

Robert Song, 'Creator, Christ and Sexuality'

Introduction

In the past half century, many of the most controversial and divisive moral questions that have been faced by the churches have revolved around sexuality. For the Roman Catholic church, these have centred on contraception, while for mainline Protestant churches and churches of the Anglican communion debates over the legitimacy of same-sex sexual relationships have given rise to rancorous conflict and, increasingly frequently, formal division. In the context of societies whose understanding of sexuality has been transformed since the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the pastoral and missiological difficulties posed by the churches' continued adherence to historic sexual norms have been intense, paralleling the exegetical and theological complexities confronted by those who challenge the apparently plain teaching of Scripture and unambiguous tradition of the churches.

Historically, Christian ethics has always treated sexuality as part of the ethics of creation. "From the beginning of creation," says Jesus, "'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'" (Mark 10:6–8). Sexual ethics has been fundamentally an ethics of marriage: sex has been legitimised only in the context of marriage, and this has traditionally been taken to preclude same-sex sexual relationships. Yet it has also been crucial for the history of Christian understandings of sexual morality that the ethics of creation is not just an ethics of nature, that is, of a self-standing realm independent of theological narration. "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage," Jesus further declares (Matthew 22:30), indicating that creation is intrinsically oriented to its eschatological fulfilment. As a result, the pathway of celibacy is opened, establishing that sex, marriage, and children are not essential for human fulfilment.

Whether this eschatological dimension opens other possibilities in relation to sexuality, we will explore below. But first, we will consider some central Scriptural themes as well as some of the decisive points in the history of Christian thinking about sexual ethics.

Scriptural Themes

The traditional Christian understanding of sexual ethics has consistently returned to a small number of foundational Biblical passages. In the first creation story in Genesis 1:26–8, human beings are declared to be created in the image of God: “Male and female he created them,” and as male and female they are blessed and commanded to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. A second account is given in Genesis 2:18–25: here God, having formed a man from the dust of the ground, declares that it is not good for him to be alone, and that a helper should be created for him; so, from his body God fashions a woman, whom the man declares to be “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” On this basis is marriage established, the man and his wife becoming “one flesh.” Confirmed by Jesus’ quoting of these two passages in the context of a dispute about divorce (Mark 10:6–8), we find here the essential elements of the historic Christian ethics of sex: there are two sexes, male and female; marriage must be heterosexual; implicitly, from the conjunction of the two Genesis passages, marriage is intrinsically related to procreation; sex should be confined to marriage; and marriage should be faithful and lifelong. All of this is given a richer theological meaning in Ephesians 5:31–2, where Paul talks of the two becoming one flesh as a “great mystery,” which he is applying to Christ and the church: echoing Jeremiah 2–3 and Hosea 1–3, this suggests that marriage somehow witnesses to or embodies a greater reality beyond itself, namely the permanence of God’s loving covenant with Israel and the church.

Jesus’ teaching that in the resurrection there shall be neither marrying nor giving in marriage (Mark 12:25) and his reference to some making themselves “eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:12) opens a new perspective, namely the calling to celibacy for some of his followers. This is filled out in 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul expresses the wish that “all were as I myself am” (v. 7) and submits that in a world order that is passing away those who refrain from marriage will do better, being able to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the affairs of the Lord. Nevertheless, Paul allows that marriage remains a calling, even if only on the grounds that “it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (v. 9).

Many other Biblical details about the ethics of marriage and sexual behaviour have been discussed throughout Christian history, from teaching about divorce to the rightful ordering of Christian households to the particulars of sexual immorality. But all of these are premised on the assumption of the fundamental structure of marriage as the proper context for sexual activity. The same could be said of the Biblical texts customarily associated with a prohibition against homosexuality. These include the story of Sodom (Genesis 19), two verses in Leviticus (18:22, 20:13) about not lying with a man “as with a woman,” Pauline references to *arsenokoitai* and *malakoi* being amongst those who will not inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9), and again to *arsenokoitai* as those who exhibit behaviour contrary to the sound teaching of the gospel (1 Timothy 1:10). Probably most influential has been Paul’s elaboration of the results of idolatry in Romans 1:26–7, in which people are given up to degrading passions, both men and women exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural. While interpretive debate of these has been extensive (see further Gagnon 2001; Loader 2012; Brownson 2013; Song 2014; Gunda and Naughton 2017), there is a strong case for thinking that their intelligibility is exclusively dependent on, and therefore of questionable significance outside of, the picture of sexuality given in Genesis.

This question of intelligibility is crucial for thinking about the Christian ethics of sexuality. For example, without some appreciation of the underlying picture that makes sense of particular Biblical texts, it will be difficult to elucidate the significance of Scripture for sexual behaviours about which it is silent: even if one decides that “sex” is to be confined to marriage, what does that mean for married partners who engage in mutual masturbation, contraception, oral sex, anal sex, or consensual BDSM, none of which are unambiguously referred to in the Bible? Again, if the task of Christian ethics is not just one of asking what the Bible said as an antiquarian matter, but of thinking through how Christian disciples are to act now in the light of Scripture, we will need to weigh the significance of philosophical and scientific understandings that have arisen since the Bible was written. For example, does it matter that “sexuality” understood as an integral component of one’s psychology is a modern notion for which there is no classical or biblical equivalent? Or that the term “homosexuality” referring to an enduring pattern of sexual attraction only emerged in the late nineteenth century in the context of psychiatric medicine, suggesting that it was unknown to the Bible? Has the

enormous growth in our understanding of sexuality from the biological and human sciences generated insights that are morally relevant or not? Amongst the conceptualities that have arisen for thinking about sex, gender, and identity, which ones illuminate the meaning of Scripture, and which hide it? Which cultural currents have alerted Christians to underappreciated elements in the Bible, and which are in danger of distorting Biblical understandings?

None of these questions will be answered simply by reading off the surface of the text of Scripture. Christian ethics must therefore always be *theological* ethics, in which the task of theology is to elucidate the nature of ethics both in response to Scripture, but also in critical engagement with the tradition of Christian teaching and with the claims made by philosophers and scientists. It is this task of interpretation and mediation that has been undertaken by theologians throughout Christian history and which continues right up to the present.

Augustine

Undoubtedly, Augustine is the theologian most historically influential on Christian thinking about sex and marriage. Although he is popularly credited with sole responsibility for bequeathing sexual repression to the Western world, the story is far more complex. Amongst the strands significant in early Christianity before he wrote, there was an apologetic need to respond to pagan accusations of sexual immorality by showing that Christians could match the sexual austerity of the highest Roman philosophers, the Stoics. “Either we marry only to have children, or if we do not marry we are continent always,” Justin maintains; while Clement of Alexandria and Origen affirm Stoic teaching that sexual intercourse is solely to be undertaken for the sake of procreation and that sex for any other reason (including during pregnancy) is contrary to nature and therefore immoral. Virginity was widely regarded as preferable for both men and women, not out of fear of sexuality as such, but as a form of emancipation, an embrace of Christ’s resurrection body that symbolised freedom from the cycle of birth and death and from the power of earthly political orders that depended on the reproduction of new generations of citizens (Brown 1988; Foucault 1986, 2021).

Augustine’s own construal of these inherited themes is shaped by the theological controversies that shaped his thought. Against the Manicheans, and taking up the early church’s opposition to Gnostic denial of the goodness of the body, he affirms that sex

and marriage are intrinsically good. There is a puzzle for him here since there is a clear connection in his mind between procreation and mortality. If Adam and Eve had remained immortal, what need would there have been for procreation to preserve humankind? But if procreation is a consequence of the fall, in what sense is it good? At all events, he eventually decides, sex and sexual differentiation between male and female are not a consequence of the fall, but are created good and required for procreation. Against the Pelagians, and preoccupied by the uncontrollable invasiveness of sin, he insists that it is difficult to avoid sexual sin, even in marriage: fallen human nature gives rise to concupiscence, the failure of desire to be subordinate to reason, evidenced in the non-amenability of the male erection to the rational will. Sex might be acceptable if undertaken for begetting children, but for any other reason it is a sin—pardonable, to be sure, within marriage, but a sin nonetheless. But it is certainly not pardonable if it degenerates into uses “against nature,” no doubt including oral and anal sex.

On these premises, he elaborates the three-fold good of marriage. Marriage is good because of its connection to offspring (*proles*), the purpose for which marriage was established. Its good also consists in faithfulness (*fides*), which is broken through adultery. These two apply to all marriages, while the third, the sacramental bond (*sacramentum*), obtains for Christians alone: marriage can only be dissolved by death, its obligations sufficiently strong that a marriage cannot be broken even in the case of infertility. But he also surmises that marriage is good because of the natural companionship between the sexes, which older couples still enjoy even when they are childless or their children have died. In a good marriage, where the flame of youthful passion has died down, still, the order of love between husband and wife remains strong. In this we may find a source for what will become known as the “unitive good,” the good of the relationship between the spouses in itself as something distinct from the procreative good of marriage.

And yet even if marriage is good, for Christians it is always less good than sexual abstinence. Here, as everywhere in Augustine’s thinking, we need to note the significance of different temporal positionings within the theological narrative. For the patriarchs the nature of the times meant that it was a duty for them to multiply the people of God so that in due course the promised Saviour of all peoples would be born; whereas now, following Christ, no one of exemplary devotion seeks to have children except spiritually, that is, through evangelism and baptism. Jesus’ family are those who do the Father’s will, not his birth mother and brothers (Matthew 12:46–50). Celibacy is not a

timeless, natural, created good, but a distinct response appropriate to the time after the advent of Christ (Augustine 2001).

From Augustine to the Twentieth Century

From a distance of 1,700 years and one or more sexual revolutions, it is easy to find a lot to dislike in Augustine's theology of sex. The near certainty of sin, even in vanilla sex between heterosexual married partners undertaken in a spirit of shared joy and mutual enrichment, does not sit easily with a natural reading of the erotic delights of the Song of Songs. His preserving of the Stoic repudiation of sex for any other purpose than procreation seems like borrowing from pagan philosophy in excess of anything found in Scripture: even in 1 Corinthians 7 there is no suggestion that married sex must be so constrained. But on the other hand, there is much in his writing to resource theological sexual ethics even now. His threefold understanding of the good of marriage has rightly remained influential, albeit often in significantly reworked forms. His narrative understanding of theological ethics, which decisively resituates marriage as the result of the advent of Christ, thereby denaturalises it, removing its inevitability and making clear that a Christian theology of sexuality is not an abstract ethics of nature, but has an essential Christological and eschatological dimension. And his willingness to work with Scripture, pondering its silences, puzzling over the questions it raises, and not refraining from sometimes bold conjectures in response, epitomises time and again in his work the faithful theological search for understanding.

Amongst the many contributions to Christian sexual ethics made in the long centuries following Augustine, two might be picked out as setting in train subsequent trajectories for Christian thinking about sexuality. The first is found in Thomas Aquinas, who places in formal hierarchical order the three goods of marriage: its primary end concerns that which human beings share with other animals, namely the bearing and rearing of children; its secondary end denotes what is unique to human beings, namely faithfulness; while its third end comprises what is unique to believers, namely the sacramental bond. This was to entrench in Catholic moral theology a language of the primary and secondary ends of marriage, together with an emphasis on the primacy of procreation, which only began to be put in question in the twentieth century.

Aquinas is also less anxious than Augustine about whether the sexual act need be sinful. While he formally accepts that reason should control the passions, that sex should

be for procreation, and that it should not be impeded by contraception, he also recognises the goodness in principle of natural desire: if the body is created good, the inclinations which preserve it—including the act of begetting children—cannot be altogether immoral. Indeed, he adds, to reject pleasure to the extent of omitting what is needed for the transmission of life would be a sin.

The second arises with the Reformation. The Reformers were profoundly suspicious of celibacy, not only because of the scandals it regularly occasioned, but more importantly because in their view it reeked of attempts at self-justification before God. The dependence of all believers on grace for salvation suggested not the superiority of the monastic over the married life, but the equalisation of both callings. Likewise, marriage could not have the sacramental character it had gained in the late mediaeval period, a means of grace, but should serve as a remedy for sin, averting sexual desire from its natural tendency to stray. Given that very few people evidently had the gift of celibacy and therefore the calling to it, the Reformers' presumption was that most people should be married.

At the same time, they re-ordered the purposes of marriage. Procreation remained intrinsic to marriage, but its primacy came to be displaced by love. Thus Calvin came to the view that marriage is given, first, for mutual love and support; second, for the procreation of children; and third, for protection against sexual sin. Similar orderings can be found in Anglican writings of the sixteenth century, while in the seventeenth century the profusion of Puritan paeans to the joys of domestic affection cemented the notion of a companionate understanding of marriage, with sexual delight and the openness to children being discreetly folded in.

Karl Barth

These two trajectories in Christian sexual ethics can be traced into the twentieth century, where we find them reworked in ways that bear notable similarities to each other, on the Protestant side by Karl Barth, and on the Catholic side by Pope John Paul II.

On the Protestant side, although marital love is given primacy and sex in the context of marriage is a source of less anxious scrutiny, the result of equalising the two callings was a substantial re-naturalising of marriage and a significant loss of the eschatological tension that had made celibacy intelligible, effects that are visible in Protestant cultures

to this day. One of the emphases in Barth's thought is to redress this tendency through an appreciation of what changes in Christ.

Barth's understanding of marriage is set against an account of humanity as always already co-humanity (Barth 1960, pp. 285–324; 1961, pp. 116–240). Starting from his reading of the image of God in Genesis 1, he finds the most fundamental difference between human beings to be that between man and woman; this runs deeper than any other distinction, including that between individual and individual. Human beings are created male *or* female: each must accept their own sex; there can be no androgyny or attempts to transcend one's sex or occupy the functions of the other sex; nor (here he cites Simone de Beauvoir) may one's gender be made a feature accidental to one's true self. But this structural distinction is exhibited within a more primordial unity: there is never man without woman or woman without man; each has a mutual orientation to the other. Strikingly, this mutual orientation is true in every sphere of life: Barth disapproves of "[men-only] clubs and ladies' circles," and wonders if these may be "symptoms of the malady called homosexuality" (Barth 1961, pp. 165–6). But it is also true of marriage, the focal point of the male-female relationship, which in its differentiation and relationship between the sexes images the covenant between God and Israel, and behind that echoes the internal relations within the Godhead.

From this, Barth affirms that the calling of marriage is to a full life-partnership, which encompasses the whole being of each of the partners. Its inner genesis is free and mutual love, an emphasis rooted in God's love for Israel and Christ's for the church. The encounter of man and woman includes the whole sphere of their relationship, including sex: because the command of God claims the whole person, physical sexuality and the sexual relationship are decisively sanctified. The consequence of this is the priority of the marriage relationship over its necessary orientation to procreation: marriage 'is necessarily *coniugium* [conjoining], but not necessarily *matrimonium* [parenthood]' (Barth 1961, p. 189), even if it implies an inner readiness for children.

Yet not everyone is called to marriage, and here Barth reinstates the New Testament eschatological vision over against the Protestant drift towards naturalising marriage, that is, declaring it a universal obligation derived from natural law or created order. The reason for affirming marriage in the Old Testament is the need for the procreation of children to carry forward the hope of Israel, the promise to Abraham. But once the promised seed has been born, marriage no longer has that purpose: 'The necessity to procreate imposed by the history of salvation prior to the appearance of the Messiah has

now fallen away' (Barth 1961, p. 143). Now that the Word is made flesh, children of God are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a male, but of God (John 1:13).

Pope John Paul II

On the Catholic side, the long-standing close connection between the development of moral theology and the need to provide guidance for priests hearing confession encouraged a tendency towards analysing sexual ethics narrowly in terms of particular sexual acts. Over against this, which they regarded as anti-personalist and overly biological, various Catholic moral theologians of the 1930s argued that love between the spouses was the primary meaning and ultimate end of marriage (von Hildebrand 1991). Pius XI had also appeared to teach that mutual love is "the chief reason and purpose of marriage" (Pius XI 1930, s. 24), while at the Second Vatican Council the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, introduced its discussion of marriage as "this community of love" (Second Vatican Council 1965, s. 48), and refused the language of primary and secondary ends.

John Paul II's "theology of the body" also draws heavily on personalist styles of thought (John Paul II 2006). At its heart is the idea that marriage is a communion of persons, one which as for Barth images the communion of persons in the Trinity. To be in such a communion means living in a reciprocal gifting of oneself to the other, giving oneself as a gift, receiving the other as a gift, and rejoicing in the gift one receives when one has one's own gift received. In marriage, the persons in communion are male and female, both in their created distinction and in their original unity. Masculinity and femininity represent two ways of being a body that complete each other, and "the spousal meaning of the body," as the Pope terms it, consists in each presenting the whole of themselves to the other.

This represents a decisive move beyond any kind of biologism or physicalism; because sex enacts a union of whole persons, it is not just a biological transaction or a mere animal mating. It also means that the unitive and procreative ends cannot be separated so readily. Sometimes contraception is defended on the grounds that it serves the unitive end by enhancing the mutual love of the couple, even if it thwarts the procreative end. But according to the theology of the body, contraception cannot fulfil even the unitive end, since the union is the union of whole persons, and to hold back

one's powers of fertility by means of contraception would be to deny that. Against the Stoic imperative, sex need not be restricted to a procreative purpose: the Pope is clear that sexual desire as such is good, and only becomes sinful concupiscence or lust when one fails to attend to the whole person and sees them only as a means to sexual pleasure.

Revisionists, Liberals, and Beyond

Barth and John Paul II differ in some important respects: Barth was less concerned about contraception, principally because after the birth of Christ the propagation of the race has ceased to be an unconditional command, but also because the command of God regarding parenthood is a separate command from that of marriage and is to be enquired after in free personal responsibility. But more noteworthy are their similarities. They both work from a personalist understanding of human beings, in which the embodied, loving I-Thou is the heart of the marriage partnership. They both affirm the primacy of that relationship as a reflection of God's relationship with Israel and the Church, rather than seeing it solely as instituted for the sake of having children. They both regard sex between married partners as good in principle, rather than something that requires justification or pardon. In all these respects, they take their leave of the long shadow of Augustine. And they do so, we might venture, not in abstraction from long-standing trends in wider culture and thought, but in part because of a recognition that by ruminating on cultural trends such as the increasing connection of marriage with love, and philosophical movements such as personalism, they are enabled to uncover and creatively elaborate themes in the Bible that had previously been inadequately recognised.

Of course, looking back several decades, while both have many admirers, others maintain that they have not gone remotely far enough. Both argue for an ontological grounding for sexual differentiation, and both affirm a sexual binary, holding together a complementarity of the sexes within a primordial unity; but neither properly addresses in detail the problematising both of biological sexual difference arising from intersex variations, and of taken-for-granted identifications of sex and gender. Barth is rightly sceptical about endorsing empirical generalisations about the differences between the genders; but based on the ordering he finds in 1 Cor. 11:2–16, Eph. 5:23–4 and elsewhere in the New Testament, he asserts a sexual hierarchy, a “preceding and following... super- and sub-ordination” (Barth 1961, p. 169). John Paul II, by contrast, moves to an equality

in complementarity in his theology of the body, associating masculinity and femininity in general terms with their different roles in relation to procreation; but arguably he never really answers the question whether equality in difference can finally avoid tilting towards inequality. And neither of them provides any theological or conceptual space for non-heterosexual sexual relationships.

In contrast, an example of a Catholic revisionist approach to sexual ethics is provided by Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler. Criticising what they call the “classicist” worldview of traditional Catholic thinking, for which reality is “static, necessary, fixed, and universal,” and proposing instead a historically conscious worldview which is “dynamic, evolving, changing and particular” (Salzman and Lawler 2008, p. 2), they endorse a personalist anthropology that integrates the physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual and relational dimensions of sexuality. Thence they rework the notion of complementarity to take account of sexual orientation: if it is the person as a whole, whether heterosexual or homosexual, who is the point of departure, then “in a truly human sexual act, the genitals [will be] at the service of personal complementarity” (2008 p. 152), whatever the sex of the partners.

Also tending to similar conclusions on same-sex relationships, but less tightly tied to an explicit engagement with Catholic teaching, is the work of Margaret Farley. While she seeks to be respectful of the Bible, tradition, and secular disciplines of knowledge, she is particularly mindful of developing an account that is accessible to those of other faith backgrounds and none, which a belief in creation by God warrants. Central to her framework for “just love” are the ideas of autonomy and relationality, which “ground an obligation to respect persons as ends in themselves” and forbid their use as mere means (Farley 2008, p. 212). These issue in a set of norms for sexual ethics, such as free consent, mutuality, commitment, social justice, and not doing unjust harm, in which the sex of the partners is at best of secondary interest: for this reason she talks of fruitfulness rather than procreation since it does not imply that non-heterosexual partners experience a second-class form of sex.

Many other revisionist or broadly liberal contributions have been made, and many of these cross the churches. Same-sex couples, it is often noted by such writers, can fulfil the marital goods of faithful love, permanence, and the remedy against sin, and even if their relationships cannot be directly procreative, they can be fully as fruitful in other ways as infertile heterosexual couples: besides which, the distinction between sexual

acts that are infertile because the couple is beyond childbearing years and those that are infertile because contracepted or non-heterosexual seems questionable, especially if used as a basis for legitimising some forms of relationship and delegitimising others (John 2012). Connected to this, procreation has been treated analogically or metaphorically, as an openness to fruitfulness in works of charity, or in other forms of parenting such as fostering or adoption. Others have looked to lesbian and gay relationships as a source of insight for heterosexual friendship and sexuality (Stuart 1995). Perhaps as influential as anything has been the simple appeal to love. God is love, and in our loving relationships we image God: if the essential message of Scripture is about God's love for the world, then everything in Scripture should be measured against that. Just as love is the fulfilling of the law, so every command should be tested against the law of love.

More bracing interventions have come from the direction of queer theology. Resourced by Michel Foucault's anti-essentialist narratives to the effect that sexuality is not timeless but has a history (Foucault 1976), and Judith Butler's stylising of the social construction of gender as ritualised performance (Butler 1993), the effect of queer theory has been to destabilise notions of sex, gender, and identity. Against not only conservative but also liberal essentialising of sexual identities—that one is “lesbian” or “gay” or “straight” or “born that way”—it questions representations of people's sexual orientation as their deepest truth, which needs to be expressed and recognised. Such are the Romantic assumptions of classical liberal theory, which extend the rights of heterosexuals to lesbian and gay people but leave other non-normative sexualities and identities excluded. The practice of queer theology, as the restless refusal of domestication, lies in an unceasing exposing of the inherent instability of normative categories (Loughlin 2007; Cheng 2011; Cohen 2019). In relation to sexuality, this means resisting binaries and settled identities (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, etc.) and learning not to lay down sexual life-scripts for others, but attending instead to real bodies and real lives and the untidy granularity of their particular relations to power (Althaus-Reid 2000; Tonstad 2018).

Mediations and Interpretations

It is common on all sides of the debate to locate revisionist, liberal and queer probings of Christian understandings of sexuality as standing in opposition to a hitherto unbroken

line of theological thought. But they are better understood as continuing the same task of mediation and creative interpretation that has characterised the theological tradition from the outset, as we have already seen in the case of Augustine, Barth, and John Paul II. No doubt in the profusion of their writings some have been more well-disposed to the sources of theological authority, and others have been more self-consciously iconoclastic, but in general one could make a strong case for seeing them as also sifting through the deepest impulses of their times in order to uncover elements in the Bible that have hitherto been insufficiently thematised.

Perhaps the clearest example of this is in relation to the hierarchy of the sexes. Throughout the tradition, the patriarchal assumption of the subordination of women to men had been largely unchallenged until the twentieth-century engagement of feminist theology with the rise of women's movements. In the case of Barth, we see the subordination of both men and women to a *taxis* in which men precede and women follow, and in John Paul II we find a sexual complementarity, but in both cases they set this against the background of a primordial equality. As they both recognise, the force of Gen. 1:27 is to the effect that women as well as men are made equally in the image of God; but feminist theology simply pursues more insistently the question of how much this foundational equality amounts to if it results in inequality in lived experience, whether this inequality is consciously justified through an explicit assertion of sexual ordering or it emerges in practice because different-but-equal schemas are liable to degenerate into inequity in actual historical conditions. Queer theology then takes this questioning a step further, resisting the forms of violence that are enacted through abstract categorisations, remembering the attention Jesus paid to the eunuchs and the adulteresses, the racialised outsiders and the centurions' personal slaves, and holding that all human beings will matter equally only when these human beings matter.

Nevertheless, when they turn to questions of sexuality there are some concerns with these responses. First, though this should not be pressed too quickly, there is occasionally a tendency to speak in a way that suggests an incipient docetism. There may be no intention to deny the goodness of the body in the manner of the ancient heresy; on the contrary it is exactly the desire to celebrate the body and sexuality that animates much of this writing. But if the personal is contrasted with the biological in a way that licenses a surreptitious elision of the latter, if the connection between sex and procreation is entirely lost, if one's biological sexedness is deemed to be of no relevance of any kind to one's identity, if the body is absorbed into discourse without remainder, then we may

wonder whether the Christian understanding of human beings as body-soul unities is beginning to be lost.

Second, there is a danger of neglect of the significance of eschatology for sexuality. The narrativel theological dimension which dominated patristic thinking, as we saw in Augustine, which underlay the mediaeval promotion of the monastic over the married life, for all its problems, and which was recalled in Barth and John Paul II, is often eclipsed in favour of a timeless account of the nature of sexual relationships. To be sure, this may be a rewritten understanding of a sexual anthropology that is hospitable to nonheterosexual and nonprocreative lives and experiences, and it may be implemented in a way that is intended to make it accessible to those outside of Christian faith, but if shorn of a theological narrative, it may gravitate towards being any one of a number of universalising philosophical accounts of human sexual nature with a Christian tinge. Yet Christians talk of creation rather than nature, and they do so in order to indicate an orientation both to the Christ through whom all things are made, and also eschatologically to the Christ in whom all things are fulfilled.

Marriage in Christ

This points us towards a way of conceptualising marriage not just in relation to the ethics of creation, but in its proper Christological and eschatological context. We do this through a series of propositions.

- First, we live in complex theological time. With the advent of Christ, the eschatological kingdom which fulfils creation has been announced by him and has been made real through his death and resurrection; and in the power of the Spirit, the church is called to bear witness to that reality. Yet we still await the time when Christ will be all in all; as it is, we also live in the good but perishable bodies of a created but fallen world.
- Second, the fulfilment of creation is not the mere repetition of creation: sex ad is not the same as sex bc. Whereas before Christ procreation is seen as an unavoidable part of marriage, the sign of God's continued blessing on the covenant people, after Christ new members of the covenant people are added not by birth and circumcision, but by baptism and new birth: the promise is guaranteed to all who share the faith of Abraham, not just those who are his descendants according to the flesh (Rom. 4:16). Because Christians reproduce not by procreation, but by baptism,

and find their shared identity not in the blood of Abraham but in the blood of Christ, marriage and children are no longer a necessary part of their identity and are no longer needed in order for them to be fulfilled. Against the need to preserve the species, against the logic of evolution, against the sub-Freudianism of the liberal left, against the family values of the conservative right, celibacy becomes fully intelligible as an option, an eschatological vocation to which Jesus and Paul both personally bore witness. The same conclusion could be drawn from the resurrection of Christ, as many of the Church Fathers reasoned: now that Christ has been raised, death has been defeated; where there is no death, there is no need for birth; and where there is no need for birth, there is no need for marriage. For this reason, in the resurrection, there shall be neither marrying nor giving in marriage (Luke 20:34–6).

- Third, eschatologically there is no need for male and female. If there will be neither marrying nor procreation in the resurrection, the question of gender becomes moot. To see this, we might ask why gender exists at all as a dimension of human existence. The answer as given in Genesis 1:27–8 lies in the immediate connection between God’s making humankind male and female and then commanding them to be fruitful and multiply: that is, gender differentiation exists for the sake of children, and theologically speaking all other historical and cultural accretions of gender are predicated on this one architectonic fact. It follows that if there will be no procreation in the resurrection, there will be no need for the gender binary. (It is striking that arguably none of Augustine, Barth, and John Paul II provide any very persuasive reason for thinking that there will be a need for gender, or at least for giving gender any substantive content: Barth declares that “the fact that male and female are one in Christ does not mean that they are no longer male and female” (Barth 1960, p. 295), despite the fact that this is exactly what Paul asserts in Gal. 3:28!)
- Fourth, it is still not good for human beings to be alone. Because we live in complex time before the final manifestation of Christ’s glory, the original reason for marriage still stands. While celibacy is now fully an option, marriage also remains an option, each of them callings for which there is a gift (1 Cor. 7:7). However, if procreation is no longer necessary, the underlying reason for marriage to be procreative no longer obtains, as Barth affirmed. And in turn, if the only reason for the differentiation of the sexes is procreation, it follows that marriage no longer needs

to be heterosexual. The question of marriage no longer turns on the gender or sexual identity of the partners, but on their willingness to commit to each other according to the goods of loving faithfulness, permanence, and fruitfulness.

- Fifth, procreation is still a good. If the new creation represented merely a renewal of or return to creation, it might follow from the above that gender and procreation were themselves a result of the fall, as Gregory of Nyssa proposed. But Augustine's instinct that they are a created good is preferable, representing a more natural reading of Genesis and avoiding possible negative implications about both women and materiality. Children remain a sign of God's continuing blessing—and do so even in the midst of ecological crisis.
- Sixth, the church is the body of Christ in which differences are both allowed and reconciled. For Paul, notably in 1 Corinthians, the church is the context which gives meaning to individual Christian bodies. If on the one hand procreation and therefore gender are no longer necessary, and if on the other procreation and therefore gender remain a good, these represent truths to which different people will bear witness, as they have the calling and the gifting. No individual is required to bear in their body the weight of the whole witness of the church.
- Finally, marriage in Christ witnesses to the fulfilment of marriage in creation. If marriage eschatologically refigured is not the repetition of marriage in creation, nor is it its denial: rather it points to possibilities for marriage that were latent in marriage from the start. If procreation finds its fulfilment in fruitfulness, it is not that fruitfulness is a dematerialised denial of human biological nature, but that the creation of a partner for Adam was always intended to ensure that Eden would be fruitful. Again, if children are the *fruit* of the relationship of male and female, they are the fruit of that *relationship*, which always remains prior. And finally, if children are a gift, they are so always as a sign of God's goodness, and never as its fullness. The reality to which marriage points and in which marriage participates is the reality of the covenant love of God for Israel and the church, itself in turn a reflection and a fruitful overflowing of the relations of love within the Trinity.

These propositions are only lightly sketched and leave many questions unanswered. But along with many other similar proposals, they suggest that there are the resources within the Christian history of reflection on Scripture for thinking freshly about the ethics of

sexuality, in a way that draws on the deepest impulses of the tradition but also recognises that we still have more to learn.

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