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## Pastoral Care and Sex

Harold L. Senkbeil

In the utter confusion that reigns supreme in our culture regarding sexuality and marriage, it is tempting for pastors to put on other hats in order to address the chaos. And capable historians, psychologists, and sociologists certainly have much to contribute in matters fundamentally moral and ethical. Pastors, however, are called upon daily to tackle these issues not in a theoretical way, but in terms of concrete human existence as it impacts people in their most fundamental vocation: sex. That is, from conception on, each human being is fundamentally a sexual being created male or female in the image and likeness of God. All contemporary “gender theory” aside, there are no generic humans. Humanity is binary and humans live embodied lives from the moment of their conception. Therefore matters of sexuality are always involved in the pastoral care of human beings, even in matters that are not overtly sexual.

### *Shepherding Sexual Souls*

Although these matters are clearly moral and ethical, pastors dare never relinquish their primary calling as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries. Clearly, pastors are not primarily ethicists, nor are they moral policemen or sexual traffic cops. They remain always *pastors*, that is, shepherds of souls for whom Jesus died—souls that are embodied as male or female human creatures, made in the image and likeness of God. My approach in this essay, therefore, will be pastoral instead of ethical. As soon as you mention “pastoral,” many interpret that word as inherently compromising and conciliatory—as in “who am I to judge?” As Lutheran pastors we know better. We are not interested in compromise. Our concern is genuine healing. We are *Seelsorgers*, approaching each situation as spiritual physicians working from diagnosis to treatment. So that is the template that we need to lay over every circumstance involving sexual ethics: what are the underlying ailments in each situation, and how may they best be addressed? If you approach sexual sin strictly as a case of moral failure, you will miss the diagnosis entirely and will not be able to provide a lasting

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cure. If, on the other hand, you see moral aberrations as symptoms of underlying misbelief and idolatry, you are more likely to get an accurate diagnosis and thus provide for a valid and more faithful treatment.

We must remember that we are called to the kingdom in these tumultuous days during a momentous time of great opportunity. This is not a time for hand-wringing and despair. What to us appears to be cataclysmic chaos is not just the normal change in worldviews, but actually the transition from one epoch to another. If I may use an analogy, what we are experiencing is the cultural equivalent of an earthquake. Scientists tell us that the tectonic plates of the earth are constantly shifting silently and imperceptibly, and when enough tension builds up over the centuries, there is a sudden and dramatic realignment of the earth's crust.

What we are seeing in terms of crumbling public mores and the apparent collapse of sexual norms and boundaries with subsequent redefinitions for marriage and family is evidence of the cultural earthquake we are currently undergoing. At no time since the days when the Roman Empire was grinding its way into collapse has the church faced such a time of simultaneous challenge and opportunity. Students of church history note that it is in such times of dramatic cultural shift and transition that the church finds new life and vitality—but only if she does not hitch her wagon to the cultural shooting stars that flame into brilliance, then quickly flame out into black holes.

### *Cultural Drift and Moral Shift*

There were some distant early warnings of the cataclysm we are experiencing. I ran across the first while rummaging in a used book store in the late 1990s. Written by Chad Walsh, poet and professor of English who was an early champion of the works of C. S. Lewis, its provocative title was "Early Christians of the 21st Century."<sup>1</sup> At first I thought it was misshelved. But then I discovered that it was published in 1950. In his book Walsh argues that, given the cultural trajectory of postwar America, by the end of the century the Christian veneer of the West would have peeled back and a new paganism would appear. He predicted that by the dawn of the new millennium Christianity would be only a dim and vanishing memory, culturally speaking. He wrote: "'Modern civilization,' which dates roughly from the Renaissance, is now on its last legs."<sup>2</sup> Remember,

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<sup>1</sup> Chad Walsh, *Early Christians of the 21st Century* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1950).

<sup>2</sup> Walsh, *Early Christians of the 21st Century*, 9.

he published this in 1950! He went on to observe that many were predicting at that time that Christianity, having been on the decline for several centuries, would shortly fade away completely. Walsh held out another option—namely, that the decline of Western civilization was due to the watering down of Christianity and that a return to Christian teaching would be the price a reluctant world would have to pay if it wanted any civilization at all.

A generation later another voice was raised foretelling our seismic cultural shift. Malcolm Muggeridge was a former BBC correspondent who became not only one of Christianity's most notable converts, but among its most ardent and articulate apologists. In 1978 he gave the inaugural addresses in the Pascal Lectures of the University of Waterloo in Ontario. His lectures were published in 1980 under the intriguing title: "The End of Christendom." In these lectures he outlines in meticulous detail the collapse of the Christian consensus first of all in the humanities and then subsequently in terms of social mores. He characterized this as a kind of corporate death wish masquerading under the banner of liberalism. There is a certain irony about the toppling of the Christian consensus; he notes:

Previous civilizations have been overthrown from without by the incursion of barbarian hordes. Christendom has dreamed up its own dissolution in the minds of its own intellectual elite. Our barbarians are home products, indoctrinated at the public expense, urged on by the media systematically stage by stage, dismantling Christendom, depreciating and deprecating all its values. The whole social structure is now tumbling down, dethroning its God, undermining all its certainties. All this, wonderfully enough, is being done in the name of the health, wealth, and happiness of all mankind. That is the basic scene that seems to me will strike a future Gibbon as being characteristic of the decline and fall of Christendom.<sup>3</sup>

Now of course Muggeridge is quick to point out the distinction between "Christendom," as he calls it, and the Christian church. Both he and Walsh, despite their dire predictions about the direction of culture and public policy, also believed the turbulent years that we are now experiencing would be days of great opportunity for the church. The term "Christendom," as Muggeridge uses it, refers not to the church, but to the post-Constantinian alliance forged between the church and the state in various lands and various eras throughout the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and into the time of the Enlightenment and modernity. These men

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<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *The End of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), 17–18.

were not using the now-fashionable word “postmodernity” (or late modernity, as I like to call it), but what they were talking about is what we see all around us now: the rapid demise of the impact of Christian teaching on public life and its near-total eclipse when it comes to public policy and social institutions, including government. Maybe the church’s alliance with Caesar at the time of Constantine was not that good of an idea, but its day is clearly over now. The coalition between Christianity and government—or even between Christianity and society—is collapsing in ruin all around us. Christendom is dead, but Christ’s church remains forever. “I will build my church,” says Jesus, “and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).

### *The Pastoral Challenge*

So here is our current challenge: How are we to be the church built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone, without relying on all the social props that we have had for centuries and while everything around us is in radical cultural upheaval and chaos?

It used to be that you needed the vantage point of decades to sense these cultural shifts, but they are coming now with increasing frequency and intensity. There was a time when only geezers of my vintage would talk about the “the good old days,” but now Gen Xers, in the prime of life, are beginning to sound like sentimental oldsters when they reminisce about the simpler days of their childhood. The half-life of moral decline and decay is getting shorter and shorter.

Who could have foretold a decade ago, when advocates for gay rights were just beginning to let their presence be known, that we would now be sitting post-*Obergefell* with same-sex marriage declared a constitutional right by the Supreme Court of the United States of America? Who would have anticipated the winner of an Olympic men’s decathlon getting the courage award for excellence in sports performance, not for sports performance, but for his public transition to faux womanhood? As we speak, legal aid societies are trying to determine how to protect business owners from being sued out of existence because of their refusal to compromise their religious convictions regarding the definition of marriage. Meanwhile, gender identification is gaining steam as the deciding factor over against biological sex, and some states have already enacted legislation opening public school restrooms to children who wish to “identify” as a person of the opposite sex without regard to their external genitalia.

It seems to me there are four propositions foundational for addressing these unprecedented phenomena and in laying groundwork for careful teaching and pastoral care in the midst of the sexual cataclysm all around us.

### **1) Christians find their identity in the city of God, not the city of man.**

Some years ago, Robert Kolb drily observed in one of his lectures: “The Eisenhower Administration isn’t coming back again anytime soon.” It was his way of pointing out the obvious: the comfortable postwar world that characterized church life in America in generations past is gone for good. We can no longer assume that the American way of life and Christianity are synonymous, though, as I mentioned above, that assumption was problematic all along.

#### *The City Set on a Hill*

What this means, though, is that we must be more deliberate in modeling and teaching Christian behavior; the culture will not do it for us. Not that it ever did, but first with every passing era, then each passing year, and now month by month we see the devolution of a society that is imploding morally and socially. There was a time when you could look up and down the street or across the road to your farm neighbors and assume that what you saw there was a Christian way of life. Those days are now officially in the rear-view mirror; they are not coming back. We need to prepare Christian people to be what our Savior said they would be: a city set on a hill that cannot be hid, the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. Those who live for Christ and his kingdom will increasingly look like oddballs and freaks in a world in which people create their own persona and lifestyle out of their own pleasures and urges. A world full of unbridled egos is not a pretty picture; expressive individualism on steroids is no way to build a healthy society. Worse, it is a spiritual disaster zone. As our Lord reminds us, the wide gate and the easy road lead to destruction, but the narrow gate and the hard road lead to eternal life (Matt 7:13–14). Our task is to shepherd Christ’s sheep and lambs safely through these perils to life everlasting, and that means guiding them along the path less traveled.

#### *Resident Aliens*

So the first thing we will need to stress in our teaching regarding sexual behavior is that what passes for acceptable behavior legally and socially can no longer guide Christians. We will not become monastics or Amish; we will not disengage entirely from the world. We will be resident

aliens, if you will. We will be critical of whatever is handed to us by pop culture, and we will not bow the knee to the faddish idols of our day in terms of the arts and entertainment world. Like the Christians of late antiquity, there will be certain things acceptable to everyone else that will be off limits for us. For them it was the public games that included bloodlust and death, for us it will be x-rated movies and video games, to cite but a couple of obvious examples.

We must refuse to let the world define us. We will be very much in the world, but not of the world. Like others who know not the Lord Jesus, we may reside in the city of man, but our true identity is found in the city with foundations, whose maker and builder is God. And this identity, we must hasten to add, is as much caught as taught. Perhaps more caught than taught, actually. That is, people do not just need to hear orthodox teaching from their pastors on these crucial matters of sexual identity and fidelity; they need to actually see it modeled and lived in their pastors, in their households, and among fellow Christians. There must be orthopraxy to accompany orthodoxy.

We find this concern for modeling Christian godliness throughout the Scriptures. One example will suffice. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul urges his charges to keep an eye on those who live according to his example, reminding them that those who live only according to bodily impulses are enemies of the cross of Christ. "Their end is destruction," he writes, "their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things" (Phil 3:19). And yet, the apostle contends, Christians are not disembodied spirits. There is a physicality to the sexual standards he urges on them. The body is not a tool for self-gratification, but a creation of God redeemed by his Son and sanctified by his Spirit. The body is not for this world only; as citizens of a heavenly kingdom here in this world, Christians live in their bodies now in complete awareness that the fullness of their bodily existence is yet to come when the Savior appears at the end of time to transform our lowly body to be like his already glorious body, "by the power that enables him to subject all things to himself" (Phil 3:21). Yes, we live in the city of man, but our true identity is found in the city of God.

## **2) Sexual identity is not a social construct but is rooted in creation.**

The second and third propositions flow from the first. That is, since our heavenly citizenship is rooted in creation, redemption and sanctification, that means our sexual life is grounded in the mystery of the Holy Trinity as well. "God made me . . . and *all my members* . . . and still takes care of them" is the way Luther put it in his usual earthy way in the



explanation to the first article.<sup>4</sup> Let us put that to our catechumens plainly and bluntly and ponder it deeply ourselves. Sexual distinction is by God's design, deeply engraved on his creation. A person's gonads along with all other bodily organs as well as his or her personality, brain, and intellect do not originate in blind chance but are lovingly and deliberately created by God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. We are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made, and that wondrous creation most certainly includes our sexual nature.

That means we do not get to define our own sexual identity; it is divinely created and ordained. This biblical view, of course, is not only dramatically countercultural but highly controversial. Ever since the Enlightenment the idea has been gaining momentum that people determine their own identity for themselves; they have the inherent right to define themselves. For example, the so-called right to privacy, upon which the courts have based their decisions dismantling legal protection for unborn life and the boundaries of sexual license, is not inscribed in our Constitution. Rather, the courts have manufactured this legal fiction out of the popular social consensus that individual preferences trump sound reason and the common good. So even though the plain meaning of the Constitution's written text makes no provision for a right to privacy, justices who reflect the bias of the current world view claim to have discovered it in what they call the "penumbras and emanations" of the Constitution.

So with expressive individualism and individual rights firmly enshrined as the central and determining factor in the public arena, it follows that all social strictures automatically come under suspicion. Most every accepted social institution goes under scrutiny, and the hermeneutic of suspicion claims that these institutions were invented by people intent on limiting personal freedom and expression. Under this view it is not only legitimate, but also necessary to dismantle these institutions, deconstructing them into their component parts and then reassembling them to conform to personal preference or current fads and fashions. So we now have almost any domestic living arrangement of adults and children qualifying as "family" without regard to biological or conjugal relationships.

### *Sex Deconstructed*

But deconstructionism goes further than social institutions, it now seeps over into the fabric of creation itself. Male and female sexes become

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<sup>4</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 105.

arbitrary self-chosen persona rather than created givens. Thus, contemporary gender theory insists that masculinity or femininity is a projection of one's own feelings having no connection to so-called "assigned gender" at birth. The body therefore becomes ancillary to sex rather than determinative of sex. It is not much more than a machine or mechanism to express one's chosen identity as male or female and, still further, one's preferred sexual expression. So far the only limitations on sexual liaisons is that they must be by mutual consent with a person who is an adult, although those strictures are now beginning to be questioned as well.

This is deconstructionism run amuck, when biological reality itself can be ignored or reconstructed to conform to personal preference. The brouhahas already cropping up across the country when boys choose to use girls' restroom and locker room facilities or vice versa are only the tip of the iceberg; we are facing a radically different world than ever before in human history.

Yet we have come to the kingdom for such a time as this. It is our joyous privilege to teach and model an understanding of human sexuality rooted not in social theory or personal preference, but in God's own creation. Sexual identity is not a social construct; it is rooted in creation. The creation narrative of Genesis gives us the warp and woof from which to weave the rich tapestry of what it means to be man and woman in our time.

"God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26, 27). And so God combined the dust of the ground with the breath of his own life-giving Spirit, and Adam became a living soul. But it was not good that he should be alone, therefore the Lord extracted a rib from Adam's side and built a woman from Adam's rib. Note that although they were created in complementary ways socially, physically, and emotionally, they were fully male and female prior to their one flesh union.

### *Ontological Sex*

It is important in the hypersexualized climate in which we live to stress that sex is something you are, not something you do. In other words, one can be fully male or fully female without engaging in erotic activity. Too many youth and adults are ashamed to admit that they are not sexually active because they are getting the message from our culture that the frequent orgasm of your choice is definitive for human sexuality. Thus chastity is ridiculed, and those who live sexually pure and decent lives in

what they say and do are not only viewed as relics of the distant past, but somehow freakish and subhuman.

In a world that has lost its story, Christians need not only to learn the creation narrative but to embrace it as their own, and to literally be that story before a watching world, fully male and fully female, glorifying God in their bodies as they live out their sexual vocation—abstinently apart from marriage and faithfully devoted to their spouse within marriage. Sexual identity as male and female is not a self-constructed reality but is rooted and grounded in creation.

### **3) Christians understand that their bodies are ransomed by Christ and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.**

Many have noted the new Gnosticism that seems to pervade the thinking of our culture, as well as its unfortunate influence on the church. In the secular sphere it partially explains the schizophrenic attitude toward sex that on the one hand prizes sensuality and promotes sexual indulgence, yet at the same time is hypersensitive to anything that could be remotely construed as sexual harassment. People are encouraged to dress as whores and gigolos, yet express alarm when others respond sexually. Sexual innuendo in entertainment is passé, and now overt sex-play and mock sex acts are woven into song and dance routines. Yet at the same time, our world professes great shock about the rise of sexually transmitted diseases and the sexual abuse and violence that abound. Sexual copulation is viewed as the means toward fulfillment and spiritual enlightenment, yet at the same time the human body is viewed as an empty container that can be trashed at will. Preborn babies are dismissively called “products of conception,” and their body parts are dissected and sold to the highest bidder.

The most extreme examples of sexual degradation and dysfunction still rouse disapproval and concern among Christians, of course, yet the spirit of the age has caused great confusion in our churches as well. It is important that pastors find their voice and teach the truth regarding foundational matters having to do with human sexuality, and it begins with the propositions outlined in this paper. First, we live not according to the standards of behavior acceptable in society, but rather in accord with our calling as God’s people. Second, sexuality is not constructed socially, but created by God. Now, third: Our bodies are not our personal property; rather, they were created by God the Father, redeemed by his Son, and sanctified by Holy Baptism as temples of the Holy Spirit.

*Theology of the Body*

This trinitarian theology of the body needs to be recovered and utilized at every point in catechesis and preaching. Although a theology of the body is pivotal regarding sexual ethics, it has multiple overtones of meaning at every dimension of Christian faith and life. We are sexual beings; there are no generic humans—only males and females. That means that our identity as male or female is our most fundamental and foundational Christian vocation. Whatever we do, whether we eat or drink, we do all to the glory of God—and we do it not generically, but as a man or a woman. In other words, the doctrine of the creation, redemption, and sanctification of the body frees sex from the narrow confines of erotic attraction to find its rightful place as a positive force in the life we live in this world as enfleshed spirits—or spiritual bodies, whichever way you prefer to look at it.

The immense power of the sexual drive was designed by God the Father as a wonderful gift to join man and woman together in bodily union as husband and wife for their mutual joy and support and for the procreation and nurture of children. Yet this wondrous gift of a loving Creator was polluted and defiled by the rebellion of Adam and Eve in the garden so that the distinctive nature that he had given them in his perfect creation was a cause of shame after their fall into sin. Their bodies, which had been their mutual joy and delight, were now contaminated by sin and befouled by shame. And so it is to this day. As Paul writes to the Romans, “[T]he Law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin” (Rom 7:14). Not that the human body or its sexual drive is in itself evil, but the evil one has taken the natural gifts of God’s good creation and enslaved them for his own purpose. And so the stage is set for struggle. What the Christian wants to do according to the renewed will, he finds himself unable to do because of the temptations of the flesh. Delighting in the law of God in his inner being, there is another law in the parts of his body waging war against the law of his mind. As Paul put it: “I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Rom 7:23).

*Enfleshed Salvation*

The Son of God, however, has appeared in order to undo the effects of sin and the captivity of the devil. Taking on our humanity, he was incarnate in male flesh, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary to break the bonds of slavery to sin. It is not the angels that he redeemed, but the offspring of Abraham. He was made like his brothers in every way—that means that he had boy parts like all males—so that he

could make payment for the sins of the people. “Because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb 2:18). Our high priest is able to sympathize with us in our weakness, because He was tempted like us in every way—including sexually, yet without sin (Heb 4:15). His was not a spiritual redemption, but a very physical one in which he was stripped and flogged and nailed up to die in naked shame to ransom us out from under captivity to sin, death, and the devil. In his perfect body he bore all sin and carried our iniquity and covered all our shame. Ransomed and redeemed by his body and blood, we stand forgiven, cleansed, and free from shame, and clothed in his perfect righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

This same Jesus who is our righteousness is also our holiness. That is, he is our covering for both sin and shame. His sacrifice not only removes our guilt but also cleanses us from the defilement of our sin. Buried with him by Baptism into his death, through the same washing we are risen with him into his resurrection. It is not a spiritual resurrection he gives us, but a physical one. His sacred body, born of Mary, is the instrument of our salvation by which he removed the penalty of our sin and restores us in body and soul to the innocence of our first parents in Eden.

That means that our salvation is also physical. As Paul wrote: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). His was not a spiritual ransom, but a physical one, pertaining not merely to souls, but to bodies as well. That means our bodies are not our private possession for our own entertainment or personal pleasure; they belong to the One who ransomed us in his own flesh and blood.

In the washing of Holy Baptism we were joined to Jesus in his death and resurrection, and by the same washing the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in our bodies. Christians are to be taught to revere their bodies as shrines in which the Holy Spirit lives, filled therefore with God’s own holiness to cleanse them from iniquity, cover up their shame, and renew them for God’s service, whether married or single. Paul wrote to the Christians in the decadent city of Corinth, sorely tempted to the promiscuous life of sexual indulgence of their neighbors, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:19–20).

*Reverence for the Body*

In a world that literally treats the body like trash, Christians live dramatically different lives than their secular neighbors. We understand these bodies of ours as special creations of a loving heavenly Father, who made us each through the instrumentation of the bodies of our human fathers and mothers and has given us each unique eyes, ears, and all our body parts, and still takes care of them. He does all this out of fatherly divine goodness and mercy without any merit or worthiness in us. Not only that, but we been transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Christ Jesus has become our Lord, for he has purchased and won us from sin, death, and the devil's dominion, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and the innocent, suffering death of his own perfect body, that we might be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness in these physical bodies of ours just as he himself is risen from the dead, lives, and reigns in physical flesh to all eternity. And the Holy Spirit has not just called us by the gospel, but enlightened us with his gifts and placed us within the fellowship of his holy church, a communion of holy people sanctified by his holy things, forgiving us all our sins each and every day. On the last day the same Spirit will raise these bodies of ours from the decay of death and give to all believers eternal life in both body and soul. It is our joy and delight, then, to live as sexual beings, men and women created, redeemed, and sanctified to be holy just as God is holy, clothed in the perfection and holiness of Christ himself.

Therefore, despite the sin rampant everywhere around us and the lust that continually tugs at us from within, we live a new and different life by the grace and mercy of God. For though we are continually tempted, we are also continually redeemed and sanctified. Sinful lusts indeed attack, but they need not enslave those who belong to God by faith in Christ. Their bodies have been purchased and won by him, and the Holy Spirit is enshrined within them by Holy Baptism. Dead and alive by Baptism into Christ, they belong to him who once was dead but lives forever. This makes all the difference in the world in terms of temptation to sexual sin.

Let us not make this complicated; we need to speak plainly and forthrightly to both youth and adults about the human body and its passions, and then speak just as straightforwardly about what it means to offer all the parts of our body to God as instruments for good. This is the baptismal therapy unpacked by Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for

unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (Rom 6:12-14)

Our sexual organs too have been ransomed with Christ's blood and sanctified by God's Spirit to serve the living God.

#### **4) For Christians, sexual identity is a holy vocation, whether married or single, reflecting the union and harmony within the godhead.**

To be man and woman created in God's image and likeness by his express purpose and will is far different than to be a generic human being evolved haphazardly by chance who happens to be endowed with a peculiar sexual apparatus with unique appetites and compulsions. Whether we see human sexual desire as an itch to be scratched or a gift to be channeled makes all the difference in the world. In the first instance, the sexual drive is like any other physical appetite that craves indulgence. In the second, sex is honored as a gift from God intended for union and communion. "In our image and after our likeness" was the blueprint for mankind, made in two distinct sexes (Gen 1:26). In other words, in their sexual differentiation Adam and Eve reflected the distinction between the persons of the Godhead. And in the relationship of human beings with one another, most especially in the sexual union of man and wife, there was a reflection of the unity of the Holy Trinity. This is a great mystery, and it deserves reflection, contemplation, and exposition in our preaching and teaching, particularly as sexual distinctions become ever less important in society and as sexual deviations and decadence become ever more common and prevalent.

#### *God Made Sex*

Sex was God's idea. Sexual differentiation is reflected in his entire creation, both plant and animal. And the whole creation, including sex, he declared "very good" (Gen 1:31). We no longer live in Eden, to be sure. There is nothing we can do by our reason or strength to put all the broken pieces of God's good and perfect creation back together again. Like Humpty Dumpty, all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot glue things back together the way they once were. There is no road back to sexual perfection here in this world.

Yet even though fallen and contaminated by sin, sex remains part of God's good creation. Perhaps one of the reasons we find so many Christians ill-prepared to face the sexual debacles of our time is that we have not catechized them well regarding this most intimate part of our collective

Christian vocation. By default we have given people the impression that they can govern their sexual lives like everyone else in society. During the days of “Christendom” this worked—not perfectly, but it worked to some extent. Sexual behavior that was in conformity to God’s will and law was the social norm to a large extent, and deviant or immoral sexual behavior was penalized in social mores and to some degree by secular law. But no longer. “Christendom” has fallen, apparently never to rise again. In our world now, just as in the world of late antiquity, it falls to Christian men and women to take up the challenge of teaching and modeling a life of sexual faithfulness in a society that is driven by the unbridled compulsions of the sexual drive.

### *Our Sexual Vocation*

That means we have to be forthright when it comes to matters of sex and marriage. Silence on these matters means that we open our homes and families to the Pandora’s box of sexual promiscuity that pervades our contemporary culture. Finding our voice and speaking up is essential. And when we do speak, let us make sure we have more to say than “just say no.” The sexual prohibitions of the Scriptures are there to protect and enhance sex as God’s good creation within the covenant of marriage as a force for good within society, but the Bible also gives us something positive and constructive to say about the sexual vocation.

Let us speak discreetly and tastefully, but also winsomely and confidently about what God has built into the human body. Every Christian, and that includes pastors, is a sexual being with sexual drives. Sexual desire remains a force with which to be reckoned. It cannot be ignored, but must be channeled and directed for a godly purpose. The sexual drive was designed by God himself to bring man and woman together in bodily union as in the garden when Adam first saw Eve and exclaimed: “At last! Bone of my bones and flesh and of my flesh; she shall be called woman because she was taken out of man” (Gen 2:23). The express purpose and will of God for sexual differentiation and distinction is that man and woman would be united together in marriage. They are complementary in body, mind, and spirit. They are made for each other. It is for this reason that in every generation a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and they become one flesh. This is why marriage is not a secular or political institution, but a holy estate. It was instituted by God in the time of man’s innocence as an earthly, physical expression of the eternal, spiritual unity and harmony between the persons of the Holy Trinity.



This marital union is an exclusive union, forsaking all others, as Bishop Cranmer put it in the time-honored wedding vows of the *Book of Common Prayer*, to be husband or wife to one another as long as they both shall live. So sexual abstinence apart from marriage and sexual faithfulness within it are the hallmarks of God's design for man and woman.

### *Chastity vs. Celibacy*

Yet some Christians are not married. And it is not good that they remain in isolation either. Our society says do whatever seems natural to you. But since the fall into sin, what of course comes naturally to humans is not in accordance with God's design. So though arbitrary celibacy is not imposed on men and women made in God's image and likeness, they need his gift of chastity to live out their sexual vocations as male and female.

Chastity means to use the sexual drive for the glory and honor of God and the benefit of my neighbor. Therefore if I am single, I am sexually abstinent, and if I am married, I use my body for the benefit and pleasure of my spouse. As Bishop Cranmer put it in the husband's marriage vow, "With my body I thee worship," reflecting the man's sacred vocation of channeling all his bodily desire and sexual energy for the benefit of his beloved wife. Of course, ever since the fall such chaste direction of the sexual drive does not come naturally; sexual desire since Eden bleeds over into lustful compulsions and obsessions for self-gratification. But by daily contrition and repentance the old Adam dies and the new man emerges and arises to live before God in righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Thus every day baptismal renewal brings forgiveness for past sins of the body and power to redirect bodily energies to the glory of God and the neighbor's welfare.

### *Corporate Chastity*

The cult of privacy we have erected around sex is not only unhealthy, but distinctly unchristian. Sex is a public, corporate matter for the Christian, not in the sense of group orgies or erotic display, but in the fact that who I am as a sexual person and the way I use my body privately is never a private matter.

In a remarkable passage from his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes bluntly about sexual chastity among Christian men as a distinguishing mark of their brotherhood:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own

body [or “possess his own vessel”] in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter. (1 Thess 4:3–6)

The Greek word *σκεῦος* (“vessel”) can refer to the male sexual organ.<sup>5</sup> Here the apostle clearly teaches that sanctification, which comes from God, includes not indulging in the kind of sexual license common among pagans who do not know God and therefore have not been sanctified. Rather than merely abstaining from sexual promiscuity, these men are to direct their sexual energies to honorable and holy use, so that it fuels not unbridled passionate lust, but chaste and brotherly love among Christian men. Failure in these areas is not just a matter of sin against God, but sin against the brother. Conversely, by implication, chastity and purity build up the bond of brotherhood among men within Christ’s body.

Since we are all members one of another in the body of Christ, we bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. My sexual sins blemish and scar the other members of Christ’s body. On the other hand, my chastity of mind and body enhance and edify my fellow members in their own life of sexual fidelity. Collectively we are all Christ’s bride. Brothers and sisters within the family of God, we are all corporately pledged to faithfulness to our heavenly Husband; my private life of sexual chastity enhances our corporate life of fidelity to Christ Jesus, our mutual groom.

### *Corporate Love*

Not all the members of Christ’s body are married to an earthly spouse. Some are single, whether by circumstance or choice. God himself said that it is not good for man (or woman) to be alone. We are designed to live in community just as God the Holy Trinity has lived in eternal union and communion from all eternity. What about those who live singly, then, within the Body of Christ? Are they doomed to perpetual loneliness since they are not joined in conjugal union with a spouse? By no means; there are other forms of human intimacy besides marriage. There are other loves besides marital love. Just as there is love between parents and children and brothers and sisters, there is also love between friends. These loves are not contingent upon sexual intercourse.

Love is the distinguishing mark of Christ’s church, because it flows from his all-encompassing divine *agape*, which is freely lavished on the

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 928.

unlovable. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you," Jesus says (John 15:12). "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Though for various reasons Christians may live for a time alone, they should never be lonely within Christ's body, the church. Because God first loved us, we love one another. Forming bonds of friendship within the body of Christ is probably more important now than ever before. Whether a person is widowed, divorced, or never married, no matter to which sex that person is attracted, he or she is called to sexual chastity. But these single persons are not called to stoicism and isolation. Every brother or sister within the body deserves a heart open to their sorrows and joys and a mind eager to embrace their thoughts and dreams. Love is the mark of Christ's church, and such love embraces all, married or single.

#### *Our Corporate Mission*

Leading a chaste and decent life in word and deed—a sexually pure life in what we say and do—is not the impossible dream, but a blessed reality for all those, married or single, who find their union and communion with Christ and one another in the blessed fellowship of his holy church, where all weep and rejoice together as one body. There is strength in numbers. Thank God, while the Holy Spirit calls us each singly by the gospel, he does not leave us alone. He also calls us corporately into that holy communion, which is his church, in which he richly and daily forgives not just all my sins, but also the sins of all believers in Christ.

Despite the seismic shift in sexual mores, the decline in the marriage culture, and the subtle and overt persecution of those who stand against the pervasive sexual immorality of our increasingly decadent society, it is our joint privilege to teach and model a life of sexual fidelity, bodily purity, and faithful commitment to our gracious God, who invites all his faithful to the joyous eternal marriage feast of the Lamb.