

THE NEW TESTAMENT on Sexuality

The grace to help us live sexually whole and chaste lives is readily available in so many ways—in ourselves, our families, the Church, the Word of God, the sacraments, prayer, the lives and witness of Mary and the saints, and "in the recesses of each human heart, where prayer, conscience formation and discernment find holy ground" (*Human Sexuality*, 21). In the New Testament, as in the Old, ethics can only be understood in a theological context, as a response to God's grace in Jesus Christ. There are interpreters who contrast Law and Gospel, taking their lead from Paul's saying that "Christ is the end of the law" (Romans 10:4). There are also those who see the ethics of the New Testament focused in the commandment to love God and neighbour (Mark 12:28-34), or simply in "love" as the one guiding ethical principle. Others deny that the New Testament provides even general principles; Christians must simply be guided by the Spirit. Others again emphasize Christian character, Christian community, or response to the God revealed in Christ as the context for ethics. There are varying degrees of validity in all these approaches, but by themselves they are inadequate if they fail to recognize the positive role that law continues to play in the New Testament. At the same time, the requirements of the ceremonial law are superceded or reinterpreted by New Testament writers. With respect to the moral laws, Jesus not only reaffirmed them but defined their intent more clearly and fully (e.g. Matthew 5:27-30). Love and law are not to be set against each other. Jesus said, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments' (John 14:15). Similarly, the Apostle Paul did not oppose love and law. While emphasizing that salvation does not come by works of the law, Paul stated that the law is not abrogated but fulfilled in love. Believers are to "fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2), and Christ is "the end of the law" not in the sense of abolishing it but in the sense of bringing it to fulfillment and completion. The moral law revealed in the Old Testament, and known to Gentiles through conscience (Romans 2:15), remains binding on Christians, not in any legalistic sense but as a revelation of God's will for humanity. The Ten Commandments, for example, are still guidelines for Christians (e.g. Mark 10:19, Romans 13:8-9), and the New Testament epistles provide specific ethical directives as well as general guiding principles.

A summary of New Testament perspectives

The New Testament assumed some of the central understandings of sexuality found in the Old Testament, especially that sexuality is God's good gift that needs to be carefully ordered and nurtured. In doing this it carried over some of the Jewish community's moral sensitivities, while reassessing others.

In light of the new age to come in which old distinctions were to be eliminated, early Christians saw themselves as an inclusive community. Their identity and life were shaped decisively by the ministry, cross, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They saw themselves as a "new family" of God in the final days. Consequently, inherited family structures and the mandate to procreate were of secondary importance. At the same time, the

permanency and mutuality of the marriage commitment were given new seriousness. Jesus and his early followers challenged many patriarchal assumptions of the day. But this understanding receded as the church sought to demonstrate respect for a familiar order as it reached out to other cultures.

The early church saw itself as a people called to live differently from the world. This was a way of anticipating God's final fulfillment in Christ. Determining what that meant in their sexual lives was an ongoing challenge. They believed their bodies had been incorporated into Christ's communal body. Thus, what they did with their sexuality was significant. Although marriage continued to be affirmed, for the sake of God's mission, celibacy also became an acceptable lifestyle for those who were so gifted.

Love for neighbors and concern for right relationships became central in the New Testament ethic. Jesus' affirmation of the dignity of all people, particularly those scorned and considered to be "the least," led him to resist legalism. He focused instead on the spirit and intent of the Torah. He largely ignored the rules of purity that tended to separate people and stressed divine compassion and forgiveness as the way to include all people in God's new community. Paul was also primarily concerned about the compassionate character of the community. Christians were to demonstrate a care for one another and to live responsibly as sexual beings so that the church's mission and witness might flourish.

The New Testament includes little discussion of sexuality issues. However, *The First Letter of Paul to The Church at Corinth* (also known as *1 Corinthians*) is rich in such coverage. In fact, it contains many of the topics in current sexuality education programs and can be viewed as a form of sexuality instruction for the first century.

First Corinthians includes some coverage of at least 17 sexuality topics. In his letter, Paul briefly addresses anatomy, families, child-rearing, values, decision-making, communication, assertiveness, shared sexual behavior, and sexual desire. He also provides extensive information on bodies, love, marriage, gender roles, sexuality and society, law, and religion. *First Corinthians* recognizes the sacredness of the body and sexual relationships, reinforces that sexual desire is part of life, and respects the importance of mutual and egalitarian pleasure and responsibility in intimate relationships. It also affirms marriage and presents a brilliant description of love.

Paul believed that the "body is a temple of the Holy Spirit" (*1 Cor 6:19*). He also recognized the sacredness of all parts of the body: "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body" (*1 Cor 12:14-26*). Although he unfortunately differentiated between more and less honorable parts of the body, he asserted that "...there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another" (*1 Cor 12:25*).

Paul underscored that sexual relations are sacred and not to be engaged in lightly. *1 Corinthians 6:12-20* should not be read as condemning all sexual relationships as some theologians have implied. Rather, it affirms that

sexuality has the ability to profoundly affect one's life. Many scholars have written that *porneia* should not be translated as fornication but rather as *sexual immorality as delineated by the Torah*.¹⁰ Paul was urging Christians to avoid using prostitutes--especially cultic prostitutes--because the physical act of intercourse involves the sanctity of becoming "one flesh." In the words of William Countryman, Paul "regarded sexual desire as a natural appetite though one too central to human identity to be treated casually."¹¹

Paul recognized that adults experience sexual desire. He felt that people have the ability to make decisions about their sexual feelings, that sexual feelings are not uncontrollable, and that they should be acknowledged and acted upon only as they support one's values (*1 Cor 7:36-8*).

Paul did not suggest abstinence and celibacy for all. He believed that permanently abstaining from sexual relationships is a special gift: "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind" (*1 Cor 7:7*). Indeed, in a surprising admission, he stated that his personal belief in celibacy was not from Jesus or God: "Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord" (*1 Cor 7:25*).

Paul clearly affirmed marriage as the context for sexual relationships and emphasized the mutuality of roles. "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to the husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body; but the husband does. Likewise, the husband does not have authority over his own body; but the wife does" (*Corinthians 7:3-5*).

Further, partners have a right to expect sexual relations on a regular basis: "Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time" (*1 Cor 7:5*).

Paul wavered in his understanding of the equality of both genders, but he did underscore the unique contributions of both. Although there are certainly lines in this text that are overtly patriarchal (*Corinthians 11:8-10*), other verses recognize the importance of both genders: "in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman" (*1 Cor 11:11*).

The centrality of the message of love is a basic component of all good sexuality education programs. And here, Paul is as relevant today as he was two millennia ago. Chapter 13 could be a central point of study for sexuality education programs from adolescence to adulthood:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude....It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (*1 Cor 13:4-7*)

Mark 10:2-16

Jesus taught in public settings throughout Judea, and many people came to learn from him. Others, however, came only to challenge or test him. The test in this case concerned what was lawful in terms of divorce. This was an important debate among Jews of that day. One popular rabbi, Hillel, taught that divorce should be a simple option, while another popular rabbi, Shammai, argued that marriage should be highly protected. Because each of these rabbis had such a strong following, the Pharisees knew that if they could align Jesus with one camp or another, a large segment of the population would be upset with him. Matthew 22:17-22 tells us of a similar incident. The Pharisees sent their disciples to ask Jesus a question about paying taxes hoping that his answer would be unacceptable to either the Romans or the Jews. Jesus' brilliant strategy in both cases was to ask a question in return and redirect attention toward God's heart and purpose. It is worth noting that the Pharisees' questions concerned lawfulness. They didn't ask what was wise, true, holy, or honorable in the question of divorce or marriage. They didn't ask about God's heart in this matter. They wanted to know the legal particulars. Where is the fine line? What technicalities make divorce permissible? What is lawful? Jesus asked, "What did Moses command?" Referring to Deuteronomy 24:1-4, the Pharisees responded, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away." Now, this passage in Deuteronomy does not advocate divorce; it acknowledges that divorce happens, and it regulates the circumstances under which divorce can take place. The primary importance of this regulation is to protect the wife. Moses insisted that if a man were to divorce his wife, he had to document the choice he made so that she would not be abandoned with her status ambiguous. In addition, if a man divorced his wife and she married someone else, the first husband could never take her back again. This provision was to discourage wife-swapping and other forms of marital abuse. You may recall the famous "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth" law, which limits the amount of revenge but does not mandate revenge. Similarly, Deuteronomy 24 merely places limits on divorce without advocating it. We should notice, too, that Deuteronomy 24 is only one part of Moses' instruction on divorce and marriage. The Pharisees did not turn first to Genesis (also authored by Moses). Jesus did. Their choice of a passage that centers on the way to get divorced instead of the work of God in establishing a marriage says much about the condition of their hearts. The Pharisees tried to test Jesus by quoting from Deuteronomy 24. Jesus agreed that Moses did make such allowances, but then he turned their attention to Genesis 2. He reminded his listeners of God's creation plan for marriage, and he told them that the reason people divorce is because their hearts are hard. Our Lord's words here deserve some consideration on our part. Both the Old and New Testament allow for divorce. It is not the unforgivable sin. There is honest recognition in Jesus' words that marriages are often tragic. Marriages create intimacy, and intimacy carries with it great power. The person who can bless you the most can also hurt you the most. In a marriage where there is hardness of heart, the possibility for pain is very great. Lives become intertwined when there is physical closeness, emotional joining, shared living space, common economic responsibilities, parenting together, for better or worse, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer. Hardness of heart is a core of selfishness, a refusal to listen and understand. It

is stunted emotions, feelings, and appetites that make unreasonable demands. It is the assumption that my needs are more important than yours. It is the cause for divorce.

In verse 6, Jesus reminded the Pharisees that "at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female.'" The culture of today tells us that there is no such thing as maleness and femaleness, that sexual identity is a personal choice. Jesus completely contradicts that notion. God made us male and female to compliment each other. Marriage brings complimentary elements together and takes us to the heart of what it means to be a man or a woman. It is a delightful thing to discover.

In verses 7-9, Jesus continued, "'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." Jesus clearly states that God makes marriages. He makes us male and female. He fits us for one another. He not only makes us who we are but also brings us together. The joining together is not a one-time thing. It begins on the day when public vows are made, when sexual intercourse and oneness in that sense takes place, but it takes a lifetime to join people together. We grow together through laughter and struggles, through sorrow and thanksgiving. What God has joined together, no one should separate. Marriage can be tough. It involves living with a person who is a different gender, who has a different way of looking at things, who comes from a family that does things differently. The beautiful thing is that God takes people who do not automatically connect and teaches them to draw one another out. You will never understand yourself better than when you see yourself through the eyes of someone who loves you intimately, who probes, asks tough questions, and cares about stuff we don't even see in ourselves. It is an extraordinary thing, and it requires faith. Marriage is a school for faith; we learn that we need God in order to accomplish this drawing together of one to another.

When they returned to the house (verse 10), the disciples asked Jesus about the things he had said. Jesus answered that anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her and vice versa. Why did he say this? He was destroying euphemism. If a marriage is viable and you choose to leave a partner who is willing to stay with you, you are committing adultery. There is no good language for it, no pleasant way to say it. People use euphemism to excuse their choices, saying, "I'm starting a new chapter in my life. I'm leaving a bad thing behind. We are closing the past and moving on." Jesus rejected the euphemism and called it by its real name: adultery. However, what God joins together, no one should separate; if you do, you will live with the consequences. Name it for what it is. Euphemisms do no one any good.

Most commentators put a major break between verses 12 and 13. The language of the text does not make it clear if the two passages are linked by time or place, but there is a thematic link. Who suffers the most when marriages break up? Children do. In this passage, people are rebuked for bringing little children to Jesus, but Jesus said, "Do not forbid them. Bring them to me." He held them in his arms, he touched them, and he blessed

them. This should be very encouraging if you are a child from a divorced home or if you know of a child who is going through those circumstances. Jesus insisted that the little children be brought to him. They belong to him, and he wants to bless them. It is a tremendous word of hope. There is nothing that the healing power of Jesus cannot fix. There is no loss or failure that cannot be restored by his touch. Jesus said that anybody who comes to him must come like a child, with simplicity and humility.

We live in a world of strident voices telling us there is no purpose in maleness and femaleness, that relationships don't need spiritual depth, that every possible human experience is equal in value to any other one. Our sexuality, it is claimed, is not the purposeful gift of a loving Creator. Yet most people want to know that God cares. They want to know that it is possible to share life with another person and receive God's blessing, to grow through problems instead of being destroyed by them. They want to know that there is a community that will help if there are problems. They want to know what we, the Body of Christ, take for granted. The Lord said that we are a city set on a hill. People are wandering in the wilderness looking for a way home. Where are they going to find light? Where are they going to find peace? Lost people want very much to know what is right and true. We offer life to people who need it.