

Sex, Singleness and Marriage

- exploring human sexual relationships

SEX AND SOCIETY

Opportunity

We live in a 'sex saturated' society¹:

- Media, marketing, values and opinion are all orientated towards sexual liberation and satisfaction;
- Sex manuals and aids emphasise technique and method, the pill and the condom promise freedom and pleasure;
- Emancipated attitudes suggest unlimited opportunity; preserving virginity has been described as 'arrant masochism';
- Pornography has driven the development of the internet more than anything else; 'sex' is the word most frequently typed into search engines;
- The global 'sex industry' generates more money than both the global film and music industries combined.

Anxiety

However, among many we detect unease and apprehension:²

- Emphasis on technique brings great pressure to perform;
- Focus on sex as 'genital coupling' raises questions about love and fulfilment;
- For many there remains both ignorance and inhibition, sex is more than 'a branch of gymnastics' with two bodies entwined in the dark searching for an orgasm;
- The fact that a person can experience multiple orgasms and still remain emotionally unfulfilled is a telling commentary on the human experience and experiment with sex.

Question

'Do Christians have anything relevant to say about sex?'

On the street people's perception of the church's attitude is one that is negative, restrictive, ignorant and irrelevant about sex. Christians should welcome the openness and debate surrounding sex, in contrast to the hiddenness and hypocrisy of past generations. Areas in which Christians have a clear contribution to make on the subject of sex must be:

- Spirituality and identity
- Covenant and commitment

¹ There is a story told of a man who stopped to refuel his car at a petrol station. He looked up and saw a huge sign with the word '**SEX**' painted in bright bold letters. On closer examination he discovered a further message written in much smaller print underneath, 'Now we have your undivided attention, please do not park in front of the pumps!' The Greek philosopher Socrates and an ancient Jewish tradition both suggested that men and women originally existed as a single person, but they became separated; ever since they have focused their energy into trying to get back together again!

² Condom dispensers at motorway service stations often have four draws; 'sensitive', 'flavoured', 'ribbed' and 'extra strong Anadin'! This seems the perfect icon for the modern sexual experience.

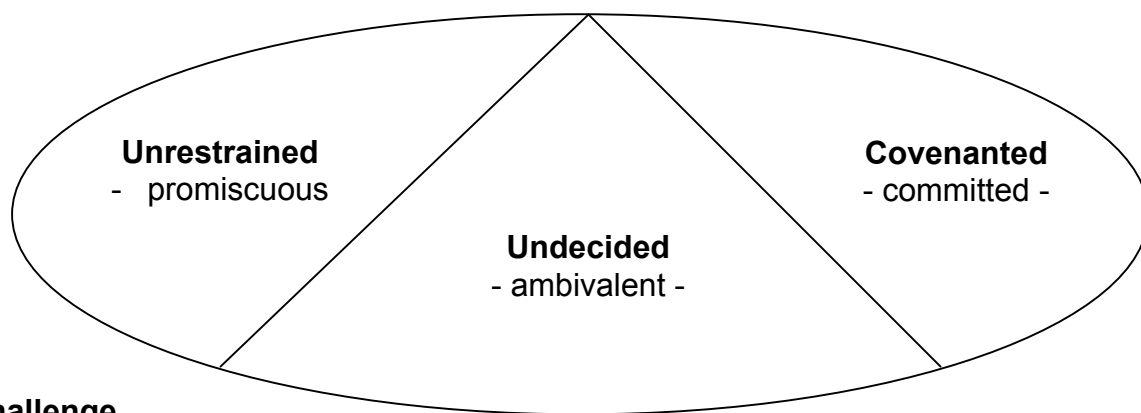
- Meaning and experience

Choice

At its core, how we express our sexuality is a very simple choice. We do so:-

- Either within covenanted / committed relationships;
- Or within promiscuous / unrestrained relationships.

These are the only options. However, in reality, many people stand ambivalent and undecided at the point of choice. Human culture traditionally encourages some form of commitment (marriage) to contain sexual activity. However, while the majority follow this path, many of these same people actually wish to be (or secretly are) promiscuous. They want the experience of both worlds. This has been true throughout history and is an important part of the backdrop to Christian thinking about sex and marriage.



Challenge

The reality is that sex is awesome. It has been profoundly described as ‘the word of one being to another being, the voice of being crying unto another being whether in the garden of Paradise or in the wilderness’ (Ramsey). It is wonderful in experience and terrible in misuse. Understanding must precede experience but experience will lead to greater understanding of the depths of its mystery. The fact that sexual knowledge and encounter, in themselves, do little to remove a sense of ignorance and inhibition, suggest that true sexuality finds its roots beyond itself in personhood, spirituality and the divine.

SEX AND SEXUALITY

Sex and reality

Human sexuality is foundational. It is a strong central core to our identity and self-understanding. Yet at the same time it is complex and very fragile. Our sexuality is shaped through the intertwining of the:

- **Physical:** our biological and genetic structure and function
- **Psychological:** our libido, orientation and understanding
- **Social:** our way of relating to those of the opposite sex and the same sex
- **Cultural:** our expectations of life-patterns and behaviour

Tensions and traumas in any of these areas can have a profound effect on our sense of identity, sexuality, choices and behaviour.

Sex and spirituality

A biblical Christian understanding of human sexuality is closely linked with the image of God. When God created people in divine image and likeness, we are told:

‘... male and female he created them’
(Gen 1:27)

At the heart of the ‘image and likeness of God’ there is relationship, and relationship is at the heart of sexuality. Sexuality is at the centre of every human relationship and at the hub of all true humanity. Within sexuality we touch and explore the divine; it is part of the essence of spirituality and spirituality is at its core.

The fact that sexuality and spirituality flow into one another and have their source in God, is seen in the way that scripture frequently uses sex and marriage metaphors to speak about God’s relationship with people :-

- The Sinai covenant is spoken of as a ‘marriage covenant’ (Jer 2:2; Ezk 16:8)
- Yahweh and the people are seen as being like husband and wife (Is 62:4-5; Hos 2:19-20)
- The sin of Israel and Judah is spoken about as adultery (Jer 29:23; Ezk 23:37) and prostitution (Jer 3:8; Ezk 23:3)
- For Hosea a true relationship with God must show itself in that loving faithfulness (Heb: *chesed*) which is the essential ingredient of any marriage, and in that intimacy of ‘knowing-experience’ (Heb: *yada*) which is the essence of sexual intercourse (Hos 6:6)
- The erotic lyrics of the ‘Song of Songs’ reveal God as the life-giving source of human sexual experience, and there to be encountered in its voluptuous joy
- Paul speaks of the community of faith as ‘the Bride’, and sees in human marriage a profound mystery, which is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church (cf Eph 5:21-33)

Sex and distortion

One of the tragedies early in the story of the church is the way it distorted sexuality by making it solely to do with reproduction and only functional in purpose. This view was strengthened by:

- Gnostic ideas with their insistence that sexual appetites are fleshly, corrupting and in no way spiritual
- Augustine arguing that ‘original sin’ was communicated by the corrupting act of sexual intercourse which was itself stimulated by evil desires
- To engage in sexual activity with no intention of conceiving a child is sin

This led to the belief that truly spiritual people should shun all sexual activity in pursuit of a higher celibate way.

While the possibility of procreation is a wonderful possibility consequence of sexual intercourse, it is interesting that there are *only two* passages in the whole Bible that make a direct link between the act of sexual intercourse and conceiving children:

- ‘God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, ...” (Gen 1:28)
- “Did not God create you into a single being, one flesh and spirit with her? And what is this single being destined for?” God given offspring (Mal 2:15)

Why are there no more passages that make this connection, when you think of all the biblical references there are to sexual intercourse and marriage? Clearly it is understood, and goes without saying, that couples who engage in regular heterosexual sexual intercourse are very likely to conceive and become pregnant. The biblical emphasis surrounds the Hebrew word ‘yada’ (‘to know’, ‘to experience’), and makes it clear that it is relationship, not reproduction, that is the chief aim of sexual intercourse and marriage.

Quite outside the biblical and Christian tradition there are some provocative observations to reflect upon:

- In the natural world human sexual activity shows itself as more than just ‘a mating urge’; we are unique in the animal kingdom in copulating irrespective of the female cycles of fertility and suggests that for humans it is primarily to do with relationship rather than reproduction;
- In oriental ‘tantric’ religious practices, sexual activity is used as a doorway into spiritual experience; often called ‘riding the tiger into nirvana’. This demonstrates a recognition of the the profound link that exists between sexuality and spirituality;
- In secular society the rise in promiscuity and pornography is seen by some as an unconscious search for a substitute to spirituality; in the process it of course damages an authentic understanding of sexuality, spirituality and relationships.

Sex and celebration

So what is a Christian understanding of sexuality?

In the second biblical creation story we are told that the man and woman were:

‘... both naked and not ashamed’
(Gen 2:25)

Here is an understanding of sexuality that is both simple yet profound:

- vulnerability with dignity
- freedom with respect
- innocence with honour

Here is sexuality integrated into their entire lives; no shame but rather ‘shalom’; that wholeness which brought an organic unity within themselves, between themselves and with the whole creation.

Notice that the very first consequence of human sin was a corrupted sexuality: -

‘Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked’
(Gen 3:7)

This proves that sexuality is at the very essence of human personhood. Nakedness became a shame; covered first with leaves and then with skins (Gen 3:7,21). Male and female relationships became exploitive; grasping femininity, dominating masculinity [Gen 3:16]. We now have people who are not at ease with their bodies, often racked with guilt, or who see sex as merely genital not total, an appetite not a covenant. Churches often handle sex with fear and inhibited legalism rather than purity and liberated freedom.

The challenge to the community of faith is to discover a true understanding of sexuality in terms of the new covenant. A Christian understanding of sexuality must include: -

- **Total physicality:** True sexuality is a celebration of complete tangible personhood, it rejoices at being alive as a physical body! It embraces the *whole* of us, not bits of us; it is not just genital but total. Remember, we do not *have* a body, we *are* a body! So sexuality is to do with how we express the completeness of ourselves through our bodies and is at the heart of who and what we are as people. To hold and caress a child is to nurture and affirm their sexuality; it integrates the physical and emotional and enables them to grow up at peace with their bodies. Sexuality should infuse every facet of a person's life; the sheer joy and excitement of physical well being is a fountain of sexual energy. It is inextricably linked with our sense of identity and self worth, it involves thinking about who we are as a person and what we want to give and need to receive. In a culture that has reduced sexuality to 'sex-bits', 'private parts' and 'erogenous zones', the Christian response is a call to wholeness and totality; proclaiming that each one of us are full sexual persons quite apart from genital sex.
- **Total spirituality:** True sexuality is to do with the uniting of the physical and the spiritual. Our sexuality is intimately tied up with who we are as spiritual persons. Our spiritual life enriches our sexuality, our sexuality gives an earthy wholeness to our spirituality. The Bible has no understanding of a spirituality and godliness that is separated from that which is physical and human, so our sexuality is expressed in:-
 - Our capacity to love and be loved
 - Our need to experience emotional fulfillment
 - Our ability to accept and control sexual feelings

Sexuality is to do with emotions, identity, values and relationships that are active, creative and responsive. There is no doubt, however, that in our encounter with the total spirituality of sexuality we are working at the edge of mystery.

- **Total humanity:** Sexuality is to do with the way we express ourselves in relationships with every other human being, the way we relate to them as we touch and share one another's lives. It is essential we recognise that every human encounter and relationship is shot-through with sexuality and has a clear erotic dimension to it. Every human encounter is a sexual encounter, whether:
 - Woman / man
 - Man / man
 - Woman / woman

The whole network of human relationships, whether intimate or casual, family or formal, that make up our everyday lives create the continuum within which, and through which,

our sexuality flows. This flow of constantly changing encounters intimately effects and gives avenues for various dimensions of sexual expression and experience. This of course includes people who are physically and mentally challenged; they too must be drawn into the stream of sexual fulfillment at every dimension of relationship.

SEX AND CELIBACY

Celibacy as wholeness

Sexuality is a gift from God; every person is created to be a complete sexual being, both within themselves and as expressed towards others, without genital sex.

Singleness has equal validity to marriage; it is neither a higher nor a lower way, it is a parallel path. Celibates in other faiths often deny their sexuality as a hindrance, while Christian celibates are called to embrace their sexuality as a gift, learning to accept and control their sexual feelings, but never repressing them. Celibacy is not denying sexuality, but embracing it in a distinct and positive manner³.

Celibacy affirms the truth that sexuality is to do with a person as total, not genital. A single person expresses their sexuality through their capacity to love and be loved, through their need to experience and ability to provide emotional fulfillment; by touching and sharing other people's lives. There has been a witness to the incredible depth and breadth of sexuality beyond the experience of marriage. Celibacy is a proclamation of the integrated wholeness, within oneself, which is at the core of a Christian understanding of sexuality.

Jesus' sexuality

This truth is clearly illustrated in the person of Jesus who was fully human, had deep relationships, and was single. How Jesus handles his personal sexuality in all his relationships with both women and men is a very important example for us, and a model for true celibacy. He quite clearly exuded sexual charisma which drew both women and men towards him, and yet he handled it with gentle self-control and purity.

Women were very attracted to him, and frequently touched him; culturally scandalous in Jewish society at the time. He accepted their affection and honoured them, though bystanders were shocked and spoke of them as shameful. You get the impression that when Jesus encountered women he never put them under any of the emotional sexual pressure that men so often do, even unconsciously, in order to manipulate them. Women felt safe and comfortable with Jesus. Prostitutes, the women who are most cynical about men, were also drawn to him and at ease in his company.

At the same time he was equally comfortable in the intimate company of an exclusively male gathering. Men were also attracted to him and hung on his every word. Here his sexuality was both robust, firm and gentle.

³ Many people who are secular in their lifestyle find celibacy to be a liberating experience.



Jesus has a deep maturity and poise about his sexuality that is an important model and example to us all.

Celibacy for all

It is easy to think of celibacy as the way of the few; those who are not yet married or have chosen not to marry. However, in reality it is a path that *everyone* must learn to walk⁴: -

- During childhood and youth each person is single and has to come to terms with their sexuality
- In old age, or as a result of sickness or accident, someone who has been married may find themselves grappling with celibacy
- Certain physical and mental restraints may leave a person celibate, but still very much sexual

Most important of all, we must remember that someone who is married has an exclusive and full sexual relationship with their partner, but that same person has numerous other relationships, each of which must find expression in celibacy⁵. Celibacy is therefore something that must be understood as significant for every individual person every single day of their life. Someone who treats celibacy as important only for those who are single demonstrate that they neither understand celibacy nor a true Christian perspective on sexuality.

New Testament teaching

Jesus makes it clear that the celibate way is one that some of his disciples can expect to walk; some people are born celibates, some are made celibates, others choose celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of God (Mt 19:11-12). Paul writing about sexuality has many positive things to say about celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7:

- Celibacy is good (v1)
- Celibacy allows greater commitment to prayer (v5)
- Celibacy is a gift from God (v7)
- Celibacy makes troubled times easier to endure (v26)
- Celibacy makes it easier to be single minded for God (v32)

In contrast to this, people who forbid marriage and teach celibacy as a higher way are inspired by evil (1Tim 4:1-3).

Celibacy is a gift to be received by faith either for life or simply a period of time. Celibacy is not a lifetime vow but daily commitment⁶, it may last till death or it may give way to marriage; both are good and both are valid.

⁴ The fact is that sexual feelings are not uncontrollable. We must always remember that the most powerful sexual organ is the mind, and the Holy Spirit wants to transfigure our mind (Rm 12:2), the fruit of which is self-control (Gal 5:23)

⁵ Paul even argues that within marriage itself, the couple must be single-minded, "Let those who are married live as those who are not" (1Cor 7:29)

⁶ This was a reflection made by Cardinal Basil Hume in a BBC Radio 4 interview a short while before his death in 1999.

Experiencing celibacy

Because a Christian understanding of celibacy sets a pattern of sexual self-expression for everyone, whether single or married, it raises *three* important practical issues for us to consider:

- **Affirmation:** Everyone needs to feel affirmed within themselves and have a confidence that their gifts and abilities are being developed and used in a way that is valued. However, most local churches and our society in general is structured for heterosexual couples and can leave singles feeling socially and emotionally disadvantaged. The community of faith has the responsibility to be the place that honours the celibate equally alongside all others in seeing their gifts, abilities and characters being fulfilled, and their leadership and wisdom enriching the community as a whole. Too many singles, in reality, actually find themselves on the periphery rather than the hub in spite of what may be said to the contrary. Local church must create the family in which the solitary find their place (Ps 68:6); at the centre not at the edge.
- **Friendship:** Celibacy reminds us that the Quakers were correct in recognising that the core of authentic Christian community is a 'society of friends'. The time has come to discard the hollow, shallow and often superficial language of 'fellowship', which is also has no meaning in our contemporary culture, and to embrace true 'friendship'. Christian celibate sexuality highlights the uniqueness of the biblical concept of love. Here we see 'eros' and 'agape' flowing together in purity, sacrifice, control and commitment. Celibate love is rooted in friendship and can often express and experience dimensions of sexuality sometimes neglected in marriage. This was the case for David and Jonathan, who each loved the other 'as themselves' (1Sam 18:1), 'as their own life' (1Sam 20:17) with a love that 'surpassed the love of women (ie. the opposite sex)' (2Sam 1:26). This was not homosexual but celibate love, and the hallmark of true friendship open to all.
- **Intimacy:** Everyone needs the experience of closeness; to be deeply touched by others in physical and emotional encounter that is both significant and appropriate. Whether someone is celibate by calling, or by circumstance rather than choice, the experience can be one of loneliness, isolation and longing. This is something that has to be taken very seriously; Christians as communities and individuals must find ways of meeting these deep personal needs that everyone has, and those who are single have most acutely.

Exploring physical and emotional intimacy between people, raises the issue of appropriateness. We have discussed the fact that every human encounter and relationship has an erotic dimension as something very positive. It can, however, lead to difficulties if there is not clear understanding, communication wisdom and honesty.

It is actually intriguing just how physically intimate it is possible to be with another person while still being proper and wholesome in your actions. Yet, a simple look, comment or touch, that is just slightly different can be very intrusive and improper⁷.

⁷ There is a remarkable parallel here to our response and restraint in the face of violence; we all know exactly when we cross the line between expressing strong assertive meekness towards someone and when we violate them – the same is here in terms of physical appropriateness and intimacy.



The letter to Timothy gives simple insightful advice which, if followed, meets our celibate sexual demands of every circumstance. We are to treat:

‘... an older man ... as a father ... younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women like sisters, with all purity’ (1Tim 5:1-2).

Here we have intimacy with appropriate restraint, here we have love with real respect.

SEX AND MARRIAGE

Sex and text

The biblical creation stories suggest it was God’s intention for the majority of people to expect to share their lives in a permanent marriage relationship with a partner of the opposite sex (Gen 1:27-28; 2:18-25)⁸. We have seen that sexuality is a gift, celibacy is a gift (1Cor 7:7) and marriage is also a gift. According to Jesus, not everyone is called to marriage, but only to those to whom it is given it is there to be received (Mt 19:11). So we approach the subject of marriage with gratitude, humility and joyful responsibility.

The biblical picture of sexuality within marriage is awesome, it begins in a garden east of Eden:

‘The Lord God made man fall into a deep sleep, and while he was sleeping, he took out one of the man’s ribs and closed up the flesh. He formed a woman out of the rib and brought her to him. Then the man said, “Here at last is one of my own kind. Bone taken from my bone, and flesh from my flesh. Woman is her name, because she was taken out of man”. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united with his wife, and they become one flesh.’(Gen 2:21-25).

We see the imagery, language and implications of the Eden passage continuing to be used by the anonymous prophet in the prophecy called Malachi:

‘... God stands as witness between you and the wife of your youth, the wife with whom you have broken faith, even though she was your partner and wife by solemn covenant. Did not God create you into a single being, one flesh and spirit with her? And what is this single being destined for? God given offspring. Be careful for your own life, therefore, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce, says Yahweh the God of Israel’. (Mal 2:13-16)

Jesus also uses the imagery of Genesis 2 when speaking about the nature of marriage in a discussion about divorce:

Jesus answered, “Haven’t you read the scripture that says in the beginning the Creator made people male and female? And God said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one’. So they are no longer two, but one. What God has joined must not be separated”. (Mat 19: 4-6)

⁸ The exceptions would be those who remain celibate (which we have discussed above) and those who divorce or are homosexual in orientation.

Paul continues to use the same language and imagery when dealing with the pastoral issue of a Corinthian man having sex with prostitutes in the local brothel:

‘Do you not know that your bodies are parts of the body of Christ? Shall I take a part of Christ’s body and make it part of the body of a prostitute? May it never be! Do you not know that a person who joins themselves to a prostitute becomes one body with her? Scripture says, “The two become one flesh”. The person who joins themselves to the Lord is one spirit with him. Flee immorality! Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, the immoral person sins against their own body. Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?’ (1Cor 6:15-19).

Notice the reoccurring phrases and ideas; ‘one flesh’, ‘one body’, ‘one spirit’, ‘no longer two but one’; but it is the phrase ‘one flesh’ that has come to define a biblical understanding of marriage.

Sex as ‘one flesh’

What do we actually understand by this intriguing and tantalising phrase, ‘one flesh’? It distills both the miracle and mystery⁹ of marriage;¹⁰. The power of the moment is expressed in the dramatic concept of ‘leaving and cleaving’ (v24KJV). Leaving marks a complete new era, cleaving means a whole new relationship; not just in freshness but in very nature. The heart cry of joy, “Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh” (v23) proclaims how the bodies and lives of a man and a woman become completely interwoven, interdependent, interlaced, integrated in marriage.

The act of genital sexual union creates a unique ‘one flesh’ bond (cf Gen 2:24; Mal 2:15; Mt 19:6; 1Cor 6:16; Eph 5:28). Sexual intercourse produces something which is much more than simply physical and emotional, it touches the spirit as well and creates a unique state of being, two persons as one flesh. Sexual union is a life uniting act; an act in which the whole self affects the whole self. The physical coupling is indicative of a deeper coupling of heart, mind, soul and spirit. Scripture speaks of sexual intercourse as ‘to know’ (Heb *yada*); this is no coy euphemism but reveals the heart of the act as a special knowledge of intimacy. Sexual union ushers each partner into the subterranean depths of each others being; it is the interlocking of mind, heart, emotions and body¹¹.

⁹ Don’t forget that Paul sees the Genesis 2 passage as a mystery and as a prophecy about Christ and the church: see Appendix 4 at the end of these notes.

¹⁰ “Two complete people, unique individuals, created by the One in the image of the One, finding completeness in one another ... In sexual union each couple return to the garden east of Eden, a world in which there are no others, an aloneness in which one wants one other alone. They are again the first man and woman. There is a giving of self and a real hearing of each other, in which their whole being is engaged spontaneously without wanting anything or anyone else. Rejoicing as beings encountering and knowing one another within the bodily act. Above all else sexual intercourse is an act of love.” See Ramsey ‘One Flesh’ pub Grove 1975

¹¹ It is important to reflect on what popular sexual language communicates about people’s sexual experience.

Sex is marriage

In the light of all this it is quite clear, from a biblical perspective, that 'sex is marriage'. The act of sexual intercourse is an act of binding covenant, the act of marriage itself¹². Sexual intercourse is not simply the heart of marriage, or the physical consummation of publicly stated promises¹³; it is the binding and abiding moment that creates the marriage. Whatever words may or may not be spoken, God has so infused physical genital sex with spiritual significance that to engage in it is to be making a declaration of covenant. To have sexual intercourse is to say to your partner "I am committing myself to you in life-long covenant"; it is 'body language' in the most profound sense.

Sex apart from marriage

Of course, all this has profound implications for how we view sexual relationships engaged in quite apart from any commitment of marriage. Biblically this is promiscuous sexual intercourse:-

- When there is no intention of marriage it is 'fornication' (eg 1Th 4:3)¹⁴
- When it breaks an existing covenant of marriage it is 'adultery' (eg Ex 20:14)

Both are condemned because they are so destructive. Genital sex is an act that has profound consequences even if they are not fully realised by those involved;¹⁵ that is why a life uniting act without life uniting intent must wound the inner spirit.

The argument that 'sex is marriage' must *not* be used to suggest that a person is somehow 'married' to:-

- The first person they had sexual intercourse with
- Every person they have had random sex with
- Someone they may have been sexually violated by

Such an argument would be ridiculous, fly in the face of reason and logic, and make legalism an absurdity. The central issue is obviously the 'intention' that lies behind the act of sexual intercourse. To engage in a profound 'covenant making' act randomly, promiscuously or violently, with no intention of affirming its meaning can never be 'marriage' and must devalue and even pervert it.

¹² We shall discuss what is understood by the popular use of the word 'marriage' below.

¹³ Marriage is of course much more than just intimate sexual relationship, but sex integrates and symbolises all other dimensions of marriage.

¹⁴ Biblically there is a frequent link between the idea of 'fornication' and 'prostitution'; while prostitution is condemned the Bible also is sensitive to the plight of a woman trapped in poverty who can only survive by selling her body for sex.

¹⁵ This statement must of course be reflected upon alongside the astonishing truth of God's creative and liberating power in forgiveness; repentance for sexual sin makes us 'new creations' in Christ, we become 'virgins' all over again. The two facts, of the deep impact of sexual actions and the liberating healing of forgiveness, must be held together.

A contrasting illustration may help. A couple with a physical disability that prevents complete, or even, any sexual intercourse from taking place are still married, even though 'sex is marriage'. This is because of both their 'intention' and 'commitment' towards each other. Their relationship is more than just 'companionship' - they *are* married.

Sex before marriage

Christian young people often discuss the possibility of 'sex before marriage'. However, if 'sex is marriage' then the idea does not fit any biblical concept. Even asking the question shows the dislocation that has taken place between 'sex' and 'marriage' in popular Christian thinking. Sexual intercourse is not something that is *permitted* by marriage, but the act of covenant that *establishes* marriage itself. Clearer Christian teaching on the nature of sex and marriage would move the subject from legalism to liberty in both thinking and attitude.

What about couples who are engaged? Does the decision and promise to marry put them in a place where 'sleeping together' is now permissible? The question is one of appropriateness. Sex is marriage and marriage is living out your life with one another on a daily basis. If a couple have decided, for whatever reasons, not to do that as yet, then having sexual intercourse would seem inappropriate: -

- Remember that 'marriage' does not give you permission to have sex, rather sex is the act of covenant upon which the life-long experience of marriage is built;
- There is a strong argument for encouraging couples to have short engagements with simple wedding ceremonies.

Marriage with ceremony

When someone asks the question about a couple, "Are they married?", what is being implied? How is the word 'marriage' being used in this context?

It usually implies that the couple have gone through a public, legal and often religious ceremony. These marriage / wedding ceremonies are found in all traditional world cultures. They clearly show a universal human desire for stability and permanence in sexual relationship. They also show a recognition of the primal power of sex and the perceived need to control it within the community. Wedding ceremonies also remind us that marriage in a society is usually inextricably linked to power, property and procreation which communities have also thought necessary to control.

Marriage is highly complex. Deeply intimate and personal, while at the same time public and social. Wedding ceremonies attempt to do a number of things: -

- Affirm the couple within and between themselves
- Declare their intentions to the community
- Identify the couple within society
- Focus their sexual activity away from others
- Link together the families of the couple
- Give the families satisfaction and celebration

They also provide areas of protection that can be arranged by other legal means today: -

- Provide physical and legal protection to children
- Provide maintenance for the partners
- Give some insurance in case of a partner's death
- Control the distribution of inheritance

Christians have recognised the value and validity in a marriage ceremony with its vows and visibility providing an important emotional and social function.

The Bible refers to five wedding celebrations, but only five:

- Jacob and Leah (Gen 29:21)
- Samson and the Philistine woman (Jg 14:10-20)
- Parable of the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1-14)
- Wedding at Cana in Galilee (Jn 2:1-10)
- Marriage feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9)

References to so few wedding celebrations, which played such an important part in oriental society, in the light of so many references to marriage only reinforces the truth that it is the act of sexual intercourse, 'to know', that is the primary understanding of marriage in scripture.

Christians could say that a ceremony does for marriage what baptism does for faith. But we need to:

- Recognise that all marriage ceremonies are simply the product of a particular culture, they change over time, there is no 'biblical pattern'
- Remember that Christians can give true meaning to a wedding service of any culture; they clearly did in the early church
- Be aware that 'church marriage services' can be more to do with fashion and status than personal faith
- Consider whether all marriage ceremonies should be secular, with the religious service an option for people of faith

Marriage without ceremony

Today many couples reject the idea of marriage and simply 'live together'. The reasons may be complex and various. A few examples would be:

- They reject the social control that marriage represents
- They have childhood anguish due to parental divorce
- They claim, "A piece of paper won't make any difference!"
- They want greater sexual freedom etc.

The church has historically been very hostile to couples who live in open permanent sexual relationship which do not fit in with the traditional conventions of marriage. Often spoken of as 'living in sin'.

These couples feel they have simply side stepped marriage, which they see as irrelevant. An attitude that has gained increasing acceptance by many in society. In the light of this what are the issues that Christians need to reflect on:

- A Christian understanding that 'sex is marriage' means that 'marriage' cannot be side stepped. 'Marriage' is in fact a reality in all regular and intentional sexual relationships. It exists independent of any public ceremony or declaration.
- The core biblical requirement of marriage is 'faithfulness' (cf Hos 6.6) rather than formalities. God clearly delights in a couple who 'live together' in faithfulness for many years, in contrast to those that marry and divorce after only a few years. Christians have often been guilty of making more of ceremony than commitment.
- While wedding ceremonies would have been as important in biblical society as in any other culture, it is interesting how few are actually mentioned in contrast to the numerous references to couples 'knowing' each other at the point of marriage consummation (see above).
- Whatever the reasons a couple give for not having a public marriage ceremony, Christians should credit them with displaying real honesty in making their decision rather than simply going along with popular social expectations.

Reflection and response

The greater openness about sexual behaviour and the challenges to traditional patterns of sexual relationships is a wonderful opportunity for the church to show that it has something that is both significant and life-giving as well as challenging and disturbing on the subject. Not simply arguing for maintaining the traditional status quo, but coming from a position that takes people by surprise and confronts them with the truth.

- Christians should publicly state the biblical understanding that 'sex is marriage':
 - Provoke debate and discussion
 - Challenge people to think in fresh ways
 - Develop a fresh popular understanding about sex
- Christians should recognise all committed sexual relationships as marriage:
 - Give much more respect to 'common law marriage'¹⁶
 - Affirming God's delight in faithfulness
 - Making it clear that you cannot side-step marriage
 - Show the inseparable link between sex and marriage
- Christians should encourage cohabiting couples to look at the responsibilities of their relationship in a fresh way:
 - Affirming them in the choice they have made;
 - Challenging their inner attitudes towards commitment;
 - Making clear that separation would be divorce

¹⁶ We recognise that this is a popular way of referring to long term committed cohabiting relationships and not a technical legal term.



- Christians should support public policy to aid cohabiting couples:
 - Financial parity with conventionally married couples
 - Legal and financial protection following the death of a partner
 - Remove stigma from their children - no child is 'illegitimate' or a 'bastard'

- Christians should recognise that cohabiting relationships can be fragile:
 - Encourage couples to be positive about their relationships
 - Welcome them into the life of the local church
 - Should the couple choose to formally marry they should be encouraged to count the years of their marriage from when their relationship first began and not just from their 'wedding day'

- Christians should firmly challenge all forms of promiscuity:
 - Casual sex with no sense of responsibility
 - Serial 'monogamous' relationships
 - Married couples with 'open marriages'; 'swinging' with other sexual partners

These responses seek to strengthen the biblical concept of marriage as a relevant and truthful Christian voice in contemporary society. It should be clear that they fundamentally challenge the ideas that, "Marriage is not important" or that "Sex before marriage is permissible".

Appendix 1: Sex is Commitment

The fact that 'sex is marriage' makes it implicit that sexual intercourse is an act of commitment. By this very act the two become 'one flesh', and as Jesus says, 'what God has joined let no one separate' [Mt 19:6]. Here the theme is permanence, not a static fixedness but a life long living constancy. Sex and sexuality are like precious streams of water in a dry land, which are to be treasured and protected if they are to remain refreshing and pure:

'Drink the water from your own cistern,
 living water from your own well.
 Do not let your fountains flow to waste elsewhere
 nor your streams in the public streets.
 Let them be for yourself alone
 not for strangers at the same time.
 And may your fountainhead be blessed.
 Find joy with the wife of your youth,
 as fair as a hind, graceful as a fawn.
 Let hers be the company you keep,
 hers the breasts that ever fill you with delight
 hers the love that holds you captive'.

(Pr 5:15-19)

Sexual intercourse is an act of covenant between a man and a woman, and it is much more than an agreement, it is a commitment. In both promise and spirit it should bind the couple together as strongly as being one flesh. But it is also a covenant with and before God; nothing short of 'a covenant of God' (cf Pr 2:17). In the words of the prophet, 'God



stands as witness between you and the wife of your youth ... your wife and partner by solemn covenant' (Mal 2:13). It is only within sex as commitment that the full power of the sexual experience, which makes marriage, can work its creative effect in replacing the 'aloneness' which God said was not good (cf Gen 2:18):

- **Sex gives sustenance** : supporting and cherishing one another
- **Sex gives healing** : childhood hurts healed by love
- **Sex gives growth** : self-realisation, fulfillment and maturity

From a biblical Christian understanding sex without life long commitment is an affront to God, an insult to the partner and an experience without true meaning.

Appendix 2: Sex is Pleasure

Scripture presents love making and sexual intercourse as a joyful celebration, with mutual pleasuring at its epicentre. In the garden man and woman were together, 'naked and not ashamed' (Gen 2:25). Here is innocent and uninhibited eroticism; uncorrupted by sin. Here is sensuality without salaciousness, passion without promiscuity, love without lust. The whole of the Song of Songs comes as a commentary on this verse, and as a symphony in praise of making love:

“Restore my strength with raisins
and refresh me with apples!
I am weak with passion.
His left hand is under my head,
and his right hand caresses me.”

Before the dawn wind rises,
before the shadows flee,
I will go to the mountain of myrrh,
to the hill of frankincense ...
My sweetheart, my bride, is a secret garden,
a walled garden, a private spring;
where plants flourish ...

Fountains water the garden,
streams of flowing water,
brooks gush down from the Lebanon mountains.”

Wake up north wind.
South wind, blow on my garden;
fill the air with fragrance.
Let my lover come to his garden
and eat the best of its fruits”.
[Song of Songs 2:5-6; 4:6,12-16]

The Song exudes sublime sensuality through every verse, breathing the qualities of true erotic love throughout:

- **Intensity:** (2:5; 3:2; 3:4) eros without shame
- **Restraint:** (8:10; 6:3,8) sex too deep for squandering
- **Exclusive:** (4:12) love kept; (4:16) love aroused
- **Mutuality:** both initiate, both receive : book structure
- **Permanence :** (8:6-7) no promiscuity - 'love never ends' (1Cor 13:7)

So often the experience of being engulfed in an ocean of sexual passion has been viewed as unspiritual. It has been religion, not faith, that has inhibited intercourse. It has been religion that says 'sex equals reproduction', taught 'the missionary position' and suggested you 'lie back and think of the kingdom'! God, in contrast, wanted to lead couples back to the garden and beyond. The New Testament is quite clear :-

- 'marriage is honourable, and the 'bed' (Gk *koite / coitis*) undefiled'; intercourse is pure and good (Heb 13:4)
- 'each should satisfy the others needs' (1Cor 7:3); there is to be full fulfillment
- 'the wife / husband is not master of her / his body, the other is' (1Cor 7:4)
- 'do not deny yourself to each other' (1Cor 7:5)

There are to be no restraints within the circumference of love and the other partner's wishes. It has been wisely commented that, "Some people would be surprised at what some men and women of God get up to in bed!"

- Sex is communion : the total sharing of the total self
- Sex is recreation : both fun and revitalising - the KJV speaks of it as 'sporting' (Gen 26:8)!

The Rabbis taught that Friday night (Sabbath) was the most important night to make love, the night that celebrated the creation!

The physical act of sex is a whole range of different experiences, affected by different circumstances and moods and genital sex is but a small part of the vast experience:

- It takes time and sensitivity
- It demands honest communication about feelings and desires
- It requires security about identity and self worth
- It needs freedom from fear, guilt and tension
- It develops by experiment and sensitive technique

An orgasm; that exultant outpouring of energy, is not the sole aim of intercourse. However, it is the 'pleasure bond' which does so much to weld the lives of a couple together.

Appendix 3: Sex is Procreation

Human sexuality is not reproduction, but it has the stream of procreation running through its heart. We have already made the point that to insist that sexual intercourse must have as its primary purpose the conception of children is a distortion. Nevertheless, 'children are a gift from the Lord, they are a real blessing' (Ps 127:3). The fact that children can be the perfect fruit of sexual love, 'one flesh unity having passed into the one flesh of the child'

(Ramsey). The inability to conceive children can traumatise the marriage relationship; in the words of Rachel, "Give me children or I die" (Gen 30:1).

God's command to the original man and woman was, 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gen 1:28), and the continuation of the human species depends upon obedience to these words. And yet, despite what can be enormous social pressure couples don't have to have children; the choice is theirs. This of course raises the whole question of contraception and birth control, which has been a matter of huge debate in the church over the years:

- If sexual intercourse has the primary purpose of propagating children then contraception will be wrong, and abstinence the only path if conception is no longer desired
- If sexual intercourse has the primary purpose of expressing relationship then contraception will be valid; every couple has the freedom to decide not to have children if they so wish

In a world experiencing a demographic explosion, limited resources, declining infant mortality and a growing number of women who want to express themselves in the home and beyond it seems essential. Surely God's command to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth' (Gen 1:28) has been more than fulfilled!

Appendix 4: Sex is Mystery

The human sexual experience is so profound that it defies full expression and is shrouded in mystery of itself. It has spiritual depths which speak of God himself. So it comes as no surprise to find that within itself it is a parable of eternity:

'Submit yourselves to one another in obedience to Christ ... A person never hates their own body, but feeds and looks after it; and that is the way Christ treats the Church, because it is his body and we are its living parts. As scripture says, "For this reason, a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh". There is a deep mysterious truth implied in this scripture which I understand as applying to Christ and the Church. But it also applies to you : every husband must love his wife as himself; and every wife respect her husband'. (Eph 5:21-33)

God created sexuality as a picture of his ultimate relationship with us. We are the 'bride of Christ' (Rev 21:2) to touch the heart of sexual experience is to touch the quintessence of eternal relationship (Jn 17:21).

'For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven' (Mt 22:30).

However it may appear, this scripture is not saying that our future destiny is to be asexual, other worldly beings, beyond the resurrection. It is simply saying that in that new deathless existence we will experience a whole new kind of life. It is true that there will no longer be procreation, and the exclusive relationships within which this takes place at present. But it points to the possibility of a fulfillment of relationships in the risen life which the exclusiveness of the marriage bond in earthly life would have made unthinkable.

Resurrection body expression takes relationship, the essence of sexuality, to unimagined dimensions. The marriage bond as mystery, speaking of spiritual truth, affirms this.

Questions and Reflections

1. Why do you think the church has so often failed to integrate sexuality and spirituality?
2. In what practical ways can we honour celibacy?
3. How would you counsel a common-law couple who have become Christians?

Open Reflection

People in your neighbourhood think that Christians have nothing positive to say on the subject of sex, and that Christian behaviour in this area is both inhibited and legalistic. Can you suggest reasons why this is the popular view about Christians and sex? What positive contribution should Christians make to the contemporary debate and experience of sex? Christian teaching on sex will always be a challenge to every culture, nevertheless how can it be presented in a way that will command respect?

Reading and Resources

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