

# Sexuality in Biblical Perspective

By Ivan T. Blazen

## Part One

**T**here is a great deal of sensitivity about the topic of sexuality. Sexuality is not merely an academic subject; it touches people in very personal ways. University students, for example, are reticent to talk openly about sexuality in classes for fear of exposure and judgment, although many have a high level of interest and many questions.

My purpose here is not to register judgment or bring discomfort. God has created us as sexual beings, and that is cause for rejoicing. If any feel they have not always lived up to God's ideal for their sexuality and wish the past could be altered, it is most reassuring to know, as Scripture teaches, that God's grace accepts us and redirects us. So, in an atmosphere of grace, I would like to discuss the theme of sexuality as presented in Scripture.

## Good News Versus Bad News

The Bible contains good news, not only about salvation, but also about sexuality. Scripture teaches that sexuality is a very positive rather than negative aspect of creation. The first chapter of the Bible makes the point clear: On the sixth day "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female created he them" (Gen. 1:27).<sup>1</sup> Genesis calls each day's creation good, and then in response to the entire creation it declares, "God saw everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). "Everything" includes our sexuality, which is inherent in the phrase "male and female."

In the biblical tradition, sexuality is rooted in creation and in the goodness of creation, indeed in the *very* goodness of creation. In view of this, when I look at the history of negative thinking about sex, especially in the Christian church, I wonder why we so often have not celebrated our sexuality as something very good. It has long been looked upon as contrary to spirituality, to be hidden rather than publicly discussed, and not particularly to be enjoyed. Many have thought that sexual expression and satisfaction are at odds with the ideal in creation.

What factors have led to this adverse appraisal of sexuality? First, from ancient times and traditions comes the belief, which still influences us today (for example, in Christian Science), that the first created being was spiritual rather than physical. Materiality, body, and flesh were considered results of a fall from the primal reality.

There is a brief hint of this kind of belief in 1 Corinthians 15, a chapter on the resurrection of the dead. Paul observes that as we have borne the likeness of Adam, so in the resurrection we will bear the likeness of the risen Christ. In conformity with this and in apparent rebuttal of the idea that the physical is a secondary condition far removed from the original creation, Paul says that the spiritual is not first, but that the physical is, then comes the spiritual (vs. 46).

In addition to being spiritual, the first person was also thought to be androgynous (a composite term from the Greek words for male and female). In androgyny, male and female are not distinguishable. As Plato taught, the ideal person split into two halves, one male and the other female. A restive quest ensued by both halves to find their other half and become once again an androgynous being. Such a view implies that sexual differentiation and cohabitation between the two sexes represent a fallen state.

Nothing could be further from the biblical account in Genesis, where God created male and female as two individual persons. They are not halves looking for their other half, but each is a whole person looking for another whole person with which to enter into relationship.

Another idea inimical to a positive affirmation of human sexuality is dualism. Just as the primal man idea emphasizes the nonmaterial nature of the first person, so dualism emphasizes that in our present makeup we are a combination of spirit and body, the ideal and the nonideal, the eternal and the temporal. It is the spirit rather than the body that expresses the true self. Thus, in dualism, salvation is escape from the body into the realm of spirit, whereas in the Bible salvation involves the resurrection of the body.

From dualism's premise that the body is not really good or eternal, two options follow: libertinism or asceticism. One gives the body free reign, the other no reign. In 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 we see both tendencies operating in the same church. The idea inherent in asceticism is that one cannot be a sexual being and a spiritual being at the same time. Some Corinthians held this belief, as shown by Paul's answers to them in 1 Corinthians 7.

The history of the Christian church has been much affected by the ascetic tendency. Witness such notables as the outstanding theologian Augustine (A.D. 354-430), whose thought has affected the Christian church greatly. Augustine's position on sexuality is well summarized by Lewis Smedes, emeritus professor at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Augustine, to whom we otherwise owe more than most of us even imagine, interpreted the Christians' calling to struggle against evil as a calling to struggle against their sexuality. Intense desires for sexual fulfillment and intense pleasure from sexual action were for him marks of fallen man. Augustine could not imagine an innocent person in Paradise turned on sexually: a sinless Adam could never have been sexually aroused by a pure Eve; Adam and Eve could not have walked with God in the day and made spontaneous love at night. If we do this now it is only because we have not brought our bodies under the rule of Christ. The less one is driven toward sex and the less pleasure he receives from sexual expression, the more sure he can be of his own sanctification. The Lord, in his grace, tolerates our inconsistency; but we must know that he calls us to better, sexless things. This was how Augustine felt about sexuality. Some Christians still carry Augustine's feelings in their hearts; they can only hope that God tolerates their sexuality until their liberation from it in heaven.<sup>2</sup>

1 Timothy 4:1-4 mentions an early precursor to this understanding:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later [or the last] times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are seared with a hot iron. They forbid marriage and demand abstinence from foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good.

What is Paul talking about in this passage? Why would some forbid marriage? Why would they forbid certain foods, and what kind of foods would they forbid? On the latter issue, it seems clear that meats were among the forbidden foods. The recommended alternative is vegetarianism. For Paul, however, to forbid meat was heretical. As Seventh-day Adventists, we may have difficulty understanding the meaning of this text because Adventists have long promoted a vegetarian diet as the basis of better health.

Those who articulated the view mentioned in 1 Timothy were not at all concerned for the health of the body, but for the health of the spirit. Thinking dualistically, they considered meat too material and sensual.

## The Bible rejoices in the God-given sensuous nature of human beings with our capacity for intimacy.

As such, it would bind the meat eater to this material world and inhibit growth in spirituality and progress in returning to the spiritual realm. Vegetarian movements existed in Paul's day to promote spiritual welfare.

Paul's opponents advocated avoidance of marriage for the same reason they forbade meat. Marriage involves sex, and sex is so sensuous, so meaty as it were, that it contravenes the spiritual quest to ascend to the heavenly home from which the spirit has been separated. Asceticism's message was clear: sexuality and spirituality do not mix!

It is interesting that the word chosen in Genesis 2 to represent our union with each other is the word *flesh*. God sees that it is not good for a person to be alone, and creates a companion who is of the same nature and entirely complementary. Adam's response is: "Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (vs. 23). Genesis provides a commentary: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (vs. 24). This passage embraces more than sexuality, but certainly includes the intimacy between two people by which they come into total union and communion with each other. A new community is formed and sexual engagement is its sacrament.

### Singing Love's Song

The Bible rejoices in the God-given sensuous nature of human beings with our capacity for intimacy. For example, Proverbs 5:15-19, in an admonition to husbands to focus on and be faithful to their partners, expressively and erotically declares: "Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love."

What is found here in brief comes to full flower in the Song of Songs, which describes not only the feelings of the male toward the female, but also of the female toward the male.

I always find it fascinating how people are able to allegorize these texts. Some do it out of embarrassment over such erotic material, and some because they discern a deeper message. These allegorizations are often beautiful and ingenious, but I don't think they

represent what the book is truly about. The Song of Songs is not about God's love for Israel or the church, nor is it a metaphorical message about righteousness by faith. Rather, it is a series of love poems, very sensuous and earthy in their intention and manner of expression.

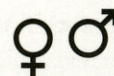
When I was teaching at Pacific Union College some years back, Louis Venden and I had a weekly radio broadcast. We did a series on the Song of Solomon, and requests for those tapes were greater than for any other. I would like to flatter myself that we were so interesting that people could not resist buying our tapes, but I think the real reason was that people felt liberated to think that in God's word there is a place for talk about sensuousness, and in very beautiful language at that. To turn the book into allegory is to lose a dimension of relationship the book actually intends and describes—a dimension we can ill afford to be without.

Biblical books may be understood in terms of three categories: Those that contain God's word *to us*, such as the Prophets and the Sermon on the Mount; those that express our words *to God*, such as the Psalms; and those that contain our words *to each other*, such as the Songs. To be without such a book, with the beauty of its depiction of amour between humans, would be a real loss indeed.

The existence of such a book in the canon of Scripture says that God is very interested in our sexuality and enjoyment of it. I agree with Judaism when it teaches that to deny who we are as sexual beings or not to enjoy what God has made for us to enjoy is to deny God's creation, and thus to be in trouble with God. So let's not mess with God by failing to be totally human!

The Song of Songs begins in a very dramatic way with the beloved's expression of strong desire for her lover's affection. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" (1:2-4). This gets our attention immediately, does it not? If a woman is willing to be this earnest and open with her lover, it ought to get his attention.

The beloved then speaks directly to her lover with



words of praise and affirmation. "For your love is better than wine." Things get moving, and there is longing for the whole experience. "Draw me after you, let us make haste." Nothing cold or boring about this. Lovers need to hear from each other, "I can't wait!"

The love act itself is placed in the most romantic of settings—in the beauties of nature. "Come my beloved . . . let us go out early to the vineyards and see whether the vines have budded, whether the grape blossoms have opened and the pomegranates are in bloom. There I will give you my love" (7:11-12).

Love's passions are pictured as overwhelming. "Love is as strong as death, passions fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it" (8:6-7).

In a passage that may make us smile, the beloved sees the strength of love's passions as enervating and calls out for sustenance. "He brought me to the banqueting house [the place of sexual intimacy] and his intention toward me [KJV = banner over me] was love. *Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am faint with love*" (2:4-5).

It is very interesting to see how the lover responds to his beloved in chapter 4, verses 1 through 7. The language is ancient, and modern equivalents would be needed today, but in the Songs lovers appeal to their partners' imaginations by use of extended metaphor. The lover begins with words of adoration every woman needs to hear. "How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh how beautiful!" The language becomes specific as the lover describes how he sees the various parts of her body.

Your eyes behind your veils are doves. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead. Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn. Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon; your mouth is lovely. Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate. Your neck is like the tower of David, built with elegance; on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors. Your two breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies.

He wants to spend all the time he can with her, his vision of loveliness, and therefore says: "Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense" (4:6). At that point the lover returns to his general premise, but with even stronger acclaim. "You are altogether beautiful my love; there is no flaw in you" (4:7). How irresistible an expression! Every relationship could be

strengthened with words such as these.

Not to be outdone by her lover's descriptiveness, the beloved extols her partner in equally vivid terms in chapter 5, verses 10 through 16. "My lover is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand." What man would not wish to think that in the eyes of his partner he is the very best? A rather incredible description of the husband's body follows, which begins with "His head is purest gold," and culminates in verse 16 with, "his speech is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable. This is my beloved and this is my friend." The greatest lover should be the greatest friend. True friendship is the only atmosphere within which genuine intimacy can occur.

I think of a person who experienced trouble with his marriage. He thought the way to solve relational problems with his wife was to be more macho. He would prove himself and overcome her sexually. The more he approached her in that spirit, however, the more she fled, for the real issue in sexuality is not primarily physical prowess, but the quality of the relationship. What has to be reconstructed to make sexuality everything it is meant to be is a deep personal friendship based on mutual respect, admiration, and appreciation in which you know your partner cares about you supremely.

In Songs 8:14 the beloved speaks again to her lover and says, "Come away, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the spice-laden mountains." I think we need a little spice in our sexual lives, a little creativity and imagination, a new way of speaking and touching and, above all, a superb friendship that makes us want to be together sexually to express the depth of our love for each other.

### Does Scripture Contradict Itself?

So far, I have discussed positive Scriptural passages about sexuality. There are passages that some consider negative, and Matthew 5:27-30 is one. In Jesus' explanation of a deeper meaning to adultery he says that "everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (vs. 28). Some have thought that this passage refers to sexual attraction at the sight of a lovely person. Those who espouse this view think Jesus' admonition is not only negative, but also impossible to fulfill, for all humans have sexual attraction toward others.

This is true, but to think that Jesus refers to lust is incorrect, in my judgment. Jesus is not speaking about the awakening of sexual impulses but of purposive

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mental manipulation of others for one's own gratification. The way this text reads in the Greek suggests this meaning. Whoever looks at a woman in order to, for the purpose of, lust after her, is where the adultery comes in. Mental rape, not sexual attraction is the idea. The problem comes from treating others as objects for exploitation, rather than subjects to be respected in their own right and dignity.

With these thoughts in view, Matthew 5:17-20 is not a negative text at all, but very positive in its intent. It involves valuing the other person, precisely the quality that goes into a healthy sexuality. Jesus calls us to see another person not in the relation of subject/object, but of I/thou, as two subjects coming together in fellowship, two equals who both desire the same thing.

Sometimes the eschatological vision of God's redeemed people in Revelation 14:1-5 is understood to imply a negative appraisal of sex. Verse 4 characterizes the redeemed as "these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins." If taken literally, this statement makes celibacy a goal of human life, or rather male life, since it is intimacy with women that causes defilement. Thus, on literalistic assumptions, verse 4 presents two negative ideas: one about sex (redemption requires its avoidance), and the other about women (they are a source of pollution).

We forget the symbolic character of Revelation and of elements in this passage if we categorically espouse this view. The Lamb standing on Mount Zion is symbolic, as are the four living creatures and the 144,000. Also in accord with the figurative nature of the book is the woman of Revelation 18, with whom the kings of the earth commit fornication and from whose cup "full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication" (17:4) the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk (17:2). In chapter 17, verse 18, the woman is equated with "the great city that rules over the kings of the earth"—an obvious reference to Rome—and in chapter 18, verses 2 through 3, with Babylon. The whores of whom she is said to be the mother (17:5), may well be the defiling women of chapter 14, verse 4.

The concern of Revelation is with idolatry, otherwise specified as fornication. Idolatry involves calling someone "Lord" other than the one who truly is, Jesus Christ. At the time Revelation was written, the

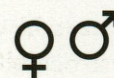
emperor had taken upon himself the title "Lord" and called for the worship of himself as divine.

In contrast to those who commit spiritual fornication with the woman (Rev. 18), worship the beast and its image, and have the mark of the beast on their foreheads (Rev. 13), the redeemed of Revelation 14 have the name of the Father inscribed on their foreheads (14:1). The explanation of their virginity is given, I believe, in the passage itself: They follow the Lamb wherever he goes (14:4) and in their mouths no lie is found, for they are blameless (14:5). Thus, the passage underscores the purity of the redeemed with respect to the nature of true religion and worship. This is the counterpoint to the false religion and worship described in Revelation 13.

But what about 1 Corinthians 7? Some people are sure this passage presents a negative view of sex. Paul's antisexual stance appears to be clear from his declaration that it is not good for a man to touch a woman (vs. 1), his recommendation of abstinence from sex for spiritual purposes (vs. 5), his advocacy of celibacy (vss. 7-8), his proposal that those who have wives live as though they had none (vs. 29), and his assertion that remaining unmarried is better than getting married (vs. 38).

Is this a decisive argument? I don't think so. This position does not reflect the perspectives from which Paul speaks or the fullness of detail he presents. It is extremely important to note from the outset that the perspective from which Paul begins his discussion is that of a respondent to questions posed and positions taken by the Corinthians in a letter they had written to him (vs. 1). If one turns Paul's statements inside out, so to speak, and reads between the lines, the thoughts of the Corinthians can be discerned.

At rock bottom, they argued that sexuality and spirituality do not mesh. It was they, not Paul, who urged men not to touch women, that is, to engage in sex with her. These can hardly be Paul's words, since he rebuts them in his response.<sup>3</sup> It was the Corinthians who held that married couples should abstain from sex



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(and undoubtedly that singles should not marry for the same reason).

In contrast, Paul answered that, in view of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have relations with his own wife and each woman with her own husband (vs. 2). In other words, to attempt a celibate way of life, contrary to the natural sexual instinct, posed the danger of leading one into fornication (probably with prostitutes), as instances among the Corinthian Christians already evidenced. (Compare 1 Cor. 6:12-20.)

Furthermore, Paul argues that married couples need to engage in sex on a regular basis (vss. 3-5). In a revolutionary statement for a culture where wives remained at home to beget children and where husbands found their sexual fulfillment outside of marriage, Paul calls for men to give their wives what is due to them sexually, and for wives to do the same for their husbands. (Note the equality of the sexes.) Each had authority over (that is, a marital claim upon) the body of the other.

They were not to deprive each other unless—and here Paul makes the concession mentioned in verse 6—the Corinthians wished to abstain during special seasons of prayer. Paul does not command them to abstain, but writes that both married partners should agree (another indication of equality in marriage) and that such periods should have set termination dates, lest Satan tempt one partner or the other to go elsewhere for sexual intimacy. So Paul, far from advocating sexual abstinence, promotes a healthy sex life, not merely for procreation, which the text does not mention, but because of the need for sexual intimacy itself.

To be sure, Paul does express a wish that others could be celibate, as he was (probably a response to a Corinthian belief that Paul's own celibacy implied that others should be celibate, as well), but he also recognizes that such a decision takes a special gift, which only some had (vss. 7-8). For this reason he recommends that "it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (vs. 9). Paul's statements may seem limited as to the grounds for marriage (to avoid fornication, vs. 2; to satisfy sexual passion, vs. 9) because he is not developing a total philosophy of marriage in this passage, but is answering specific questions and countering particular antisexual opinions. Context is everything.

Some Corinthians apparently advocated ending marriages among couples who could not sustain celibate relationships, especially among new believers who had pagan partners (vss. 10-16). In answer, Paul says, No! Stay married, except in cases of desertion by unbelieving partners. In such situations believers are not bound to the marriages (vs. 15). Incredibly, Paul asserts that, among mixed couples, unbelievers do not pollute believers, as the Corinthians seem to have argued, but that unbelievers and any children born to such unions are sanctified through the presence of believers (vs. 14)!

What are we to make of Paul's statement that husbands should treat their wives as if they had none (vs. 29), which may be seen as destructive of any meaningful concept of marriage and sex? If Paul meant, "Don't treat your wife as a wife and sexual partner," he would be flying in the face of his own instruction early in the chapter (vss. 2-5). He would also be contradicting his own statement that one who has a wife should not seek to be free from her (vs. 27).

The explanation for Paul's call can be found in the eschatological perspective that frames his thoughts. He sees the distress of the last days (vs. 26), the shortness of time (vs. 29), and the fact that the form of this world is passing away (vs. 31, compare 1 Cor. 10:11: "The ends of the ages have come"), as affecting all aspects of human experience.

Paul mentions five major subjects: marriage, sadness, gladness, ownership, and commerce/culture. For each, he says "Be as if not." He does not in any way deny their reality or call for their abolition. Rather, since the end of history is on its way with the coming of Christ, each subject should be as if not. That is, believers were not to make these the be all and end all of human existence. They were advised to form a new attitude toward this world's realities and stake their claim primarily on what is ultimate and ahead.

In this context, there is no denial of marriage, but rather a reassessment of it in terms of the supreme value: God's intervention in human history. Such a view would lead to a positive transformation of marriage and all human values.

The eschatological perspective also undoubtedly stands behind Paul's view that the person who marries does what is good, but the one who refrains does

better (vs. 38). Paul cannot be contrasting a good state with one that is bad, for he acknowledges that marriage is good. The comparison is not a moral one, but arises principally from end time considerations.

In view of the eschaton, which Paul's Jewish apocalyptic heritage depicted as a period of unparalleled distress (vs. 26), it would be better, that is to say easier, more advantageous, if one were single. One would not have to worry about duties involved in marriage, and thus would be freer to focus on the coming Lord (vss. 32-35).

## Part Two

The importance of sexuality can be gauged by the way it is guarded. Two passages come into view: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 and 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. These passages are not at all antisexual unless one assumes that their common admonition to avoid fornication makes them so. In actuality, both imply the goodness of sexuality, for they take great pains to guard it from abuse and to place it in theocentric and soteriological perspective.

## Sanctification and Sex

Paul signals the nature of his concerns in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 with a prayer that precedes immediately, in chapter 3, verse 13: "And may he [God] so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." Here Paul ties together ethics (holiness and blamelessness) and eschatology (the coming of the Lord), themes he more fully develops in chapter 4.

As to holiness, or its synonym, sanctification, Paul reminds his readers that apostolic instruction has taught believers to live in a way that pleases God (vss. 1-2). We please God and live in accordance with his will when we lead sanctified lives, that is, lives that express our separation from worldly values and our consecration to God (vs. 3).

What does this involve in terms of our sexuality? Paul delineates three points in relating sanctification to sex. First, believers are to avoid fornication (vs.

3). The Greek term that Paul uses is *porneia*, from which we derive the English word pornography. There is a degree of ambiguity in usage of this term, but it can be said that *porneia* has a number of nuances, all the way from the inclusive idea of sexual immorality (Gal. 5:19; Col. 3:5) to such specific meanings as sex with prostitutes (1 Cor. 6:12-21; the verb behind *porneia* means to buy); sexual relations with relatives, that is, incest (1 Cor. 5:1; compare Lev. 18:6-18); and adultery (Hos. 2:2; Rev. 2:21-22).

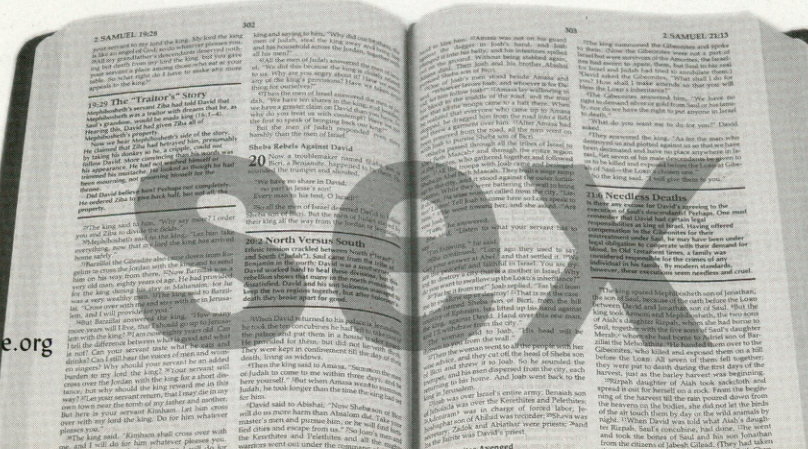
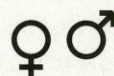
Intercourse outside of marriage, another possible meaning for *porneia*, is not condoned but hardly comes into clearly identifiable usage in the New Testament. Questionable references are found in John 8:41 and 1 Corinthians 7:2. In the former text, Jesus' Jewish adversaries maliciously accuse him of being born of fornication, meaning that he was an illegitimate child one or both of whose parents was unmarried at the time of conception. This text scarcely permits a "Thus saith the Lord" for all times and places. No rule for sexual conduct is being advanced here, for it involves only an expression of calumny toward Jesus.

As for 1 Corinthians 7:2, because of the presence and possibility of *porneia* in the community, each man is admonished to "have" his own wife and each woman her own husband. The question is whether "have" is a call to get married or for already married people to "have" sexual relations with their partners, in contrast to those who advocated celibacy in marriage.

The latter understanding is probably correct, for a number of reasons. First, the verses that immediately follow (3-5) call for a regular sex life among married people. Second, the use of "have" in 1 Corinthians 5:1 refers to a man living in a sexual relationship with his father's wife, that is, his stepmother, something forbidden in Leviticus 18:8. Third, Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:27 says that those who do not have a wife should not seek one. If Paul was calling for marriage in 7:2, he contradicted his own later instruction in the same chapter.

The term *porneia* in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 is probably general in scope, referring to any form of illicit sexual intercourse. In addition to pointing out various uses

of *porneia*, above, I offer the following general principles for recognizing



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the danger zone of fornication. These principles are predicated on the belief that intercourse is more than the achievement of pleasure or a procreative process, but that it represents and effects union between two persons. If this is true, fornication may be present when:

1. Sex is separated from love, and *eros* (self-satisfaction) from *agape* (self-giving).
2. Means are separated from ends and sexual functions from personal relationships. I well recall a single woman who attempted suicide out of deep distress and despair after a number of encounters with men who seemed to want just one thing. On one occasion she was even chased through her own home. Because she was a long-time friend, I later asked her what feelings or thoughts had pushed her to such a drastic decision. She explained, "they wanted something from me, but they did not want me!"
3. Parts are separated from persons. I once came across some magazines from a porn shop in New York City. As a youth, I took a look and was stunned. There were no faces, no whole bodies, only close-ups of body parts. Persons had vanished, and only parts with mechanical functions were left. Such pictures erase the concept of a human being made in the image of God and the meaning of love. You can only love a person, not a part.
4. A temporary sexual union is separated from a lifelong commitment and union of love.
5. Culture is separated from Christ and human proclivity from divine principle.

What is the answer for temptation to *porneia*? This is given in the second clause in 1 Thessalonians 4, which explicates the meaning of sanctification as applied to sex. Instead of engaging in sexual immorality, the believer is to "acquire or possess his own vessel" (vs. 4), which is the literal rendering of the text. The meaning of the clause, as reflected in English translations, is either to find a wife or to exercise self-control over one's body. Though arguments are adduced for both translations, the best seem to favor the one that involves marriage.

Whether Paul had this meaning in mind, or possibly self-control, his point is that the way of sanctification and honor should be followed rather than that of passion and lust, as exhibited by those who do not know God (vss. 4-5). Paul is not saying that sex should be passionless, a rather contradictory notion, but that the lust of immoral society should not characterize Christian living. Knowing God should make a profound difference in how we relate to people sexually, or any other way. The mores of the old world should not be the morals of the new world in Christ.

Not only should believers seek honorable marriage, but, as the third clause specifies, in their sexual activity they should in no way transgress against or defraud a brother, a fellow Christian (vs. 6). That is to say, not only should Christians seek a life partner for themselves, but they must never injure or destroy the present or future partnerships of others. Sexual misconduct is not merely a matter concerning oneself, but always defrauds another person.

Paul offers three motivators for placing sex in the arena of sanctification. The first has to do with future judgment by God: "The Lord is an avenger in all these things" (vs. 6). This statement may seem tough, but its intent is positive: God takes seriously our misuse of his gift of sexuality and the hurt we do to others through it. Justice will be done.

The second motivator deals with God's past call to Christian vocation. Coming to Christ was not a call to a life of uncleanness, but to a life-walk in sanctification.

Third, we are challenged to recognize that when we reject the apostolic summons to be sanctified sexuality, we reject not merely man, but also God (compare 1 Thess. 2:13), who is with us in all our life experiences through the presence of his Holy Spirit (vs. 8). Life in the Spirit means a life of holiness. This is a not a call to dethrone sex, but to ennoble and enjoy it within God's will.

Sex, therefore, is not merely a social or secular event but a spiritual one, for how we relate to another human is how we relate to God. The horizontal and vertical, the divine and human dimensions of reality, are intertwined. To love and respect each other is to love and respect God. To have no special concern for the body and being of another is to wound the heart of God.



## The Gospel and Sex

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 deepens the problem of *porneia* and relates sex to salvation. Certain members of the Corinthian congregation were frequenting prostitutes and, instead of experiencing qualms, had arguments to support their actions. "All things are lawful," they said (vs. 12), meaning, "I have the freedom to do as I please."

They may have developed this attitude by misconstruing Paul's teaching of salvation by faith apart from works of law. Even more likely, they may have premised their actions on eschatological certitude that their inner selves had been spiritually raised, that they were already reigning with Christ (1 Cor. 4:8) and thus were above the temptations and failures of historical existence (compare 1 Cor. 10:12). In other words, their bodily lives could not affect their spiritual lives. They, like certain "Christian" Gnostics of the second century, may even have thought that their indulgence in flesh was evidence of their freedom from flesh!

The Corinthians also had a naturalistic argument derived from the realm of food. They drew an analogy between eating and sex. Just as surely as "food is made for the stomach and the stomach for food" (one of their slogans), so, they reasoned, the body with its genitalia was made for sex and sex for the body. Going to prostitutes, therefore, accorded with reason, for their very vocation was to satisfy this natural need. Besides, as food and the stomach will eventually be destroyed (vs. 13), so the body and its sexual functions will be done away with. What difference would it make, then, if they continued the sexual customs of their former pagan days? The body is transient!

In combating Corinthian practice and philosophy Paul brings the gospel to bear upon the question of sex with prostitutes. His essential argument is that sexual activities should be evaluated in terms of the salvific realities the gospel announces. Paul bids us to concentrate on the following points:

1. Christ's death for us implied in "for the body" in verse 13 and "purchased with a price" according to verse 20. If Christ has made us his own through dying for us, then the Corinthian analogy between food and the stomach, on the one hand, and the body and fornication, on the other, is false. As the Lord gave his body for us, so our body is not to be for fornication but for the Lord (compare 2 Cor. 5:15).
2. Christ's resurrection from the dead and the future resurrection of all believers (vs. 14).

Thus, it cannot be argued, as the Corinthians did, that the body is temporary and hence not of great significance. On the contrary, our bodies will be raised to live with Christ!

3. The concept of the body of Christ of which all believers are a part (vss. 16-17). Participation in this body negates participation in the body of a prostitute. The two unions are totally incompatible. One presupposition of Paul's thought here is that sex is not merely an external function or a casual event, but it is an act that unites persons. A bond is created, whether negative (as with a prostitute) or positive (as with a marriage partner). Paul's discussion implies that sex is the sacrament of the self, that is, a physical means by which a spiritual reality is effected. Through sexual intimacy we say (or should be saying), "I love you and need you always."
4. The dwelling of the Holy Spirit in the temple of the body as a sign of belonging to Christ (vs. 19; compare Rom. 8:9).

None of these points denies sexuality, but rather places it in its proper context. As a result of such weighty considerations, the believer is to glorify God in his body (vs. 20). This and not "I am free to do anything I please" (vs. 12) is the goal of Christian existence and the standard of Christian conduct. In both Thessalonians and Corinthians we see that religion and ethics are inextricably tied together. What God has done for us in Christ is the starting point and continuing basis for all ethical reasoning. Sexuality is to be understood in the light of God's sanctifying purpose for our lives. In Jesus Christ there is no abolition of sex, but its transformation into what God from the beginning intended it to be—*very good*.

## Notes and References

1. All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
2. Lewis Smede, *Sex for Christians: The Limits and Liberties of Sexual Living* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans), 5.
3. Scholars have identified a number of Corinthian slogans in Paul's letter, for example, 6:12, 13; 8:1, 4; 10:23.

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