

BACK TO THE GARDEN: RECOVERING THE DIVINE UNION THROUGH OUR SEXUALITY

*The Rev. Daryle Niedermayer, B.A., B.Sc., M.Div.,
Pastor, Regina, Saskatchewan*

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Scriptural Analysis

The Directive for Fertility

As a starting point for discussing sexuality, many theologians use the injunction by God to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28)¹. They point to childbearing as the main reason to protect families, heterosexual relationships and the institution of marriage. This was certainly true for the early tribal societies of Israel. Israel’s existence and subsistence required a growing population. In such a culture, polygamy was encouraged and sexual activity for any other purpose was seen as perverse (McCary & McCary, 1984, p. 7). Maximizing the birth rate and compensating for a gender imbalance caused by war and hunting accidents required a polygamous society.

Throughout the Bible and until modern times, women were no different than any other property owned by men (Ex. 20:17). As society advanced and the rule of law became increasingly common, male life expectancy increased and monogamy replaced polygamy. Monogamy enhanced the equitable distribution of females among the increasing number of males. Monogamy was not chosen because anyone thought that “one man-one woman” was morally superior, righteous, or more fair and just to both men and women.

With the rise of the industrial era in the late 18th century, a surplus of labour led to the decline in importance of women as child-bearers. This factor, together with increased leisure among the upper class, allowed women to become more literate and articulate. Together with progressive-minded men, women were able to slowly posit an alternate, liberal interpretation of Scripture and the equality of men and women.

The Normative View of Human Sexuality within Scripture

Today equality between men and women is the normal view in our church. We reject the heritage characterized by its preoccupation with fertility and misogyny while affirming truths we now hold as self-evident: men and women are equally valued and created by God, and the planet has enough people already.

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As Christians however, we are not content to simply say that men and women are equal. There is something inextricably bound in our maleness and femaleness that makes either incomplete on its own. We find this theme in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

The first creation account tells us that, “God created humankind² in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). The second creation record says the same thing, yet in a different way. After creating man (in Hebrew *adam*), God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Gen. 2:18). After making every animal of the field and every bird of the air, however, none was found to be a suitable partner. Finally, God separates *adam* into man (in Hebrew *ish*) and woman (in Hebrew *ishah*). The man pronounces, “This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken. Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:23-24).

Jesus returns to these stories in defining his own understanding of human sexuality. In Matthew, Jesus merges these stories before concluding that the sexual bond between a man and a woman is a divine one.

“Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mt. 19:6).

Paul asserts this same truth in his writings. In his list of human dualisms, he is prepared to assert that Christ provides unity so that “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free.” When discussing gender however, he chooses a different word: “there is no longer male *and* female” (Gal. 3:28). This idea that our completeness in Christ means that we can no longer be male or female is as important as it is subtle.

According to Hans Dieter Betz, the Greek culture of Paul’s time believed that in the beginning, there were three kinds of human beings: the two sexes of male and female and a third androgynous gender. “This myth then goes on to explain the sexual love between the sexes as the result of their separation into two halves and their desire to regain the primordial state of unity” (1979, p. 198).

Paul uses the cultural stories of his time to assert that as long as we are either male or female, we are incomplete. Our incompleteness as males or females gives rise to the sexual drive to rejoin with the *other* and so re-experience the divine unity that existed at creation. Whereas ethnic and socio-economic class distinctions do not prevent Christian unity, Paul affirms that ultimate Christian unity does require gender differences to be removed. This drive to reintegrate our male and female natures helps explain why Paul is

² In Hebrew, this word is *adam*.

such a strong advocate of marriage and sexual fulfillment within marriage (1 Cor. 7:2-5) in spite of the fact that he expects the imminent return of the Lord (1 Thes. 4:15-18).

Revisiting Leviticus and Romans

This view of sexuality allows us to understand two of the most troubling passages in the human sexuality debate: Leviticus 18 and 20, and Romans 1.

In Leviticus 18:22 (and again in 20:13), God commands the Israelites not to “lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.” These passages are contained within the purity code and dates from an era when the national welfare required optimizing the birth rate. Because the family unit was the primary social mechanism to achieve this fertility, it also required protection. These passages are grouped with other sexual injunctions with the same goal such as: the degree of familial separation required for sexual relations, bestiality, or sacrificing children to Molech.

Within a larger context, Leviticus contains the criminal and civil code upon which to base the social order for the ancient tribes of Israel. Few if any of these purity laws are invoked within our Christian or secular societies today. As well, the Leviticus passages only prohibit male homosexuality; lesbianism incurs no similar injunction.

Romans 1 is more critical to our discussion. Here Paul claims that everyone—even those who have never been exposed to the Gospel—has an implicit knowledge of God and is invited to live in faith. Nevertheless, many dishonour God and opt to become “futile in their thinking” (Rom 1:21).

“For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error... They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Rom 1:24-30)

While Nelson suggests that words like “leaving,” “giving up,” or “exchanging” means these people are heterosexuals who are only flaunting or experimenting with homosexuality (1978, p. 186), it is more likely that Paul is chastising them for forsaking the opportunity for the heterosexual unity that offers them communion with the divine. They think they know how to find God but they are searching in all the wrong places.

For Paul, homosexuality is not the only sign of divine rejection. Murder, gossip, haughtiness, and rebellion to parents are included as symptoms of the carnal natures to which these people returned.

Summary

Scripture is not mute on the issue of human sexuality. Throughout both testaments and from a number of writers, there is a strong undercurrent defining sexuality as one link in our communion with the divine. We see that an affirming, lifelong heterosexual bond between a man and a woman is the normative and divinely intended response to the gift of our human sexuality. Thus, the relationship that we normally call marriage is a blessed relationship. This blessedness is not encumbered or enhanced by the presence or potential of children in the relationship, but rather by the divine opportunity to reintegrate our maleness and femaleness into the divine nature from which we were first created.

Humanity is like a coin that needs the impression of both a head and tail image before it can become legal tender. This bonding of our male and female essences is the minting of our humanity and provides a vital connection between the divine and us.

Scripture also provides clarity around the issue of same-sex relationships. On the one hand, the strong polemics characterized by some elements within the faith community cannot find support in Scripture no matter how frequently certain verses are quoted. We cannot justify any abrogation of civil rights or condemnation of homosexuals without equally condemning a wide range of other human acts.

On the other hand, there is no basis for pronouncing a homosexual relationship a blessed state; rather homosexual relationships undermine God's plan for humanity by subverting the healing and unity for which humanity longs and which we are promised in Christ.

Practical Implications

The factors that determine sexual orientation are complex, not well understood and are frequently the subject of persistent debate among competing schools of thought. A discussion of the sociological, physiological and psychological factors and their interactions is beyond the scope of this paper.

However, the question of whether sexual orientation is a natural predisposition (as proponents of same sex blessings frequently assume *a priori*) or a lifestyle learning or choice is important. If evidence decides for the former, then the debate has implications for treating all God's people equally. It would be repugnant to discriminate against any person for some biological or genetic precondition that is beyond that person's ability to control.

While genetic markers exist correlating homosexuality and genetic attributes, the correlation is not strong (Lalumière, *et. al.*, 2000). Research confirms that the significant factors in determining sexual behaviour involve learning, modeling and reinforcement of behaviour (Karlen, 1971; Kinsey, *et. al.*, 1948; Ford & Beach, 1952, p. 125ff; McIntosh, 1968).

This may seem confusing to those struggling with questions of sexual preference. Most people feel resolute in their sexual identity, insisting that it is an inviolable quality of who they are. How can it be learned and thus possibly mutable? Sociologist Peter Berger's concept of "Alternation" helps illustrate how we go through life setting down and ripping

up cornerstones of our personal identity; each step in the journey capturing the essential “me” until we undergo the next metamorphosis (1963, p. 51ff).

Conclusion

It is through committed heterosexual relationships that we fully discover our humanity and become reunited with the divine essence and image through which we were created. This is not only the normative expression of our sexual nature and drive, but the divinely prescribed one. This completion of our humanity does not replace the offer of grace and communion through Christ Jesus. Rather, it augments that offer.

In as much as it is our calling as the Church to welcome all God’s people, we must be sure to welcome people regardless of their sexual preference. The scriptural record does not support the vitriolic rebuke with which some groups within our society engage. Rejecting and condemning actively homosexual individuals is an anachronism that should have been extinguished shortly after the conquest of Canaan. Today, welcoming actively homosexual individuals within our church and inviting their participation in the life of our faith communities is commanded and compelled if we affirm that the gospel is meant for all people regardless of their personal behaviour, sins, vices and virtues.

In as much as it is our calling as a Church to exhibit and model an example of the godly life, we must be examples and witnesses of the divine in a world infected by sin. Committed heterosexual unions provide us with a historic glimpse into our creation in God’s image and an eschatological hope for our ultimate destiny in Christian unity. Homosexuality undermines God’s will by discouraging and detracting from these unions. A decision that such homosexual relationships can be “blessed” is therefore untenable.

Welcoming, including and affirming the equality of all people under the umbrella of God’s grace should not require us to bless or condone their choices, behaviours or preferences. To do so would mute the second use of the Law and render the Church impotent.³ Balaam’s words should resonate with us as a church when he asked, “Must I not take care to say what the Lord puts into my mouth?” (Num 23:12).

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