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THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF SEX

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By D. B. KNOX

The Protestant Faith

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Sex goes so close to the centre of our being that views on sex will vary with views on man's nature. The Christian view of sex is a subsection of the Christian view of life. Scripture teaches and experience confirms that the highest good in life is relationship. "Real life is meeting".

The Christian view of man is that life has a purpose, namely the establishment of personal fellowship not only with one another, but with God. Such fellowship with God and with those who in Christ are in God's presence with us, will transcend the dissolution of the physical body in death.

If we ask ourselves the question 'What is the object of life?' and 'what is God's purpose for us throughout eternity?' the answer is that we are created for fellowship - fellowship with one another and fellowship with God. The doctrine of the Trinity shows that there is fellowship within the Godhead itself. We are made in the image of God and as we grow in fellowship, mutually considering each other in an unselfish way, so we grow into the image of God and grow as persons.

You will recall that in the account of creation everything is pronounced by God as good, with one exception: God said "It is not good that man should be alone". Our natures are made for fellowship. This is God's purpose for us and this purpose is reflected in the way humanity is constituted. Sex is very closely related to this purpose. Each of us finds ourselves to be either a man or a woman and men and women together make up mankind. Masculinity and femininity is each incomplete in itself but finds its completeness in personal fellowship between men and women. Men need the companionship of women, and women that of men, in order that each might become completely a

human person, a true man or a true woman. Sex relations are both an expression of this fellowship and a means towards its deepening. That is why it is a matter of such intense interest to everyone, because it reaches so close to the centre of our being and our needs.

The basic objective in the creation of our sexual nature is the procreation of children. But for humanity this is set in the context of love and fellowship, and children are born into a fellowship, that is, the family. So sex has its place in God's purpose for mankind of fellowship and companionship. Although sexual union is not essential for true personal fellowship between men and women, our sexuality serves God's purpose both by the procreation of children as increasing and continuing the group and in doing so adding a dimension to fellowship by the variety of age and relationship in the family; and it also strengthens the growth of fellowship between two people - a man and his wife. Marriage is a normal way for growth in personality through fellowship, that is, through the mutual interdependence of husband and wife. We are in fact all mutually interdependent; and it is as an aspect of this interdependence that sexuality has been ordained and that mankind finds itself men and women, a bisexual race.

The basic text for the Christian doctrine of sex is in the first chapter of the Bible (Genesis 1:26-28): "And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them: and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth". Note the juxtaposition: "God created man in His own image, male and female

created He them". God is fellowship within Himself - Father, Son and Spirit - and fellowship within mankind is a reflection of the image of God. Masculinity and femininity is a means for the development and strengthening of this human fellowship. Not that there is sexuality within the Godhead or that sexuality will be part of our eternal fellowship; in fact, Jesus Christ explicitly teaches that marriage belongs to this age only; in as much as death belongs to this age only (Luke 20:35,36). But our masculinity and femininity bind us in mutual interdependence, and the consequential relationship is a means of personal fellowship. But though relationship is essential, sexual relationship is not in itself essential and will be superseded in a higher life.

But we are now concerned with our present experience. God has created us in His own image and this, as so often in the Bible has a proleptic element. We are to grow into the image; the phrase indicates the purpose set before us. One of the instruments by which men and women can become united into an integrated fellowship of heart and mind and so become more truly persons through being interdependent and no longer isolated individuals is sex. This is clearly expressed in the second chapter of Genesis, v.18 and vv.23,24: "And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.... And the man said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh".

At the very centre of the Biblical interpretation of sex is the brief but pregnant sentence, "the two shall become one flesh". In the Bible, the word flesh includes the whole personality in

its creaturely characteristics, so that 'the two shall become one flesh' points to a unity of the persons. Sexual intercourse is never a passing affair but establishes a relationship between persons. It is a personal activity because it requires mutuality. As St. Paul reminded his readers the individual spouse is not the master of his or her body (I Cor. 7:4). In modern individualism and existentialism the sharing of oneself with another is impossible. Yet this is what sex achieves for a married couple, and it is a remarkable fact of experience that spouses adopt one another's outlook, views and even prejudices, without apparently any necessary convincing argument. On the other hand, modern materialistic humanism, which regards sex simply as a biological function and the other person in sexual activities primarily as a pleasure yielding body strengthens rather than transcends egocentric individualism.

Sexual desire is by no means only for physical contact with a person of the opposite sex. Both partners feel the need of the other as persons. They yearn for one another and through sexual relations they create an interdependence which extends over the whole life of the two people. This is because sexuality is a quality of the self. In it we understand what it means to be either masculine or feminine and not simply self-sufficient. Sexual intercourse implies knowledge of ourselves as well as knowledge of the other sex. This is not merely physical knowledge but knowledge of persons. It is interesting to note that the Bible speaks of sexual relations under the phrase "to know" your wife or husband.

Human relationships are important, but true relationship with God and consequently with fellow men is the supreme importance and the supreme good of life. Personal relationships can be described as knowing a person, thus, to know God and Jesus

Christ whom He has sent is eternal life, that is, the full, true, everlasting life. Knowing a person may be said to be being in fellowship with a person. And so, as St. John says, Christians not only have fellowship one with other but primarily have fellowship with the Father and the Son. Eternal relationship is the object of creation: restored relationship is the object of the Incarnation.

The most intimate human relationship is the relationship of husband and wife. God has created humanity so that neither men nor women constitute humanity but humanity is made up of men and women, and this bi-partism of humanity is reflected in the unity of marriage where the two parties man and wife form one unit, not merely economic or social but one unit of relationship within themselves as well as in their relations with other people. Sex is this polarity of men and women, and the activities through which sex expresses itself are ways by which the polarity is unified into a single fellowship. These activities are manifold, ranging from social chatter to the full expression of sexual activity in marriage. Thus the biblical view of sex is that it is the expression of relationship and an instrument of that relationship. It is no accident that the Bible uses the words "to know" to describe sexual relations. It is a pity that some modern English versions have failed to notice this, and paraphrase it at a merely physical level. In human sexuality the physical is simply the framework of the personal, and physical union a way to express and deepen that personal fellowship and union which the word "know" is the best single word to describe.

When it is realised that sex is the expression of personal relationship and the means of personal development through the growth of fellowship, some interesting facts associated with sex will be in-

telligible. For example, the natural reticence which surrounds our speaking of sex. This is not, as is sometimes thought, a false guilt complex, for it still remains true even with those who are fully conscious that their sexual relationships have become established at a pure level. It is the reticence naturally associated with the baring of our inmost personality; for sex goes close to the centre of personality. The same consideration explains the natural modesty which is associated with sex and is to be noticed even in young children and which is reflected in the language of antiquity as well as the language of Christendom.

When we see that the purpose of sex is that it should be a means to the fulfilment of personality through creative relationship, we have a criterion to test lawful, or illicit, sexual activities. Since mutual consent is a pre-requisite to all personal actions, rape, or the lascivious word or look or touch, being one-sided, and not intended to lead to a relationship, are an invasion of personality and an act of dishonour to a person. But consent is not the only consideration; for example, prostitution is reprehensible because both the woman who sells her body and the man who uses it treat her as a thing and not as a person.

Sex activities which cannot lead to the development of personal relationships in the unity of man and woman in one flesh are rightly recognised as perversions. Of course not all such activities are equally abominable, but all have the same characteristic, namely that the use sex is put to cannot possibly lead to fulfilment for the purpose of our sexuality, namely the growth in personality through a growing unity in fellowship. Thus perversions isolate one aspect of sex, the physically pleasurable, and pursue it for its own sake, disregarding the

development of personal unity. Yet sex is rooted deep in our personality and this is why a misuse of our sexual nature has more disruptive effects on our personality and fills psychiatric consulting rooms in a way misuse of other bodily appetites does not. For they are not, as sex is, designed primarily for personal fellowship.

Similarly pre-marital relationships which have no intention of being permanent, though not perversions, are a misuse of sex as they are not intended to lead to the fulfilment of our sexuality either in the begetting of children in the fellowship relationship of the family or the deepening of fellowship in the growing unity of persons. They misuse the unity of the flesh in the pursuit of one of its concomitants, i.e., physical pleasure. Yet we all know that physical sensations never fulfil what they promise. Happiness is a willo'-the-wisp. It cannot be pursued directly. It is, however, experienced in true relationships of persons. This explains one of the interesting characteristics of sexual pleasure, namely that "in a really successful partnership sexual pleasure normally continues to increase in both parties throughout married life". (A. Comfort, Sex and Society, p.88). This admission by a nihilistic humanist points to the important fact that there is not only more pleasure obtained by using sex according to its purpose, but also that unless we do this the real depths of pleasure that are possible in sex are unobtainable. Thus the libertine who pursues pleasure in sex for its own sake, flitting from partner to partner, by this very action rules out the possibility of enjoying what is the possible. On the other hand when the use of sex is kept within its purpose of monogamous marriage it not only yields pleasure and an increasing pleasure, but more importantly it also achieves personal fellowship without which no happiness is possible. God intends us to be happy all

the time and to be intensely happy, but to achieve this objective we must keep within the purposes of our nature.

Time is the great enemy of the physical, but when sex is used within its purposes, personal fellowship grows. Love deepens over the years and supplies a truer satisfaction as the physical wanes. So that fidelity is the key to the problem of the passage of time, that enemy of physical pleasure.

Our body is that part of ourselves through which our personality expresses itself and it is the instrument of self-giving by which a man or woman learns to reflect the pattern of the self-giving of God. When children are born into the family, this simply extends the scope of self-giving and provides the possibility of growth of personal relations. Children widen the fellowship and introduce another aspect, and a new opportunity for overcoming our self-centredness. So that fidelity in monogamous marriage with its opportunities of mutual giving and receiving, with sex as the background, is a means by which we grow as persons and in doing so enjoy the life we have been given.

Naturally, then the Bible regards divorce as a radical contradiction of the purpose of sex and marriage, though it recognizes that because of sin and hardness of heart, it may in some circumstances be the only way out (Mt. 19:3-8).

The most conspicuous feature about sex is the inordinate interest it arouses, and this inordinateness reminds us of the Christian doctrine that our personal relations both with one another and with God have been fundamentally disturbed by selfishness and sin. Sin erodes fellowship. Naturally enough this disturbance in our personality affects our sexual nature, because sex is so closely related to personal values and fellowship.

Personal fellowship can only be restored by genuine forgiveness. Fellowship with God is restored by the forgiveness which God extends freely to all who turn back to Him through Christ. Forgiveness calms the uneasy conscience and restores personal relations with God. It is worth noting that God (who is the offended party) takes the initiative in drawing us back to Himself. Similarly, forgiveness is basic in the restoring of fellowship in marriage when this has been disturbed. But in this case the turning towards each other and the forgiveness must be mutual, as it is almost certain that both spouses have a share of the blame.

In the Bible God's dealing with us is the model for our dealing with one another. Thus, ideal human marriage is a reflection of God's purpose for the divine-human relationship. The church, that is, Christians as a fellowship, are described as the bride of Christ, and from this is deduced the principle that husbands are to treat their wives as Christ the Church, e.g., "Husbands love your wives even as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for it" (Eph. 5:25).

The Bible teaches that marriage is modelled on Christ's relationship to the church, just as this in turn is modelled on the relationship within the divine Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Similarly, mating in animals is modelled on that of man, and so on down to the lowest level of life. From an evolutionary way of looking at things, this Bible view is the wrong way round. We start at the bottom and work up. Yet the Bible's view is the only logical viewpoint, once we admit the concept of purpose, for then the final result controls and explains all the more elementary stages which precede it. Purpose controls process (just as the purpose of erecting a certain type of building controls what goes on in the drawing office and on

the site), and of course, the concept of purpose is inalienable from belief in the existence of a personal God.

God's purpose for mankind is that we should grow as persons, which means growing in relationship with each other. Marriage is a crucible for this, and like all God's gifts, is a happy one; but our happiness will not be full nor our relationship stable unless we are also in fellowship with Him, to which forgiveness in Christ is the gateway.

Marriage is for this life, but the fellowship it engenders is intended for ever, to merge into the deeper fellowship of eternity. In this life marriage deepens fellowship by restricting it. But in Heaven fellowship will be deep and universal for the physical will have been superseded. And since the fellowship with God and with one another will then be perfect, the happiness will be complete.

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