
Sexuality and Christian Ethics

by David R. Larson

Many people agree that human sexual activity should be marked by genuine love. But there is much disagreement regarding the concrete meaning of love in sexual relationships and how this should be discerned. Some imply that a sexual encounter is sufficiently loving if it is mutually desired, that *forced sex* and *bad sex* are completely synonymous. Others suggest that a sexual deed passes the test if it is “natural,” either for all humanity or for a particular person. Still others proceed as if they can discover acceptable sexual activity by surveying the conduct of past or present cultures, or even by studying the behavior of nonhuman animals.

These approaches are less than satisfactory because they are insufficiently sensitive to the ravages of evil upon the entire ecological order. Our sexual desires may be distorted by physiological, environmental, or volitional misfortunes. Our perceptions of what is “natural,” either for some individual or for all humans, may be beclouded. The conduct of entire societies may be less than ideal, to say nothing about the difficulty of discovering how humans should

act from the way other animals behave. Because we live in a broken and polluted world, we cannot deduce what ought to happen merely from what already is. Anyone who seriously thinks about sexuality must therefore confess how he or she envisions human sexual expression at its very best and invite others to do the same.

This essay participates in the continuing conversation about optimal sexuality by making four suggestions. First, Christian sexual love ought to possess a particular internal content that can be called its “substance” or “matter.” Second, partly because of this content and partly because of other considerations, Christian sexual love ought to exhibit a specific external appearance that can be called its “form.” Third, if *either* the form *or* the matter of ideal Christian sexual love is diminished or distorted, there is reason for moral disappointment. Fourth, if *both* the form *and* the matter of optimal Christian sexual love are flawed or absent, there is even greater reason for ethical sorrow. If these suggestions are valid, Christians possess a standard by which to evaluate various sexual practices. This ideal or goal can provide opportunities for change as well as provide the direction in which each Christian community can move as the circumstances of individual Christian lives will permit.

I. *The Substance of Christian Sexual Love*

We can identify the substance or matter of optimal Christian sexual love by reviewing the meanings modern writers associate with four ancient Greek terms: (1) *epithymia*, (2) *eros*, (3) *philia*, and (4) *agape*. Today the Greek term *epithymia* is sometimes interchanged with the Latin *libido* when both expressions refer to the more physical dimension of love.¹ *Epithymia* in this sense is the sheer, sustained, and severe longing for coitus that instinctively draws and drives men and women in all their activities just as it impels and propels the males and females of other species. It includes the need for physical release as well as the desire for bodily pleasure. But Paul Tillich rightly insisted that *epithymia* is also a hungering and thirsting of the whole person for closeness and union,² a point supported both by the root meaning of "coition" ("a coming together") and by the recent reports that humans often prefer the intimacy of intercourse to the intensity of masturbation.³

Eros, a term whose meaning is often confused with that of *epithymia*, refers to the more aesthetic and mystical dimension of love. *Eros* pursues beauty and transports one into ecstasy whenever it discovers excellence. Irrespective of whether beauty ultimately resides in the eye of the beholder or in the being of the beholder, or both, to be in love is to esteem someone as an astonishing embodiment of aesthetic delight, an experience that is both liberating and captivating.

Philia refers to the more emotional dimension of love. It is the fondness that friends have for each other. *Philia* provides a secure serenity that permits each person to be at ease in the presence of another, whether succeeding or failing, well or ill, elated or dejected. Love in this sense is preferential, reciprocal, and conditional. There are some people one enjoys in some situations more than others, as even the

accounts of Jesus suggest. The sense of peace one experiences in the presence of a true friend depends in part of the realization that one's admiration of the other is not unilateral, that one is both desirous and desirable. *Epithymia* and *eros* can be experienced reciprocally; however, mutuality is not essential to their basic meanings as all unrequited lovers know. *Philia*, in contrast, flowers only in the soil of reciprocity: it is impossible to have a friend without being a friend just as it is impossible to be a friend without having a friend.

Agape refers to the more volitional dimension of love. At the very least, it is a decision to consider the other person's interests as favorably as one considers one's own simply because he or she is a person.⁴ In this narrow sense of the term, *agape* is not emotional, reciprocal, preferential, conditional, or surprising. Because this dimension of love "is not an emotion or an impulse, but a decision of a sanctified will,"⁵ the New Testament can invite us to love even our enemies even though they would not be our enemies if we liked them. *Agape* refers to the premeditated and resolute determination to treat humanity, wherever one finds it, as intrinsically and not merely instrumentally valuable. It is the choice to treat another as though he or she is an end and not merely a means, as though he or she is a person and not merely a thing.⁶ Such love "is patient and kind;" it is "not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude." Love in this sense "does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right." It "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."⁷ As indicated by the ancient Hebrew idea of *chesed*, a concept that floods *agape* with meaning and purpose, the distinctively ethical dimension of love is steadfast, tenacious, forgiving, and loyal. It depends more on the one who loves than upon the one who is loved.

Agape, understood as the distinctively ethical dimension of love, is a necessary aspect of every optimal sexual relationship.

As Jack Provonsha suggests,⁸ *agape* is like a sun around which the other dimensions of love revolve as planets in their true orbits. Each other dimension of love forsakes its legitimacy, however, whenever it moves in a trajectory away from *agape*, their true center that determines their proper circumference. Set free from *agape*, *epithymia* turns the other into a mere instrument for carnal gratification as though the other were nothing but a machine producing sexual satisfaction. Apart from *agape*, *eros* becomes fickle or oppressive, ready in the first instance to forsake the other when he or she no longer appears as beautiful as one previously thought, and ready in the second instance to distort and disfigure the other by attempting to force him or her to conform to one's own standards of excellence. Apart from *agape*, *philia* smothers the other in a suffocating insistence that one always be consulted or present, as though the other has no justifiable life apart from the relationship. In this way *philia* overlooks the strange truth that genuine love is divisive as well as unitive: their very closeness enables true friends to be worlds apart in important areas of their lives.

Despite its necessity, *agape*, as used here, is not a sufficient component of ideal sexual relationships. It specifies the least such relationships must be, not the most they can be. The decision to respect humanity wherever one finds it should pervade all relationships, even the most casual and distant ones. The distinctively appealing aspects of sexual love become available only as a relationship moves in a natural progression from *agape*, through *philia*, and *eros*, to *epithymia* without ceasing to be guided and controlled by *agape*. Apart from *philia*, *agape* can be correct but cold, as in the polite but self-protective greetings strangers exchange. Apart from *eros*, *agape* can be dull, plodding, and boring, without the intrigue and romance that is so tantalizing in the

discovery of beauty, whether physical, mental, or emotional. Apart from *epithymia*, *agape* lacks the distinctive joys of physical intimacy, the peculiarly profound satisfactions of venereal pleasure. In view of these realities, Christians must make a decision: they must renounce either (1) the ethical worth of sexual love or the (2) exclusive

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ethical endorsement of *agape*.⁹ Those of us whose world-views are informed by the Hebraic affirmation of the material world in general and the human body in particular will choose the second option. For us, it is important, even ethically vital, to affirm the moral worth of sexual love in all of its fullness.¹⁰

The idea that Christians ought to affirm sexual love in all its dimensions stands in sharp contrast to the position that Augustine developed in *The Good of Marriage*,¹¹ the single most influential document ever circulated in the history of Western Christian sexual ethics, Catholic or Protestant. This essay charted a course between the views of the Manichaeans, who held that sexual intimacy, like everything physical, is morally suspect, and the opinions of the Jovinians, who were condemned as heretics for suggesting that marriage is as pleasing to God as celibacy. Against the Manichaeans, Augustine declared that "the marriage of male and female is something good"¹² because it provides offspring, fidelity, and sacramental grace. Against the Jovinians, Augustine contended that "marriage and fornication are not two evils, the second of

which is worse; but marriage and continence are two goods the second of which is better.”¹³ He concluded that “it is a good to marry since it is a good to beget children, to be the mother of a family; but it is better not to marry, since it is better for human society itself not to have need of marriage.”¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas developed more thoroughly than did Augustine the suggestions that marriage is a Christian sacrament; however, he listed it as the last of the seven sacraments because, as he put it, “it has the least amount of spirituality.”¹⁵ Jeremy Taylor came to a far healthier conclusion several centuries later when he wrote that the proper purposes of sexual union include the desire “to lighten and ease the cares and sadnesses of household affairs, or to endear each other.”¹⁶

II. The Form of Christian Sexual Love

The external appearance or “form” of the interchange in which optimal Christian sexual love occurs can be described as: (1) relational, (2) permanent, (3) exclusive, and (4) heterosexual. Truly relational affairs are mutually enhancing and not merely mutually desirable. Such relationships usually occur among mature persons who are approximately equal in age, power, freedom, and ability. Otherwise, there is every likelihood that the stronger party will exploit the weaker party, even if such selfish use is not directly intended. From this perspective, a sexual encounter is literally deformed if each party does not give as well as receive genuine and complete satisfaction. Such relationality, such objective mutuality and reciprocity, is absent from chauvinism, whether male or female. It is also absent from masturbation, rape, prostitution, pedophilia, bestiality, necrophilia, incest, voyeurism, fetishism, exhibitionism, sado-masochism, and so forth. No matter how

frequently such activities occur among non-human animals, no matter how prevalent they may be in any human population, and no matter how strong one’s inner proclivities may be toward any of them, such forms of sexual expressions fall short of optimal sexuality because they are relationships which are not objectively reciprocal.

To say that the sexual encounters of Christians ideally occur in relationships which are permanent and exclusive is to suggest that mutuality and reciprocity flourishes best when there is no fear that complete physical, mental, and spiritual involvement will be either terminated or compromised. This loyalty is frequently terminated in the practice of serial or sequential polygamy and polyandry. It is compromised in the practice of simultaneous polygamy and polyandry. Because serial polygamy and polyandry have become so common in industrialized societies, and because the stresses of modern living bring special pressures upon permanent and exclusive unions, Christian theologians such as Tom F. Driver of Union Theological Seminary in New York, Raymond Lawrence of St. Luke’s Episcopal Hospital in Texas, and James B. Nelson of the United Theological Seminaries in Minnesota contend that now permanence may be more important than exclusiveness. Lawrence calls for “a more flexible monogamy” in which an attempt is made “to hold to both the value of lifelong commitment between two persons and the value of stimulation that can come from a variety of multiple intimate relationships.”¹⁷ Driver writes that “life inside marriage is not to be construed as forbidding sexual relations with other persons.”¹⁸ Nelson agrees that such a conclusion is at least possible, but he quickly cautions that all the evidence is not yet in and that permanent and exclusive unions may not be as stifling as their Christian critics take them to be.¹⁹

Nelson’s cautions are in order because it is doubtful that the permanence of a union can be enhanced by compromising its exclusive-

ness. Until men and women become more adept than they presently are at separating what they do with their bodies from what they think and feel toward each other with their minds, flexible monogamy, which presupposes the ability to make this great divorce, can be expected to end in disappointment and frustration. Once people do become accustomed to distancing their selves and from each other in the most intimate of all human activities, Christianity will have little interest in sexuality except to remind people that things need not be so

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and that they have not always been so. Sexual intimacy is fascinating precisely because in it one *whole* person unites with another *whole* person, each person totally involved in the uttermost participation of the body, mind, and spirit, as a celebration of their shared past, present, and future. Once this total involvement is destroyed by those who advocate permanent but not exclusive unions or exclusive but not permanent unions, sexuality will merit very little interest.

The claim that the sexual meetings of Christians ideally occur in heterosexual relationships presupposes the conviction that human gender differentiation, whether its mix of biological and cultural components, possesses much theological significance. Many theologians over the centuries have explored the relationships between God and humanity, body and soul, freedom and destiny, individual and society, sin and salvation, and history and eschatology without devoting a single paragraph to the theological meanings of men and women. In view of the great attention this

polarity has received in music, art, literature, humor, and scholarship, it is odd that these theologians have found so little import in this significant dimension of human experience.

Other religious thinkers have virtually equated gender differentiation with the Fall. Aristophanes, one of the speakers in Plato's *Symposium*, contended that Zeus sliced androgynous primordial humanity into male and female in response to human rebelliousness and arrogance.²⁰ Philo, the ancient Hebrew philosopher and exegete who was deeply influenced by Plato, detected in Genesis 1 a "heavenly" human who was immaterial, immortal, and sexually undifferentiated and an "empirical" human in Genesis 2 who was material, mortal, and dimorphic.²¹ In the 20th century, Nicolas Berdyaev wrote that "original sin is connected in the first instance with the division into two sexes and the fall of the androgyne; i.e. of man as a complete being. . . . Man is a sick, wounded, and disharmonious creature primarily because he is a sexual, i.e. bisected being, and has lost his wholeness and integrity."²² Interpretations such as Berdyaev's are to be credited for taking sexual differentiation seriously. They do account for the pain and misery which so often characterize the encounters of man and woman. But such interpretations are inadequate because they are unable to elucidate the joy and gladness man and woman often find in each other's presence.

A more comprehensive approach is available in that school of theological thought that finds a close connection between gender differentiation and the image of God in humanity, a parallel that seems implied by the biblical statement "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female created them."²³ Emil Brunner held that human gender differentiation is related to but not identical with the image of God.²⁴ He described the polarity of man and woman as a single strand in the image of God or as an image of the image of God. By this Brunner

meant that Christianity's understanding of God as a co-unity finds a parallel in human gender differentiation, that gender differentiation symbolizes that we live in a "communiverse." Karl Barth declared that "I think that *imago Dei* is the relation of man and woman. Man is in an I-Thou relationship similar to the I-Thou relationship in God himself."²⁵ Barth inferred from this that each human is to rejoice in his or her gender, to delight in companionship with persons of the other gender, and to recognize that man precedes woman in the priority of service.²⁶ Paul Jewett's discussion, which breaks away from the male chauvinism evident in the views of Barth and Brunner, asserted that "Man's creation in the divine image is so related to his creation as male and female that the latter may be looked upon as an expositor of the former."²⁷ In a similar vein, Urban Holmes wrote that "the polarity of male and female is perhaps the most profound insight we have into what it means to be human, to be made in the image of God."²⁸ "Without the gospel we are prey," asserted Alan W.

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Jones, "to a despairing biological determinism on the one hand, or an androgyn which denies the glorious mystery of sexual differentiation, on the other."²⁹ This positive interpretation of gender differentiation, which seems more capable of articulating and elucidating both the agonies and the joys man and woman experience in their encounters than either the neutral or the negative interpretations, renders even the most exemplary homosexual relationship less than ideal because it functions as though gender differentiation possesses no indepen-

dent symbolic theological significance. This is why Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse, a psychiatrist and theologian, describes the religious significance of homosexual conduct as "a symbolic confusion."³⁰

The idea that Christian sexual love optimally embodies a particular substance and a specifiable form is pertinent to the discoveries Alan Bell and Martin Weinberg of the Kinsey Institute made in their recent study of homosexual activity in the San Francisco Bay Area.³¹ Their report, which contends that one should not speak of "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" but of "heterosexualities" and "homosexualities," depicts the homosexual relationships of 485 men and 211 women as either (1) Closed-Coupled, (2) Open-Coupled, (3) Functional, (4) Dysfunctional, or (5) Asexual.

The lives of the Asexuals are ethically the most disappointing. Apathetic, withdrawn, not interested in sexuality or anything else, they often contemplate suicide as an inviting alternative to their empty lives. The lives of the Dysfunctional are only slightly less disappointing. Coming closest to fulfilling the stereotype of the "tormented" homosexual, they are described by Bell and Weinberg as social misfits who find it difficult to manage their lives sexually, socially, and psychologically. Although Bell and Weinberg describe Functionals as generally cheerful, optimistic, and self-reliant, virtues that Christians can applaud, it is morally disappointing that these persons, who organize their lives around sexual encounters in homosexual bars, baths, and clubs, are indifferent to the benefits of permanent and sexually exclusive unions. Bell and Weinberg, who write with no religious or moral aim, report that homosexuals involved in Open-Coupled relationships, unions that are permanent but not sexually exclusive, are generally well-adjusted. They nevertheless are beset by inner

turmoil caused by tension between loyalty to their primary companions and commitment to other people with whom they are sexually involved. This discovery, which is precisely what a Christian interpretation of optimal sexuality should expect, makes it exceedingly difficult to endorse "open" or "flexible" unions, whether homosexual or heterosexual. The suggestion that ideal sexual relationships are reciprocal, permanent, and sexually exclusive receives unexpected support from Bell and Weinberg's report that homosexuals involved in such unions, which function much like wholesome heterosexual marriages, tend to be the happiest, healthiest, and most successfully adjusted people of the entire sample. Christians therefore have every reason to encourage homosexuals who are honestly convinced that they should neither attempt to function heterosexually nor remain celibate to form Closed-Coupled homosexual unions, even though similar heterosexual relationships should remain Christianity's first hope for all believers.

III. Standards, Churches, and Societies

The primary purpose of every ethical standard is to function as a criterion by which one can measure one's own moral maturity. We should realize that in our sexual relationships we all fall short of God's glory. Some of us fail on the formal side in that our sexual relationships are not reciprocal, permanent, exclusive, or heterosexual. Others of us participate in relationships that are outwardly proper but fail to embody the true meaning or substance of Christian love. Each one of us should concentrate on those areas of our own lives in which we most need to experience God's forgiving and enabling grace, ever mindful that moral maturity is fostered more by fresh realizations of God's goodness than by preoccupa-

tion with our failures. For me, the most serious deviations are my own. For you, the most serious shortcomings should be your own. There is therefore no need to debate

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endlessly the relative goodness or badness of various perversions of optimal sexuality.³²

This should make us slow to disfellowship people from our congregations whose lives are not wholly harmonious with ideal Christian sexuality. Every congregation must remember that it can ask so much of its members that its influence and membership will be very small, or that it can ask so little of its members that the congregation will be no different than the surrounding society, and that in either case the church fails.³³ Precisely how and where the line should be drawn regarding any individual's membership in the denomination is wisely left up to the local congregation by Seventh-day Adventist polity. Only those who are closest to any situation should be permitted to deny full membership to anyone who desires it. As it makes these difficult decisions, the congregation must consider the denomination's depiction of ideal sexuality, the person's alleged failures, and the person's attitudes and influences within the congregation. The person's "spirit," his or her cooperativeness, teachableness, and submissiveness to the congregation's counsel, or the lack of such dispositions, hopefully will be the decisive consideration.

Christians in secular societies should also be reluctant to impose their ethical ideals upon the wider community. Any religious organization does well to distance itself from groups who appear to the general

public as overly concerned, almost hysterical, about private physical intimacies. More importantly, it is futile, and possibly dangerous, for religious groups to expect the political order to legislate their convictions unless (1) some common practice seriously harms individuals or the common good, (2) the legislation will not foster evils that are

greater than those it outlaws, and (3) the proposed legislation can be fairly enforced.³⁴ The genius of many modern democracies is not that they are "Christian" but that they are "free." Christians, like Buddhists, Jews, Moslems, Marxists, atheists, and agnostics, have a vested interest in preserving this freedom for themselves and for others.

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30. Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse, *Homosexuality: A Symbolic Confusion* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977).

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32. Adventists who insist upon prolonging such debates may wish to consider Ellen White's suggestion that "God does not regard all sins as of equal magnitude; there are degrees of guilt in His estimation, as well as in that of man; but however trifling this or that wrong act may seem in the eyes of men, no sin is small in the sight of God. Man's judgment is partial, imperfect; but God estimates all things as they really are. The drunkard is despised and is told that his sin will exclude him from heaven; while pride, selfishness, and covetousness too often go unrebuked. But these are sins that are especially offensive to God; for they are contrary to the

benevolence of His character, to that unselfish love which is the very atmosphere of the unfallen universe. He who falls into some of the grosser sins may feel a sense of his shame and poverty and his need of the grace of Christ; but pride feels no need, and so it closes the heart against Christ and the infinite blessings He came to give." *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1956), p. 30.

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