

Sexuality in Christian History

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Sex has made history! Certainly there is a history to Christian teachings about human sexuality in all its complex dimensions. But the history of sex is neither confined to nor fully comprehended by Christian thought on the subject. Sex is as big as history and is one of the hidden factors in the persons whose names have made the annals of history. History has unfolded in the process of persons' attempts to come to grips with their sexuality.

That dimension of sexuality must be mentioned only in passing. Certainly that is much too large for the scope of this address. We must content ourselves with an examination of the Christian past in order that we can better come to terms with our sexuality. It is important to realize that our ideas about sex do have a history—we are the inheritors of tradition rooted firmly in the recent and ancient past. We have been molded by these teachings.

It is also important to recognize that all thought about sexuality by Christians past has been the result of the interplay between personal, religious, political and social histories. Those Christians who dealt with sex theologically were reflecting their own experience, the impact of the thought forms or philosophies of their day, the tension and conflicts in church and society and the interchange of ideas in the Christian community. Ideas about sexuality may be revealed truth, but it is truth revealed under the circumstances of history. Limited by human perception and historical circumstance, truth is present but never fully grasped. "We see through a glass darkly" (I Cor. 13:12) in every generation. This means that whatever insights are relevant for one's own day will be of only relative value for another time, another place. Thus, our task is not to discover the truth in past history but in and for our history. We do not look backward to the sages of the past to find the word for our time. We stand at the intersection of yesterday and tomorrow listening for the guidance we may glean from their wisdom but awaiting the word of God's own future.

The Biblical Story

One of the "givens" to aid us in our search is the biblical story. The biblical wisdom provides a definitive framework within which our intellectual and existential quest is cast. In its pages are found pointers to the very mind of God. These serve to guide our search for the Will of God in our own time. Here are images of God and human responsibility that provide solid moral guidance in the midst of the shifting sands of social circumstance and historical crisis.

Walter Wink has reminded us, however, that we search the Scriptures in vain for a definitive sexual ethic.¹ Even so, it provides authoritative images that aid our ethical task.

The story begins in the garden—the paradisaical portrayal of human sexuality in the intention of God. The Genesis narrative captures the human experience of joy and anguish derived from human sexuality. In the beginning God created us male and female. And "they were both naked . . . but they felt no shame" (Gen. 2:25). The goodness of creation, creature and Creator are all affirmed. At the height of God's creativity, he gives sexuality to his creature made in His image. Male and female bear the image of God. Sexuality helps to understand this creature made in the image of God. "From the beginning" the will of God is that this gift should be cherished, nourished and enjoyed most intensely by those most able to relish and govern its powers and processes.

But all was not—is not—well. The joy is diminished, the rapture is subdued. Sin enters the story. This creature against the creator and spoils the beauty and innocence of the garden. Disobedience and arrogant rebellion portray the human temptation to act on grounds of pride and selfishness. As nature is despoiled, the earth creature is driven from the garden. All nature now bears the mark of human rebellion.

The man now suffers the pain of toil, the woman the pain of childbearing. Anguish and suffering dilute the joy. A love story has gone awry, as Phylis Tribble put it.² Created in and for joy, sex has been contaminated by sin and condemned to a less than perfect place in the life of creation.

The story never says or infers that sex is sinful nor that sex was the occasion of sin. What it does say is that sex is

experienced under the conditions of sin. The Hebrew had a healthy naturalism that relished this most intimate and precious of all human experiences. But it realistically assessed its powerful potential for injury and hurt. Persons were blessed or cursed or blessed and cursed by their sexual experiences. From the same ground came forth both good and evil.

From that time on—from the entry of sin into the human story—the contamination of evil has attended human sexuality. (The evil is not in sexuality, for that is the creation of God. It is in sin, for that is the creation of human rebellion.)

This helps to understand the twin factors in Hebrew rhetoric of a naturalistic candor and a guarded reticence when speaking of sex. The Old Testament can be remarkably straightforward about sexual experiences—from those of Joseph, to David, from Rahab to Solomon. Still, nakedness, incest, adultery and a host of other sexual contacts were taboo—forbidden in the registry of acceptable social conduct. Euphemisms—feet, thigh, loin—were chosen to speak of male genitalia. This should not be confused with prudery, however. Rather, it recognized the appropriateness of speaking in veiled terms of that so cloaked in mystery. One could best celebrate that which is not devalued by careless conversation.

Further, the mystery of their sexuality was a sign of the secret of their covenant with the Creator. In the flesh of their genitals, they bore the sign of covenant membership. This sign was not to be flaunted before the pagan nations but guarded as the secret of their being. Sexuality thus retained a religious significance while it was never given religious standing. Sex was never to be incorporated into their worship of Yahweh for Yahweh was not sexual. He did not create by divine fertility but by the spoken word—the word which is also act. Thus, sexuality could have no religious standing. Coitus was not an act of the gods, but an experience of people.

Even so it had religious significance. The sign of circumcision was a reminder of their covenant and election. They bore on their body the sign of redemption. Beyond the failure of the Garden was the forgiveness of election and covenant

hesed—the mercy, grace, steadfast love of the God of Israel. The one who created them out of mercy, redeems them for his love.

Thus, the Hebrew story moved beyond the despair of guilt in coitus. The joy of creative love was celebrated in every act of married coitus. It was coitus that sealed the covenant of marriage and became a sign of continued longevity of this people that belonged to God in fidelity as well as rebellion.

Notions of human sin did not rob the Hebrew of the joy of sexuality. Its love poetry is among the most sensuous of the literature of the world. Witness the **Song of Songs**, a "symphony of eroticism . . . that invites all companions to enter a garden of delight."³ If Genesis portrays "a love story gone awry," the **Song of Songs** portrays "love's lyrics redeemed," says Tribble. God does not condemn people to perpetual guilt for wrongfulness even in sex. He redeems our passion and forgives the sin that we might enter the rhapsody of new joy. If there is banning from the Garden of innocence, there is the joy of the Garden of bliss. If we are condemned to pain, we are also promised joy. This symphony of love is a song of joy, not of anguish, despair, loneliness or guilt. All the daughters of Jerusalem are admonished to know its delights (3:5).

Even the Song shows the impact and limitation created by sin, however. Sex is not sinful but is experienced under conditions created by sin. This is not existence in a state of perfect bliss or eternal union. Sex is not divinized but harmonized with the human condition. Even in these fields of play, fulfillment does not come automatically nor easily. *Eros* seeks but does not always find (3:2, 5:6). Not joy but illness may be the result of unrequited love (5:8). Love's speech wavers between distance and intimacy, discomfort and consolation, dismay and rapture. All nature—plants, trees, gazelles, foxes, doves, goats and deer—shares in this symphony of eros—its intense joys and its immense frustrations. This intermingled joy goes to the foundations of existence. All of creation is touched by redemptive love which is always suffering love.

That theme is epitomized in the Incarnation. Sexuality is supremely redeemed in the one through whom love is perfectly revealed. The one perfectly imaging the Father is the one who redeems us from the tyranny of sex divinized or demonized. He has experienced sexuality under the conditions of humanity—"Tempted in every point as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Jesus overcame the dichotomy in creation and lives without the discord of disobedience. He thus points the way to the redemption of sexuality by making possible the redemption of humanity. To save the person is to redeem sexuality. To redeem sexuality is to save the person from the disharmony created by sin.

The resurrection of Christ becomes a sign on the horizon of the future for the final redemptive drama of God. We are moving toward the consummation of history when all the distance and disharmony of sin in creation will be resolved. The resurrection is the promise within history of that redemption yet to come.

The biblical story of sexuality does not end but points to the end—the goal of history and nature established by the one who set it on its path toward the future. The future is God's own future but it is also the future of redeemed humanity. "We shall see him as he is for we shall be as he is" (I Jn. 3:2) is the promise toward which we move. Tragedy is turned to triumph; chaos is transformed into order; distance into intimacy; and confusion into consolation. There—in that time—pain will be transformed into joy; transgression into obedience. There will be no tears, nor any pain for God shall have redeemed our existence.

The biblical story then treats human sexuality with realism and the hope of redemption. Wherever God's redemption is experienced, there is a sign of his promised future. This is God's promise for every human experience in every dimension of our sexuality. This is our story—and our hope. We may in our own sexuality experience redemption and thus the joy of our existence in love.

The Story in History

The biblical story has not fared so well at the hands of its interpreters. Quoting the Bible does not mean one under-

stands or is true to the biblical perspective. That is why it is imperative to begin with the Bible and not with interpretations of the Bible. The Bible is our "word of God," not the inherited traditions of church or said. A study of the history of Christian sexual thought, for instance, certainly shows the influence of the Bible. But there are other influences as well and the end result frequently seems far removed from the biblical story.

I want to focus three characteristics of our received tradition. Understanding these may be avenues to better understanding ourselves. It might also serve as a way to "test" the tradition in light of the biblical witness.

1. **A predominantly negative attitude toward coitus.** Sexual activity in all its forms came under suspicion as Christian writers tended to stress the "sin side" and diminish the "joy side" of human sexuality.

The crucial turn came during the time of the early church. Struggling for its own existence and trying to define itself over against a world of philosophical currents, the early church allied itself with Hellenistic dualism and rejected Hebrew naturalism. Dualistic thought identified the world of matter, including the body with all its passions, with evil. Spiritual realities were the true verities traceable to the soul, the divine spark or image that resides in people. The notion of the resurrection of the body gave way to the idea of the immortality of the soul. Reason and the rational life were elevated as spiritual powers while bodily passions and emotions were regarded as inferior at best and sinful, at worst.

The consequences for sexual thought were disastrous. Asceticism—the effort to overcome bodily passion because of the morbid notion of the sinfulness of the flesh and the corruption of the world—entered Christian thought. This was combined with a works righteousness which aimed at extraordinary holiness and merit. This meant the subjugation of the body and the contemplation of the soul. Tertullian (160-220 A.D.) argued that active sexuality was pagan while continency was Christian.⁴ Origen (185-254) emasculated himself in his youth believing sexual intercourse was repulsive and a pollution of the flesh.

From this there developed the "cult of the virgin" that exalted celibacy as the superior way of life—a notion probably reflected in Revelation 14:4 where the procession of the redeemed is a company of virgins "which were not defiled by women." The idea of the perpetual virginity of Mary (mother of Jesus and other children) emerged. The sinlessness of Jesus was explained by his virgin birth and celibate life. Tertullian argued that all the apostles were virgins except Peter.⁵ He felt that the death of a married partner was fortunate since that delivered one from the temptation of the flesh. He made it practically a test of faith to remain single, arguing that remarriage is adultery.⁶

The few Christians of the era who resisted such nonsense were severely criticized and finally condemned as heretics. The Helvidians challenged the perpetual virginity of Mary; Jovinians argued wives were as morally pure as virgins and Vigilantius advocated a married clergy and questioned the value of celibacy. Under Ambrose the synods at Rome and Milan declared them condemned. By the fourth century, celibacy was a requirement for the clergy—as indeed it was for anyone sincerely committed to the Christian life.

Even married couples should refrain from sexual intercourse. Marriage was not the creation of God but a hospital for sinners—making coitus available under social constraints but without religious justification. Tertullian said that even the chaste use of wedlock was morally the same as fornication for the acts were intrinsically the same.⁷ Clement of Alexandria taught men to feel no desire for their wives ". . . for [Christians] have learned not to have thought for the flesh to fulfill its desires."⁸

The first great systematic theologian of the Church, however, was Augustine. He set the stage for historical Christian attitudes to follow. His was a blend of Neo-Platonic thought with biblical influences. There was also more than a hint of the influence of Manichean dualism though he attacked that philosophy in theory. He at least argued that all of creation, including sex, was good. But a choice of anything less than the greatest good was an evil choice.

The greatest good was rational contemplation of God—the meditation of the soul with its Creator. By that construct,

sex did not have a chance. The soul was to subdue the body; contemplation was to replace passion; reason was to dominate emotion. The lines he drew to human sexuality were invidious. What was not conducive to contemplation was the result of the Fall. Concupiscence or lust now attends all bodily passion and is an intrinsic evil. Lust was not the original sin but now attends every sexual act. It is a taint passed on through procreation and that makes each of us sinners by conception. He was followed closely by Aquinas who even more carefully and systematically closed the gaps to Christian acceptance of sexuality. In both these giants of Christian theology bad theology had been wed to bad biology. They made unhappy marriage partners!

Married sex was tainted with an evil that the most pious and devoted of Christians could not overcome. The resulting burden of guilt testified to the relentless separation of body from spirit, of emotion from mind and of sex from spirituality. Christians, sincere in their commitment to Christ, could not bring their sexuality to the altar of consecration. The only justification for sex in these thinkers was procreation. God permits coitus only because it is necessary for conception. But unless coitus is for conception it is evil, pure and simple. By that token, all non-procreative, only-for-pleasure-or-love, sexual acts were condemned. They were purely lustful without religious justification.

The Reformers—Luther and Calvin—somewhat recaptured the biblical elements of redemption and forgiveness. They attempted to develop an ethic of grace and thus resisted the works righteousness of Roman Catholic moral theology. Celibacy was accepted for those with a special call but rejected as normative for Christians. The Protestant parsonage was established. Clerical celibacy was not even advised, much less required. Marriage was the primary calling; its need was rooted in human nature and established in Creation.

Luther's marriage to Katherine von Borah contributed to his very positive views of the joys of family life. He was never able completely to overcome his Natural Law heritage, however, in that sexuality was still suspicious. Marriage was a remedy for sin; a hospital for the sick;⁹ and the procreative purpose remained primary.

Calvin was more positive. He stressed the companionate nature of marriage which recaptured the oldest biblical account (Gen. 2:18-25). Hardly a ladies' man, his phlegmatic personality could apparently have been content with a spiritual marriage. But he did not disparage the venereal element of marriage; coitus is holy and undefiled. Sex is regarded as unclean or unholy only because Satan warps our sense of values and moral judgment. We end up calling evil that which is good. The second part of virginity is the chaste love of matrimony, he argued.¹⁰

However, Calvin was the original Puritan regarding sex outside of marriage. For him, the grossest of all sins was fornication. This he based on Natural Law along with other non-marital sexual acts: homosexuality, incest, prostitution and adultery. All these were sins deserving excommunication.

The Puritans followed Calvin's clues to the letter, extending his moral judgments to civil law and religious constraints. The stress on marriage led them to discourage singleness. Bachelors, almost in a class of suspected criminals, were offered incentives of free land as an enticement to marry. As long as they were single they were taxed "for this selfish luxury," and were given the ignominious duty of killing crows and blackbirds. Single women were "maidens withering on the virgin thorn." If not married by 25 they were publicly ridiculed as "old maids," which only deepened their plight. Prudishness and ridiculous moralisms were extended to customs of dress and decorum. Dancing was prohibited as sexually exciting. Work was recommended as a way to keep the mind off sexual interests ("an idle mind is the devil's workshop.") And woe to the woman who appeared in public revealing more than face and hands.

The legacy of these teachings is not only a part of our social fabric but of our psychological makeup. The predominant impression made by historic Christian teachings is that our bodily passions are sinful and that even coitus in marriage is tainted with an unholy guilt. The combination of powerful religious teachings and confusing social constraints has contributed to marital unhappiness and moral confusion as to the goodness of being sexual.

Christian theology at best has made an uneasy alliance with sexuality. Yes, sex is to be affirmed as good because the Creator is good. But the expression of sexuality is to be carefully delimited. Variety in sexual play by married partners has been condemned as "unnatural" and sinful even by Protestant thinkers. The religious source of this nervousness seems to be in allowing for the goodness or acceptability of the sensual side of human nature. It is the rational model against the sensual model and reason wins out. The Stoic we have always with us in the court of sophisticated, systematic, ethical teaching. But not in human experience.

One of "the polarities of our existence" is that we may deal with sexual questions in terms of logical constructs and so-called rational thought but in actual experience, reason gives way to passion. I would argue that the emotional factor has been a powerful element even in logical or systematic treatments. Augustine was a guilt-ridden profligate unable to contain his sexual drive until lawful marriage. Aquinas was a quiet intellectual whose genes did not include an active pituitary gland. Devoted to his mother, he never had a meaningful contact with, much less relationship to, a woman. The irony is that these two giants of theology have been primarily responsible for the church's teachings on human sexuality. Not the biblical teaching but the Bible understood through men like this has been our legacy from history.

2. Historic Christian teachings have been **an ethic of heterosexual relationships**. Homosexuality and homosexual acts have had nearly universal condemnation among Christian writers. The moral condemnation has frequently been carried over into legislative attempts to punish and/or abolish this sexual phenomenon. The penalties of the law were compounded by Christians ostracism and condemnation. The result has been that of leaving a significant group of people without guidance for their sexual lives and with terribly confused signals from the church and their own experience regarding their life before God. If the church's preaching is that of grace, its preachments have been that of scorn and judgmentalism for those who are homosexual. In this, as in few other areas of the church's life, morality has been a pretext for cruelty of the most insidious and extensive kind.¹¹

Salvation may be by grace in the official teaching of the church, but it turns into the harsh legalism of a heterosexual works-righteousness when the question turns to those who are homosexual. The roots of this mentality lie in the teachings of the Bible as traditionally interpreted. The Holiness Code and the writing of Paul have been taken as sufficient condemnation to answer the question of the moral and spiritual acceptability of homosexuality once and for all. This, combined with the logical construct developed in the early church, in the Natural Law tradition of the Middle Ages and in the Orders of Creation approaches of Neo-Reformation thought, has left Christians with a dearth of materials by which to approach the subject with any degree of grace or openness. Rather, our struggle is to get beyond the posture of moral revulsion—which undoubtedly represents not only our moral heritage but our own uncomfortableness with homosexual impulses.

The early church fathers seem not to have had a great deal to say about homosexuality as such. They were busy encouraging all Christians to be celibates which would take care of the problem.

Aquinas drew the noose tight around the neck of those who were homosexual. With his consistent but loveless logic he brought Natural Law theory to its flower. According to this approach whatever failed the test of reason and/or the natural order was sinful. Homosex failed on both scores. Of sexual acts among people, this was the worst. It was purely lustful and thus had no redeeming quality. This formed the filter through which Aquinas read the Scriptures—from Sodom to Corinth.

The Reformers and Puritans followed Natural Law moral teachings without serious modification—certainly as to homosexuality. Luther referred to homosexual acts as “inhuman, satanic, and contrary to nature.” Sodomy “extinguishes the fire of natural desire and stirs up another,” he said.¹² Calvin, in his **Commentary on Romans**, declared that all the sins Paul enumerated were against the natural law. The original Puritan, however, Calvin, called fornication the grossest of all sins. But those guilty of sodomy, incest, homosexual acts or

prostitution were to be excommunicated as well.¹³ The Puritans seldom if ever mentioned homosexuality, preoccupied as they were getting everyone married and punishing those who violated the covenant. Likely the colonies did not confront homosexuality on any extensive basis. Their pressures on singles to marry and the rigors of life in the colony may have served to repress or re-direct whatever homosexual impulses there may have been.

Neo-Orthodox theologians Barth and Brunner modified Natural Law into the Orders of Nature. By this notion, heterosexual marriage was God's intention and pattern from creation. That theological construct established an ethical norm: homosexuality violates the divine intention of marriage. It also violated the intentionality of God for personal growth and development. Homosexuals were, at best, "incomplete" for they were not able to enter into the male-female union that fulfilled each and brought meaning to being "male" and "female."

Carlyle Marney wrote of this approach that there is no "we-ness" toward the homosexual from the church. The church becomes a closed communion of heterosexuals—all guilty in one way or the other of violating their own conscience or social mores with regard to sex. But all (heterosexuals) could self-righteously boast of their superiority to homosexuals. The incestuous deacon, the lustful clerk, the adulterous choir member, the promiscuous coed, the jock on the make—all could feel morally arrogant toward these—the least of all. "I thank thee, Lord, that I am not as homosexuals are . . ." becomes the smug, self-righteous prayer of heterosexual Christianity.¹⁴

The Biblical material may well have been pushed beyond its meaning by Christian traditions. There are three types of homosexual conduct dealt with in the Bible. These are all condemned. The first one was those related to inhospitality. For instance, the homosexual acts associated with the story of Sodom-Gomorrah were designed to humiliate the strangers who were visiting Lot.

The background has two components. First was the covenant law of Israel that commanded hospitality toward strang-

ers. The sojourner was to be treated with respect and protected, not oppressed, humiliated or destroyed. The second background factor was the common Mideastern practice of humiliating enemies by subjecting them to acts of sodomy. The Hebrews sent their enemies home naked from the waist down. Nakedness was, for them, a shame. Other Semitic tribes sodomized their enemies, however, which is a practice that continues to this day, as in Iran. The act is degrading and humiliating—designed to break the spirit and the will of the prisoner and thus defeat him psychologically as well as militarily.

This seems to have been the intention of the men of Sodom. Lot's guests had entered his home without checking their credentials at the gate with the officials of the city. Feeling insulted and that their authority had been ignored, they proceeded to ventilate their anger by threatening to humiliate the strangers by subjecting them to sexual abuse. Their hostility and suspicion of strangers in general seem to have been the mentality behind their intent to sodomize. This seems also the interpretation given by Ezekiel 16. It was not until much later that the secondary sin was substituted for the primary—as in Jude 7.

The second category of homosexual sins condemned in the Bible was those connected with religious rites. Israel was determined to keep all sexual acts and thus any element of fertility ritual out of Israel's worship of God. The reform under Josiah (II Kings 23; II Chr. 38) included the destruction of homosexual centers—apparently places of religious ritual. The harsh condemnations of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 were related to the concern of the Priestly writer to set forth regulations for religious ceremonial purity. The parallel is that of heterosexual prostitution. Secular prostitution was tolerated (Josh. 2:1; 6:1f.) but any priest's daughter (Lev. 19:29) or widow who went into prostitution was to be slain. The association with sacred prostitution seemed to be the problem, not prostitution as such.

Paul's condemnation of homosexual acts in I Corinthians 6:9 also seems in the context of idolatry. Corinth's pagan temples involved both heterosexual and homosexual religious acts. Paul is distinguishing the Christian from a pagan life-style. As the Hebrews, so Christians do not associate sexual-

ity with God and thus fertility rites are never permitted in worship. Paul associates "fornicators, adulterers (heterosexual) and pederasts (homosexuality)" with "idolators" which seems a clear reference to worship ritual not permitted for Christian.

The third type is those associated with a sensual lifestyle. Paul's treatment of homosexuality in Romans 1 is in the context of condemning a lifestyle obsessed with overindulgence. Sexual acts are engaged in purely for sensual reasons. Excess in everything from eating and drinking to sexual appetites is the concern. The picture is that of the jaded sensualist who has tried every variation of sexual acts one could imagine. Curiosity and lust characterized their insatiable craving for ever more exotic and unusual sexual contacts. Heterosexuals engaged in homosexual acts just because of their jaded and faded interest in heterosexual partners. They had tried it all and now looked for new territories to conquer. "God gave them up to unnatural passions" was Paul's powerful indictment of sexual interest turned into obsession with sex.

There can be no question then that certain types of homosexual activity were condemned in the Bible. What is open to question is whether the biblical writers ever made the distinction between orientation and behavior or whether their heterosexual orientation prevented their being able to make such a distinction. This is a question, however, which is being pressed in our time. The lack of historical guidance on the subject leaves us lacking a base in tradition or Bible upon which to build an ethic for those who are homosexual. That task will have to be resolved on theological and ethical grounds, which is seen, for instance, in the writings of such persons as D. D. Williams, Norman Pittenger and others.

Christian ethics will need to take account of the biological (genetic-psychological) evidence in developing its moral posture. While the data is not all in, there seems ample evidence that (1) there is such a thing as a homosexual orientation (whether or not one has engaged in homosexual acts), and (2) not all who are homosexual are psychological misfits or moral perverts.

These twin insights are not incorporated within historical Christian attitudes toward homosexuality. If our ethic is to

be "Christian," however, these children of God will also need to be included in the grace that extends to our sexuality. Rather than being treated as psychological misfits or moral perverts outside the kingdom of God, they need the same type of concrete guidance given to all the rest of us who are seekers after the kingdom. The question for each of us is how can I relate to my sexual powers in a way that is consistent with and appropriate to my life commitment to Christ as Lord of my life?

3. **A strong androcentricity** has also characterized historic teachings of the church, primarily because men have been the teachers. Women have been subordinated to men in church, culture, theology and ethics.

Luther compared the relative excellence of male to female to that of the sun and moon respectively. The role of women was that of bearing children, a means of venereal relief for the man and subordination in marriage. Calvin's ideal wife was one who combined "grace and virtue, contentedness and suavity, (with) simplicity." He also wanted her not to neglect his general wellbeing. He was not disappointed. He wrote of his deceased wife that "never did she interrupt (him) on any occasion."

Certainly the Puritans advocated and idealized the patriarchal family model. The woman was inferior to man because she was the first to "fall" in the Garden and the one who tempted the man to sin. She was to bear children without complaint for in that vocation was her salvation.

The one ironic exception to this tradition is that which idealized the woman as the crowning glory of virtue and the source of nobility in men. The Romantic tradition stems from a curious combination of courtly love with the cult of the virgin. As Mary was exalted as the virginal mother of the virtuous one (Jesus), women became regarded as the source of virtuous men. The natural desire of sexual passion was sublimated by a code of chivalry and honor. Marriage was utilitarian—not for the profound expression of affection and devotion—but for the legitimate bearing of children. Love was an ideal emotion—rooted in the soul and the source of one's salvation. A woman of noble bearing and beauty could

evoke from man the highest aspiration of spiritual and moral attainment.

The woman in question, however, was not attainable. Like the virgin Mary, she was only desired and admired. Usually, it was another man's wife who evoked the deep longings for love and virtue as in the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. This, as C. S. Lewis points out, was adulterous love. Further, it was the chase—or the effort to attain blessing—that was of primary importance. Requited love short-circuits the striving. The man is to be willing to do anything—to “scorn delights and live laborious days”—for the sake of his beloved.

What is functioning here is a secular version of the moral teaching of the cult of the virgin. Veneration for Mary is translated into adoration for woman. Men strive after the unattainable. They cannot attain perfection but they are made more noble by striving to be perfect.

Notice also that the woman is idealized woman, not real woman—a person with sexual needs and interests, dreams, hopes, fears. She is perfect woman—able to instill a passion for truth, beauty and nobility in the man that desires her. But she falls from the pedestal as soon as she “lowers herself” to the man's level and requites his passion. Having possessed her, she is no longer desirable. She loses her power and sense of mystery. The man is to chase but not capture.

The effect of Romanticism on Western culture and morals has been considerable. Its idealization of the cause and effect of love permeates the nursery stories and children's tales that portray beautiful Princesses and handsome Princes riding off into the sunset to “live happily ever after.” No mention of sex or marriage. They are in love. That's all that matters. Or, the beautiful Princess kisses an ugly frog and a handsome Prince appears. The magic is in the love that transforms ugly into beautiful. How many people have married partners with ugly habits (alcohol, drugs, abusive) believing their love would be all-sufficient to transform the partner?

The prom scene is another setting for this unbiblical notion of love. “I did but see her passing by/But know I'll love her till I die.” Or, “Some enchanted evening/you may see a stranger across a crowded room/you may see a stranger and

somehow you'll know/You'll know even then that somehow you'll see her again and again."

That's really all that counts—seeing her across the room. If you play the game by the rules, you will not meet her for she may not be perfect. She may have sweaty palms, or halitosis, or smeared mascara. The effect is in the eyes. If the heart palpitates, and you dream of this vision of loveliness, you have won. You are supposed to swoon, be slightly ill, lose your appetite, wish you were dead and in general be miserable. Romantic love has won again—but the people have lost. They live in a world of illusion and make-believe where women are fantasized about but not realistically accepted as partners in the human race.

Elements of this carry over into our double standard of morality. The troubadours taught the woman to draw the line. The knight would do anything he could get away with. Because, in her rested the predominance of reason and virtue, she was to be in control and keep him under control. When she does not, it is her fault. She is the one able to govern her passion, not him. Thus the burden of social and religious ostracism falls upon the woman more than upon the man.

The Puritans seldom found men guilty of fornication while the woman was whipped and fined, or forced to wear the letter "A" for adultery. More recently, Helmut Thielecke developed a double standard on a reading of nature's law—the different roles of receiving and giving the power of the sexual drive in men and women.¹⁵

Still a further legacy of romanticism is the resistance to sex education in school or church. This mentality reflects not only a Puritan anti-sex bias but the fallacy that "love is all that matters." If Christians love one another, the argument goes, they don't need to know anything about one another's sexual functioning. For the unmarried, sex in all its form is forbidden including sexual information on the mistaken notion that sexual questions are not to be confronted until marriage.

This radical reductionism of sexuality to coitus continues to plague Christian circles. Sexuality has to do with our being sexual creatures—male and female. It involves values as well as biology—self-image as well as genitalia. To be "educated"

about our sexuality is to enhance our growth as persons. Knowledge aids our discovery of the redemptive power of God regarding sexuality. We become liberated from the bondage of frustration, anxiety and anguish in experiencing powers we do not understand and voluntary responses over which we have no control. Indeed, "the truth will make you free."

A final legacy of androcentricism-romanticism is the subordinate role of women in church. Jewett points out that the argument is sexual, not biblical. The reason women should be kept out of the pulpit is because her presence would excite the male parishoner. On the other hand, women are not sexually aroused by a male pulpiter!¹⁶ Again the roots of romanticism and the cult of the virgin are clearly discernable. Mary was exalted above all other women and above every man but Jesus, but no woman is permitted to wear the vestments of ordination.

This de-sexualization of woman will not stand the test of scientific scrutiny. The sexual drive of woman is just as, if not more powerful than, that of man. We are all sexual creatures—some are men, some are women, but we are more alike in interests, moral capacities and spiritual attainments than we are different. Each bears the image of God and either may be called of God to share the gifts of ministry in appropriate ways through the church.

Conclusions

The contemporary church's task is to understand its own heritage. With critical appreciation, it is to examine the total context from which particular teachings emerged. The formulations of the past cannot be accepted uncritically—neither can they be rejected without examination. There is wisdom to be gained both from their errors and their valid insights. Their errors help to guide us around the pitfalls common to our gropings for guidance. Their insights have contributed to our joys and better enabled our coming to terms with our sexuality. Our task is to enter the history of the people of God with the responsibility of developing a Christian witness to persons coming to terms with their own sexuality. The church is to bear witness to its time as our fellow pilgrims have done in ages past.

This will involve gleaning insights from the biblical wisdom that enables us to interpret and digest the truth of science and philosophy. The Bible itself will provide the basic perspective for Christian approaches to sexuality. Rediscovering the biblical story will enable us to lay aside many of the distorted teachings about sex which have been passed on to us by our elders.

The last word from God on the subject of sex has not been heard. We are continually in the process of discovering who we are and what we are intended to be. Every word so far has been a limited, and a partial, word. So will it be in our time. The time for the last word is "not yet." Our task is to give a tentative word for our time—to announce with humility our understanding of this mysterious power of our being and relate it to the mystery and power of the presence of God in our lives.

We have this ministry-task in the midst of the human story marked by the stain of sin as well as by the joy of a bright hope. Like Hester Prynne who "comforted and counseled as best she might," we enter the anguish and joys of those with whom we travel. That pilgrimage is marked by "the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced or erring sinful passion—or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because uninvolved or unsought." We minister to both for each is an equally difficult burden. But we minister also in hope—seeking the word of graceful forgiveness and joyful grace—that makes God's redemption live through the celebration of our sexuality. Perhaps this is the day of which Hester dreamed when she shared her hope with those she counseled. She had "a firm belief, that at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between men and women on a surer ground of mutual happiness."¹⁷

The way ahead seems to be that of a Christian naturalism. Christian theology in the past tied itself either to the philosophical idealism or Manicheanism or supernaturalism, or to Freudian psychology that stressed early learnings, birth trauma, etc. I would contend that the most positive way toward the future seems to be to take our cue from Hebrew

naturalism. This will free us to affirm the sexual nature of our being, the sexual needs of our existence and the moral commitments that enable us to nourish, cherish and celebrate its joys.

Endnotes

1. Walter Wink, "Biblical Perspectives on Sexuality," *Christian Century*, November 7, 1979, p. 1082.
2. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), chap. 4.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
4. Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Body*, lix (59)
5. *On Monogamy*, 8.
6. *On Exhortation to Chastity*.
7. *Chastity*, III.
8. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, III, 58 and 59.
9. Martin Luther, *Works*, 15, p. 541; W. 3, p. 520.
10. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, xii, 28.
11. Roger Shinn in *Homosexuality and Ethics*, ed. Edward Batchelor, Jr. (New York: Pilgrim, 1980), p. 5.
12. Luther, *Works*, 43, 57.
13. Calvin, *Romans*, p. 108.
14. See Carlyle Marney, "The Christian Community and the Homosexual," *Religion in Life*, Winter, 1966.
15. Helmut Thielecke, *The Ethics of Sex* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 79ff.
16. Paul Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 160ff.
17. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Scarlet Letter," in *The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Vol. V (New York: Sully & Kleinteich, 1850), p. 311.