

## **Christian Ethics:**

### The case of marriage and sex (3/12/17)

Christianity speaks to many ethical issues we face, including some of much debate in our culture. Hot topics seem to be money, sex, power and death. Let's look at the case of marriage and sex, through the Anglican lens of "Scripture, tradition and reason," using the models of law, purposes and relationship. (and remember: "we don't measure-up and God loves us anyway!")

#### **Scripture:**

In scripture, sex is intertwined with marriage (as it has been in most of the world's cultures for most of history). Marriage is the ticket to a sexual relationship, and that relationship is tied-up in the commitments of family and child bearing. The exceptions from early in Israel's history (concubines) are cast in a negative light. Well before Jesus' time, the consensus developed in Judaism that marriage was to be a monogamous and exclusive relationship.

#### *Law:*

Laws appear against adultery, fornication and prostitution (both secular and religious prostitution) and the New Testament, building on Jewish teaching, clearly applies these rules to men and to women. Clear commandments include the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment against adultery (Exodus 20:14, Deuteronomy 5:18) and the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment against coveting which mentions coveting "your neighbor's wife." Divorce gets some allowance in the Old Testament, but there are clear restrictions and Jesus raises the bar, (while citing cases of infidelity as possible cause for divorce; Matthew 19:3-12). There are a few brief prohibitions of incest and gay sex as well (see page 4).

#### *Purposes and Relationship:*

Variations on the word "adultery" appear in the bible 75 times. Jesus points us toward the underlying purpose of commandments against adultery: "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*" (Matthew 5:27-28). Variations on the word "marriage" appear 151 times. Thus, there is more in the Bible that helps us understand God's purposes in sex and marriage, buttressing and deepening our understanding.

For instance, in 1 Corinthians 7:1-5, Paul lifts up the mutual self-giving of husband and wife in the marital sexual relationship:

*Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.*

Sex is not merely a right that marriage gives. Sex is to be a mutually self-giving part of that relationship rather than a self-serving activity—even within marriage. This informs the models of both *purposes* and *relationship*.

Jesus validates other teachers of his day to stress the importance of a marriage commitment. Jesus gives theological depth to marriage: it is a relationship created by God, reflective of the very creation of us as human beings:

*Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?" He said to them, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery." (Matthew 19:3-9, NRSV; see also Mark 10:2-12)*

Even the disciples balked at this teaching, and Jesus acknowledges the challenges involved. Still, Jesus' appeal to God's purposes in marriage form the foundation of Christian understanding of marriage. While our current culture might see adultery and prostitution in a negative light (but even that is changing), other examples of sex outside of marriage have become quite popular. The generic term for sex outside of marriage is "fornication." In some Bible translations, this word is rendered as "sexual immorality." Fornication is forbidden numerous times in the Bible, including cases where it is named in lists of various sins. Paul elaborates on how fornication violates God's purposes:

[Paul responds to some Corinthians who say that through Christ "all things are lawful for me."] *"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are beneficial. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food," and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:12-20, NRSV)*

Here we see the sexual relationship as a spiritual link between people, the abuse of which does damage to us. Paul's language here emphasizes the connection between sex and marriage.

### **Tradition:**

While individual Christians have continued to wrestle with sexual sin as in all ages, Christian teaching from its earliest days has maintained Jesus' high view of marriage as a relationship consecrated by God, and with God's purposes for sex to be found within that relationship. The purpose of sex is then for the unity of husband and wife, and for the gift of children. Roman Catholics stress that both purposes must be pursued in sex (thus their opposition to artificial contraception, because it blocks openness to new life). Protestants do not extend their prohibitions that specifically, but they recognize those same two purposes generally.

Many periods in the life of the church have included an admiration of the celibate life, as Paul commended it in his letters. But like Paul in Scripture, the church also celebrated the relationship of marriage and the sexual relationship within it (in contrast to the Gnostics, for instance).

The one issue that has always challenged the church has been divorce. Jesus makes some allowance for divorce, as does Paul (1 Corinthians 7:8-17), but those are exceptions to a sacred commitment. Following the reformation, the Roman Catholic Church became known for its staunch opposition to divorce, but it has always allowed for divorce under another name (annulment). Protestant Churches maintained a skeptical stance toward divorce until the past century in the west. One colleague of mine cites what he calls the “three As” as commonly recognized causes for divorce: Abuse, Adultery, and Abandonment. I would add Addiction, certainly in severe cases.

At its worst, the church has unevenly condemned and rejected adulterers or others who break sexual rules. At its best, the church has sought to support marriages in difficulty and lift up the importance of right relationship as the purpose of maintaining the commitment of marriage. In the Book of Common Prayer, the congregation makes a promise to uphold the couple in their marriage. At our best, we can be a community that can press against the pain of marital hardship, and rely on God’s transformative power to bring new life to broken relationships.

**Reason:**

Anglican theology engages “Scripture, tradition and reason,” by starting with scripture, reading scripture through the lens of tradition, and seeking the mind of God through our own reasoned reflection and prayer. Now we tend to think of reason as science or some other thinking stripped bare of any religious thought, but this was not so for most of Anglican history (and before it). Reason is seeking the mind of God, whose mind and reason set up the laws of nature. In nature, and informed by scripture and the Holy Spirit, we can see God’s purposes unfolding. In this way, reason can affirm our sexuality and provide direction and context in which our sexuality can thrive and be life-giving, rather than self-seeking and destructive to ourselves and our relationships. Thus reason helps us deepen our understanding of God’s purposes in marriage and sex, and our understanding of what the relationship of marriage can be.

When it came to marriage and sex, reason was seen as a way to manage our animal passions that draw us to unreasonable and dangerous actions. In the past century, however, our culture seems to understand reason as the *pursuit* of our animal passions, in tension with religious thought that might place restrictions on our desires.

**Developments in recent history:**

The development of a sense that we have a “right” to sex (and to the particular sex we want) may have roots in admiration of the “survival of the fittest” mentality and Freud’s attack on both sexual self-control and religious understandings of the human person. In the popular understanding of Freud and others, sex became our very purpose in life. This was all taking place at the same time the west was looking for a secular ethic, unmooring ethics from their Christian sources. Utility and individual autonomy became values in contrast to the bonds of the family or social commitments such as marriage. Society pressed more and more toward finding loopholes in limitations on sexual behavior or in the commitment of marriage itself. The sexual revolution seemed to appropriate the American value of freedom to turn back any sexual boundary altogether.

### **The case of gay sex:**

Alongside these developments came the establishment of personal identity based on sexual desire or practice. Formerly, such were labels of condemnation such as “adulterer,” driven by emotional reactions rather than Christian charity. But in recent decades, this developed as a defense. “Gay” and “Lesbian” became more than descriptors of desire or practice, and are often claimed as definitions of personal identity. Thus, to ask for marriage as the context of sex is sometimes described in our culture as oppressive or as the rejection of whole persons.

The church has at times (wrongly) rejected people because of their desires, and we should do a better job of reaching out in love (as well as in grace and mercy for those who, like the rest of us, wrestle with temptation and sin). But does that mean that we should change the church’s teaching on appropriate boundaries for sexual behavior? On what basis in scripture or Christian theology can we make that change? Many have answered this question on the basis that we are made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26-27). Does that mean that all our desires are completely good? Or that the desires that are hard to manage must be good? We also know (see Genesis 3) that we desire the wrong thing from time to time in many areas of our lives, including sex. On what basis in Christian theology do we then say “no” to our desires if we take that line of thinking?

### **Scripture:**

Setting aside taboo reactions of our culture in the past, how does scripture address these issues? There are a handful of passages that address gay sex, and all are negative. Remember also that they appear in the context of a wider teaching of marriage and sexuality and God’s purposes for us in creation (see above). These passages include prohibitions or inclusions in lists of sins (Lev 18:22, 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:10). Some have argued that the New Testament passages cite instances of *abusive* relationships rather than consensual ones. But this reads too much into one of the Greek words used, and the other Greek word is completely generic. In the case of Romans 1:18-2:3, there is a deeper treatment of the case in relationship to how God created us, and the relationships assumed are not presented as abusive, but consensual.

Note, however, that in Romans and 1 Corinthians, this behavior is cited as an example of general human sinfulness. “And this is what some of you used to be,” Paul writes after one of these lists in 1 Corinthians. His point there, as in Romans, is that we are all in need of God’s grace and mercy. We must always remember that none of us ‘measures-up,’ but because God loves us anyway, we should also show love to others regardless of their success in virtue. Clarity in ethics is no excuse for rejection or condemnation. Accountability and boundaries are appropriate, but not blanket condemnation of whole persons.

### **Tradition:**

The church, alas, has not always been always compassionate. In recent years, even staunchly traditional voices, including popes and conservative evangelicals, have made a point to call for greater compassion. In the matter of the church’s teaching, the church has been consistent throughout its history, and only in the last 10-20 years have very small portions of Christianity challenged this teaching. Even among Anglicans, the 2.3 million American Episcopalians and Canadian Anglicans are a minority in the 80 million Anglicans worldwide. If the Holy Spirit is doing a new thing, most of Christianity has not heard it decisively. The clarity of witness in this case, both in scripture and the church, stands in contrast to other issues where there is more basis for debate, for instance in marriage of clergy or divorce, or women’s roles in society or the church.

**Reason:**

Even uncoupled from religious thought, recent science seem to show us only that same sex desires are there (in perhaps 2% of people, though there is still no clear understanding of their origins), that they are often strong and that they are durable. Sexual desires are very hard to change, if at all possible. Gay men who, because of their Christian convictions, have chosen heterosexual relationships, affirm this to be true: though they may have a good relationship with their wife, their desire for men has not gone away completely. We should not treat the issue lightly, and Christian compassion should be our response rather than derision or abuse. Science can describe our desires, but it does not tell us how to respond to those desires. Again, the question becomes “How do we manage our desires—what boundaries are appropriate for sexual behavior and how do we answer that within Christian theology?”

**Relationships:**

In the model of “law,” and of “purposes,” we can find clear limits in scripture and tradition, with traditional support in reason. In the model of “relationship” we find more nuance that might help us navigate these questions. We are called to Christian relationships and we learn from Christian theology how to be in relationship rightly. Part of that is compassion and mercy. Boundaries on sexual behavior are not always easy to bear. Celibacy, especially if not chosen, can be a lonely state. God certainly calls us to love one another in Christ, who loved us while we were still sinners. Traditional ethics is no excuse for derisive or abusive treatment or blanket condemnation. The framework of relationship also reminds us that there is much to be commended in a relationship of two people characterized by mutual support and commitment. The language of the debate these days makes it challenging to disagree and yet to communicate love. But that is God’s call to us regardless of which ethical question is at hand.

**The Episcopal Church:**

The Episcopal Church has been wrestling with this issue for several decades now. The Book of Common Prayer 1979 defines marriage in keeping with traditional teaching (see pages 422-425). In 2003, General Convention (the national gathering of the Episcopal Church representatives every three years) gave tacit approval to same sex blessings, though the theology for this approval was not very developed or clear. In 2015, General Convention gave approval for same sex marriage, including rites to be used. General Convention also provided protection for bishops and rectors who choose not to implement these liturgies in their dioceses or parishes. Thus, the historic understanding of marriage still has a place in the church. St. Peter & St. Paul does not use these liturgies for blessings or weddings, maintaining the prayer book understanding *and* seeking to extend God’s grace to all people.

Advocates for these changes have (rightly) called for compassion and listening to the experiences of others who are different from us. Many see these as justice issues. Others who oppose the changes see this as a question of fidelity to scripture. Others avoid the issue altogether. Yet it is a live topic in our culture. How will we engage in this conversation as Christians? Can we “speak the truth in love” to each other, seeking God’s wisdom?

Please pray that we will honor one another across our disagreements and differences and seek God’s guidance together, and that we will treat *all people* with dignity and respect.