. We are confident when we approach Him He welcomes us and we receive His mercy and grace. Through prayer, we participate in His work in the world – both seen and unseen (Hebrews 4:16).

We are called to pray privately as well as in group settings.

We encourage individual times of solitude in prayer (Matthew 6:6-7) and provide opportunities for corporate prayer. We encourage prayer at every small group, neighborhood table, or other corporate gathering. All Willow Creek campuses have a prayer room where people can spend time alone with God, pray for or receive prayer from others. One-on-one prayer with trained pastoral counselors is available at all campuses – including anointing with oil when requested (James 5:14).

Willow Creek prayer ministry teams support the body by praying for requests submitted by individuals and ministries. In addition, Willow's Elders regularly and intentionally gather prayer requests from Willow's staff and ministries – and pray for those needs. ***We believe in the spiritual gift of intercession.***

While all believers are called to pray, there are members of the body who God specifically calls to pray on behalf of others in response to His prompting. These members have the gift of intercession (Romans 8:26, John 17:9-26, 1 Timothy 2:1-4).

In addition to praying, sometimes intercessors bless people they pray for through encouragement and exhortation that can be very comforting and revealing. If such encouragement is shared (along with the prayers), the intercessor is to offer these words with humility and no claim of divine authority.

People receiving encouragement from an intercessor should receive the words as sincere blessings from a flawed human being. It is important to not take another believer's words as God's final authority. God is not offended by our need for confirmation of encouragement from any source. He encourages us not to be easily swayed as we seek His guidance (Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 John 4:1).

We believe in and pray for physical, spiritual, and emotional healing.

Jesus showed that there was no power – spiritual, physical, demonic, or natural – that was not subject to Him. The vast majority of processes associated with growth, health, and healing by God's design are gradual. With this in mind, we are encouraged to keep praying, although immediate results may not be seen. We also believe God will, at times, graciously intervene and perform miracles. A lack of instant transformation does not represent a failure of faith or submission to our fallen nature, or failure on God's part to be gracious. God permits specific circumstances for a specific person.

We believe faith has an impact on answered prayer.

Believing and trusting in God's goodness, power and love is critical to a vibrant prayer life. Christians can be confident God hears and answers prayers. We partner with God as we pray. It is God who powerfully acts and we who humbly request that action (Matthew 21:21-22).

Our faith connects us to God so we want our faith to grow. Yet, it is God who does the work, not our faith. *“During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission”* (Hebrews 5:7). Small faith in a big God is enough; even faith the size of a “mustard seed” accesses His power (Luke 17:5–6).

We believe there are current prayer philosophies that are not biblical.

There are beliefs about prayer in some faith circles we do not endorse or promote at Willow Creek. These philosophies include:

- Health, wealth and prosperity beliefs – the belief Christians are guaranteed physical and emotional healing, material possessions and financial wealth on earth because of their position as God's children or as a result of the proper exercise of faith.
- Prayer to saints or other religious individuals as a way to get help or influence God apart from Him, His son, Jesus, or His Holy Spirit.

- Word of Faith Movement – the belief God is obligated to answer our prayers because we have faith and claim biblical promises or some mystical power.
- Internal worship – the belief we are little gods and carry His full authority because we have the Holy Spirit's presence.
- Philosophies that create strata and layers of hierarchy – the belief some intercessors and prophets are more “spiritual” than others and carry biblical prophet status to be followed.

These theories can lead to abuses, harmful judgments of people who are sick, lack of compassion, an unhealthy reliance on certain individuals and their words or authority, or despair at a lack of results these teachings offer. *“Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teaching....”* (Hebrews 13:9).

We believe spiritual warfare is real.

Spiritual forces work to prevent the growth and development of the Church and Christ's followers (Ephesians 6:10-18). Scripture calls us to *“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith....”* (1 Peter 5:8-9a). There is mystery to spiritual warfare. While the Bible gives guidance, it does not offer prescriptive formulas espoused by false teachers. We are confident whatever the circumstance we pray for or the results we see, God has supreme authority. There are times God is ready and willing to work but minimal conditions have not yet been met. For example, in the book of James, it says we may not have what God is willing to give us because we haven't bothered to ask.

James also writes we may not receive something because our motives are wrong (James 4:2-4). We don't look for these “blockages” as if they are hiding or can be found only through some elaborate spiritual process. We know God wants them dealt with and anticipate His making them obvious, if they are not already. For people weighed down in spiritual defeat, we are to pray God brings His love, truth, strength and hope into their situations. We are to remind people for whom we pray of biblical truths and promises. When Jesus was confronted with evil, He modeled and responded with the truth of God's Word (Matt. 4:1-11).

We believe prayer will carry us into the future God has for us.

Our best days of ministry are still ahead. We are not interested in just maintaining God's current work at Willow Creek. We want to live vibrant, relevant, teachable and power-filled lives with God. We seek to follow God daily and faithfully. We believe prayer is foundational as we move into the future. Our understanding about prayer is always adaptable as the Spirit informs and leads. We strive to be fearless without being foolish, risk-takers without being reckless, and careful biblical interpreters without wearing theological blinders. We long for God to receive glory and honor for what He has done – and will do – through prayer.



Protecting Minors and Vulnerable Adults

Introduction

The purpose in providing a set of detailed policies and procedures for protection at Willow Creek is to mandate that our church implement and maintain a permanent, robust oversight program that enables church-wide ministries to carry out their missions, while safeguarding minors and vulnerable adults against emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse.

The Elders require that all requisite forms, background checks, related policies and procedures, apply to all Willow ministries involving minors or vulnerable adults and be embedded as standard procedure prior to the commencement and implementation of any such ministry event or program. Furthermore, no volunteer or staff should be allowed to participate in a ministry role involving minors or vulnerable adults without first completing the required protection screening approved for their ministry and level of service. Church-wide all ministries will utilize the same system for tracking information about volunteers, which is available through the Willow Creek-supported database.

Biblical Basis and Guidelines

Consistent with Psalm 82:3-4, which says, *“Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy, deliver them from the hand of the wicked,”* the Elders’ original intent was to protect minors so that they can learn about God in a safe environment. This intent is now expanded to include vulnerable adults. The intent was also to provide safety to volunteers through guidelines and boundaries, which will help prevent false accusations and avoid situations where volunteers may knowingly or unknowingly be tempted to sin.

The Elders also want to protect the church. God calls all of us to be good stewards of our resources – both human and financial (1 Peter 4:10). An incident of abuse could jeopardize those resources. Instead, we want to use available resources to expand Willow Creek ministries on many fronts. Our desire is to utilize our God-given resources to reach even more lost people and bring them into a loving relationship with Christ.

By mandating protection policies and procedures that safeguard minors and vulnerable adults, the Elders are communicating the importance of safety for everyone in the church and its ministries, and establishing permanent rules for compliance in this area. It is our deepest desire that God’s children of all ages freely learn about his wonderful love and enjoy protection from harm within our environment.



Reconciliation

Introduction

As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe the Scriptures teach reconciliation is restoring broken relationships and the place where truth, mercy, justice and peace (Psalm 85) are brought together. God's mission is to bring all people together for healing and reconciliation to Him and each other (Colossians 3:13-15). Peacemaking is our own journey with Jesus and others (Matthew 5:9). It is never finished. (Romans 12:18)

Biblical Basis and Guidelines

In Psalm 85, the entire passage speaks to our reconciliation with God and each other.

Matthew 5:9 says, *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."*

John 3:16-17 says, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."*

Romans 12:13-21 says, *"Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'"*

Romans 12:18 says, *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."*

Luke 10:25-37 details the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Colossians 3:13-15 says, *"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful."*



Stewardship and Giving

Introduction

Culture today bombards us with the notion that more stuff and more money lead to happiness and fulfillment. The latest and greatest promises to bring status, value and joy. But the Bible teaches a counter cultural way of life. In fact, there are more than 2,400 verses in the Bible that teach something about money and contain a wealth of financial wisdom. The realization that we're simply stewards of all that God has given us frees us to accept God's grace and protects us from the dangers of money and the lure of more possessions.

What is stewardship? Stewardship is living each day recognizing that everything on earth and all that we have belongs to God. We carefully manage the time, talents and resources He has put in our care with the understanding that it has been given to us to further His Kingdom. This includes carefully managing our household budgets and choosing a lifestyle that allows us to give freely, save for the future, avoid debt, and meet our financial obligations. This will provide us with a joyful sense of freedom from possessions.

Biblical Basis and Guidelines

Then He said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." Luke 12:15

"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Matthew 6:24

"For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil." 1 Timothy 6:10

"Unless you are faithful in small matters, you won't be faithful in large ones. If you cheat even a little, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the true riches of heaven?" Luke 16:10-11

... And the borrower is slave to the lender. Proverbs 22:7

The heart of the matter: Giving with joy

Our value and identity do not come from the accumulation of things, but from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We give out of a place of gratitude for all that Christ has done for us. Giving should be a joyful experience not based on should and have-tos, but is the response of grateful hearts that give cheerfully and generously to a loving God. God doesn't need our money—He has the power to accomplish whatever He wants on His own. But He realizes that the love of money and possessions can have significant power over us, and therefore provided giving as the mechanism we can use to maintain control over money so that it doesn't control us. In the Old Testament, the standard was the tithe. God's people were required to contribute at least a tenth of their income to God's work. When considering the New Testament, examples of giving in the Bible range from 10% to 100%, thus the practice of tithing is a minimum guideline for Christian giving. God entrusts us to discern the portion necessary to provide for one's family with reasonable safeguards for the future versus the portion to give to further God's work through His church.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will. Romans 12:2

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:21

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus Himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' Acts 20:35

Conclusion

As we strive to fully honor God with our time, talent and resources, we should look diligently for opportunities to give and be open for God's promptings. We should never be complacent, but continuously thankful, prayerful and cognizant of the fact that how we steward our resources is a key indicator of the condition of our hearts and spiritual health.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Acts 4:32- 35

Women and Men in Community

Introduction

We believe the Bible teaches God created men and women to equally bear His image (Gen. 1:27). God's intention was for them to share oneness and community (Gen. 2:23- 24), even as the Godhead experiences oneness within the Trinity. Each had a direct relationship with God and they shared jointly the responsibilities of rearing children and having dominion over the created order (Gen.1:26-28). However, human oneness was shattered by the Fall. The struggle for power and the desire to "rule over" another is part of the result of human sin. Genesis 3:16 is a prediction of the effects of the Fall rather than a prescription of God's ideal order.

However, God has acted in Christ to redeem the human race, and to offer to all people the opportunity to be part of the New Community, His church. It is God's intention for His children to experience the oneness that exists between the Father and the Son (John 17:11, 20-23). This means that old divisions and hierarchies between genders and races are not to be tolerated in the church, where all are "*one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal. 3:28).

Biblical Basis and Guidelines

In the formation of the church at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on women and men alike, as had been predicted long before the coming of Christ (Joel 2:28, Acts 2:18). In the New Testament, women as well as men exercise prophetic and priestly functions (Acts 2: 17-18, 1 Cor. 11:4-5, 1 Peter 2:9-10). Further, the Spirit bestows gifts on all members of the New Community sovereignly, without giving anyone preferential treatment based on gender (Acts 2:1-21, 1 Cor. 12:7, 11). Every believer is to offer her or his gifts for the benefit of the Body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-8, 1 Peter 4:10-11). To prevent believers from exercising their spiritual gifts is to quench the work of the Spirit.

In the Church

In all attempts to understand and put into practice appropriate relationships between genders in the body of Christ, our sole authority is the will of God as expressed in Scripture. A few isolated scriptural texts appear to restrict the full ministry freedom of women. The interpretation of those passages must take into account their relation to the broader teaching of Scripture and their specific contexts. We believe that, when the Bible is interpreted comprehensively, it teaches the full equality of men and women in status,

giftedness, and opportunity for ministry. Spiritual gifts are not gender-based, but God assigned. All gifts are possible for anyone, regardless of gender.

In the Home

It appears that the consistent weight of the Genesis narratives of creation and the fall is on the mutuality and communal nature of the relationship between male and female that existed as they were first created. The disruption of this mutuality is expressed as the result of sin and not as God's original purpose for the human race.

Because of Christ's redemption, we can work toward restoration of relationships between women and men. Roles within relationships are not predetermined by gender, but are defined by the individuals themselves in the relationship, based on factors such as gifts, talents, expertise and experience. We believe, in Christ, marital relationships are grounded in reciprocal servanthood, mutual submission and sacrificial love.

Conclusion & Response

Mutual acceptance between men and women and teamwork on the basis of full equality are foundational to the biblical understanding of community as we practice it as Willow Creek.

Therefore, in our attempts to live together as a biblically functioning community, we are committed to the following values:

- To be intentional about developing and empowering both women and men, girls and boys, for all aspects of ministry based on giftedness and character, without regard to gender, and stressing each one's giftedness and calling.
- To pursue the kind of purity and loyalty in relationships between genders that led New Testament writers to describe them in terms of family: "brother and sisters."
- To pursue and encourage marital relationships of reciprocal servanthood, mutual submission and sacrificial love.
- To use sensitivity in all language, verbal and written, that reflect the honor and value God desires for maleness and femaleness and to encourage the use of translations of Scripture that accurately portray God's will that His church be an inclusive community (TNIV, NRSV, etc.).
- To be intentional where appropriate in overcoming sexist elements of our culture and to offer encouragement to women and men in areas where their giftedness has been traditionally discouraged.
- To teach and model these values in the church and in the home to members of our community, to the church, and to the world at large.

For further study and more complete discussion of the key scriptural passages pertaining to this issue, we recommend:

Bilezikian, Gilbert, *Beyond Sex Roles*, Baker

Barton, Ruth, *Becoming a Woman of Strength*, Shaw

Hull, Gretchen, *Equal to Serve*, Fleming H. Revell

Keener, Craig, *Paul, Women, Wives*, Hendrickson

Ogden, Greg, *The New Reformation*, Zondervan

Spencer, Aida, *Beyond the Curse*, Hendrickson