

# Hung up on sexual matters?

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In an article in an earlier edition of Press On, the amazing Hazel McHaffie made the following aside to her main remarks:

*Why is it that Christians are so hung up on sexual matters? Our Lord wasn't. Remember his gentle way with prostitutes and adulterers and the marginalised? And the very same passages in the epistles that talk about same sex relationships, also list greed and idolatry and envy and gossip. Oh dear! Jesus' words echo uncomfortably: 'Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.' But that's a whole subject in itself.<sup>1</sup>*

Hazel raises a valid question. It does seem to me that often Christians are “hung up” on sexual matters, to use Hazel’s phrase. The comparison she makes between this emphasis on sexual matters and the focus of Jesus’ teaching strikes me as a challenge to all of us. It cannot be healthy for Christians to have their priorities so significantly out of step with their master.

This will be the first in a series of articles about Christianity and sex, which I hope will encourage the reader to take a fresh view about this important topic, maybe challenge some ideas that might need reconsidering, and ultimately reach a more satisfying narrative about sex. To start this series, in this article I want to explore some of the reasons why some Christians might have an unhelpful emphasis on sexual matters. Christianity is quite diverse, and not all Christians have these hang ups. Inevitably this article is based, in part, on my own experience of my own community so may speak primarily to those within that same community. However, I think these trends cross multiple communities and denominations, which speaks to the fact that they are rooted in issues common to many Christians. In this article, I want to challenge us all, including myself, to think deeply about our motivations and be honest with ourselves about the sensitivities that are provoking us. I will propose several different explanations for why some Christians have

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<sup>1</sup> Hazel McHaffie, “Ethics, Empathy, Emotions”, Press On Journal, [www.pressonjournal.org](http://www.pressonjournal.org), 2021

become hung up on sexual matters – I suspect there is some truth in all of them – before concluding that there is a problem at the heart of the Christian theology of sex.

## Are Christians hung up on sex?

Before moving on, it is important to say something about the claim that some Christians are hung up on sexual matters. What I mean by this claim is that some Christians put a disproportionate emphasis on condemning sexual sins both within their own communities and in the wider world. I think that some Christians have come to place a significance on sexual matters that is out of step with the priorities of Jesus and the apostles. This misalignment of priorities is concerning in itself, but also seems symptomatic of a deeper issue. For the purposes of this article, I will not be focusing on the question of the morality of different sexual activities; I will simply be observing that some Christians prioritise those the condemnation of sexual activities above other behaviours. Christian attitudes to premarital sex and to homosexual acts are two such examples.

To evidence this disproportionate emphasis on sexual matters, let me give you the following thought experiment. Imagine a typical Christadelphian ecclesia. I want you to imagine four members of this ecclesia. The first is a successful business owner, who is personally wealthy and respected in the community. He also refuses to pay his workers a fair wage. The second is a self-employed builder and handyman. He asks his clients to pay him in cash so that he doesn't have to pay tax. The third is a man who has been a member of the ecclesia all his life. He has held a grudge against another member for thirty years, a grudge so intense that he refuses to even shake hands with this other person. The fourth is an unmarried brother, who has gotten his long-term girlfriend pregnant following a one-time "indiscretion". Now ask yourself, in this imagined ecclesia, which member is going to be disfellowshipped or, at very least, reprimanded. If your answer is only the unmarried brother, then that is pretty telling about our priorities as a community.

This is not just my experience. I put out a poll on a Christadelphian Facebook group and asked the question: "Do you think our community has put disproportionate significance on issues of sex and relationships in contrast to other issues?" The majority answer was "Yes". But more interesting than the poll itself were the comments that followed, because it became clear that some of those who answered "no" felt that what was lacking was an emphasis on healthy sexual

relationships. The comments gave a picture of a community that was quick to condemn sexual sin but gave little or no discussion as to how to have healthy and appropriate sexual relationships. Here is selection of those comments:

- ” I can say that churches and Christian ethics in general have put far too much emphasis on sexual sin and not enough on sexual harmony and satisfaction. We get all uptight about unmarried people having sex, and couldn’t care less about married people not having it.*
- ” Especially as a young person I felt there was a lot of emphasis on rules about what sex you can’t have, but not much focus on healthy relationships.*
- ” We tolerate all sorts of gossip and greed and so forth, while practising a hard line on \*some\* forms of sin in regard to sex and relationships.*
- ” We overemphasise the badness of sexual sins compared to other sins, but we don’t do nearly enough to prepare people for the sexual temptations life can offer.*
- ” My experience of the community is that we have some narrowly-focused obsessions and some weirdly-ignored blind spots.*

This is not just an issue of how Christians speak about those “in the world”. This is causing real harm to members of our own community.

## Does the Bible have the same emphasis?

Now, of course, the Bible does have some things to say about sexual sin. For example, Jesus does condemn both adultery and sexual immorality. Whilst he refuses to cast the first stone against the woman taken in adultery, he tells her to “Go and sin no more”.<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ own teaching on marriage, based on the creation story, exhibits his expectation that sexual relationships will be committed, faithful, and lifelong.<sup>3</sup> And yet, if you think about emphasis within Jesus’ teaching, he mentions “sexual immorality” only four times in the gospels and never mentions homosexual acts. In contrast, the sin-words used most frequently by Jesus are “hypocrisy” (21 times) and “betrayal” (25 times). If you want to see Jesus’ emphasis, see the excoriating condemnation he lays upon the Pharisees and teachers of the law,

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<sup>2</sup> John 8:11; this story is not present in all manuscripts of John’s gospel and may not have been part of the original text – the question of this origin of this story is a topic for a different article.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 19:1-6

*You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?*

*(Matt 23:33)*

He is not talking about sexual matters, but those who had twisted the commandments of God and neglected justice, mercy, and faithfulness. When he says to the chief priests and elders, *Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you,*<sup>4</sup> it is not because he thought prostitution was okay – it wasn't – but because the past sins of a prostitute were nothing compared to the unrepentant heart of those who made a pretence of righteousness. If we want to call out “woes” on this generation (and I'm not sure how productive that would be), should we not be calling out the hypocrisy and feigned religiosity of the rich and powerful?

We see the same pattern in the letter of James, who does not refer to “sexual immorality” and only mentions adultery in passing, and yet is incandescent in his righteous fury against the rich and powerful.

*Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you...*

*Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one,<sup>5</sup> who was not opposing you.*

*(James 5:1-6)*

James brings this terrible warning against the rich and powerful that the day of the Lord is coming and that they face condemnation for their self-indulgence. If James were writing his letter today, in a world of such rampant corruption, what do you think his emphasis would be?

And when Paul writes about those “wrongdoers [who] will not inherit the kingdom”, yes, he lists the sexually immoral and adulterers, but also the greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers. He is hardly discriminating between one sin over another. When he says, “the acts of the flesh are obvious”, yes, he mentions sexual immorality and debauchery, but also hatred, discord, jealousy, dissensions, and factions.<sup>6</sup> These words are all the more pointed because Paul is

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 21:31

<sup>5</sup> By the way, when James says “you have condemned and murdered the innocent one”, I am not convinced he means literal murder. I think he may be talking about murder by neglect.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21

writing to a church deeply divided by dissensions over circumcision. Far from obsessing over sexual immorality, Paul calls out fractious and contentious behaviour within the church for condemnation, because such behaviour is not befitting for those destined to inherit the kingdom of God.

Looking at this sample from the scriptures, we do not see a strong emphasis on sexual sin over and above other behaviours. Whilst sexual immorality is clearly condemned, Jesus and the apostles have other priorities to address. So if we and other Christians today are giving a disproportionate emphasis to sexual matters, then we are radically out of step with Jesus and the apostles, and risk blinkering ourselves from their priorities. If we are so keen to condemn the sexual sins of others, is it possible that we have that proverbial plank in own eye blinding us to the ways we've deviated from the priorities of Christ?

## Why are some Christians hung up on sex?

That brings me to heart of the matter. If Christians in the modern age have become hung up on sexual matters, why is that? What could be motivating this concern, this anxiety, over sexual matters that distracts us from other priorities? Let me start with some general observations.

One thing I would observe is that it is not actually all sexual matters that receive the same attention. Whilst Christians are currently very concerned with homosexuality and issues over gender, and to a lesser extent premarital sex, do we put the same emphasis on all sexual matters? It is undoubtedly true of mainstream Christianity (and I'm afraid true of our community as well) that whilst some sexual sins have received vocal and immediate censure, others have been covered up and hidden away. Specifically, child abuse. Remember what Jesus said about those who cause the little ones to stumble,

*It would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. (Matt 18:6)*

Yet, historically, the perpetrators of child abuse have been shielded, while others have been cut off from the church for their sexual sins. I think we should ask ourselves hard questions about the origins of this bias. If we are showing partiality in our judgement, are we being influenced by something other than attitudes of Christ?

Further, for all the noise and heat in parts of Christian discourse about homosexuality and premarital sex, where is the condemnation of sex trafficking, or sexual violence, or marital rape? If you were minded to highlight the wickedness of this present age, why would you not start with the grooming of vulnerable children by sexual predators? Again, our predilections may be indicative of our prejudice.

I would also draw attention to the sheer numbers of cases in wider Christian society, where a preacher or a politician who has advocated zealously for family values has turned out to be having an extra-marital affair. Or the cases where a prominent speaker against homosexuality has later come out as gay. There is a great quote from Terry Pratchett's book *Diggers* where it says,

*... and the funny thing was that people who weren't entirely certain they were right always argued much louder than other people, as if the main person they were trying to convince were themselves.*

I think there is a lot of truth in that. In many cases, we reveal our own uncertainties and confusions through those issues that we speak strongly about. And sex, with all the emotions and mixed motives involved, can be confusing. It may be that for some Christians that they are so vehement on sexual matters precisely because internally they are uncertain or feel pulled in different directions.

## Scapegoating

Christian counsellor Mark Ongley draws an interesting parallel between Christian attitudes to homosexuality and the way families behave when the parents are alcoholic.<sup>7</sup> Apparently, there is a common pattern that, if the parents are alcoholic, one child begins to act up and thus draws the criticism of others in the family. This child becomes the scapegoat. This scapegoating is a subconscious reaction to a situation where you can't talk about the elephant in the room. The alcoholism of the parents cannot be addressed, so something else takes up all the angst and uncertainty the family is feeling: the scapegoat. Ongley argues that Christians have made homosexuality a scapegoat, because there is an elephant in the room that they are trying to avoid: the sexual revolution. The significant change in societal attitudes towards sexuality that took

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Ongley, "The Church and Homosexuality", Seedbed, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJ-eWG9ZLVc&t=373s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJ-eWG9ZLVc&t=373s)

place in the 1960s. I think there is some truth in that proposal, but I suspect the issue is may be bigger and wider.

I think we can apply the concept of the scapegoat to the question of this article. However, I don't think it is just the sexual revolution that some Christians find it difficult to face. The 1960s not only ushered in the sexual revolution but also began the rapid decline in Christianity in the UK and in the US.<sup>8</sup> The UK is now probably best described as post-Christian country, with less than half the population identifying as Christian and only a small minority still attending a church regularly. The numbers are not quite so stark in the US, but certainly Christianity has lost some of its privileged status. That loss of dominance and status undoubtedly has a dislocating effect on many Christians, who may feel this loss of privilege as an attack on their identity. No wonder then that, consciously or subconsciously, some may harken back to a different time and context, such as the 1950s, when Christianity was still in the ascendancy. This was a period when (in perception if not in reality) the nuclear family was the bedrock of society, premarital sex was frowned upon, divorce was difficult and uncommon, and homosexuality was outside the established norms of society. It may well be that there is something with the Christian subconscious that connects sexual freedoms with the loss of Christian dominance in society.

Thus sexual matters – particularly homosexuality – becomes a scapegoat, because it is easier to name something external as the threat, than to face our feelings about becoming a minority in a society that seems to be moving on from its Christian roots.

### “Saint” Augustine

Christian attitudes to sexual matters have deep theological roots. If I were to ask you what images come to mind when I use words like “sin” and “temptation”, I suspect there is a good chance that you are thinking of something sexual. In his book *Unapologetic*, Francis Spufford writes about the common connotations of the word ‘sin’:

*‘Sin,’ you can see, always refers to the pleasurable consumption of something. Also, it always preserves some connection to sex.*

I think he is right in his analysis. There is something deeply ingrained in our use of the word “sin” that connects it to sex. This may be due to Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was a Christian

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<sup>8</sup> These two phenomena may well be connected, though it is not obvious which way the causality runs.

bishop and theologian of the 4th century. His thought was influential on the direction of Christian theology to this day. It was Augustine who either introduced or made popular the view that sexual arousal and lust were a consequence of the Fall.

According to Augustine, prior to the Fall Adam and Eve had the capability to procreate but rationally and without lust. However, after the Fall, their eyes were opened and they first saw each other as objects of sexual desire. For Augustine, this is why Adam and Eve now sought to clothe themselves and hide because they now felt a sexual desire that they had not previously. Augustine argues that because of that original sin, all humans since have been cursed to feel lust and involuntary sexual arousal. He is so adamant of the sinfulness of sexual desire that he says that sex is only ever for the purposes of procreation and that even then it is not without evil because it will inevitably be accompanied by sexual attraction.

This long-embedded idea that sex is sinful is an under-current in Christian thinking about sex to the present day. This is seen in the number of Christian couples who struggle on entering marriage to overcome a sense of shame in sexual pleasure.<sup>9</sup> This is also seen in the purity culture in evangelicalism (which has spilled over into other Christian denominations) that prizes virginity as a sacred state. This can be scarring and has led to some feeling shame when their virginity is lost, even within marriage.

At the time I was at university and hanging out with Christians of other denominations, the book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris was being circulated and was popular amongst some Christians I knew. This book argued against dating, or even kissing before marriage. The author later came to reconsider his views, rejected his own conclusions, and has since announced that he is no longer a Christian. The danger of purity culture is the way it equates sexual desire with impurity, and impurity with sin. How damaging to young Christians to feel that their natural bodily reactions are, in and of themselves, impure and tainted. How harmful to feel that just by having a body, that reacts as bodies do, you are displeasing to God.

## Fear of Missing Out

On top of all these considerations, it may be that Christians are hung up on sexual matters precisely because they would like to be having more sex and are worried that they may be missing

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<sup>9</sup> Why Christian Couples Feel Guilty About Sex, [www.onlyyouforever.com/why-christian-couples-feel-guilty-about-sex/](http://www.onlyyouforever.com/why-christian-couples-feel-guilty-about-sex/)



out. If you were to ask Christians, of the things that they would want to do, what things does their faith prevent them from doing, I suspect very few are going to answer murder, or theft, or blasphemy. Few people aspire to be murderers, or thieves, or blasphemers. Most of the behaviours that the Bible condemns as sinful are not actually that attractive or desirable. But sex is – particularly for someone who is single and without that physical intimacy, or someone who is in relationship and trying to wait till marriage. It may well be that they feel keenly the price of their faith that keeps them from something they understandably and naturally desire. Even for those who are happily married, there may be curiosity about the road not travelled.

If someone does feel a tension between their desires on the one hand, and what they feel their faith permits on the other, then they may understandably experience resentment against the seeming prodigious sexual freedom exhibited within wider society. Whether consciously or subconsciously, resentment can be a powerful motivator for the condemnation of others. So what might manifest as moral outrage about promiscuity or homosexuality may be frustration at unfulfilled desires.

This problem is rooted in the fact that we are sexual creatures. It is part of our physiology to desire sexual intercourse. That desire is not prompted or dictated by reason or logic. That desire arises unbidden through simple encounters with opposite sex (if one is heterosexual). And that desire does not disappear even when one is in a loving and committed relationship.

We can think about the brain as having three main components: the so-called “reptilian brain” that is all about instinct, the “limbic brain” that is about emotions, and the neocortex, the rational part of the brain. This triune model has some problems, but it is a useful simplification for understanding the tension within our brains. The “reptilian brain” is responsible for impulses like hunger and thirst and sexuality, but this is based purely on instinct rather than rational choice. It is the neocortex that is doing the thinking and is trying to keep those impulses in check. This is the tension between our impulses and rational thought is something all humans must live with. Christians are, of course, human and are not exempt from that tension. Christians will have the same impulses as other humans, but how they control those impulses and how they interpret them will be different.

Now if Christians have a long ingrained aspect of their theology that sexual impulses are impure and defiling, that sex is somehow inherently sinful, that they should aim for a state of sexual neutrality, and yet they, like all humans being, are physiologically hard-wired for regular

and unprompted sexual impulses, isn't it just inevitable that this tension is going to spill over somehow? It may be that for some Christians their internal discomfort over the tension between their theology and their physiology finds expression in active and sustained commentary on the sexual sins of others. Or, to put it more simply, perhaps some Christians are hung up on sexual matters because they can't make their own sexuality fit within their own theology.

## Summary

Why are Christians hung up on sexual matters? There are likely to many reasons: bias and prejudice, culture and conditioning, force of habit. It may well be in that in a post-Christian generation, sometimes Christians are struggling to keep sense of their own identity and scapegoating certain sexual behaviours is easier than address their loss of status. But I think there is a deeper and more fundamental problem. A theological problem. I think many Christians are yet to find a comfortable resolution between their theology and their sexuality, which leads to discomfort and resentment. This internal discomfort spills over into external condemnation of the sexual freedoms of others.

This tension is likely to be detrimental to those Christians themselves, and is unlikely to make them well placed to give guidance to others. If Christians are hung up on sexual matters, they are likely to have their priorities skewed, focusing on premarital sex or homosexuality whilst ignoring far greater societal and personal ills. If we are to live up to the calling of Christ, then we need to align with his priorities, and that may mean that we need to take a fresh look at our theology of sexuality. I hope to address this in the next article in this series.