

Sex and the City (of God)

BY TODD L. LAKE

The Bible's unblushing approach to human sexuality begins by affirming its goodness. Yet our sexuality has gone awry. Though it is no more corrupted than other human desires by our fall into sin, by its very centrality to the nature of being human, corrupted sexuality has far-reaching consequences. But there is hope for our fallen sexual desires if we allow them to be rightly ordered by God.

The Genesis creation accounts end with this surprisingly frank verse: "And the man and his wife were both naked and not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25). This naked couple living, even cavorting, in Eden is not the stuff of children's Bibles. Yet it forms the necessary beginning for grasping the unblushing approach to human sexuality in the Bible.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

Human sexuality is not presented in Scripture as an embarrassing facet of earthly life. On the contrary, God intends to show forth the divine nature itself through creating humanity as sexual beings: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness,....' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26-27, NIV)[†]. Note that the race of the first couple is not mentioned, nor the language they speak, but only the fact of their being a man and a woman.

God does not create two distinct orders of humans, but one humanity as an earthly counterpart to the unity of the one God. In the Garden of Eden, the woman is not subservient to the man, but is referred to as a

“helper” (2:20). (Certainly “helper” is not a demeaning term here, for when it is used elsewhere in the Old Testament usually it is God who is called a “helper” in relationship to humanity.) The gender differentiation of human persons within that one humanity bears witness to the fact that God subsists in multiple persons. Note the juxtaposition of “he created *him*” and “he created *them*” (my emphasis added). The pronouns shift between singular and plural to show that the unity does not undo the distinction of

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persons, nor does the existence of distinct persons compromise their essential unity. Furthermore, *elohim*, which is the Hebrew term for God used in these verses, is plural. While this plural for God in the Hebrew text should not be overinterpreted, it does point toward the fuller understanding of the unity-in-diversity of the Godhead as fully revealed in the New Testament.

God shows forth the divine image (*imago Dei*)

by creating a relationship between two persons who share in a common humanity. This ensures that the Godhead not be misunderstood as a self-sufficient, monolithic unity. Viewed from the anthropological side, it is significant that relationship, and not independence, characterizes human life from the very beginning. Moreover, this relatedness is rooted in the nature of God. The fact that human beings are not hermaphrodites, but gendered, underscores the mutuality that is part of the human condition as God created it to be.

Human sexuality is part of the crowning glory of creation. The eternal love relationship among the persons of the Godhead is given its fullest earthly expression in the self-giving love between a man and a woman for a lifetime. Indeed, it is only after the creation of humanity that God moves from saying his handiwork is “good” to saying it is “very good.” Any genuinely Christian understanding of sex must begin with the affirmation of its goodness.

SEXUALITY GONE AWRY

Though every aspect of human beings is affected by the fall into sin, sexuality is no more corrupted than other human desires. However, by its very centrality to the nature of being human, corrupted sexuality has con-

sequences that can be much more far-reaching than those of other aspects of our fallenness. The curse pronounced on Eve for her disobedience to God is intimately related to her sexuality: "...yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). It is critical to note that this hierarchical relationship of men over women is part of the curse, not part of the original creation. Nevertheless, even the domination of women by men unleashed by sin will not be sufficient to cool the desire of women for men.

The sexual equality that God created was undone by the Fall. When interpreting everything that follows Genesis 3, we must not mistake what *is* the case for what *should be*. We must be on guard so as not to affirm the curse and its aftereffects in a mistaken attempt to affirm "what the Bible teaches." After Genesis 3, human sexuality is a mix of God's original good design and humanity's sinful effacement of that design. Yet God is at work throughout history to redeem the fallen creation. The God who created us as sexual beings desires to rightly order our sexuality so that we might live as God designed us to live.

Just as Genesis was forthright about the goodness of human sexuality in Eden, so the rest of the Bible is clear about the manifold ways in which sexuality has gone awry. The first perversion of the institution of marriage is that it becomes polygamous. Genesis 2:24 had promised, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh." Yet under the curse, men create a culture in which many wives are the norm. Nevertheless, the original intent for marriage as passionate faithfulness between a man and a woman for a lifetime is not entirely forgotten by God's people. The Song of Songs, the most extended treatment of erotic love in the Bible, is about the relationship of one man and one woman. The Song of Songs is erotic poetry—indeed so erotic that the rabbis prohibited their pupils from reading it until they turned thirty.

SEXUALITY AND OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

The Christian Church has applied the Song of Songs to the relationship between the redeemed and the Redeemer for most of the last two millennia. When some critics charge that this is a result of an anti-sexuality bias among Christians, they get the facts exactly backwards. Christians have an embodied faith that allows them to see in sexual union the best metaphor available for speaking about the union of Christ and the Church. The passion, the love, and the oneness exhibited by marriage point in the direction of the ultimate consummation of the marriage supper of the Lamb. That consummation is foreshadowed in the Old Testament by the frequently used metaphor of Israel as wife and God as husband. In the New Testament, the same imagery is applied to Christ and the Church, most notably in Ephesians 5. Paul calls husbands and wives to practice self-giving love, but concludes by stating that this love ultimately points to the marriage of

Christ and the Church.

Christian mystics in the Middle Ages borrowed and developed erotic biblical images to describe the soul's relationship with God. Some have misinterpreted this spiritualization of sexual images as evidence of a denigration of sex by the mystics. But the opposite is true; Spanish, French, Belgian, and German mystics found in graphic sexual imagery, drawn from faithful married life, the most appropriate terms for delineating the soul's intimacy with God.

The Hebrew word *yada*, to know, means both cognitive knowledge and carnal knowledge, or sex. When Genesis says, "Adam knew Eve" (4:1), it is referring to sexual intercourse. Thus, the very idea of knowing God brings with it a sexual connotation; indeed, to fully know of any person—including God—is never merely a cognitive experience. To know a person is to be passionately involved with them. That is why 1 Corinthians 7 links sexual intimacy and intimacy with God. Married couples are admonished not to refrain from sexual relations "except to devote yourselves to prayer" (7:5). The most passionate and intimate physical way of knowing another person is to be set aside only for the higher possibility of passionately knowing God.

SEX, MARRIAGE, AND SINGLENES

The goodness of marital sex is not contingent on the production of children. However, even many theologians mistakenly have assumed that procreation is the primary justification for sex. Though the Bible values children as a gift from God, they are notably absent from the major passages that deal with marital erotic love. Sex does result in children in many instances, but that does not begin to exhaust its role in a marriage. In the Song of Songs, for instance, the writer depicts a love affair that glories in the sensual, without ever alluding to the pitter-patter of little feet. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" (1:2) strikes the note of longing for physical intimacy with the beloved that marks the entire book. There is no part of the beloved's body that is viewed as shameful, and no height of passion that is out-of-bounds. Children are simply not part of the picture.

The apostle Paul finds it necessary to write to Christians at Corinth, "If anyone thinks that he is not behaving appropriately toward his fiancée ... let them marry" (1 Corinthians 7:36). This admonition is only necessary if sexual desire is central to the drive to marry. The popular idea that in "Bible times" individuals coolly entered into passionless marriages solely to rear a family is false. This is not to deny that the Bible is replete with stories and Psalms celebrating the blessings of children. But the genuine blessing of children is never presented in Scripture as the primary reason for sex.

Sex itself has a place in the "new creation" of which Christians have become a part. Some Gnostic religions, which competed with Christianity

during its first two centuries, forbade sexual relations for their converts. But orthodox Christianity championed the fact that the Redeemer was also the Creator. Human sexuality had been corrupted in the Fall, but it was essentially good because Christ had created it. However, human sexuality must be sanctified and serve the ends for which it was created in Eden. Its purpose is to allow husbands and wives to intertwine their lives on even the physical level. Becoming “one flesh” is not an airy hope, but a vivid metaphor for the spiritual, emotional, volitional, and sexual union that is the God-given goal for each marriage.

It comes as a surprise to modern ears when the apostle Paul states that it is the sexual relationship itself—not feelings of love—that stands as the unique bond between husband and wife. This does not square with Romantic notions of love, but it is consistent with biblical realism. Paul soberly assesses the advantages of single life for those called to follow Christ with undivided devotion. Yet he recognizes that not everyone has the gift of singleness. For those who have the gift of being married, the apostle writes, “It is better to marry than to burn with passion” (1 Corinthians 7:9).

Erotic love (*eros*) alone is reserved for marriage. The other types of love, friendship (*philia*) and unconditional love (*agape*), are practiced by all Christians, and are appropriate in a variety of contexts. Though friendship and unconditional love are necessary virtues for married Christians, they are not uniquely characteristic of married life. Erotic love stands apart because it so intimately unites two individuals. This is a wonderful reality when that physical union is accompanied by an intention to be united in mind, spirit, and will. However, when the intimate physical union takes place between two people who are not striving for a lifelong union of lives, sex becomes a mockery of marriage. That is why Paul must denounce the visits of Christians to temple prostitutes! This is not because of inhibitions regarding the goodness and joy of sex. The limitations regarding appropriate sexual behavior result from a biblical awareness of the raw power of sex—whether used in licit or illicit ways. In having sex with prostitutes, Paul reveals, Christians were forming a “one

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flesh” bond that should be reserved for marriage. Instead of enacting the one-flesh intention of marriage, non-marital sex was merely the acting out of a natural drive. Yet regardless of what the participants think, pre- and extra-marital sex forges an intimate union between them, however fleeting the encounter (1 Corinthians 6:15-16).

It cannot be stressed enough that all of the prohibitions in the Bible against non-marital sex must be read in light of the positive treatment of marital sex. Far from the Bible being prudish about sex, it deals quite explicitly with a wide range of sexual practices. However, it does condemn those that are inimical to human flourishing. It should also be borne in mind that Scripture is directed not at unbelievers, but to God’s chosen people. This makes the prohibitions against incest of all sorts, pre-marital sex, bestiality, adultery, and homosexual relations all the more striking. Every form of sexual practice was apparently alive and well among the people of God.

The Bible celebrates the beauty of sexual relations, but it does not view an active sex life as a precondition for human happiness. Jesus was born into a world where to be a rabbi or a Roman senator, one had to be married. But Christ demonstrated that one could be a fully integrated human being without benefit of sexual relations. Christ’s singleness does not reflect a denigration of marriage. It does, however, underscore the fact that sex is not necessary for human happiness, but only for the establishment of a marriage.

Some people are called to remain single. Indeed, singleness is viewed in the New Testament as a gift of God that should be embraced as a means of serving the Church and the world. Christians may remain single for a variety of reasons. Jesus spoke of those who make themselves “eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12). In other words, a personal commitment to singleness is possible. Other Christians, who might desire to marry, may never find the right person. In addition, those who are sexually attracted only to members of the same sex are unable to marry. All these unmarried Christians are called by God to join that band of believers stretching across all ages and continents who give undivided devotion to serving God and others. This is not an unhealthy repression of one’s sexuality. Even Sigmund Freud agreed that the sublimation (as opposed to the repression) of sexual desire to other ends was healthy.

SEX AND THE CITY OF GOD

Human nature has not changed since the time when the Old and New Testaments were written. Individuals now, like then, are involved in *consensual* sexual relationships that fall short of God’s intention, including adultery, adult incest, prostitution, homosexual sex, and other extra-marital sex. The Bible does not only condemn *exploitative* sexual behaviors; God is no doubt opposed to exploitative relationships—sexual, economic, and

otherwise—but those are not the only type that can harm human beings.

Yet there is hope for our fallen sexual desires if we allow them to be rightly ordered by God. St. Paul wrote two epistles to the church in Corinth, a city known for its sexual license. It appears that the congregation tolerated sexual sin out of a mistaken notion that (a) physical actions cannot harm Christians spiritually, and (b) condemnation of others' sex lives would show spiritual immaturity. The apostle Paul rebukes the Corinthians for not taking sexual sin seriously. He writes: "Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral ... nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders ... will inherit the kingdom of God." It sounds like a final judgment, but then he adds, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11 NIV). God is ready to rightly order our sexuality if we are willing to acknowledge that it, like all aspects of our life, is in need of healing.

Christ has assumed our humanity fully. The Book of Hebrews draws this conclusion: he "in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." This means that Jesus was tempted sexually as well. The fact that he never succumbed to temptation does not mean that he "doesn't know what it's really like." Quite the contrary, Christ knows the depth and power of temptation like no one else that ever lived because he resisted it to the very end every time. Because he is fully human, Christ can fully redeem humanity.

Male domination in all spheres of life is replaced by the radically egalitarian command, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). This extends to the marriage bed itself, where a mutual self-giving symmetry replaces the hierarchy of the surrounding culture. In a world where women were viewed legally and socially as men's property, St. Paul writes: "the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does" (1 Corinthians 7:4). The woman here, like the one in the Song of Songs, is a sexually active partner. She is no sister to the apocryphal Victorian newlywed, who was advised on her wedding night to just close her eyes and think of England. The alleged female lack of interest in sex finds no support in Scripture.

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The sexual pleasure born of self-giving erotic love points beyond itself to the intimate enjoyment of God that is available to all people, married or not. It is to that end that men and women were created. In the kingdom of God, the promise is not that all the single people will finally get married, but that all will participate in the marriage supper of the Lamb of God. Jesus says that in heaven “they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matthew 22:30), not because marriage is unimportant, but because it is pointing to something beyond itself. Once the true Bridegroom arrives, the ultimate fulfillment of all earthly longing will begin. The pleasure of sex on earth will be subsumed in the reality of union with the Beloved:

“Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
For the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;...”

“Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the
Lamb.”

Revelation 19:7, 9b

NOTE

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