

Hot Topics Sex??

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Hot Topics: Sex??

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: Genesis 1:27-28; 2:21-25; 4:19; Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9, 13-20; 7:1-5; Ephesians 5:21-22, 25, 28.

Introduction

"Just Plain Sex." That's how Alan H. Goldman described his analysis of this week's topic.¹ Arguing that: sexual activity, like other natural functions such as eating or exercising, has become imbedded in layers of cultural, moral, and superstitious superstructure, it is hard to conceive it in its simplest terms.

He proceeds to explain what "simplest terms" actually means, claiming that pure physical contact with another human being and the pleasure which such contact brings is wholly sufficient to justify the experience. He rejects the idea that there must be a means-to-an-end connection in the process, but reduces this physical contact as a "desire in itself" which fulfills itself and not some other goal, such as intimacy, commitment, love, or interpersonal awareness. Of special note, is Goldman's claim that love and sex must be viewed separately and not confused with each other. On the surface this seem correct, since in our society the two are commonly interchanged, sometimes with disastrous results. But his argument wants to allow each to exist in its own right. This leads to the startling claim, "There is no morality intrinsic to sex," other than how sexual partners "treat each " as human beings — a requirement expected of all such human encounters. At the same time, Goldman states that sex can stand alone, by itself, like any other human activity (engaging in business, for example), and that, as such, it does have its own "rules" of engagement. But otherwise, it can rightly exist as "just plain sex."

The readers of our *Notes* no doubt find all of this quite objectionable, since the traditional religious understanding of sexuality insists on placing it within the safe and sound context of a committed relationship — that it was not designed by God to be treated as recreation like playing tennis. In his book, *Reflective Naturalism*², Vincent Punzo makes the point candidly by rejecting the moral equivalence of, "Will you have sex with me," and "Will you play tennis with me." Those two questions are invitations to engage in human social behaviors which have very different bases in the moral universe. Playing tennis and having sex imply different sort of relationships. Sex isn't Just a Hobby. This reminds me of an episode of the TV show, *Friends*. Monica was explaining to everyone that the night she and Chandler got together in London, she was actually looking for Joey instead because she just wanted to have "meaningless sex." How strange! The phrase, "meaningless sex" makes no sense at all. It is never "just sex"; it is always something.

Sex doesn't just "happen". Two people don't just fall on top of each other and accidentally blink and become naked. They don't kiss each other passionately and touch each other's bodies involuntarily. There is always a conscious decision made to have sex, and there is always a reason for doing so. In addition to the "meaningless sex" phrase, we have the "it just happened" excuse. Both are nonsense. Things don't "just happen." Again, when it comes to sex or any physical encounter, the people involved are aware of their decision to engage in the act (when consensual — we are not talking about rape or incest which are crimes). One night stands are never meaningless, especially if a child or disease results from them.

¹ Alan H. Goldman, "Plain Sex," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Spring, 1977).

² "Morality and Human Sexuality," Macmillan, 1969.

We live in a world of "means and ends," and human beings find it difficult to free themselves from the quest for meaning in the things they do. After all, being human implies such a quest, and sex is no exception. The question we are asked to consider in this study is what is the legitimate context for the highest form of meaning possible from sexuality. There's no denying that there are other meanings. What we are arguing in this paper is that some are higher and nobler than others, and, as Christ followers, we are called to the higher ones — to those which honor a true humanity based in the New Creation. Simultaneously, all meanings which reduce human beings to their animal forebears ignore the decidedly biblical idea that we are made in the image of God and are capable of more than "just plain sex."

This week our *Notes* will examine some key biblical texts concerned with human sexuality in the framework of committed relationships. In the broadest possible terms, we affirm the central place of marriage — that relationship between one man and one woman, bound together by covenant, sanctioned by God and witnessed by the people of God. While the cultural forms of marriage and the conditions under which marriage begins may have changed through time and place, still the rudiments of covenant bonds and fidelity have remained constant in the biblical record. Among the more difficult passages to explain are those which narrate how godly persons like Abraham, Jacob, and David chose polygamy over monogamy. Some readers of the Old Testament may well question the morality (if not the sanity!) of a fellow like Solomon who gets credit for his wisdom but decides to have 700 wives and 300 concubines in his harem! Oddly, little is said about his polygamy but a great deal about how his many wives trapped him in pagan worship. We don't pretend to have all the answers for puzzles like these.

However, biblical Ethics is not built up by cases but by covenant: God revealed His word to a people and called them to holiness — to reflect His own character in the world. Every human being has "fallen short" of the covenant ideal, including the select list above. That does not negate the legitimacy of commands like "you shall not commit adultery." Nor do the deviations allow us to set aside the general principles by which God asks us to live our lives. In some societies which live by Christian Ethics, parents pick spouses for their children, often in conference with other parents. Scripture allows for such variations. However, on matters more central to the marriage covenant, no variation is sanctioned. For example, adultery has no "mean" or "range of acceptable practice." Even Aristotle understood that in the 4th century B.C.E.³ Denying variations may actually be sinful in some cases. For example, nowhere does the bible prohibit marriage across racial lines based on the principle of covenant. Yet the church, as an institution has, in different eras, insisted on the sanctity of this separation. We reject such artificial conditions and affirm the unity of the human race with all of its God-given covenants, including marriage.

On the other hand, the current debate raging around the subject of gender confusion has resulted in some equally debasing outcomes — accepting the reality of biologically based gender confusion does not immediately imply the sanctioning of same-sex unions. Persons who struggle with feminine emotions inside a male body (or male emotions inside a female body) ought to have our compassion and love. That said, such case-based realities do not nullify the principle of one man one woman definitions of marriage. We are fully willing to acknowledge that genetics yields mistakes, or that environment shapes emotions. We live in a world where imperfection exists, and where all things still wait for restoration by God. Freedom is, after all, not only a feature of human wills, it is also a property of nature in general. In His wisdom, God allowed for evil in order that He might witness true good, borne out of freedom and choice. As Christians, we do not condemn persons who suffer with the rest of creation, in anticipation of "the freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). Instead we should stand with them and pray for them, seeking the wholeness of their humanity, even as we admit the corresponding failures in ourselves.

³ Aristotle wrote his *Nicomachean ethics* based on the idea that the definition of any virtue was "the mean between the extremes" — sometimes called the "golden mean." He explicitly pointed out that some practices have no "mean" or acceptable range of good value, and he used adultery as his example (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a8-12).

These, then, are some concerns touched on in our study this week.

Biblical Orientation

We do not find the word "sex" in the Bible. Perhaps this is due to God's refusal to allow sex to become an "object" rather than a dynamic process within the human experience. On the other hand, we read about strong desire between human beings and the clearly physical components of that attraction. The Hebrew Bible is more likely to speak in terms of *verbs* rather than *nouns* when discussing such matters. In the Torah, the word used for sex between husband and wife comes from the root *yāda'*, meaning "to know," which vividly illustrates that sexuality involves both the heart and mind, not merely the body. Thus, we find in Genesis 4:1 that "Adam *knew* his wife Eve," and the result was a son named Cain. This formulaic way of writing about sex preserves the active, verb-based account of human sexual activity (see also, Genesis 4:17, 25). Similar verb forms are used, such as "x *lay* with y," where the verb in Hebrew is usually *šākab* which can have the simple meaning "lie down" or, by derivation, "have sexual relations with." Associated with this verb is the idea of vital warmth or intimacy. The physical aspect of sex surrounds this verb (see Genesis 19:33-35; 30:16; 34:2; 35:22; Deuteronomy 22:22, 25, 29; 1 Samuel 2:22; 2 Samuel 11:4), and it does not quite share the sense of "knowing" implied in the other verb. In fact, in some of the examples given here, we see cases of incest, rape, and sexual deviation included within the meaning. No doubt, the residue of this objectified version of sex remains in our English vulgarity, "get laid."

That said, *šākab* also occurs in contexts where sensitive attitudes accompany the sexual experience:

Then David comforted his wife, Bathsheba, and went in to her and lay with her, and she bore a son, and he called his name Solomon. And the LORD loved him (2 Samuel 12:24).

Yet, contrast this with the following passage referring to the conduct of Ammon toward his half-sister Tamar:

But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he violated her and lay with her (2 Samuel 13:14).

Sometimes the primary expression for sexual relations is "x *went in to* y," used either by itself or in conjunction with "x *knew* y." In Genesis 30:1-4, Jacob and his wife Rachel fight about her barrenness, leading to her giving the concubine (female slave) Bilhah as a new wife to Jacob:

So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her (Genesis 30:4).

The result of this encounter is the birth of a child, in a surrogate-like strategy, since Rachel considers the child to be hers. Again, words like "gave, went in, gave birth" used in this context point to sexual experience as more about action than about object.

A certain cautious and poetic use of language reveals the underlying attitude toward things sexual within the Hebrew culture. Even in the more colorful narrative of *Song of Solomon*, the writer prefers to speak metaphorically about the sexual organs and practices, deriving a certain delight from comparing the beloved's body to grapes or wheat, rather than explicitly naming the anatomy. Euphemisms are common, but so is frankness. Sex is not taboo, it is simply not objectified.

The Old Testament: Foundations

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:26-28).

The first creation account in *Genesis* uses the Hebrew word *'ēlōhîm* for God. Grammatically, the noun is plural but its meaning is singular, as evidenced by the singular form of the verb of which it is the subject. However, the plural is not without significance. Scholars suggest several reasons: 1) an indication of *majesty*, the "many-splendored character" of God; 2) an indication of the *heavenly council*, consisting of God and His angelic hosts; 3) foreshadowing of the plurality of persons within the one being of God, later expressed as the Trinity: Father,

Son and Holy Spirit. Were we to place emphasis on #3, a certain coherence appears in the change from singular to plural when referring to humankind in 1:26: "Let *us* make man (the human) after *our* likeness. And let *them* have dominion..." Might we not have a case of God's image consisting not only in dominion, majesty and moral authority, but also in community? This receives confirmation in 1:27 where God creates the human *in his own image*, a fact that is poetically repeated with the grammatical elements reversed (x created y in z; in z x created y; a partial chiasmus). This is immediately followed by an explanation of the *form* which the creation in this image took place: as male and female.

It would appear, then, that part of the image has to do with the community of persons, reflected in human terms by the gender differences. This is not to imply that explicit gender differences exist in God. However, the Scriptures are not shy about referring to God in maternal as well as paternal terms (see Psalm 27:10; Isaiah 42:14; 46:3-4; 49:14-15; Numbers 11:12; Isaiah 66:12-13; Deuteronomy 32:11-12, 18; Hosea 11:1-4). These and other texts reveal the feminine within God without explicitly attributing full gender to any person within the Godhead. From this we get the sense that *image*, as it pertains to qualities of God in humankind, *includes* and affirms the distinctions of gender.

Sexuality, as a feature of human beings, belongs to their generative role within the total creation order. We learn this from 1:28 where the creation of human beings *as male and female* receives the divine blessing. The *fruit* of this blessing is the *fruitfulness and multiplication* of the humankind in the world. While the same fruitfulness is also a blessing to other creatures (1:21-22), they multiply *without the image of God*, whereas, humankind simultaneously reproduces both themselves *and the divine image* throughout the world. God the Creator creates Himself in humankind, and, in turn empowers them to procreate themselves. In a real sense, creation *as procreation*, becomes the first great creation ordinance of both the human male and female.

The sacredness of sex begins with this covenant of creation.

21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." 24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (Genesis 2:21-25).

This passage has been the subject of much discussion about the relationship of men and women in the social order. As prelude to these verses (Genesis 2:8, 15, 19a), the writer of *Genesis* informs his audience that the earth-creature, *'adām*, assumes the God-given role of cultivating and keeping "the garden," a powerful symbol of generativity and fruitfulness in its own right. Alongside his agricultural task is that of giving names to the animals, a proto-scientific task, but also a task which yields fresh information for the human: within the various species he encounters, nothing corresponds to himself (1:19b). There was method in the madness of this little exercise, for we are told that God observed something about the creation that *was not good*, namely, that the human was *alone*. By identifying the animals, with which Adam shared a genetic connection, he was given the opportunity to find a partner. No such partner appeared. The human conscious self found no counter-part in the otherwise goodly families of creatures he had named. They had no conscious selves, no ability to share social awareness nor sexual partnership with Adam.

To what do we ascribe the "deep sleep" of Adam? On the surface, we might suppose that he had to be "put under" in order to undergo the surgery which would produce his partner. John Walton has offered some insights based on analyzing the occurrences of the Hebrew word used for "deep sleep."⁴ The Hebrew noun, *tardemah*, occurs a handful of times: Genesis 2:21; 15:12; 1 Samuel 26:12; Job 4:13; Job 33:15; Proverbs 19:15; Isaiah 29:10. Its related verbal root, *rdm* is also attested in Judges 4:21; Psalm 76:6 (poetic for death);

⁴ <http://www.koinoniablog.net/2008/09/hebrew-corner-2.html>.

Proverbs 10:5; Daniel 8:18; 10:9; Jonah 1:5-6. It is not always wise to combine noun and verb occurrences in a single study because sometimes they develop in independent directions of meaning despite their common root. It is therefore essential that noun and verb forms initially be studied independently to discover whether they have retained similar semantic ranges. If this is so, as it is here, the database can be built including both forms.

We can see from analyzing these references that the data can be divided a couple of different ways. The first way is by what or who brings on the condition. In Genesis 2:21 and 1 Samuel 26:12 it is explicitly brought on by the Lord (see also Isaiah 29:10). In other contexts one could infer it is brought on by the Lord (Genesis 15:12). In others it could plausibly be argued that it is brought on by fatigue or stress (Judges 4:21; Jonah 1:5-6), or even by laziness (Proverbs 10:5; 19:15). The second way the data can be divided is according to what the deep sleep represents. In some cases it renders the person oblivious to what is going on in the human world (Judges 4:21; 1 Samuel 26:12; Jonah 1:5-6). In others the result is that *the person is responding to or is made sensitive to something in the spiritual realm* (Genesis 15:12; Job 4:13; 33:15; Daniel 8:18; 10:9).

This analysis leads us to return with a new set of questions to Genesis 2:21. Here it is the Lord who causes Adam to fall into a deep sleep. The question is whether we should consider this a deep sleep to render Adam oblivious to what is going on in the human world (like Saul in 1 Samuel 26)--thus a type of anesthetic so the surgery can be performed, or whether it should be interpreted as a sleep that is intended to allow him *to see a vision of significance* (like Abram in Genesis 15). If it is the latter, which can at least be presented as a possibility, the incident in Genesis 2 can be seen in a very different light. The resulting interpretation would be that what is described in vv. 21-22 is *what Adam saw in a dream while asleep*. It would be presented as something that God wanted him to understand about the inherent nature of woman. Favoring this interpretation is that Adam's response is a *knowing one* ("bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh"), suggesting that he is *aware of what took place*. Also favoring the dream view is that the word often translated *iribî* everywhere else refers to one of two sides, suggesting that God took one of Adam's "sides" to build Eve. This obviously would be more than a surgical procedure.

If Walton is correct, and I think he is, then what we read in Genesis 2:23-24 is not merely Adam's human opinion about the other human being standing before him, but the consequence of a divine revelation, given to him while in a "deep sleep," much like Abraham would later receive such insights from Yahweh. What this does is rule out the viewpoint that male-female relationships, and their significance are the product of culture or convention. When Adam utters the words, "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh," and then proceeds to offer an interpretation about "leaving father and mother and hold fast to his wife, becoming one flesh," he is in effect speaking the words of God learned from his dream. Even his declaration that she shall be called "woman" belongs to the dream experience.

Gender is a derivative and dependent idea in this passage. The Hebrew word *'ish*, the designation for gender-specific male, is placed in corresponding relationship to the word *'ishah*, the term for gender-specific female. From Adam's dream revelation comes the declaration that the words for male and female, used here, share a common source, and, then goes on to explain that sexual union reflects a return to human gender origins. In sexual union, human beings reaffirm their unique creation as male and female, and this understanding is by divine revelation. The story told by the writer of *Genesis* affirms the partnership of male and female through creation covenant and, at the same time, sanctifies sexual union *within the context* of that covenant.

The actual condition of this union extends far beyond a mere physical encounter. The verb for "hold fast" or "cleave" is *dābaq* with a range of meanings: "remain with, be close to, be loyal, be joined together." To borrow from our remarks in the Introduction to these *Notes*, this is not "just plain sex," but a holy union sanctified by God through what we commonly call *marriage*. Jesus, when asked about the matter of divorce, cites the Genesis 2 text to give his response:

⁴ He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one

flesh'? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:4-6; also, Mark 10:6-9).

Affirming the union as the work of God, Jesus interprets the *Genesis* text as implying that though it is the man who holds fast to his wife, it is God who joins them together. Something mysterious and permanent happens in the union described in these passages — something that will not allow sexuality to be cheapened by casual encounters or recreational purposes outside marriage. What happens within the marriage covenant belongs to the work of God and not to human design. When Jesus is subsequently questioned about what Moses allowed them to do under Torah, he replies that God conceded the exceptions only because of *hardened hearts* — human beings not yet set free by the redemptive and sanctifying work of Christ. This would imply that what we find in the New Testament is a raising of the bar, as a consequence of human hearts finally set free to fulfill the Law of God in a deeper sense. To that teaching we will turn shortly.

One final observation, based on Genesis 1:25. Shame, as a social condition, does not accompany human beings, male and female, within the safety and permanence of covenant marriage. Says the writer, "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." Literally, the Hebrew says, "The two of them were naked, Adam and his *'ishah* (female counterpart), and they were not ashamed." Shame or its absence can be based merely on the cultural practices of a given society. What might be a source of shame to one, is not to another. Of this there is little dispute. Of course, this in no way determines the moral rightness of this shame or its absence, only how it manifests itself. It is our view that shame, in the case of Genesis 1:25, is not a form of social convention at all, but the result of being in covenant relationship with God and each other. Moreover, nakedness here is not simply a comment about clothing, but the way male and female, in marriage, view one another in their sexual identities. This is not about prudishness or shyness, but about moral confidence and social safety because partnership is rooted in divine covenant. Social shame, as a convention, can be taught and reinforced. Whole societies can mitigate shame by conditioning its members to accept certain forms of nudity or sexual permissiveness.

But "to not be ashamed," in the biblical sense, comes with knowing that we are covered by glory of the divine image given us by God, and are living in faithful relationship with a marriage partner to whom we are joined, body and soul. The Hebrew word for shame is *bāšāš* and includes the idea of "disappointment," as in, "My son put me to shame by his actions." Shame is not only about what human beings experience in relationship to each other, it also involves disappointment in the eyes of God. This appears in the next chapter when Adam and his wife feel shame because of their sin, and try to cover their sexuality with the proverbial fig-leaves. In this case, the social and the spiritual shame intersect.

Aberrations and Interruptions

Nothing in these early chapters of *Genesis* suggests that the divine plan involved *more than* one man and one woman within the creation covenant of marriage. Even after the Fall, Adam and Eve (her new name after giving birth to children) remained in a monogamous relationship. However, one revealing passage in Genesis 4 uncovers the first marriage deviation from the God's original design. We quote the full context:

19 And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. 20 Adah bore Jubal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. 21 His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. 22 Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah. 23 Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. 24 If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold" (Genesis 4:19-24).

The expression, "took two wives," marks a dividing point in human society at an early stage. The man, Lamech, is a descendent of Cain, the vagabond brother of the deceased Abel, and Adam and Eve's first son. Lamech is the first *recorded* instance in the biblical record of a man taking more than one wife. When the writer tells of Lamech's offspring, he reveals the rich cultural inventiveness concentrated within a single family: keepers of livestock, musicians, and forger of metals. It's not hard to see agriculture, industry and the arts

originating from a single man. Indeed, one function of polygamy in the ancient world was to increase the likelihood that one man would dominate his society by begetting a variety of skilled and powerful offspring. While not technically genetic engineering, still, for that age, it was a cleverly devised way to increase influence through multiple sexual partners. Here, then, is the first instance of manipulating the original mandate to "be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth." Persons with sufficient arrogance about reproducing themselves in the world, took it upon themselves to violate the marriage covenant in opposition to God's arrangement for marriage. Further evidence of this appears in Lamech's hostile and self-assured claim to his two wives that he not only seized control of the reproductive arrangements, but also of the governmental ones. His comments about Cain's judicial situation actually twisted the original pronouncements of God and used them to justify capital execution for a mere act of injury against Lamech! God actually protected Cain from his potential executioners, but Lamech defies God's authority and determines to execute his own justice in place of God's.

Blended together in a single passage are the themes of sexual exploitation for personal gain and seizure of power over other the lives of human beings because of an alleged grievance. This combination finds plenty of other instances throughout history when sex and power combine to elevate tyrants, accumulate power, and substitute the human image for that of God. Lamech cared little about the image of God: he wanted to perpetuate his own!

A similar text appears in Genesis 6:

When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, ² the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. ³ Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years." ⁴ The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men who were of old, the men of renown. ⁵ The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶ And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. ⁷ So the LORD said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them." ⁸ But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. ⁹ These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God. ¹⁰ And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. ¹¹ Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. ¹² And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth (Genesis 6:1-12).

Without tracing the history of interpretation for this passage, we will summarize the overall view that all the players in this story are human beings. Some have tried to make the "sons of God" into fallen angels who have sexual relations with humans. That might have worked in a pagan theogony, but it won't work here. The guilty party in this story is not an angel but the human race itself. With human beings God is contending (6:3) and it is the "wickedness of human beings" (6:5) that prompts the decision to bring judgment on them. Had angels or other beings been involved, judging the human race would have been patently unjust — and we know that God's ways are righteous.

So what were human beings doing that brought the disfavor of God? Meredith G. Kline offered a solid defense of the view we present here.⁵ The Hebrew phrase, "sons of God," comes from the Hebrew *b^enēy hā'lohîm*. Such persons imagined themselves to be superior human beings worthy of replication throughout the world. Moreover, by the process of rapid reproduction, these "strongmen" (or despots) could more easily dominate the rest of the human race. The passage cited shows these self-proclaimed "sons of the gods" selecting from among the available women of their societies those who were most noble and strong to receive their seed and bear their children. Through selective "breeding," they effectively entrenched their power and created a group of humans which carried the name *nephilîm* a term which primarily refers to the physical stature and prowess of the resulting offspring of these unions.

⁵ Meredith G. Kline, "Divine Kingship and Genesis 6:1-4," *Westminster Theological Journal*, XXIV, Nov. 1961-May 1962.

What's relevant to our study is the way this process began: "the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives *any they chose...*" (6:2). The italicized phrase ("any they chose") strongly implies that these self-assured tyrants were accumulating royal harems made up of hand-picked women who could best serve their power interests. That is, as with Lamech, the "sons of the gods" stepped outside the God-ordained boundaries of marriage (one man, one woman) and proceeded to "cast their seed" into as many eligible women as they could through plural marriages. We might well translate this text, "as many as they chose." The word "attractive" is from the simple word for "good" (*tôb + āh*, the adjective form), and derives its meaning from each context. For the "sons of the gods," these women were "suitable" for their purposes, and so they chose to marry them. To the sin of marital deviation, they added the transgression of treating women as objects rather than partners.

By contrast, we read, "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God" (6:8-9). The phrase, "blameless in his generation," is opposite to "the earth was corrupt in God's sight" (6:11). For Noah to be blameless in his "generation," means more than simply he was the most outstanding person living at the time. Rather, unlike the rest of the "sons of the gods," Noah followed the covenant of Yahweh and did not view his generative powers as a means to elevate himself or propagate a master race. Following the simple practice of monogamous marriage, Noah and his one wife more than adequately engendered offspring that would one day fill the earth. What persons like Lamech and the *b^enēy hā^elohîm* tried to do by forcing their own agendas through their sexual natures, Noah's children succeeded in doing, while the others failed.

Modesty and Sexual Privacy

Hugh Hefner was not the first person to violate human modesty and turn human sexuality into a commodity. Among the pagans of the ancient world, as revealed in their artifacts, exhibiting and enhancing the representation of human genitalia was raised to an art form. Archaeologists have collected countless images, idols and other representational art objects which depict enhanced and aroused sexual organs, presumably used in various forms of erotic worship and fertility rites. By contrast, the Torah talks about the sexual anatomy with greater respect. Words like "flesh" (Genesis 17:11), "thigh/loin" (Genesis 24:9; Exodus 28:42), and "flesh of your foreskin" (Genesis 17:11) serve to identify without explicit crassness. In one legal stipulation, a woman is forbidden from seizing another man's "private parts" in order to protect her husband during a fight (Deuteronomy 25:11). The Hebrew term is based on the primary root for "shame" (Hebrew: *m^ebûšîm*), or that which should always be kept covered when in public. In this case, it should not be touched. On occasion, the noun "feet" or the phrase "between the feet" have reference to the genitalia (see Isaiah 7:20; Ruth 3:1-4; 7:9; Deuteronomy 28:57).

Torah considered the public display of sexual body parts as shameful (Genesis 9:21-23; Leviticus 18:6-19; 20:17; 2 Samuel 6:20). The reasons were based, not on some false view of sex as "dirty," but, quite the opposite, the sacredness of sexuality within the context of covenant marriage. Honoring our sexual natures comes from a proper privacy of sexual members, activities and language. The debasing of sexuality in our so-called open-society arises from failing to protect human beings in this way. Our own legal system is riddled with contradictions in this regard. On the one hand, exposing oneself is considered to be a lewd act (rightly so), whereas the exhibition of the human body through the media is considered protected speech.

Human privacy derives from our understanding of God. God is, in principle, unseen (John 1:18). However, when God does reveal Himself it is at His own initiative and with great care. Would that human beings followed the same protocols!

Sexual Activity: Personal and National

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. 3 You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. 4 You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in

them. I am the LORD your God. 5 You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD (Leviticus 18:1-5).

This passage introduces a section on "unlawful sexual relations" in the Torah. The book of *Leviticus* was the primary handbook guiding Israel in matters of the holy and the unholy. Because Israel acknowledges that Yahweh is their God, certain actions become inappropriate. Notice the framework for this restriction (18:3):

You shall not do as they do... You shall not walk in their statutes.	In the land of Egypt where you lived
	In the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you

Notice the dual pressures surrounding Israel: Egypt in the past; Canaan in the future.

What follows is one of the most detailed listings of sexual deviation found in the Bible. Many readers of this part of the Bible have shown reservation about this material, asking, "Why would God describe so many different forms of sexual perversion to His people? Does not the mere mentioning of these sins stir up curiosity and temptations to "try them out"? Those are good questions, but they may well underestimate the realities in which Israel found themselves between Egypt and Canaan. The cultural practices of these two powerful national groups had *already been well known to God's people*. From historical information we know that the societies of Egypt and Canaan were constantly in touch, Egypt had exercised hegemony over Canaan for the purpose of trade and economics. Several cities in Canaan were actually considered royal Egyptian cities, as tablets from that period clearly reveal.⁶

If Leviticus is any indication, all of the practices described there were very much a part of the Egyptian-Canaanite cultures, and that is why the Torah takes such pains to warn Israel against imitating them. From 18:5 we learn the underlying concern Yahweh has for His people in keeping His decrees and laws: "For the man who obeys them will live by them. I am Yahweh." Put simply, "Your life depends on following my instructions to you about sexual activity." "Life" in this context refers comprehensively to physical, social, and spiritual well-being. Human beings who adopt the sexual deviations listed in Leviticus 18 make themselves vulnerable to all forms of personal destruction. Societies which are lax in speaking against these practices lay the foundation for their ultimate demise.

One of the best treatments, in English, of this lengthy passage comes from John E. Hartley whom we will consult in summary fashion.⁷ He addresses a number of linguistic issues and offers several helpful charts showing how family relationships existed within Israelite society.

The language used in Leviticus 18 speaks about sexual relations under a variety of circumstances and with a variety of persons. Two main sections organize this material: 1) Sexual relationships among family members; 2) various other sexual activities.

The seemingly exaggerated detail found in 18:6-18 is due to the family structure in ancient Israel. The father's house comprised three to five generations who lived in close proximity. Eldest sons led their own family and then took over when the father died. These sons left to form their own households, while the remaining brothers stayed nearby. Families might remain in close associations if hard times came along. Various Hebrew words describing this network of familial relationships appear in Leviticus 18. One of the outcomes of this intertwined network was sexual temptation among members of the family living in such close space.

⁶ One such example is Gezer. The importance of Bronze Age Gezer (2nd millennium BCE), is attested to in the many references to the city in Egyptian sources. In an inscription of Thutmose III, Gezer is mentioned as being conquered from the Canaanites in his campaign in 1468 BCE. In the archives of el-Amarna in Egypt, dating from the 14th century BCE, there are ten letters from the kings of Gezer, assuring loyalty to the Egyptian pharaoh whose vassals they were. See the *Tell el-Amarna Letters*.

⁷ John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, in Word Biblical Commentary, 4, Waco Books, 1992, pp. 280-301.

The phrase "uncover the nakedness of..." appears in the Hebrew, using terms which refer explicitly to sexual organs and sexual intercourse. All forms of incest, as defined in the text, are forbidden. We need not duplicate here the myriad of possible stated combinations, though a careful reading of the passage helps us understand the general logic behind the specific proscribed sexual activities. Also, just because a case is not listed does not suggest it is permitted. After all, how can we have any doubt about the general idea in view? Sexual partners must never consist of "close relatives", as the text generalizes in 18:13.

It's tempting to discourse on the genetic reasons for such restrictions, especially those now confirmed by science. Incest contributes, in the offspring of such a union, to reinforcing weaknesses in the genetic code, leading to certain afflictions, such as hemophilia in the royal houses of England. But the Bible is not concerned only about such physical defects. Tracing our arguments back to *Genesis*, we can immediately see how such deviations interrupt the divinely established principle of "one flesh," as the derivative of the being made in God's image as male and female. Through the story of woman's creation from man, the Bible underscores the fundamental distinctness and separateness of the male and female partners in this relationship. Woman does not come from man through the process of *birth* but as the result of God's wider creational purposes. Adam is not marrying his sister or any other near-relative, but instead a human being who stands as his equal, distinct and unique; human as he is human (bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh) but unrelated by birth or other ordinary genetic process.

Then, in 18:19-23, we are given assorted sexual deviations not expressly connected to close familial relationships. These include:

1. Sexual activity during the menstrual period.
2. Adultery with a neighbor's wife.
3. Sacrifice children to the god Molech: form of ancestor worship or cultic prostitution.⁸
4. Men having sex with men.
5. Bestiality.

The words used in the text to characterize such sexual activity include: defile, profane, detestable, and perversion. In the case of 1) "defile" (Hebrew: *tāmē'*, make unclean, infect), concern is shown for the health and well-being of the person; 2) "profane" (Hebrew: *hālal*, undermine the sanctity of something), the emphasis falls on not polluting the "name of Yahweh" by engaging in such conduct; 3) "detestable" (Hebrew: *tō'ēbāh*, ritual or ethical abomination), religious and moral principles in violation; 4) "perversion" (Hebrew: *tebel*, violation of nature, confusion), nature itself is assaulted by the action.

The Torah summarizes these two sections in 18:24-30. In doing so, several points are under consideration:

1. God is concerned that His people not defile *themselves* by engaging in these sexual activities. What's at stake is not God depriving human beings of something that would otherwise bring them harmless pleasure. Indeed, the concern of God is for the well-being of His people (and humanity in general) by their observance of the stated restrictions on sexual activity.
2. In support of #1, God points to the cultural disintegration observable in the surrounding nations who *became defiled* by the sexual practices listed. It's a bit like reading Gibbon's, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and noting the primary causes for the collapse of a major civilization.
3. Sexual sins impact "the land," according to 18:25-29, and the land, metaphorically, vomited out its inhabitants. Hartley comments:

Israel's polytheistic neighbors energetically pursued fertility rites to insure the fertility of their fields, flocks, and households. But for Israel a close bond exists between human behavior and the fertility of the land. When the people obey God's laws, God blesses the land, and it bears abundantly. But if the people defile themselves by immoral, particularly sexual practices, such as the former inhabitants of the land practiced, they will defile the land. The land will become so nauseated by such behavior that it will vomit

⁸ Hartley, *op. cit.*, pp. 334-337.

out its inhabitants. It is God himself who will administer the emetic causing the land to vomit out its inhabitants. Only by getting rid of that which is making it sick can the land recover. This language is picturesque to describe a time of drought or plague; it means that God will punish his people's immoral behavior by withholding rain and sending plagues. The crops will wither and vanish. Faced by death, the people will be forced to leave their land in search of food. Or way may be the emetic that God will use. Ironically the very fertility rites the people engage in to increase the fertility of their land will pollute the land.⁹

4. The relationship Israel has with the community will be impacted by sexual sins. The haunting clause, "will be cut off from their people," hangs like the judges scales before national Israel. In order to preserve all of Israel intact as a people, the requirements about sexual activity must be met. Failure by one member of the community impacts the whole community. The defilement of sexual misconduct spreads like a virus throughout society, cheapening human relationships, objectifying human beings, and trading human life like a commodity in the market of self-interest and greed.
5. The relationship Israel has with her God, Yahweh, will be impacted by sexual sins. Strong connections exists between spirituality and sexuality.¹⁰ Throughout the Leviticus 18 passage, we find the repeated statement: "I am Yahweh your God." The way we honor the sacredness of our own sexuality reflects directly on how we view our even more intimate relationship with God.

We miss the point of this key Old Testament passage, however, if we make it out to be only about a handful of sexual practices. To be sure, it includes these at a bare minimum, but they do not exhaust the more profound concerns God had about His people and their sexuality. Understanding sexuality is not the same as understanding sex. And sexuality is about much more than what we have reduced to the description of sex.¹¹

We all face general questions and issues about sexuality in the society in which we live. These include the commodifying and commercializing of sex, which we find in movies, in advertising, in popular publications and in pornography. It is important to ask questions such as: When does a movie become pornographic? When is it acceptable to use human flesh to sell a glossy magazine or a tabloid newspaper?

We all face pressures, we are all aware of changing social attitudes, when it comes to facing up to what is acceptable, and we all need to think about and reflect on our sexuality and our ministry during the process of spiritual formation, rather than thinking the relationship is something we can deal with when we are confronted with difficulties or a crisis.

Sexuality and spirituality, our sexual maturing and maturity and our spiritual growth are related in ways that are often difficult to examine or to disentangle. For the search for sexual understanding and sexual wholeness is intimately linked with the spiritual quest and journey. It was for Israel, and is for us.

The New Testament and Homosexual Practice

The placement of this section is somewhat random, I concede. Having originally placed it at the end of the subsequent New Testament material below, I removed it to this location since it seemed to fit into the listing of sexual deviations found in Leviticus 18.

At the outset, we must make several things clear:

⁹ Hartley, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

¹⁰ A number of studies address this topic, including the following: James B. Nelson, "Reuniting Sexuality and Spirituality," *The Christian Century*, February 25, 1987, pp. 187-190; Rob Bell, *Sex God: Exploring the Endless Connections between Sexuality and Spirituality*, Zondervan, 2008; James Hillman, *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling*, Random House, 1996; J. Nelson and S. Longfellow (eds.), *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994; Joan Timmerman, *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth*, Crossroads, 1993; John Toy, "God and Eroticism," *Theology*, Vol CX, No 857 (September/October 2007), pp. 323-331.

¹¹ I am indebted to Patrick Comerford, Canon of Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, Ireland, where my wife and I worshipped in April of 2009, for the comments which follow.

1. Heterosexual sins are just as grievous as homosexual ones. The man who cheats on his wife must give an account to God every bit as much as the woman who enters a sexual union with another woman (or man with man). God's ideal lies in His creation model which we discussed at the beginning of these *Notes*. His desire is for human happiness and wholeness, and that is why he constituted human nature in heterosexual ways. We step outside those ways to our own peril.
2. What God established through creation as one man and one woman as the perfect context for sexual intimacy has been subjected to the stress of nature and the abuse of other human beings. Both nature and nurture bear responsibility for the deviations from the creation ideal. We live in a fallen world; we live in a world not yet finished. When Christ followers encounter persons whose lives have been shaped by any of these stresses, our first response should be the acceptance of persons in hope of restoration. There is a time and place to fight the culture wars in defense of marriage. But when we meet the casualties of nature's imperfections or society's indiscretions, the main commitment ought to be to their recovery. "The cause" like "the poor" in Jesus' famous saying "will always be with you" (Matthew 26:11; Mark 14:7). What matters foremost is the salvation of the lost who stand before us, whom God has brought into our lives in order to receive His grace and mercy,
3. Specific acts may fall under condemnation because they violate God's holy purpose for human beings. At the same time, acts differ from persons, just as a few raindrops do not constitute a rainy day. On the other hand, persons may well be so shaped by birth and environment, that their freedoms stumble in the face of that holy purpose. Yes, they are responsible, but we must not ignore the many trials through which they pass, trying their faith, dimming their hope, and making desperation out of their longings. We are called to come alongside them, and "bear one another burdens," whether heterosexual or homosexual ones. God is no respecter of persons.
4. The Bible actually has more to say about things like adultery, unfaithfulness, fornication, and sexual abuse, than it does about homosexuality. That said, we do not mean to insinuate the minor nature of this sin. However, in our righteous indignation, let us keep the perspective of Scripture: "All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory" (Romans 3:23).

What follows comes from Paul's letter to the Romans. His first goal is to uncover the dire and perilous condition of human beings. In doing so, he skillfully mentions those sins which are commonly connected to the corruption of human beings and which rob God of His honor. Before he actually lists those sins, he offers an analysis of why human beings fall into sin at all, and he shows why they are responsible for choices that thrust them down a steep slope to spiritual destruction.

²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. ²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. ²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Romans 1:21-32).

Once human beings decide to change the object of their worship, they immediately are forced to accept responsibility for how things will turn out for them. As long as the One True God receives their honor and gratitude, human beings can live holy lives and taste the fruits of eternal life. But, as this passage shows, human beings made a bad bargain ("exchanged," 1:23). God got sold, and images of gods made by human beings replaced Him. From this bad business decision (to sell God and use the proceeds to make idols) came a serious

consequence. You become what you worship. And when you worship what you make, you become what you make yourself to be. From these few statements, shaped into a meager argument, we see where Paul is leading his audience. Once we exchange God for our own inventions, all sorts of unexpected things happen to us. One of them is that God, respecting our choices, "gives us up" to those choices, allowing us to assume full responsibility for how our lives turn out — without Him. Ironically, God loves us precisely in His allowance of our own poor decisions, for He knows that the same will which chose against Him may one day choose for Him — which is what He wants to happen.

But the "giving up" of human beings to such self-directed decisions is a risk for God — and for us. What Paul does in this passage is document the slope downward. The sins which he lists are evidences of idol-driven worship. Idols are objects, and they are the result of human design and invention. Idols are gods, and they are suppose to be worshipped. Worshipping your own design and invention is identical to worshipping yourself. Ultimately self-worship turns to sexuality — that most powerful drive within human beings. In search of something new (worshipping the same idols gets boring, you know), human beings experiment with their sexuality and this leads to unpredictable results. Among the ancient experiments was homosexual activity. Logically, that follows from self-driven worship: if I worship myself through my idol-making efforts, at some point, I will worship my own sex — my same-sex. In effect, homosexual conduct, examined from the perspective of the self-centered person, flows from a distortion of self-love.

And so, Paul includes it rather early in the list. But he does not include it alone. What follows, in Romans 1, reaches far beyond sexual sins, whether hetero- or homo- sexual in nature. That is why we argued at the beginning of this section that homosexual sins are no more grievous to God than any other sins. They share the same cause: the enthronement of self and the dethronement of God. Those sins may be our own or the actions of others or the effect of sin on nature itself. We are not foreclosing on any of those options in every case.

In the closing verse of this passage, Paul warns about "doing" and "approving." For us, the challenge is to bring redemptive love to those whose lives have been implicated in the cycles of "giving up" described in Romans 1. But we may be tempted to buy into a value of "acceptance" which fails to distinguish between accepting the person and accepting the actions. Paul warns about an acceptance which implies an approving of such actions. Tolerance, on the other hand, is out of the question, for tolerating something neither seeks to offer assistance nor ardently affirms. Tolerance is, at best, lukewarm, a kind of false promise of acceptance. Reject me, accept me, but don't tolerate me!

Restoration of God's fallen creation is the goal of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. We are his royal representatives bearing the good news to all kinds of people with all kinds of needs. Homosexuality is perhaps one of the more complex phenomenon of our time with implications politically, ethically, socially and personally. Above all it has implications spiritually. May God grant us the wisdom and courage to speak the truth in love, and, in genuine humility, live out the reality of Galatians 6 (which read).

Jesus and Sexuality

One casualty which arises from a mere "spiritual" reading of the Gospels is to deny to Jesus any kind of sexual nature. When Nikos Kazantzakis wrote his novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and later it became a motion picture directed by Martin Scorsese with Willem Dafoe in the lead role, all sorts of objections came from the churches about the overt sense of Jesus' sexuality. This was particularly evident in the scenes with Mary Magdalene. A generation before, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, intrigued us with Mary's passionate song, "I Don't Know How to Love Him," which provoked serious thought about the sort of relationship Jesus had with the woman who honored him before his death and then — in defiance of all social conventions — bore witness to his resurrection. Much earlier, John Robert Seeley, in his *Ecce Homo*, published in 1866, hinted that Jesus had ordinary feelings about sex. He wrote:

It is commonly by love itself that men learn the sacredness of love. Yet though Christ never entered the realm of sexual love, this sacredness seems to have been felt by him far more deeply than by other men.¹²

When we consider the situations in which Jesus faced sexual controversy, a realism appears in the biblical stories which defies ordinary religious sensitivities. Is Jesus at all rattled by encountering the woman taken in adultery (John 7:53-8:11), having been "caught in the act..."? With regard to the sinfulness of her action, Jesus makes no distinction between her sexual offense and the variety of sins represented by the crowd gathered to stone her. He refuses to condemn her — paramount to granting her forgiveness, and then tells her not to repeat the sin. Though Torah had specific rules about what she had done, Jesus looks beyond her fault and sees her need.

On another occasion, Jesus finds himself in the house of a Pharisee where a most unusual thing occurs:

37 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner" (Luke 7:37-39).

The net outcome of this encounter is the affirmation by Jesus that the woman has been forgiven her many sins, having shown to him deep love and affection — rich truths which Jesus illustrates through a parable. Scholars have pointed out the unmistakable sexual nuances of this meeting between Jesus and the woman. We do not suggest any impropriety between the two of them. However, it is inescapable that feet, hair, and touch combine in this text to provoke deep reminders of Jesus' humanity. He could hardly have been sexless in this encounter, nor were all of her feelings completely spiritual. We might venture that her spirituality expressed itself through forms which reflected her past without including any of the lustful intentions she might once have felt toward a man in the same setting. Jesus would not have missed this possibility, and though he did not encourage her old ways of being a woman, he surely felt in his human heart all of the feelings expected under such an encounter.

A similar set of implications arise in John 4 where Jesus meets the woman in Samaria at the well of Sychar. In a previous study, I have explored some of the sexual metaphors present in the woman's conversation with Jesus, and will not repeat those here. However, once again, Jesus did not behave like a prude nor did he criticize her choice of language in her quest to find relationship with Jesus. She obviously admired him, was aroused to curiosity by his sudden appearance at the well, and later declared that she had never met a man like him! Considering her past, that was saying a great deal (read the passage for more details). What's important to notice is how Jesus addressed himself to her spiritual condition by way of her sexual history. Sexual conduct, flawed though it was, became for Jesus the avenue to her ultimate salvation.

Jesus was not sexless. It is true that much has been made of his singleness, and the evident fact that he never married. Apart from his unique relationship to Mary Magdalene, nothing is said about sexual encounters. Some have suggested he was a homosexual because of the way John's Gospel speaks about "the disciple whom Jesus loved." References to that disciples reclining on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper do not provide the least shred of proof for this, since physical proximity among groups like the Twelve were common in the ancient world. The Near East has a much healthier view of touching, in non-sexual ways, than the over-exposed West. Jesus simply followed those patterns, and even encouraged Thomas and others to "handle me and see," in presenting himself resurrected and alive (John 21:27; also, Luke 24:39; 1 John 1:1).

Perhaps one of the more interesting passages has to do with "eunuchs."

10 The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." 11 But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it" (Matthew 19:10-12).

¹² Macmillan and Company, 1866, p. 249.

The context of this saying is a teaching on divorce. The disciples hear Jesus tell them that marriage is far more sacrosanct than traditional interpretations of Torah suggest. Our Lord wants to be even more demanding on his followers than Moses was on Israel. Jesus held marriage in high regard, and refused to allow divorce on trivial grounds. Within Second Temple Judaism, such casual reasons for ending marriage might include a husband's dislike for his wife's cooking! In response the disciples wonder if marriage is even possible under such new rigorous conditions. To this resignation, Jesus offers his saying about eunuchs. Who, then, are these persons within the context of Jesus' world?

It is evident that the word "eunuch" is being used in an extended sense.¹³ Strictly speaking a eunuch is a man who has been either voluntarily or forcibly castrated. Technically, one cannot be born a eunuch under this definition, but if the meaning is extended it may include persons born impotent or with other sexual disability. The Rabbis reinforce this understanding.¹⁴ The Torah excludes such persons from the sacred assembly (Deuteronomy 23:1; Leviticus 21:20). What Jesus tells us in cases 1 and 2 is, frankly, not all that interesting, since most people would have nodded agreement at an accepted practice affecting eunuchs by birth and by surgery.

What's shocking is that Jesus speaks about someone *making themselves* into a eunuch by their own choice. Consistent with his style of teaching, Jesus leaves the startling saying till the end (#3). What on earth could he mean? 1) The early church eventually interpreted this as an argument for some people to become celibate, and the practice of celibacy in the priesthood finds part of its justification from this passage. In wider terms, the meaning is simply that for the sake of God's kingdom, some persons will forgo the usual sexual activity associated with marriage or within marriage. We might say that part of their *vocation* involves the single life. With this in mind, Jesus makes clear that sexuality is not the supreme value for human beings, and that there are other values which *may*, though not necessarily, supercede our sexuality.

But 2) another possibility presents itself. Among the religious practices of the peoples surrounding Judaism was the decision to actually castrate oneself literally in order to enter a religious vocation. The cult of Cybele, the earth goddess, was prominent in Asia Minor. They were called *Galloi* and were recognized in the cities by their long flowing hair. Would Jesus and his contemporaries in Israel had seen such persons in their locale? As a matter of fact, archaeology has confirmed the presence of the Cybele cult in the region of Neapolis in Samaria, allowing that Jesus and his followers would have seen the long-haired priests and known how the *Galloi* got that way. When Josephus would later explain to the Romans how the Jews felt about eunuchs, he titled the section *Galloi*, following the familiar designation. It must have been an occasion for Jewish puzzlement when encountering such an institution of priests who purposely altered their genitalia in the service of their god.

For Jesus' followers, this might have struck them as similar to the saying, "If your hand offend you, cut it off..." (Matthew 5:30; 18:8; Mark 9:43), which was the Lord's way of saying that his followers should be willing to do whatever it necessary to enter the kingdom of God. But cutting off hands or plucking out eyes is one thing; castration is quite another! What Jesus was doing in this saying was to take a well-known pagan practice, self-made eunuchs for one's god, and throw down the gauntlet to his disciples. "There are even people," he says, who by reason of their misguided pagan enthusiasm to their gods go so far as to castrate themselves. How about that as a model for what you should be prepared to do for the sake of the true God and his kingdom! The demands of the kingdom override any attachment whatever to sensual gratification, to family ties, even to the obligation to marry and found a family in obedience to the commandment. To be "eunuch priests" for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is to have a will for total dedication and the renunciation of all lesser ideas, objectives

¹³ The following explanation comes from Harvey's University of London lecture, "Eunuchs for the Sake of the Kingdom," The Ethel M. Wood Lecture 1995. Delivered before the University of London on 15 March 1995.

¹⁴ Mishnah, Yeb. 8:4-6; Niddah 5:9.

and obligations comparable in intensity and commitment. Put succinctly, sex must never become our god if Jesus Christ is our Lord. And if Jesus Christ is Lord, sex is not.

That is why, no doubt, Jesus remained unmarried: not because he thought sex was beneath him or that God's Son couldn't possibly have sexual inclinations, but in courageous acceptance of a supreme loss (sexual practice) in order to fulfill the plan of human salvation on the cross. None of this concedes that Jesus was asexual. He knew a great deal about "looking at a woman in order to lust after her," and how close that lust could be to committing adultery in one's heart (Matthew 5:28; also, 15:18-20; Mark 7:21-23). He did not speak those words in a vacuum, but as one who "was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). The sufferings of Jesus involved the conscious surrender of sexual happiness, not the denial of it. It meant grappling with sexual feelings, desires, and all of the bodily responses associated with these. But by choice, having embraced the larger purpose of God, he set aside the fulfillment of those desires — natural though they were to him — in order to complete his higher calling.

For Jesus "bringing forth fruit for God" in the form of growing the kingdom became the central focus of his reproductive life (see John 15 where the agriculture metaphor replaces human reproduction as the symbol of the fruitful life).

Sexuality in the Early Church

Corinth was considered an especially promiscuous city. The adjective "Corinthian" became synonymous with "fornicator" in the minds of some of its contemporaries. Whereas Jewish precedent tended to hide sexual sins unless opportunity came to make an example of an especially grievous offender — as in the case of the woman taken in adultery — pagan practice was to flaunt and glorify all things sexual. Greek and Roman art was not shy about drawing attention to the naked human body, and the public baths gave ample opportunity to do the same. Jewish people, unless their name was Herod, recognized shame and reverence, practicing a privacy suitable to their ethic.

For a man like Paul to travel in pagan cities required a certain mental readjustment. While passages like Acts 17 show an agitated Paul in Athens — agitated over idolatry — he kept such reactions to himself (and his biographer!) so that he might preach freely the Gospel to the nations. Demonstrative sexuality was akin to idolatry for someone like Paul. Yet, he worked patiently with people like the Corinthians, confronting sexual licentiousness where he found it affecting the church, but willing to receive back a brother who repented.

Several texts in his correspondence with the Corinth church illustrate his challenges.

9 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, 10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Notice how, in this passage, sexual sins head the list. This is not because sexual sin is more sinful than being a swindler (at the end of the list), but because it was likely more frequent and more prominent. When we consider that famous people in ancient Rome (Nero, for example) were involved in all forms of sexual perversity without the least shame before the public eye, finding such imitated practices in places like Corinth was common. Sexual sins were considered idolatrous to Paul, as they had been before he became Christ-follower. Yes, he preached grace, but also reminded his audience, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may increase? No way!" (Romans 6:1). Also, Paul saw heterosexual sins on the same level that he saw homosexual ones. Some comments about this:

1. "Sexually immoral" comes from the Greek *pornos*, akin to our "pornography" but referring specifically to heterosexual sex outside of marriage — in all its forms.
2. "Adulterer" derives from *moichoi*, the technical word for violating the marriage contract. No less than nine words appear in classical Greek based on the same root, and having to do with breaking the marital vows, including one which refers to the fine imposed on a person who committed adultery (*moichagria*).

3. "Effeminate", from *malakos* which usually means "soft, fair, weak, cowardly, youthful," but by association comes to mean "effeminate."
4. "Homosexuals," from *arsenokoitēs*, the active male partner in a male-to-male sexual encounter. The ESV combines #3 and #4, implying the active and passive partners in a homosexual encounter.

13 "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food"- and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! 16 Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." 17 But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. 18 Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body (1 Corinthians 6:13-20).

In this passage, by using the example of food and stomach, Paul makes clear that some human appetites are quite normal, though subject to eventual destruction. When it comes to sexual desire, we are also dealing with a normal appetite, something which Paul freely allows. However, the abuse of sexual desire in the form of *porneia*, sexual immorality, also falls under the judgment of the Lord. The reason has to do with who owns our body. We do not have exclusive rights over our bodies because we are devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ. According to Romans 12:1-2 we are to offer our bodies to God as a "living sacrifice," dedicated to His service. Moreover, writes Paul, the body of Jesus was raised from the dead by God, and that same destiny awaits us. Through the coming resurrection of our bodies, God lays claim to our bodies. Here Paul makes several key points:

1. Our bodies are members — that is extensions — of Christ.
2. Therefore, when we join our selves to a prostitute, we are, in effect, joining Christ to a prostitute, a truly unholy thing to do!
3. Also, joining our bodies to a prostitute entails "becoming one body with her," an argument which draws its force from Genesis 2, as we have noted above.
4. Our being joined to the Lord entails a union of spirit. The two unions are not compatible with each other.

In effect these four arguments combine into one major conclusion: we cannot belong to Christ and to a sexually illicit relationship at the same time. We cannot have the spirit of Christ in a prostitute's body.

5. Sexual sins are especially destructive to us — we sin against our own bodies through the likelihood of contracting venereal disease ("sins against his own body").
6. Damaging our bodies in this way hampers our role as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" who lives in us as God's special gift.
7. Ultimately, the price of a prostitute must not supercede the price of our salvation. We have been redeemed by the blood of Christ — a high and holy price — and so we must not dishonor what God has done by sexually immoral conduct. Instead we are to "glorify God in our body."

1 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." 2 But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 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. 5 Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control (1 Corinthians 7:1-5).

The translators of the ESV suggest that Paul is responding to a series of questions or claims from his Corinthian church. This can be seen from the quotation marks around the statement about not having sexual relations. If we accept this translator's judgment, then Paul had to respond to those who thought it best not to enter into sexual unions, even in marriage. With or without the quotation marks, the idea that sexual relations should

remain the sacred province of marriage is certainly well-established in Scripture. Paul certainly agrees that not having sexual relations *except inside of marriage* is a good thing.

However, he does not offer blanket endorsement of all celibacy. In fact, he sees such general rules as dangerous to sexual purity. Knowing the powerful and intensive nature of sexual desire and attraction, Paul sees in marriage the God-given way to give full expression to sexuality, safely and satisfyingly. "Because of the temptation..." is Paul's acknowledgement that real desire requires a stable context for its fulfillment. This applies, Paul says to both men and women. They are, he argues, owners of each other's bodies. In this analysis, Paul shows significant egalitarian values: this is not a case of men owning women in a one-way arrangement, but the true reciprocal claim men and women have on each other's bodies in marriage.

Moreover, Paul gives great freedom to men and women about whether or not they will express their sexual desires through sexual activity. If spiritual reasons require, they might agree to abstain. That which determines the length or circumstance of this *sexus interruptus* is the risk of sexual temptation to go outside of the marriage to find another sexual partner. "To deny" to each other means that one marriage partner overtly refuses sexual engagement to the other marriage partner. Such unilateral decisions are unwise and a source of possible temptation.

In such advice, Paul shows himself the wise pastor of his churches — churches located in a pagan world where sexuality often transgressed the bounds of marriage.

21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. 25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body (Ephesians 5:21-30).

What sort of relationship is marriage such that it becomes a proper context for the expression of sexuality? Why is this relationship superior to any others in this regard?

These are good questions, ones which flow from the public conversation about the place of marriage in American society. Paul makes some important contributions toward answering these questions:

1. Men and women live in a committed, mutually submitted, and Christ-centered relationship when they enter marriage. Submission is mutual and it is voluntary. That is not always true with sexual relationships outside of marriage where the "hunt" drives the process, and the hunter and the hunted live in a constant state of unsettledness about each other. Sex ever functions as the "hook" holding together two people who have not entered into a covenant with each other. As such, sex in a non-marital setting always leaves persons on their guard, wondering, questioning, doubting, and certainly not safely trusting each other.
2. This text offers a superior alternative, one which respects persons, and thereby protects them in a loving, considerate bond. To be a "head" in the language of Greek anatomy did not mean to be the "brain" or the "leader," but instead, it meant to be the "source" of life and generativity. For the man to be a woman's "head" means for him to be her source. For the woman to "submit" to the man means for her to avail herself of his supply and accept his love.
3. When such a relationship functions properly, sex is not a weapon, hook, trap, manipulation, or lure. Rather, sex becomes a symbolic expression of the unity which head and submission imply.
4. Sex treats the other's body as one's own; sex sees one's own body as belonging to another. This way of seeing the other is learned at the foot of the cross where God's Son gave himself for the other and made of the other his own body — the church, the people of God.

5. In this way, belonging to the body of Christ becomes the environment in which marriage is learned anew, and where sexuality becomes within marriage the sacrament for expressing God's love for His people. Such love is redemptive, washing, cleansing, and restoring the other. Such love does not use sexuality as a way of demanding marital rights but a way of giving them away.

Concluding Thoughts

Our efforts in these *Notes* have included reaching for the breadth of the topic of human sexuality in a Christian setting. We have tried to focus on the biblical material primarily. In so doing, we also acknowledge the immensely important role of the social sciences which have learned from the Christian tradition. Of special concern to us has been the tendency to objectify sex and to turn human beings into sexual objects through commerce, media, and personal relationships. Human beings are, by God's creation, not *objects* but *subjects*. And holy subjects at that. When nurtured in the context of loving human relationships, sexuality contributes to genuine human thriving. We believe that God's intended relationship for the expression of human sexuality is marriage — between one man and one woman. Absent such a safe environment, sex returns to the unprotected world of predator and prey, of hunter and the hunted where exploitation replaces love.

The Gospel proclaims the Good News that restores human beings and launches the New Creation. Sexuality is affirmed as the sacrament inside of marriage and is interpreted as the symbol of Christ's union with his church, his people. Violating this sacred covenant of marriage is violating the body of Christ. Violating marriage is an assault on human nature itself. That is why we proclaim marriage, and in so doing reclaim sexuality.

Glory to God! Amen.

Digger Deeper: Hot Topics: Sex??

(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *Hot Topics: Sex??*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Discuss the dangers associated with sexuality outside the committed relationship of marriage. Why does the notion of "just plain sex" not make sense? Think about cases in the Bible where sex was separated from marriage. What were the results?
2. What sort of language does the Bible use to talk about sex? (Genesis 4:1, 17, 25; 19:33-35; 30:16; 34:2; 35:22; Deuteronomy 22:22, 25, 29; 1 Samuel 2:22; 2 Samuel 11:4; 12:24; 13:14). Do you find this way of expressing the idea strange? Insightful?
3. Using Genesis 1:26-28 as the basis, describe the foundations of sexuality in the Bible. Explain the use of pronouns in this passage.
4. In what ways is gender associated with God? (Psalm 27:10; Isaiah 42:14; 46:3-4; 49:14-15; Numbers 11:12; Isaiah 66:12-13; Deuteronomy 32:11-12, 18; Hosea 11:1-4). How is this significant for human sexuality?
5. Read Genesis 2:21-25. Summarize the story of Adam's coming to terms with his sexual nature. How did it come about? What implications does this story have for the way we understand and practice sexuality?
6. Explain Jesus' understanding of human sexuality in Matthew 19:4-6 (Mark 10:6-9). On what did he base his conclusions?
7. Was Jesus a sexual being? What evidence do we have that he grappled with his own sexuality? (See Luke 7:37-39; John 4; Matthew 19:10-12; Matthew 5:28; 15:18-20; Mark 7:21-23; Hebrews 4:15).
8. What is "shame," and are there both good and bad senses of shame? Explain your answer (see Genesis 1:25; 3:7, 10-11). In what ways is shame an important part of our experience of sexuality? What is the relationship between shame and privacy?
9. How is sexuality perverted in the following texts: Genesis 4:19-24; 6:1-12? Discuss the ways sex is used as a means to power.
10. Read Leviticus 18. Why are so many sexual perversions listed in this chapter? What is God's purpose for telling His people about them? Briefly categorize the list, and then identify the social pressures on Israel which prompted God's instruction in this chapter.
11. Homosexuality appears in a few biblical passages, including Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, and 1 Timothy 1:10. Summarize the teaching of these passages. What questions do these texts raise? How might you answer them?
12. Using Galatians 6 as a guide, what should be the Christian heterosexual's approach to a homosexual?
13. Study 1 Corinthians 6:13-20. What is the main theme Paul develops here? Carefully trace his argument and the rationale he develops against so-called "recreational sex."
14. Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-5. What guidance does Paul offer about sex within marriage? What pitfalls does he warn against? How can people avoid them?
15. According to Ephesians 5:21-30, how is marriage a safe and nurturing context for the experience of human sexuality? By contrast, how is sex outside of marriage especially risky?