

A Healthier View on Sex

Tom Gaston

In the previous article in this series, I addressed the question “Why are some Christians hung up on sexual matters?” I posited a number of different explanations, including the proposal that some Christians have a problematic theology of sexuality. I suggested that for many Christians there is a tension between their physiology and their theology, and that this tension is expressed in resentment and condemnation of the sexual freedom of others. In this article I want to explore those theological missteps that have led to some unhelpful conclusions. I also want to start articulating the alternative with the hopes that we can achieve a more balanced view of sexuality.

Embodied Persons

One common doctrine of mainstream Christianity is the immortality and immateriality of the soul. This doctrine leads to the idea that your true self is that immortal soul, which will survive and exist apart from your body. Taken to the extreme, this might imply that your body is not part of your person but is just a vessel in which your true person resides. There is language in the Bible that might point in that direction. Peter refers to his body as a “tent”, implying it is a temporary dwelling, and Jesus refers to the possibility of body and soul being killed separately, implying that they are distinct.¹

Yet the Bible also presents us with the union of body and soul as being the whole person. For instance, Paul writes, *May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess 5:23)*. Whilst Paul clearly expects that the body will be transformed at the resurrection, nonetheless he views life after death as an embodied state.² This is indicative of

¹ 2Peter 1:13, Matthew 10:28

² 1Corinthians 15:42-44

the fact that for the early Christians the human person was body, soul, and spirit – not just a soul. Your body is part of your person, not simply a temporary shell.

Therefore we should be cautious about drawing too sharp a distinction between our body and our soul, as though our body were something separate from our true selves. It is undoubtedly true that our bodily impulses can sometimes be in conflict with our rational choices, but those are tensions that exist within the same person. Whilst we might think of our body as having a mind of its own, it would be more accurate to think about our body giving us multiple different signals that our rational mind has to synthesize and moderate. Our bodies, then, are not inherently wicked or sinful, but are part of God’s creation that is declared “very good” by God himself.³

This includes bodily functions like the desire for sex.⁴

The Flesh and Body

Paul talks often about the flesh. In particular, he talks about the works of the flesh in contrast to the fruits of the Spirit – clearly for Paul, the flesh and the Spirit are in opposition. Consider these words from his letter to the Romans:

The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. (Rom 8:6-8)

You might be forgiven for thinking that when Paul talks about the flesh he is talking about the body. If so, then the desires of the body would seem to be in opposition to God. Paul gives no grounds for exceptions here: the mind governed by the *flesh* is death. On this reading, our bodily desires, including our sexual impulses, could only be viewed as something to be resisted, as something that would draw us away from God. But such a reading is both incoherent and unstudied. After all, our bodily desires include the desire for food, water, and oxygen – such desires cannot be meaningfully said to be in opposition to God.

Paul uses the term “the flesh” in a special and technical sense to refer to humans in their sinful state apart from God. He is not referring to the body per se. This is seen, for example, in

³ Genesis 1:31

⁴ And if anyone, Augustine or otherwise, were to suggest that our sexual impulses are a consequence of “the Fall”, then I would ask them for chapter and verse because Genesis knows nothing of such a proposal.

Colossians⁵ when Paul condemns the “merely human commands” of those who practice “false humility” and “harsh treatment of the body”. He says these human commands “lack any value in preventing the indulgence of the flesh”. Here Paul distinguishes between the body (*soma*) and the flesh (*sarx*). The fact that he says that harsh treatment of the *body* does not restrain the desires of the *flesh* is indicative of the fact that they are two different things for Paul. It is not our *bodies* that are in opposition to God – our bodies are part of who we are – it is *sin* that is in opposition to God.

It is worth focusing on what Paul says in the second chapter of Colossians. He is castigating those who create self-imposed regulations against the joys of this present world – those who say, “*Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch*” (Col 2:21). He is writing against those advocating for asceticism, that is, neglecting the body. He accuses them of “empty deceit” and being “puffed up without reason”. They have created human rules that have no value and are not according to Christ.

Paul says something similar in his letter to Timothy, writing:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. (1Ti 4:1-5)

Paul is explicitly talking about those who “forbid marriage”. When he says *everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving*, he is including sexual intercourse. The fact that he ascribes the rejection of the gifts of God’s creation as the “teachings of demons” means we should have no mistake about his conviction on this point. There is nothing sinful in-and-of-itself about sexual intercourse or sexual desire.

To cast the gift as sinful risks dishonouring the giver.

⁵ see Colossians 2:8-23, specifically verses 8, 18, 21, and 22-23

Virginity

“Virgin” is a hard binary word. Until your first act of sexual intercourse, you are a virgin and ever after you are not. This is an identity-word that has almost no comparator amongst other activities. We would usually not label someone a “thief” ever after their first theft, nor less label someone an “accountant” after their first dalliance with budgeting. Yet the word “virgin” is delineated by a single act. Now if you also consider the state of virginity to be one of special innocence, purity, even righteousness, then through one act this special purity is lost – never to be regained. This idea of purity that cannot be remade once lost is a key tenet of the purity gospel. It is also an idea that has some troubling implications.

A Christian who believes that virginity is inherently pure and innocent is only going to feel a sense of shame when that virginity is lost, even if that first act of sexual intercourse is on their wedding night. Given the general injunction upon humankind to “be fruitful and increase in number”, there can be no possible sense in which those fulfilling that commandment could be regarded as less pure than others.⁶ This is false conclusion derived from faulty premises.

Perhaps more troubling is the idea that those who engage in sexual sin are somehow irredeemable, in direct contradiction of the promise of the new covenant that God will “remember their sins no more”.⁷ Yes, at a purely semantic level, someone who has had sex is no longer a virgin. But in the eyes of God, one who has repented of their sins and been forgiven is as though they had never sinned.

Under the Law of Moses, there are rules and regulations about the virginity of brides.⁸ (The virginity of men is not at issue.) Indeed, the penalty if a new wife cannot produce proof of virginity is death. This might lead us to suppose that there is some special significance in female virginity in the eyes of God. However, in this same passage, there is a distinction made between a virgin who is pledged to be married – that is betrothed – and one who is not. In the former case, if a man sleeps with a betrothed virgin then both are stoned to death; it is a form of adultery. However, in the case of a virgin who is not betrothed to a man, if she is raped then the penalty for her rapist is not death – it is fifty shekels of silver to be paid to her father.

⁶ Genesis 1:28

⁷ Hebrews 8:12

⁸ see Deuteronomy 22:13-29, specifically verses 20-21, 24, and 28

Why? Because the question of female virginity, under the Law of Moses, is not a matter of her wellbeing or her purity, but a matter of the bride price which her father expects – the dowry paid for her virginity.⁹ This is symptomatic of a patriarchal society, where daughters (who could not earn a living) were an expense to be borne until they became an asset to be sold. This is not a moral standard that Christians aspire to.

Paul writes to the Corinthians that he wishes to present them as “a pure virgin” to Christ.¹⁰ This is, of course, metaphorical, but we should not think the implication is that virginity in-and-of-itself is a more righteous state. Paul explicitly says in this same verse that the Corinthian church has been “promised” to Christ. This language of Paul builds upon Christ’s parables of the bridegroom. The church has been betrothed to Christ and now awaits his return for the marriage of the Lamb. In this context, the metaphorical loss of virginity would entail an act of infidelity – of unfaithfulness – and *that* is the point at issue.

It is not the act of sexual intercourse that makes one impure. It is the context that denotes the significance of the act.

Lust

When I was at university, for some reason unknown to me, students began asking each other how many of the Ten Commandments they had broken. What was interesting was that non-Christians would typically answer “eight”, because most people have told a lie and stolen something (if only their sibling’s sweets) and dishonoured their parents at times. Christians, however, would sometimes answer “nine”, not because they had actually committed adultery but because they thought they had committed adultery “in their heart” through lusting after someone.

This idea derives from a single verse found in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, where he says:

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt 5:28)

Many Christians draw the implication from this verse that to sexually desire another person is equivalent to adultery, or, by extension, as bad as premarital sex (if the object of your desire is

⁹ also see Exodus 22:16-17

¹⁰ 2Corinthians 11:2

unmarried). Given how frequent sexual attraction occurs, especially for eighteen year old students flush full of hormones, this equivalency would turn many into daily adulterers. But is that really what Jesus means?

Later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus says this:

For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person. (Matt 15:19-20)

And, this:

A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. (Matt 12:35)

It is a consistent theme throughout the teaching of Jesus that the heart is the origin of both good and evil. From the heart comes evil thoughts and it is those evil thoughts that lead to sins, like adultery and sexual immorality. James says something similar when he writes,

Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (James 1:14-15)

Jesus is warning against a rigid legalism that focuses on the *actions*, rather than the origins of those actions. For Jesus, morality is not about keeping rules and commandments, but is about the state of your heart before God. This is not to say that adultery-in-the-heart is as bad as actual adultery; the point is that it is a heart that desires adultery that *leads to* the act of adultery. The issue is not sexual desire, but sinful desire.

A heart that desires sin is not right before God.

The word “lust” is unhelpful. In English, it always has sexual overtones, but the Greek word used in the New Testament is often used for other desires. The prophets “desired” to see Jesus, the prodigal son “longed for” the pods that the pigs ate, and Jesus “desired” to eat the Passover with his disciples – all this same word.¹¹ There is nothing inherently sexual about this word – any sexual connotation comes from context. When John equates “everything in the world” with “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life”,¹² we should avoid the conclusion that he is talking primarily or even especially about sexual matters.

¹¹ see Matthew 13:17, Luke 15:16, and Luke 22:15

¹² 1 John 2:16

He means the desire for wealth and status and power as much as any other desire.

It should be obvious that not all desire is evil. Desire is the prelude to any pleasurable activity, including those that we are explicitly told are a gift from God. What makes a desire an evil desire is context. When Jesus warns about “looking lustfully” after a woman, the context is adultery. That is to say, Jesus warns against a desire that cannot be fulfilled without sin. The issue at hand is not that the desire is sexual but that is sinful. The problem is not the physiological promptings of sexual attraction but the gestation of those impulses into a fixed desire that could only ever be fulfilled in sin.

The Purpose of Sexual Intercourse

One of the dominant themes in the Christian theology of sex is that the purpose of sexual intercourse is procreation, that is, making babies. In Catholic theology, this is the motivation for the prohibition on contraception because, it is argued, the natural end of sexual intercourse is procreation and thus to engage in sexual intercourse without the possibility of conception is unnatural. Even Christian denominations that take a different view on contraception are still heavily influenced by this historic emphasis on procreation, leading some to argue that the primary purpose of marriage is to have children.

This line of reasoning can be detrimental to childless couples. There are many reasons why couples may be childless. Some couples will be afflicted by infertility, others will judge that their circumstances would be inappropriate for child-rearing, and others will simply not have the desire to raise children. It would be an unfortunate and harmful theology that implied childless couples had a purposeless marriage, or that such couples had no legitimate rationale for sexual intercourse.

Such a theology would also be without any biblical support. Whilst there is the command to humanity to “be fruitful and increase in number”, this is plainly a general instruction to the entire species and not a specific commandment for all couples. Raising a child is a significant undertaking – maybe the most serious responsibility you might undertake – and no-one should feel compelled to make babies against their better judgment.

Another common theme in the Christian theology of sex is that the purpose of marriage – and thus sexual intercourse – is to teach us about the relationship between Christ and the church. This teaching derives from Ephesians 5, and related passages, where Paul says, *Husbands, love your*

wives, just as Christ loved the church (Eph 5:25). This teaching informs a lot of Christian thinking about the roles of men and women in the church, about marriage, and much else besides. Husbands are given the special privilege – or intimidating responsibility (depending on how you look at it) – of taking the role of Christ to their wives. Wives, taking the role of the church, are to respect their husbands.¹³

Single Christians are left unable to experience this teaching, except vicariously. This might leave unmarried women feeling that they should imbue men in their church with the significance of the role of Christ. It might also lead to some single Christians feeling inferior to those who are married, or as though somehow they had failed in relation to God's desires for their lives.

The problem at the root of this idea is that it reverses the function of metaphor, turning an explanatory device into a spiritual imperative. Metaphors and similes work on the following basis:

1. a thing already exists and is commonly known to exhibit certain characteristics;
2. a second thing, which is less well-understood, also exhibits those characteristics; and
3. a metaphor is made, comparing the second thing to the first, more commonly understood, thing.

For example, the mustard seed is known to be a small thing that grows into something much larger, and thus when the Kingdom of God is said to be like a mustard seed, it is understood that the Kingdom of God has the same characteristic. When Paul compares Christ and the church to a husband and wife, he is using a metaphor. Christ will not *literally* marry the church; the comparison is made to explain the relationship between Christ and the church by comparison with a commonly known thing that exhibits similar characteristics.

Marriage comes first, the metaphor comes second. Reversing the function of this metaphor would mean that God ordained marriage only secondarily, as an explanatory tool for teaching about Christ and the church. It is not obvious that there is any justification for such a proposal. Given the common usage of metaphor and similes, there seems no reason to suppose Paul is doing anything other than using a metaphor here.

Did God ordain shepherding so Christ could be the Good Shepherd? Or road building so that Christ could be the Way? Did God create light so Christ could be the Light of the world?

¹³ Ephesians 5:33

Marriage was not created as a proxy for Christ's relationship with the church. Marriage was created by God for its *own* merits and was only later employed by Paul as a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and church.

Both these proposals for the purpose of marriage fail to do justice to the scriptural teaching about the responsibilities of marriage. Paul (arguably at his most romantic) says,

The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. (1Cor 7:3)

This injunction carries the clear implication that Christian couples will be having sex regularly, far more than the mechanics of procreation require. To cease from having sex is to “deprive” your spouse.¹⁴

This teaching from Paul echoes the Law of Moses when, in the context of taking a second wife, it says the husband must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing, *and marital rights*.¹⁵ (What the NIV sanitises in translation as “marital rights” is in Hebrew quite plainly about having sex.) This passage lays out the basic responsibilities of a husband to his wife; having sex is listed alongside the requirements of subsistence. In the later rabbinic literature, failure to live up to these responsibilities was grounds for a woman to divorce her husband. There is a recognition in both Exodus and Corinthians that having sex is a crucial component of marriage.

Whilst having sex can result in a baby, and maybe there are lessons from marriage about our relationship with Christ, there is something more fundamental at play.

In marriage, physical intimacy is inextricably linked to emotional intimacy through the risk of vulnerability, the closeness of connection, and the act of self-giving. Having sex is a physical expression of the close emotional connection between two people. Having sex binds a couple closely together. Others could describe this process in terms of the release of hormones and other biological interactions; as Christians we can describe this in terms of the blessings of the Creator who has so ordained marriage to be bound through such physical union.

¹⁴ Corinthians 7:5

¹⁵ Exodus 21:10

A Balanced View of Sex

As humans, we are embodied persons. Our bodies are part of our person, part of our identity, part of who we are. Our bodily impulses and desires are not alien to us, nor are we working to break free from them – they are part of who we are. Our bodily desires are the prelude to the pleasures that God has gifted to us to be enjoyed with thanksgiving. They are not wicked or sinful in themselves. They do, however, need to be moderated by our reason and our conscience because these bodily desires can give us no moral guidance, and for this reason they can lead us astray if we follow them unthinkingly.

Imagine a man meeting a woman for the first time and finding her physically attractive. His reaction to that woman is simply his body doing what it is programmed to do: identify potential mates. Those impulses might be the start of a process that leads to him seeking to form a connection with that woman, one that blossoms into a healthy and moral, committed, sexual relationship. However, those impulses have no greater content than identifying that initial attraction. Those impulses cannot inform him whether such a relationship would be happy, or helpful, or moral; that is information which needs to be provided by his rational mind.

Now imagine that this man is already married. Those initial bodily impulses will be exactly the same and will have that same meagre content: physical attraction. His rational mind will have to inform him that he cannot pursue that relationship without sin; that information will not come from his body. The same impulses that might lead us to a happy and fulfilled marriage might, in a different context, lead us to adultery and betrayal.

It is not those impulses that are good or bad, but the *context*.

Sexual intercourse is a gift from God. It is a blessing that God has given to humans as the basis of strong, healthy, and intimate relationships. It is a blessing that God has created to bring joy to marriage and to give physical expression to emotional connections. There is nothing inherently sinful about sexuality or sexual desire. It is only when enacted in the wrong circumstances that sexual intercourse becomes sinful.

That tendency within Christian theology to attach shame and guilt to sexuality is a monumental error that risks misrepresenting the Creator's intentions and damaging Christian relationships. It may also explain why Christians have become so hung up on sexual matters,

quite out of proportion to their significance. We need to reject this unbalanced view of sex and replace it with something more wholesome and more biblical.

More than that, we need to give thanks to our Maker who has so blessed us with the abundant joys of this present world.