

SEX AND GENDER ISSUES

A Paper

Submitted to Dr. Billy Puckett

of the

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

Introduction to Ethics

in Leavell College

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November 7, 2013

Introduction

Norman Geisler is certainly correct when he makes the observation that we live in a “sex-saturated” society.¹ Movies, night time television shows, and pop-music exhibit our culture’s infatuation with sex. One can walk into any shopping center and take a look at the ads of clothing stores such as Victoria’s Secret, Hollister, and Abercrombie to see how sexually charged the advertisements are. Pop music artists such as Rihanna and Flo Rida are well known for their sexually explicit lyrics, and TV shows such as *Modern Family*, and *Game of Thrones* exemplify our culture’s lose sexual ethic.

Politically, America has begun to change its legal stance regarding homosexual marriage, and the rights of those who identify as bi-sexual, trans-sexual, and gay are hotly debated. How are Christians to respond to our culture’s sexual ethic, and what insight can we gain from the Biblical perspective? Even more importantly, how does one interpret the Biblical data regarding the Bible’s own sexual ethic? Some scholars have questioned whether or not the Bible is clear about its sexual ethics, claiming that the Bible is not consistent in its teachings about sex.² Popular opinion believes that the Bible’s views are archaic, and unfit for modern culture, and believes that the Bible is an outdated book with outlandish rules, or that it has been misunderstood by church tradition.

The objective of this paper is to examine these claims and to critique the popular opinions of our culture regarding the Bible and it’s teaching about human sexuality. Furthermore, a firm *a priori* commitment to the Bible’s inspiration and infallibility will be maintained and a defense will be given as to why the Bible has a consistent sexual ethic that can be known, and that its

¹ Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Contemporary Issues and Options*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 260.

² Jennifer Wright Knust, *Unprotected Texts: the Bible's Surprising Contradictions About Sex and Desire*, Reprint ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

teaching can and should be applied to our modern day context. An argument will be presented from a traditional evangelical perspective.

The Biblical View of Gender and Sexuality

Norman Geisler writes “Sexuality affects all aspects of one’s life. A person’s gender (or sex) is a teleological, or designed, factor of an individual’s life. There exists what is considered a *complementary* difference between men and women.”³ Geisler goes on to say that men and women have designed roles to fulfill (Gen. 1:26-27; 2:21-25; Eph. 5:22-32; Col. 3:18-24). An important note must be made: according to Genesis 1:26-27, God created humans “male and female”, and calls his creation “very good.” (Gen. 1:31). This logically entails the idea that God intended humans to have ontological distinctions in gender. Furthermore, God says to Adam and Eve “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28), thus establishing that sexual intercourse is a God-ordained capability and has a God-designed function.

According to Stanley Grenz, sexuality is a mystery, and it relates intimately to personhood and being made in the image of God.⁴ Sexuality seems to be an essential property of being human. An important distinction must be made between humanity’s “sexual desire” and its “desire for sex.”⁵ Grenz says “Sexual desire refers to the need we all share to experience wholeness and intimacy through relationships with others. It relates to the dimension often called *eros*, the human longing to possess and be possessed by the object of one’s desire.”⁶ According to Grenz, Sexual desire should not be limited to the sex act, but encompasses a broad range of

³ Geisler, 263.

⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: an Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶*Ibid.*, 21.

human actions and desires, and expresses itself in the religious sphere of life in the form of the desire to know and be known by God. Grenz goes on to say “[human] sexuality...is a powerful, deep, and mysterious aspect of our being. It constitutes a fundamental distinction between two ways of being human.”⁷ Human beings are created male and female, and these distinctions within gender are to be seen as essential ontological characteristics that are God ordained, and are grounded in the image of God, in which humans are representatives (Gen. 1:27).

Geisler observes correctly that “the marriage relationship was established as the first human institution.”⁸ Marriage was established before the fall, and the marital commitment and fidelity to that commitment is still binding between a husband and wife today (Heb.13:4). Genesis 2:24 states “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Geisler notes that the “hold fast” carries with it the idea of an unbreakable union.⁹ Geisler is correct, and echoes what Jesus taught in Mark 10:2-12. As the final and consummate expression of God’s revelation, Jesus taught that marriage is the bond between one man and one woman, and expresses itself in a lifelong commitment to sexual exclusivity. Marriage, as such, finds its definition only within this context. To define marriage apart from its God-ordained design is to redefine reality and make marriage autonomous from the one who instituted all of reality.

The first two chapters of Genesis and the teachings of Jesus in matters of sexuality form a paradigmatic foundation for a consistent biblical sex ethic. The entirety of biblical revelation regarding human sexuality stands upon this foundation. Any deviation from this paradigm is to

⁷ Grenz, 21.

⁸Geisler, 264.

⁹ Ibid.

redefine reality apart from its sovereign author. Therefore all sexual behavior that falls outside the covenantal context prescribed by its creator falls short of its ideal intent.

According to Grenz, the rejection of adultery follows from the Bible's view that sex is a sacred gift only allowed in the contexts of a monogamous covenant.¹⁰ Because of the Bible's view of sex, any sexual activity before marriage is seen as immoral. Jesus condemns fornication in Matthew 15:19 and the Apostle Paul says to flee from sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 6:18. Furthermore, Exodus 20:14 states "You shall not commit adultery." This teaching is affirmed, and brought to an even higher standard in Matthew 5:27-28. Jesus said that if one even looks upon a woman with lustful intent, he has committed adultery. In the teachings of Jesus, marital fidelity stems from a heart of commitment, not just external promises.

In Leviticus 18:6-8, any incestuous relationships are also condemned. Bestiality is condemned as well (18:23). In Deuteronomy 17:17, Moses commands "do not multiply wives," which affirms that the biblical view of marriage is strictly monogamous. Homosexuality is also forbidden. In Leviticus it states that "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (18:22). In Romans 1:26-27, Paul lists homosexuality as condemned by God. Again, the Biblical paradigm for all sexuality is confined to the covenantal union between one man and one woman, therefore excluding all other forms of sexuality.

Current Issues Regarding Gender and Sexuality

Casual Sex

Our culture is rife with casual premarital sex and it is normative among non-Christians to engage in sex without any binding commitment. How are Christians to respond to this normative behavior? Insight can be gleaned from the Apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 6:16, Paul writes "Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her?" While the

¹⁰ Grenz, 103.

context speaks of a prostitute, that is beside the point (though this discussion does not exclude prostitution). Lewis Smedes insightfully comments "...behind Paul's vigorous attack on fornication is a positive view of sexual intercourse. Sexual intercourse involves two people in a life-union; it is a life-uniting act... he sees sexual intercourse as an act that signifies and seeks the intrinsic unity- the unbreakable, total, personal unity that we call marriage."¹¹ In sexual intercourse, a mysterious bond is sealed that unites a man and woman together into one flesh (Gen. 2:24). Smedes writes "The physical side of sexual intercourse is a sign of what ought to happen on the inside."¹² Casual premarital sex is wrong because it is a "life-uniting act without a life-uniting intent."¹³ In Paul's worldview, sex outside of marriage is a contradiction of reality. Though the reality of the act, the meaning of sexual intercourse, may not be noticed by the ones who are engaging in premarital sex, there is an objective meaning that is still there.

Sexual intercourse, according to Paul, is a union that should only exist in marriage. Paul teaches that when two engage in sex, they become one flesh, and it is the reality of this that makes sexual fornication wrong. But what does "one flesh" mean, exactly? To understand Christianity's traditional understanding of sex and marriage, it is essential to understand the "one flesh" paradigm. Quoting Genesis 2:24, Jesus says, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together let not man separate"

¹¹ Lewis B. Smedes, *Sex for Christians: the Limits and Liberties of Sexual Living*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 109.

¹²Ibid., 112.

¹³Ibid., 110.

(Matt. 19:4-6). This is a foundational text, and to understand it, we need to explore the New Testament further.

Alexander Pruss observes “a crucial New Testament theme is the analogy between the Christ-Church and husband-wife relationships. It is specifically essential to Pauline thought that the Church, including Christ as head, is the body of Christ and has the unity of a body that preserves a diversity of functions” (Eph. 5:28; 1 Cor. 6:16; 1 Cor. 12:13-21, 27-28).¹⁴ To understand the connection, Pruss starts out by arguing “all love is directed toward some kind of real union.”¹⁵ In other words, love is teleological. Pruss then goes on to explain that what involves our physical body, necessarily involves our soul.¹⁶ The Bible teaches that humans are not merely physical flesh, but that we are souls. “Biblically, our souls are not just ghosts moving the machinery of our body, but our souls are that in virtue of which our bodies are alive.”¹⁷ An intimate relationship exists between the body and the soul, so that what the body does, the soul does also.

Love is teleological, that is, it is goal-oriented. When two people fall in love, there is a coming together of two people, first psychologically, and then physically. This is easily observable. When two young people fall in love, they not only get closer and closer psychologically, they naturally get closer physically. However, as has been argued above, it would follow that these outward signs of affections are not just physical facts. The psychological intimacy between two people is more than the firing of neurons. Humans are an “organic unity” of body and soul, and that which involves the physical, necessarily involves the soul. Love unites

¹⁴ Alexander R. Pruss, *One Body: an Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 89-90.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the whole of two people. Lovers want to be united, and the goal-oriented nature of love is what draws them closer and closer, body and soul. This is why consummation is indicative of commitment, not the other way around.

So, humans are an organic unity, and love is teleological. So how does sex make two people “one”? Certainly the sex act does not make them one being, for this would present some major metaphysical problems! Nor does sex make two people one creature, biologically speaking. What does Paul mean when he speaks of the two becoming one-flesh? According to Pruss, becoming one-flesh is neither metaphysical nor biological, but functional.¹⁸ As mentioned above, Pruss observes that Paul thought that the Church, is the body of Christ, and that Christ is its head, that the Church has the unity of a body that preserves a diversity of functions. If we look at a body, it is made up of individual parts that contribute to the whole. In 1 Corinthians 12:14-17, Paul writes,

“For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?”

The body has different parts that serve an overall function. Here is the connection: by looking at how Paul views the body, Pruss believes that this illustrates something about the one-flesh paradigm. Marriage is an institution that involves two bodies: diversity. Sexual intercourse is the act where these two bodies become, not metaphysically, nor biologically, but one functionally.¹⁹ Just as the church has many parts (diversity), it is one body cooperating toward one goal (function). This goal, namely, is the glorification of the Son. So here we see that in marriage, two

¹⁸ For a detailed discussion, see “One Body” chapter 5, by Alexander Pruss.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

people are joined in love toward a goal that leads to their unity, and this unity is sealed in the sex act.

A better understanding of the one-flesh paradigm may seem to materialize, but one more question remains: what is the goal of the sexual union? Pruss seems to believe it is a combination of sexual pleasure, higher goals, and reproduction.²⁰ To assess Pruss' conclusions would go beyond the required length of this paper. However, recall from earlier in this paper that the Bible teaches that men and woman have designed roles to fulfill, and that one of these functions is reproduction. Reproduction, though, is only one side of it. Remember also, that there is a difference between the sexual desire and the desire for sex. Humans have a desire to possess and be possessed by the object of their desire. As Grenz noted earlier, this desire seems to be rooted in what it means to be a person created in God's image.

John the Apostle says that God is love (1 Jn. 4:8). The ability to love, and to receive love is a communicable attribute of God. Since love is goal-oriented, love seems to find its ultimate fulfillment in the one who is love. From this it seems to follow, that to love someone is to love them for their own sake, and not for some selfish self-gratification. It seems then, that the goal that love strives to is to the person themselves, which is physically represented by sexual intercourse. Just as the Church is one body that strives toward the goal of glorifying Christ, it seems that sex unites two people in one flesh, whose chief aim is to give love to the other person. Sex should be self-giving, not self-gratifying.

To recapitulate, humans are more than mere physical beings. They are a unity of material and immaterial stuff; body and soul. Love is much more than mere physical "happenings" that physiologically incline two people to kiss and caress. It is a weaving of persons in unity; persons made in the image of God. Thus, sex is a sign and seal of a covenantal relationship between one

²⁰ Ibid., 115, 127, 132.

man and one woman. It was created in no other fashion, and for no other purpose. Sex is sacred, and from the implications that follow from the Biblical teachings, sex before marriage is a contradiction of terms. Put in another way, premarital sex is “putting the cart before the horse.” This integrates well with other areas of Christian theology, and it has an explanatory appeal. Sex is a sign of the covenant, just as is baptism and the Eucharist are signs of the covenant community. Baptism is for those who confess Christ as Lord, and the Eucharist is eaten by those who identify with the Church. This is why the Eucharist is confined only to Church members, and why babies should not be baptized. Because sex is sacred, it is restricted to those who are members of a covenant, and this covenant is marriage.

Homosexuality

One other current issue needs to be addressed, and this is the issue of homosexuality. For many Christians, homosexuality is a brute decision that an individual makes. In other words, one chooses to be a homosexual. However, this claim is too simplistic. A crucial distinction needs to be made between homosexual orientation, and homosexual activity. Christian Philosopher, William Lane Craig rightly points out “...the Bible doesn’t condemn a person because he has a homosexual orientation. What it condemns is homosexual acts.”²¹ According to experienced counseling professionals and homosexuals alike, same-sex attraction is not a choice²². Exploring the foundation for this distinction would be to go beyond the purpose of this paper. The purpose here is to focus upon the decision to act, and not the orientation, because it is the decision that grounds moral responsibility. Philosopher Paul Copan writes, “Even though we are born with a sinful, self-centered inclination, God judges us based on what we *do*...a person may, for

²¹ <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/a-christian-perspective-on-homosexuality#ixzz279SxfXnV>

²² Gary R. Collins, *Christian Counseling: a Comprehensive Guide*, 3rd ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 385.

whatever reasons, have same-sex inclinations, but God won't judge him on the basis of those inclinations, but on what he does with them."²³

It has been argued above that marriage, as defined by the Bible, is a covenant between one man and one woman, and that sexual intercourse is restricted to the confines of this covenant, and that Genesis chapter one is the paradigm foundation for biblical sex ethics. What will be explored here, then, is the consistency of biblical ethics in the case of homosexuality.

According to some, the Bible is not consistent in its ethics, and that homosexuality is a legitimate life-style within biblical ethics. John Boswell, author of *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, claims that homosexuality, as a loving and committed monogamous relationship, was foreign to the Biblical authors.²⁴ According to some scholars, the Bible condemns homosexuality in connection to rape, pedophilia, and temple prostitution, but not homosexual unions between two committed partners. Those who are sympathetic to the homosexual community oftentimes look to biblical characters, claiming that many of them were in gay relationships.²⁵ David and Jonathan appear to have had a homosexual relationship (2 Sam. 1:26), even kissing each other in 1 Samuel 20:41. Ruth and Naomi kiss each other as well, in Ruth 1:14. Even Jesus is said to be a homosexual, based upon the text that says that John was the disciple whom Jesus loved (Jn. 13:23).

The pro-homosexual arguments have major weaknesses. First, texts that point to the displays of affection between certain biblical characters, reads too much of our modern sensitivities in the text. In all the texts cited above, the displays of affection are typical of

²³ Paul Copan, *When God Goes to Starbucks: a Guide to Everyday Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 80.

²⁴ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

²⁵ Copan, 81.

middle-easterners, and are still prominent cultural norms in the middle-east today without homosexual connotations.²⁶ As to the claim that the Bible affirms homosexual unions, excluding instead, homosexuality in connection to deviant activity (prostitution, pedophilia, etc.), misunderstand the paradigmatic nature of biblical law. Genesis 1:27 lays the groundwork for human sexuality, and this text is further affirmed by Jesus himself, which ultimately means that marriage, properly defined, is a covenant between one man and one woman. Everything outside of this biblical standard is deviant.

To put it plainly, Christians do not believe homosexuality is wrong because of verses such as Leviticus 18:22, or Romans 1:26-27. More accurately, Christians believe the aforementioned verses condemn homosexuality because the Bible teaches that sex is sacred, and that sexuality is to be enjoyed within the context of a heterosexual marriage.

Conclusion

The evidence that the Bible has a consistent sex ethic is overwhelming, and the evidence leads this writer to conclude that all the biblical commands that prohibit sexual activity outside of a covenantal framework of a one man, one woman relationship, stem from the Bible's view that sex, as well as gender, is sacred. Man and woman are made in the image of God, and their sexuality is not defined by their own wills, but by the will of the one who made them. Likewise, sex is defined by the one who created it, and the physical act of sex is representative of a deeply personal union between a man and a woman, which reflects a theological truth about the teleological nature of love. Sex is a sign and seal of an inward reality, a reality that reflects

²⁶ Ibid.

functional oneness. Three goals of this functional unity were given above, but there seems to be a deeper mystery here.²⁷

It can be asked, what grounds the human's sexual desire? Above it was argued that the grounding is in the image of God. According to theologian, Millard Erickson, the image of God enables humans to have relationships.²⁸ Something about our relationships reflects who we are, and who God is, and the sex act seems to be an even deeper reflection of something very profound. In the sex act, there is distinction of persons, but unity of function. Pruss writes "something very much like the kind of functional organic unity...in sexual activity is found in the Trinity."²⁹ While the analogy breaks down at certain points, we have some very similar traits represented in both, namely, distinction of persons and unity of purpose.

Sex and gender are sacred. It is sacred because it has been instituted by God. Because of this truth, all biblical commands concerning sexuality, positive and negative, follow suit. Mankind cannot redefine sex, gender, and marriage anymore than they can redefine reality. To make ourselves autonomous from the reality that God graciously set us in, and to redefine the institutions that he has set in place is to go against the King. He is beautiful and good, and his creation is beautiful and good, and to fashion things according to our fallen desires is to mar and distort reality.

²⁷Pruss, 112.

²⁸Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 533.

²⁹Pruss, 112.

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