



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Sex and the City (of God)
(The Pornographic Culture, pp. 9-16)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
PO Box 97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2002 The Center for Christian Ethics

Naked and Not Ashamed

This naked couple, Adam and Eve, 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 Scripture.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Genesis 2:18-25; and 3:1-13, 16-21

Responsive Reading†

This is the list of the descendants of Adam. When God created humankind, he made him in the likeness of God.

Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them "Humankind" when they were created.

Reflection

Human sexuality, in its created order, expresses the image of God. "So God created humankind in his own image," Genesis 1:27 says, "in the image of God he created *him*; male and female he created *them*" (emphasis added). The pronouns shift between the singular and the plural to show that God creates only one humanity, yet in two distinct sexual persons, the male and female. Their unity in humanness does not undo their distinctness as persons, and their distinctness does not compromise their essential unity. Mutuality and relationship, rather than independence, have been essential to human beings from the very beginning.

From a Christian perspective, Lake suggests, we see that "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." As Christians we share "an embodied faith" that allows us to see in sexual union a rich metaphor to describe the human relationship to God:

- ▶ The erotic imagery of the Song of Songs has been applied to the relationship between Christ and the Church. Furthermore, Paul takes up the imagery of Israel as wife and God as husband, which is frequent in the Old Testament, and adapts it to Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5. "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," Lake writes.
- ▶ Christian mystics in the medieval era wrote in graphic sexual imagery, borrowed from faithful married life, to make clear the soul's intimacy with God. Such borrowing has precedent in the Bible: the same Hebrew word, *yada*, which means carnal knowledge, or sexual intercourse (as in Genesis 4:1), is used for God *knowing* the deepest secrets of our hearts (Psalm 44:21) and in the gracious invitation for us to *know* God (Psalm 46:10). "To fully know any person—including God—is never merely a cognitive experience," Lake says. "To know a person is to be passionately involved with them." This close connection between sexual intimacy and intimacy with God may be behind Paul's instruction to married couples not to refrain



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2002 The Center for Christian Ethics

from sexual relations “except to devote yourselves to prayer” (1 Corinthians 7:5).

The story of Adam and Eve not only expresses the underlying goodness of human sexuality, but also reminds us that our sexuality has gone awry due to the fall into sin. Though our sexuality is no more corrupted than other human desires, “by its very centrality to the nature of being human,” Lake observes, “corrupted sexuality has consequences that can be much more far-reaching than those of other aspects of our fallenness.” For instance, in the garden in Eden the woman is not subservient to the man, but is created to be a “helper as his partner” (2:20). (Elsewhere in the Old Testament, *‘ezer*, the Hebrew word for “helper,” can describe God’s caring relationship toward human beings. It is not a demeaning word.) Sin, however, brings male domination of women, which is not part of God’s original intention. The curse pronounced on Eve for her disobedience to God (3:16) is that “even the domination of women by men unleashed by sin will not be sufficient to cool the desire of women for men.”

We must remember that in everything following Genesis 3, human sexuality is a mixture of God’s good design and our sinful effacement of that design. Yet the good news is that our Creator is at work to redeem the fallen creation; God desires to rightly order our sexuality so that we might live as God designed us to live.

Study Questions

1. “Shame can be defined simply as the feeling we have when we evaluate our actions, feelings, or behavior, and conclude that we have done wrong,” writes psychiatrist Michael Lewis. “It encompasses the whole of ourselves; it generates a wish to hide, to disappear, or even to die” (*Shame: the Exposed Self*, p. 2). How do you respond to Lewis’ definition?
2. Is human sexuality shameful in the Eden story? How does shame enter the picture? How does God respond to the man and woman’s shame?
3. The woman is created to be the man’s “helper as his partner” in the garden in Eden (Genesis 2:20). Lake reminds us that in the Old Testament, *‘ezer*, the Hebrew word for “helper,” usually describes God’s caring for human beings. Look at the representative uses of *‘ezer* in Psalms 115 and 121. With these as background, how would you interpret the woman’s relationship to the man *before* the fall into sin?
4. Is erotic imagery an appropriate metaphor for our relationship to God? What are the dangers in using such imagery today? What would be the advantages?
5. How does the hymn “Be Thou My Vision” (p. 49) capture some of the complexities of Genesis 3:8-9?

Departing Hymn: “Be Thou My Vision” (verses 1, 2a, 4b, and 5)

† Genesis 5:1-2 (NRSV).

Naked and Not Ashamed

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1 or 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

[Note: This study guide covers the first half of Todd Lake's article, "Sex and the City (of God)." The second half is discussed in the next study guide, "Sex and the City of God."]

Teaching goals

1. To understand the goodness of human sexuality in God's creation.
2. To consider how the fall into sin distorts our sexual desire as well as our actions.
3. To explore how, in the Christian tradition, sexual union of man and woman can be a metaphor for our relationship to God.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Pornographic Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

"In much of pagan mythology creation is something wrested out of a primal chaos. The resulting order was sometimes good and sometimes tainted with a curse, the curse being experienced in the various problems attendant to living in the world. For instance, in early Greek myths about creation, sexuality is seen as a curse; it is a mythic explanation of the problems arising because there are two different sexes in humanity. Zeus blighted human beings by dividing them in two, thus weakening their threat to the gods. In other words, the evil that occurs in the world is 'in the system.' In the biblical story of creation, [however,] God created all things "very good" (Genesis 1:31)." (A. J. Conyers, "Living Under Vacant Skies," *Heaven and Hell [Christian Reflection]*, pp. 13-14.)

This passage highlights the power of stories to shape our moral imagination. If the creation of human sexuality is good and is not a curse, then what is the origin of shame in respect to our sexual desires and actions?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will experience the true joy of relationship with God and one another which was part of God's intent in creation.

Scripture Reading

Ask three members to read Genesis 2:18-25, 3:1-13, and 3:16-21 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This lesson is not about the pornographic culture. Rather it is about the goodness of human sexuality in

God's creative intent. "The only way to get something bad is to take something good and spoil it," J. Budziszewski has written. "Whenever you find a bad thing, look for a good thing somewhere in the ruins." The great good which the inauthentic sexuality portrayed in pornography threatens to engulf, is that male and female, in union together, comprise the image of God. True sexual intimacy goes to the heart of God's character and intention.

Briefly review how Christians have understood sexual intimacy as an earthly reflection of the eternal love among the persons of the Godhead (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and as a metaphor for human relationship with God. Of course, these Christians have not confused sex with God's love; rather they have identified the passion and oneness of sexual intimacy as the closest analogue in our human experience to God's unconditional love that seeks relationship. *A major point to emphasize in the lesson is this: for these Christians, human sexuality, as created by God, was not shameful.*

Yet, just as Genesis 2 is forthright about the goodness of human sexuality in Eden, so the Genesis 3 and the rest of the Bible is clear about the manifold ways in which our sexuality has gone awry. One such distortion is that men dominate women sexually, which is a far cry from the "helper as a partner" relation (contrast Genesis 3:16 with 2:20).

Therefore, we cannot "read off" from our current sexual desires and patterns of behavior the original intention of God. Our sexuality is a mixture of God's good design and our sinful effacement of that design. The next three lessons, "Sex and the City of God," "Simpletons, Fools, and Mockers," and "Habit's Harsh Bondage," will explore some specific ways in which human sexual desires become disordered.

Study Questions

1. Members will hear echoes of the Genesis 3 story in Lewis' title, "The Exposed Self," and description of the results of shame. Is the definition too narrow? Can we also feel shame when a family member, friend, or other person with whom we identify ourselves, does wrong?
2. Shame enters the story after the man and woman disobey God. When God comes to walk with them "at the time of the evening breeze" (3:8), they hide among the trees in the garden. God makes garments for the couple (3:21). Commenting on verse 21, Ralph Wood has said, "God makes the very best leather outfits, or Gucci clothing, for the couple."
3. You might assign a member or small group to survey each psalm. God (unlike an idol) is alive, responsive, but very much his own person, according to Psalm 115. We do not dominate God. Psalm 121 emphasizes God's constancy and loving, careful attention.
4. Members might want to distinguish the use of verbal from visual sexual imagery. The dangers include (a) worshipping sexuality rather than God, (b) sending a confusing gospel to people who have been influenced by nature religions, or (c) distracting our thoughts away from worship. They might mention advantages of erotic imagery such as (a) expressing well the intimacy of our relationship with God, (b) being drawn from common human experience, (c) underlining the essential goodness of sexuality in God's creative plan.
5. The hymn is a prayer for communion with God, "thy presence my light." It combines the language of love ("my Treasure thou art" and "Heart of my own heart") and the language of allegiance ("High King of heaven" and "O Ruler of all").

Departing Hymn

Verses 1, 2a, 4b, and 5 of the familiar hymn "Be Thou My Vision" are reprinted on p. 49 of *The Pornographic Culture*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.