

Is There Such a Thing as “Christian” Sex?

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It is challenging for Christian pastors and counselors to discuss human sexuality in ways which do not alienate liberals on the left, conservatives on the right, or biologists in the middle. Feminists frequently see males as dominating or insensitive, and conservative Christians sometimes feed into this by emphasizing patriarchal models of marriage as if this were the biblical paradigm for all time. Evolutionary biologists view sexuality primarily as a means of propagating the species. Into this cacophony of strident voices the Christian seeks to inject a calm but clear message: Christian sexuality is primarily a search for intimacy. In a culture obsessed with sexuality as entertainment, the followers of Christ call others to view human sexuality not primarily in terms of eroticism, power, or procreation, but rather in terms of psychological intimacy. From a biblical perspective, becoming “one flesh,” with one’s mate also provides the occasion for becoming a co-creator with the eternal I AM. In addition to the procreational potential and orgasmic excitement provided by sexual intercourse, God intended for these encounters to be loaded with an abundance of psychological intimacy. Intimacy is the raison d’être of sexual relationships. Intimacy provides sexuality with a quality that can mollify crises in the present life, and imbue sexuality with a splendor worthy of the next life as well.

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WALKING THE SEXUAL TIGHTROPE

To pastors and counselors working in a Christian milieu, discussing sexuality sometimes seems like a “lose-lose” enterprise, because one frequently fails to satisfy either the fundamentalists on the right (who feel sexuality is a personal matter and who prefer to confine all detailed discussions of sexuality to the privacy of the bedroom), or the fundamentalists on the left (political-correctness police who seek to enforce their own liberal biases with the same fervor and rigidity they despise in their conservative counterparts).

The problem with both of these fundamentalisms is their adherence to de-contextualized literalism. Repressionists on the right seem so riveted to preventing a descent into hedonism or Bohemianism that sooner or later (and it’s usually sooner) they divert discussions of sexuality into an opportunity to present their pet prohibitions: pornography, abortion, gay marriages, STDs, etc. The politically-correct fundamentalists also have their own de-contextualized literalisms. For example, in their enthusiasm to accord women equal respect and equal pay in the workplace, radical feminists have espoused the position that men and women are equal in all but the most negligible details, a patently absurd assumption which serves their political agenda but hardly squares with the reality that women are sometimes equal to men, sometimes inferior, and sometimes superior. Much depends on the context and the job requirements.

The knee-jerk reflex of radical feminists to argue that *all* or *nearly all* perceived differences between males and females are a result of socially constructed, imprisoning stereotypes is simply wrong. Studies have revealed significant gender differences from the moment of birth. For example, total sleep for a 24-hour period is significantly greater for female than for male neonates (Sander, Stechler, Julia, & Burns, 1976). Female newborns also show greater mouth activity and more tongue involvement during feeding, as well as greater overall tactile sensitivity (Korner, 1973). Male neonates show greater activity levels from birth onward. One can hardly attribute such basic differences to social constructions. A more reasoned and contextualized analysis might yield an array of tasks in which females were predominantly superior in some tasks, while males showed exceptional aptitudes in others.

Frequently, the “eye of the beholder” brings excessive baggage to the field of vision. Andrea Dworkin, for example, in ranting against the evils of pornography inadvertently reveals the fundamentalist’s proclivity to homogenize:

Given the fact that women’s oppression has an ahistorical character—a *sameness* across time and cultures expressed in rape, battery, incest, and prostitution—it is no surprise that pornography, a central phenomenon in that oppression, has precisely that *quality of sameness*. (Dworkin, 1988, quoted in Francoeur & Taverner, 1998, p. 218) [emphasis supplied]

Dworkin’s radical feminist presuppositions that men are *inevitably* devoted to *ahistorically* suppressing women—in all times and in all places—blurs her

perceptions of the male gender. She fails to see that numerous men are frequently tender, loving and kind. Her feminist fervor endows her with a perceptual myopia which makes it impossible for her to appreciate the complexity of the hated and oppressing male gender, and it is hardly surprising that she reaches the conclusion that sexual intercourse is *always* an act of dominance wherein a more powerful male uses and “colonizes” a woman’s body for purposes of power. (Dworkin, 1987).

In countering the “oppression-phobic” feminists, Christian fundamentalists have sometimes sounded like “submission-philiacs,” bolstering their nineteenth-century case for male-as-patriarch with carefully-selected scriptural references interpreted with fundamentalistic exegesis. On nearly all sexual issues, opinions are galvanized and strident. Discussants enter debates spring-loaded. Abortion, pornography, gender differences, contraception, sex education, homosexuality are all topics certain to engender not only differences of opinion, but irritation, rancor, and bitterness as well.

How then can Christian pastors and counselors discuss human sexuality in a way which brings healing rather than hatred, inspiration rather than irritation? Thoughtful discussion of sexual issues is most likely to occur when human sexuality is *not* seen primarily as an erotic encounter, an act of biological propagation, or as a power struggle between the sexes. Christians might emphasize that God designed sex to *promote psychological intimacy*. When sexuality is understood in this holistic way, Christians have an opportunity to enrich the interchange with their own unique perspective.

CHRISTIAN SEXUALITY AS THE SEARCH FOR INTIMACY

If I’ve learned anything in three decades of psychotherapy, it is this: *sexual* problems are *personality* problems. Most people searching for sexual satisfaction are not in need of anatomy lessons or “How-To” manuals. What they lack is the courage or skill to establish and maintain intimacy. But here they get little help from either the right or the left. The “don’t-stray, don’t-play” exhortations of Christians and the “just do it” propositions of secularists fail to address the core component of Christian sexuality. The erotica-phobics on the right, the oppression-phobic feminists on the left, and the evolutionary biologists in the middle, all miss the essential core of human sexuality. Christian sexuality is not essentially about eroticism, power, or propagation; it is primarily about maintaining boundaries that enhance family structure and promote psychological intimacy.

For Christians, *sexuality is a search for intimacy*. Psychological intimacy is a uniquely human phenomenon. For animals, sexual intercourse serves primarily to propagate the species, and not much else. But for humans—the only species that copulates face to face—sexuality was designed by God to be the ultimate experience of intimacy. Becoming “one flesh” was intended to be the pinnacle

of psychological closeness. Sadly, as many know from personal experience, it is possible to have sex without intimacy. One can be physically naked yet psychologically shrouded. It's possible to "do it" without "making love." One of my therapy clients once described sex with her husband in the following words: "When we make love, I feel like a semen receptacle." That is, perhaps, the most graphic description of non-intimate sexuality I have ever heard.

The sexual challenge for humans, is not, as evolutionary biologists would have us believe, to propagate as widely and efficiently as possible. For human beings, created in God's image, sexuality offers the most exquisite experience of *psychological intimacy* the Creator could dream up. But in contemporary culture, the intimate sharing of one's soul is missing in far too many sexual relationships. That is why casual sex is so disappointing in the long run. In God's Edenic environment, sexual contact was the occasion for intimacy not only with one's opposite-sexed soulmate, but with one's Creator. Becoming "one flesh" with your soulmate simultaneously provided the occasion for becoming a co-creator with the eternal I AM. In the best of all worlds, Adam and Eve experienced uninterrupted naked intimacy with one another (even when not mating). When engaging in sexual intercourse—the pinnacle of their intimacy experiences—they "upped the ante," by moving into the domain of divinity: creatorship. By coupling sexually, they exercised their potential to become co-creators of the human race, contributing microscopic, but magnificent, bits of DNA to the process of co-creating progeny who would be similar to themselves, but never exact replicas.

Only a divine mind could design an act of intimacy so abundant with excellent freight, and Christians have a unique opportunity to highlight the splendor of this bio-socio-theological melding of excitement, bonding, and creativity called *sexual intimacy*. Other characterizations of sexuality seem limited by comparison. The evolutionary biologists' *survival of the fittest* is threatening and intimidating by comparison, The feminists' *domination/subjugation* motif is frightening to women and demeaning to men, creating self-defense classes instead of closeness. Finally, the fundamentalist Christians' emphasis on prohibitions unwittingly creates an obsession with boundaries which is antithetical to intimacy. Boundaries are important, but they are not the essential core of Christian sexuality. Intimacy is.

ORGASMS AS ENTERTAINMENT

Today, our culture is obsessed with orgasms as entertainment, and consequently much of the psychological intimacy and spiritual meaning of this essentially private encounter has been sabotaged. When sexual interactions are projected onto 50 × 100 foot screens for the primary purpose of titillating and entertaining an audience, most dimensions of genuine *intimacy* are lost. In addition to the "Truman Show" quality of such sex-as-entertainment scenes, the majority of sexual encounters are choreographed to occur outside the "confining" or "ordinary"

context of marriage. They take place, instead, in the more “exciting” settings of extra-marital or pre-marital encounters. The implicit message to audiences is that getting to know your partner ought to *include* rather than *exclude* sex, and if everything seems sexually compatible *then* you might consider a long-term psychological commitment.

Nothing could be more backwards. A series of sexual encounters is a poor way to assess compatibility over the long haul. Ann Landers once said “Sex is a good basis for marriage if you can agree on what to do for the other 23 hours and 45 minutes.” So while all the cautions about “going too far” and “waiting until marriage” might seem archaic by today’s standards, they are nonetheless based on the credible notion that psychological intimacy ought to come *first* in a good sexual relationship. Once you get into making-out, raging chemicals cloud your mind about what kind of *person* you’re encountering. Just as drinking four martinis or smoking a joint is not a favorable precursor for good decision making, so intense making-out does *not* help you know your friend better—quite the opposite, it seriously distorts your perceptions. Mark Twain once said that you should go into marriage with your eyes wide open and live in it with them half closed. Sadly, too many follow precisely the opposite path, going into marriage with their eyes half closed, and “waking up” later to find themselves married to a stranger—for a short time.

Ours is a culture awash in erotica, obsessed with sex. “Getting to Know You,” (as the old song title puts it) has been replaced by “Getting to Bed.” Christians ought to raise a voice that can be heard above the cultural cacophony of erotica, and invite listeners to cultivate *psychological intimacy* instead of *sexual activity*. But this is best done not by producing a repressive list of sexual prohibitions, but by inviting others to participate more fully in real sexual intimacy—as God designed it to be. It was God, after all, who invented orgasms. God could have had us propagate by pollination, or in some other boring manner, but He didn’t. The Creator chose to meld intimacy with excitement, and even allowed us to join Him as co-creators.

The sexual sins of this age are, at the core, sins of de-construction. We have de-constructed God’s seamless garment of sexual intimacy, dividing it—at best—into recreation and procreation, and—at worst—into domination and perversion. Christians seek to place spiritual intimacy at the core of sexuality: intimacy with one’s lover, intimacy with one’s Creator, intimacy that carries potential for creating offspring. In this context, the very notion of “stranger sex” is exposed as a cultural oxymoron, for how can one share one’s soul, raise a family, or grow old together with a *stranger*?

Christian sex education ought to include, in addition to accurate and explicit discussions about things anatomical and sexual, serious consideration of how to facilitate psychological intimacy between lovers. In our prohibitory zeal to protect our youth from the destructive consequences of STD’s, rape, pornography, and other negative sexual experiences, we ought not to neglect the “weightier

matters” of intimacy. In my Human Sexuality classes I caution my students about the negative consequences of unbridled sexual activities, but I spend even more time encouraging them to think about intimacy. I stress the importance of becoming acquainted with their friends’ personalities: “Familiarize yourself with her brain instead of her breasts,” I suggest. “Have him show you his poetry instead of his pecs. Try revealing your dreams instead of your *derriere*. Practice French vocabulary instead of French kissing. Dare to bare your soul instead of your body,” I challenge. The list is essentially endless, because intimacy is about sharing *everything*, but it works out best when you give careful thought to proper sequencing.

WORTH WAITING

It is not easy today for young people to wait. They are bombarded by erotic stimuli from every segment of society. A few weeks ago I was driving to church when I stopped for a traffic light and was confronted with a bumper sticker that read IF THIS CAMPER’S ROCKIN’ DON’T BOTHER KNOCKIN’. So much for “church” thoughts. One simply cannot avoid sexuality in our contemporary culture, and in fairness to our adolescents and young adults we ought to remember that the decade between pubescence and marriage is long and intense—filled with hormones as well as homework. Sometimes it does not seem fair, because I suspect Adam and Eve’s “wait-until-marriage,” “let’s-get-acquainted” period did not span ten years or even ten days. It was likely closer to ten hours. But it probably spanned more than the typical ten minutes allocated to becoming sexual partners in today’s movies. I suspect that somewhere along the line, God had that father-son chat and told Adam “Begin with her mind, Son, and things will work out better.”

THE BOUNDARIES OF SEXUALITY

Without sounding like prudish prohibitionists, Christian pastors and counselors ought to remind others that whenever we operate outside of the Creator’s design someone always suffers. Succinctly stated: “When you stray or betray, someone always gets hurt.” In my years of practicing psychotherapy I have never known of a single instance when someone played the adultery game and won. Not once. Think about it, under the *best* of circumstances (when you successfully keep it secret, only you and your lover know) you end up in love with one person and living with another, not a pleasant situation. And the misery that accompanies affairs when they become known—as they usually do—hardly needs documenting.

Even God’s accommodation to his creatures (reluctant “permission” to have more than one wife) has not worked out well over time. That is why, all these centuries later, the Arabs and Jews are still quarreling. Trying to successfully

maintain sexual intimacy with more than one person was more than even Abraham and Sarah could manage, to say nothing about Jacob and Leah and Rachel . . . you know the whole sad history. It just does not work. Even when such relationships begin in a context of caring, they usually end in bitterness.

And when boundaries are actively violated—as in rape, incest, or other kinds of sexual abuse—the consequences are even more devastating, and seem to include a significant gender difference. When it comes to sexual suffering, “Life is not fair,” as the popular phrase puts it. Whenever people experience the consequences of inappropriate sexual encounters, females seem to suffer more. Abortions are more painful both physically and emotionally for women. Anatomically, since females were designed for sexual receptivity and subsequent childbearing, they are less likely than males to experience orgasmic pleasure and are more susceptible to STDs and other painful sexual consequences. Even optimal outcomes of sexuality, such as childbirth, seem to cost women more. Long, difficult labors are painful and sometimes life-threatening for women—not men. Little girls are more often the victims of sexual predators than are boys. Psychologically, women frequently seem to be more emotionally accessible than men and this leaves them more vulnerable when sexual relationships go bad.

Consequently, when sexuality is permeated with psychological intimacy and surrounded with commitment, it offers protection and security for both partners, but even more for females. In this sense, Christian love becomes the great equalizer, making sexuality equally safe for both participants regardless of gender differences in musculature or physical power. This is why sins of rape, child molestation, or spouse abuse are so ethically egregious—the perpetrator is using physical power to violate boundaries that the victim is powerless to protect. Stated simply, if sexual interactions are not mutual they are not Christian.

HEAVEN IN PASTELS?

At the risk of inducing instant deafness in some conservative readers, I would like to conclude by discussing the issue of our sexuality in the hereafter. I believe the quest for intimacy will find its fullest realization in the next life. This is frequently misunderstood, because our culture’s obsession with orgasms has led us to think “Sex in the new earth? I don’t think so!” Sadly, when it comes to sexuality, many Christians have neutered heaven to such an extent that it hardly came as a surprise to me when a graduate student told me, “When I think of heaven, I think in pastels.” I’ve never forgotten that statement, because this student—a talented artist—was acquainted with a wide range of mediums and could easily have said “When I think of heaven, I think of rich primary colors.” But her church had taught her the traditional “No-sex-in-the-hereafter” fundamentalism of the conservatives, and she saw heaven as a place devoid of primary colors or “earthy” experiences. Is it surprising that teenagers want to experience life “before Jesus returns?” If

Christian adolescents were honest, I suspect most of their prayers would be “Come quickly Lord Jesus—*after* I get married.”

I think one can argue convincingly that when Jesus offered his “No-marrying-or-giving-in-marriage” snapshot of the next life, he was not explicitly proscribing sex but merely saying “Things are going to be different.” Again intimacy offers us a splendid way of anticipating the richness of the next life. On planet earth, ultimate intimacy experiences (such as sexual intercourse) are not meant to be shared. We seem to be wired for exclusivity. When the Platters sang their hit song “Only You,” it was not a religiously inspired lyric, nor did they consider themselves theologians. Yet they do not want to share lovers.

I would suggest that in the next life, we will be intimate with many, many friends. Time won't be a constraint, neither will our earthly jealousies (which are usually projected insecurities: “She'll like him better than me;” “He'll find her more fun to be with than me.”) If one balances Jesus' statement “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage” (Matthew 22:30 NIV) with “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (2 Corinthians 2:9 NIV), it does not seem far-fetched to anticipate paradise as a place where you will be able to establish intimate relationships with all your former friends who have gone their separate ways—including those high-school boyfriends and girlfriends.

So when I think of heaven, I *do not* think in pastels. And I do not think in terms of gold—I am not concerned about highway construction, and if the streets are paved with gravel, I will not be particularly disappointed. I do not think of sex as necessarily procreative, and I am not positive regarding what our new anatomies will look like, but I am certain we will have fresh, as yet undreamed-of capacities for intimacy. So leave your water colors behind, forget those pastels, and prepare for primary intimacy.

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