

LOVE, MARRIAGE & SEX

by Mark Quigley

PREFACE

This is one of a series of papers looking at difficult issues for the Christian trying to please God in the 21st century. The Bible is an ancient document. It is sometimes hard to be sure how to interpret it. I am aware that this paper, like the others, merits a book to do the subject full justice. For reasons of time and space I have not covered all the historical and theological angles, especially if they do not seem relevant to our culture. Nevertheless, I hope the reader will find what is written helpful in his or her walk with God. All references are from the NRSV.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is mainly about sex. However, it is not some kind of manual or marriage guidance advice. Instead its aim is to put sex in its Biblical context. Part of that context is love and marriage, hence the title. In this fallen world we are often preoccupied with our personal happiness and satisfaction. We often fail to see God's big picture. This paper seeks to answer the questions: What did God create sex for and how should we fit in with His purposes? At the end of the paper I cover some practical issues that can be particularly troubling or disputed.

SOME OLD TESTAMENT CONSIDERATIONS

2. CREATION

To understand love, sex and marriage we need to go back to the beginning. The passages concerned are:

Gen 1:26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

27 So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."...

31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Gen 2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it...

18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."...

20 The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. 21 So the LORD

God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." 24 Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

These passages are complementary. Genesis 1 is perhaps more "broad brush" while Genesis 2 provides more intimate detail. Adam was made first and for a little while was alone. His task was to tend the ground and manage the living creatures. The garden of Eden was not a place of idle luxury, but a place for Adam to begin the job of ruling the Earth on God's behalf. However, it seems the job was too big for him alone. According to Gen 2:20 he needed but did not have a "helper". Elsewhere in the Bible God is sometimes described as a "helper", so the term does not imply inferiority. God could have provided Adam with a ready made army of men to assist him, but he did not do so. Instead he provided a woman. She could do what another man could not, i.e. bear children, and the couple are told to have plenty of descendants and fill the earth. "Filling" the Earth was necessary in order for Adam to rule it.

"Alone" or "Lonely"?

However, some writers have said that God's main concern in creating Eve was to meet Adam's psychological and sexual need for a loving partner, i.e. he was lonely until she was created. This puts the emphasis on man's need rather than God's wider purposes. Although it may well be true that Adam was lonely, the Hebrew word used for alone means to be separate or apart. It is used extensively in the Old Testament with this meaning and not to describe a psychological state. A good parallel is Exodus 18:14:

When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit **alone**, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?"

The context is that Moses was sitting as judge for the nation and the task was too great for him. Moses was not lonely, but he was alone in his task as judge and he did need help. Similarly in Genesis God's answer to Adam being alone is to provide a **helper**, i.e. someone to help him in his task.

This is an important distinction. If marriage is mainly about helping each other to carry out God's tasks it means that there will be times the couple will put God's work before their time together. A prime example is that having children often lowers the quality of marriages, especially if the child is sickly etc. The couple no longer have the time, money or energy they once had and are less able to fulfil each others' needs. If avoiding loneliness is the purpose of marriage then a couple might have no or very few children. If helping each other to fulfil God's wider purpose is the purpose of marriage then they might have as many children as they can successfully raise "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4), despite a less than perfect marriage.

If God was merely interested in using sexual reproduction as a means of filling the Earth with people he could have made Adam a hermaphrodite and then provided him with an "equal" hermaphrodite "Eve". However God provided Adam with somebody who was both "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" and somebody who was distinctly different. Together as male and female they would accomplish God's will and in some way reflect the nature of God himself. The heart of marriage is found in Genesis 2:24. A man and a woman "cling" together and become "one flesh". "Clinging" implies both physical and emotional closeness. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, e.g. Gen 29:14, being the same "flesh" refers to close kinship not sexual relations. Therefore the term "one flesh" refers primarily to the new close family bond created by marriage within which sex and child rearing is meant to take place. Gen 1:31 implies that originally sexual relations were not only necessary, but also "very good". Because there was no sin there was no need for Adam and Eve to cover their "private" parts.

Summary God's original intention was that Adam and Eve would be a heterosexual couple united in marriage who would raise a family with the long term intention of populating the Earth as rulers of creation under God. Sex between marriage partners was therefore a necessary part of this and was "very good" - one of the many pleasures God provided.

3. THE FALL AND ITS EFFECTS

The tragedy of the Fall is described in Genesis 3. Although Adam and Eve's sin did not directly involve sex it did involve their marriage relationship and everything, including marriage and sex, was affected. God's curse on Adam and Eve directly impacted on the purposes for which they were primarily created. From then on Adam's work would be tiring, difficult and frustrating while Eve's childbearing became painful. However, the effects of the Fall were far more wide ranging. Sin and death disrupted marriages, childlessness became possible, and sex became a source of difficulty and temptation. Mankind has struggled with these issues ever since.

The Old Testament records numerous departures from the ideal of Genesis 2, some very serious, some less so. The very serious such as rape and adultery are totally forbidden. The less serious include polygamy and divorce. In the Old Testament these are regulated but not forbidden. A modern parallel might be smoking which is harmful, but permitted and regulated. Most of the more serious sexual sins are listed in Leviticus 18:

1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

2 Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the LORD your God. 3 You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. 4 My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them: I am the LORD your God. 5 You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the LORD.

6 None of you shall approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness: I am the LORD.

7 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother,

you shall not uncover her nakedness. 8 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is the nakedness of your father. 9 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether born at home or born abroad. 10 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your son's daughter

or of your daughter's daughter, for their nakedness is your own nakedness. 11 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife's daughter, begotten by your father, since

she is your sister. 12 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's sister; she is your father's flesh. 13 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your mother's sister, for she is your mother's flesh. 14 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's brother, that is, you shall not approach his wife; she is your aunt. 15 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your daughter-in-law: she is your son's wife; you shall not uncover her nakedness. 16 You shall not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife; it is your brother's nakedness. 17 You shall not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter, and you shall not take her son's daughter or her daughter's daughter to uncover her nakedness; they are your flesh; it is depravity. 18 And you shall not take a woman as a rival to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive. 19 You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. 20 You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman's wife, and defile yourself with her. 21 You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. 22 You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. 23 You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion. 24 Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. 25 Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. 26 But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of these abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you 27 (for the inhabitants of the land, who were before you, committed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled); 28 otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. 29 For whoever commits any of these abominations shall be cut off from their people. 30 So keep my charge not to commit any of these abominations that were done before you, and not to defile yourselves by them: I am the LORD your God.

These sins were totally forbidden and they were binding on the Gentile nations around Israel at that time, not just the people of Israel. Most of the sins are forms of incest with close family members including in-laws. However, at the beginning Adam's children would have had to marry each other, so brother sister incest could not always have been wrong. Most of the incest references apply equally to both the father and the mother's sides of the family. However, after verse 14 there is no " You shall not uncover the nakedness of your **mother's** brother... " In the past Christian rule makers have assumed this was an omission and when making incest rules have filled in the missing verse. However, they may be making a false assumption and it is dangerous to add to the Bible. Deu 12:32 reads,

You must diligently observe everything that I command you; **do not add to it** or take anything from it.

Perhaps the best explanation for these incest prohibitions is that such sexual relationships or the possibility of them would have been destructive to family life as it was at that time. As such most or all of the incest rules presumably remain valid today. The remainder of the sins mainly seem to involve using sexual parts in ways that God did not intend and again seem valid today.

One prohibition that I think is probably not valid today is against a husband having sex with a wife who is "unclean" because of a period or childbirth. (Verse 19. The Hebrew covers all uncleanness because of an issue of blood.) Part of Jesus' ministry was to remove uncleanness

in general and this was a big issue for the early church. (E.g. see Mark 7:19 & Acts 10-11) Nobody today suggests that periods or childbirth make a woman unclean in a Biblical sense.

Premarital sex was also forbidden in the Old Testament and the penalty was that the couple should marry!

Ex 22:16 When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. 17 But if her father refuses to give her to him, he shall pay an amount equal to the bride-price for virgins.

Some have suggested that sex IS marriage interpreting "one flesh" as sexual intercourse. However, this verse shows that interpretation is wrong - she only becomes his wife after he has paid the bride price, not after they have had sex and there remains the possibility that the woman's father may refuse to allow the marriage.

4. Positive References to Sex

Despite the Fall it is clear that sex can still be positive. This is partly in terms of having children, who are very much a "blessing" in Biblical terms. God's original command to populate the Earth still stands. Bearing and bringing up godly children is still very much part of being in God's will. Malachi 2:15 tells us:

And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring.

The book of Proverbs warns against various forms of extramarital sex and by contrast advises men (and by implication women) to enjoy marital sex only:

Pro 5:15 Drink water from your own cistern,
flowing water from your own well.
16 Should your springs be scattered abroad,
streams of water in the streets?
17 Let them be for yourself alone,
and not for sharing with strangers.
18 Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
19 a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
May her breasts satisfy you at all times;
may you be intoxicated always by her love.

The final verse implies that this should continue into old age.

The Song of Songs provides the most complete reference to the delights of sex in the whole Bible. It is also one of the most disputed parts of the Bible. According to 1Ki 4:32 Solomon composed 1005 songs. The book begins:

1 The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

"Song of Songs" is a superlative meaning the best of all songs, just as "King of kings means the highest of all kings. It is a poem, parts of which are highly erotic. Some of the eroticism is clear

and some is less so because the symbolism is not always obvious to us. This is not the place for a detailed commentary. However, it is worth considering some of the themes:

- Celebration of sexual love.
- Celebration of mutual and uninhibited sexual activity within the relationship, e.g. chap 7
- Celebration of the woman's exclusive faithfulness, e.g. 4:12
- Celebration of Solomon's wedding, 3:6-11
- Motherhood, e.g. 8:1-2
- Avoidance of inappropriate sexual arousal, e.g. 3:5
- Avoidance of promiscuity e.g. 8:8,9
- Even the best of relationships has problems, e.g. 5:2-6

This is all consistent with the rest of the Bible as long as some of the "gaps" are filled in, e.g. all the sexual references involve a married couple - presumably Solomon and one of his wives -, although this is not absolutely explicit. Some commentators' interpretations involve extramarital sex. However, the word "spouse" is found six times in the book and The Song of Songs must be seen in the context of the rest of scripture. This rules out interpretations that involve immoral sex and there is absolutely no need for such interpretations.

Song of Songs contains no commentary on itself and through the ages Bible scholars both Jewish and Christian have come up with numerous detailed explanations. These fall into two groups:

1. It is an allegory of God/Christ's relationship with His people. The main argument for this approach is that important as human sex is, the Bible is much more concerned with God's relationship with His people. Elsewhere this is described as "marriage". Song of Songs would not be in the Bible if it were just a description of a human sexual relationship.
2. It should be taken at face value. The arguments are first that the sexual relationship is part of the highpoint of God's creation and it is not surprising that this should receive some extended treatment in scripture. This is consistent with 2 Tim 3:16:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

Second, if it is an allegory there is no Biblical key as to what the various symbols mean and it becomes a highly subjective matter of interpretation.

My personal opinion is that both arguments are right! I see Song of Songs as a celebration of a human sexual relationship that foreshadows, but cannot fully describe the much greater delights of the relationship between Christ and His bride following the "wedding" that will occur after His second coming. (At present the church is not married to Christ, but betrothed. E.g. See 2 Co 11:2)

5. NEW TESTAMENT DEVELOPMENTS

God's overall purpose remains the same as always. The Fall made for problems, but the way God will finally carry out His purpose is now revealed. There is now a "last Adam" (1Cor 15:45) instead of the original Adam who failed. The last Adam is the head of the people of God who will help Him by filling and ruling the Earth. (E.g. See Rev 5:9-10, Rev 21-22.) Originally the Earth was to be filled and ruled by Adam's physical descendants who would be brought up in families for this purpose. Although Christian families are still to do this (e.g. Eph 6:4), preaching to the nations is now a crucial method of enabling the Earth to be filled with people who are fit to rule in the age to come. (E.g. see Mat 28:18-20; 1 Cor 6:2.) In the Old Testament marriage was taken for granted and lack of children was a personal tragedy. In the New Testament God might call some of His people not to be married for the sake of greater fruitfulness elsewhere.

Mat 19:10 His disciples said to him [Jesus], "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." 11 But he said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

Jesus and the apostle Paul are the obvious examples of fruitful unmarried Christians. (See 1 Cor 7:8) Nevertheless the vast majority of Christians including Christian leaders continued to be married. Paul writes:

1 Cor 9:5 Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ... 19 For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.

Paul makes it plain that a single person is able to be more fruitful than a married person in serving God:

1 Cor 7:32 I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; 33 but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, 34 and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. 35 I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

However, the single state provides temptations. One obvious temptation is to seek sexual gratification immorally, so for most Christians it is better to be married and (where possible) have children. Because of this it is important that married couples have regular sex, even when one or even both of them think there are better things to do.

1 Cor 7:2 But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. 3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. 4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. 5 Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 6 This I say by way of concession, not of command. 7 I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a

particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. 8 To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. 9 But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

Another temptation for singles is to waste the time they should be spending on serving the Lord in useless activities. If this is the case it is better to be married. Bringing up children is so demanding that it is much harder to waste time! One of the churches that Paul started paid young widows to be celibate church workers. Paul told them to stop doing this as it led to sexual temptation and they would be more productive getting remarried and having children.

1 Tim 5:9 Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; 10 she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. 11 But refuse to put younger widows on the list; for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, 12 and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. 13 Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say. 14 So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us. 15 For some have already turned away to follow Satan.

In the New Testament marriage and sex within marriage is honourable but temporary.

Heb 13:4 Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

1 Cor 7:29 I mean brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, 30 and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, 31 and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

The permanent state is the church's "marriage" to Christ in the new age. (Note: the church as a whole is Christ's bride not Christians as individuals.) The New Testament speaks of the preparation of the church in this age for the "marriage" in the new age.

Eph 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, 27 so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind

— yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." 32 This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

2 Cor 11:2 I feel a divine jealousy for you (plural), for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

Rev 19:6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,
"Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.

7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;

8 to her it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure" —

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

6. Where does "Love" come into it?

This is a rhetorical question! In the Bible most marriages were arranged and the bride and groom may never have met before the wedding. Nevertheless in the Bible marital love is commanded and expected! The story of Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 24 is a good example of a loving arranged marriage. This should give heart to Christians who have married somebody only to find they are not quite the person they expected. Love should develop within a marriage whether you know the other partner or not.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for "love" (ahab) has a similar range of meanings to the English word. Israel was commanded to "love" the LORD their God (Deu 6:5) and their neighbour as themselves (Lev 19:34). Isaac "loved" Esau's cooking (Gen 27:4)! Jacob "loved" beautiful Rachel far more than plain Leah (Gen 29:30). Abraham "loved" his "only" son Isaac (Gen 22:2). It need hardly be said that love in all its aspects is an essential ingredient for a happy marriage.

In the New Testament Greek there are a number of different words to cover the different aspects of "love". Husbands are commanded to "love" (agapeo) their wives in Eph 5:25. Jesus explains the meaning of this kind of love in John 15:

12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

This duty of such love covers both partners, but perhaps husbands were more tempted to be selfish and needed reminding!

Another closely related form of love is prefaced by "phil" in Greek. In Titus 2:3-4 Paul tells Titus:

Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behaviour, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, 4 so that **they may encourage the young women to love [Gk philandros = love man] their husbands, to love their children [Gk philotechnos] = love children] ...**

Again this kind of cherishing love applies to all Christians including husbands! (E.g. See Rom 12:10.) In this case perhaps young wives were being tempted to neglect their families.

Erotic love - eros in Greek - is not mentioned in the Bible, but presumably it was taken for granted.

6. Biblical Sexual Ethics within Marriage

In the past Christian moralists have sought to specify what kind of sexual activities and feelings are proper within marriage. It seems that the early church was strongly influenced by a strand of Greek philosophy that said that the material part of man was altogether sinful and therefore sexual pleasure was sinful. St Augustine said that having children was good, but any pleasure involved was sinful! More recently it is said some Christian missionaries advocated the "missionary position" as the only correct one for sexual intercourse. There is a considerable history to this issue. However, as far as I am aware little of this is taken seriously now and I see little point in pursuing the matter.

Biblically there is little detail to say how a married couple should express their sexuality. Song of Songs suggests that mutual delight is a valid guiding principle with no obvious limits as to activity. How that mutual delight will be expressed presumably depends on the couple involved. The only limits would be the general ones to do with mutual love, care and freedom from abuse that apply to all relationships. In particular if one partner finds a particular activity distasteful it would not be loving to try to pressurise them into that activity.

Part of caring for each other within marriage is to help the partner avoid temptation, so sex will continue even when one partner does not feel like it. (See 1 Cor 7. I have already covered this above.) By this I do not mean "sex on demand". Obviously there may be numerous reasons why sex on any particular occasion might not be a good idea. Nor do I mean that it is ever right to force sex. However, there are plenty of marriages where one partner - usually the wife - has decided they do not want sex any more. Ideally they should try to deal with whatever the problem is. However, even if they do not the bottom line remains that the other partner has marital rights that should be satisfied one way or another. If they are not there is the obvious temptation to seek satisfaction in immoral ways, e.g. via pornography or an affair.

7. Immorality Matters

Sexual immorality has always been widespread, even amongst God's people. My own limited experience tells me that mature Christians in positions of responsibility and leadership are liable to sexual temptation as well as the immature and youthful. The warnings against it are numerous and sexual immorality usually heads the lists of sins found in the New Testament, e.g.

1 Cor 6:9 Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? **Do not be deceived! Fornicators** (Gk pornos), idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, 10 thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers — none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And this is what some of you used to be.

The main term for sexual immorality in the New Testament is "porneia". Although it is derived from the word for prostitute, it has a much wider meaning and there are different kinds as shown by 1 Cor 5:1:

It is actually reported that there is **sexual immorality** among you, and **of a kind that is not found even among pagans**; for a man is living with his father's wife.

Some modern supposedly Christian commentators have promoted sex to a position where it is OK within any adult consenting relationship as long as it is an expression of "love". However, this goes against the many general warnings and as quoted above it is easy to be deceived.

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## ISSUES FOR TODAY

### 8. Marriage and Cohabitation

In today's society the line between marriage and unmarried cohabitation has become blurred. Divorce is commonplace and many enter legal marriage on the understanding that if it does not work out there will be divorce. Some people have lived together publicly and faithfully for many years and there is no question of a separation until death parts them. This causes us to rethink the question of what exactly is marriage.

The modern English form of legally registered marriage is only a few centuries old and there are other ways of recognising marriage. In the early church there was a phase when there were aristocratic Roman ladies becoming Christians, but not men. They could marry Christian slaves, but under Roman law the ladies would then become slaves too! The church allowed such ladies to become concubines to the slaves in order to avoid becoming slaves themselves. In other words they did not have the full Roman legal status as wives, but the reality of their commitment was not in question.

The Bible gives no definition of marriage - it is taken for granted. However, there are Biblical clues regarding its essential features:

- God invented it. It is not merely a social convention. (Mar 10:9)
- It is a heterosexual union. (Gen 1 & 2)
- It is public. The Greek word for marriage is "gamos" which also means feast. In other words in the ancient world marriage starts with a public feast.
- It involves lifelong exclusive faithfulness. (Rom 7:1-3)
- It cannot involve close family. (Lev 18; 1 Cor 5:1)

Some long term cohabitations are so close to this that maybe they meet the above characteristics. However, for Christians the ordinary legal marriage is unambiguous and there is no excuse for legally unmarried cohabitation. The only exception in my personal opinion would be a long term cohabiting couple at least one of whom becomes a Christian, especially if they have children. In those circumstances I think they could continue to live together pending a legal marriage ceremony at the first opportunity.

### 9. Dating

Legally and physically marriage is possible from the age of sixteen. However, most people wait many years before they get married in their twenties or thirties. In order to satisfy their natural desires, at least in part, most people will have had a boyfriend or girlfriend before they marry.

For Christians this raises obvious problems. If they accept Christian morality they will not have full sexual intercourse. However, they will probably want some kind of physical expression to their feelings. There is then the question as to what are the boundaries. What is permissible: holding hands, kissing, petting? The Bible gives no list of such behaviours.

However, in Song of Songs there are three references to not arousing love - in this context meaning sexual desire (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says:

Mat 5:27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Here and elsewhere Jesus makes it plain that sin is not just to do with physical acts it is also to do with the imagination and thought life. If a deliberate act such as looking at another woman excites lust towards her then it is sinful. Drawing these two passages together it seems to me that it is wrong to commit any deliberate act that leads to lustful desires towards somebody one is not married to. Therefore it pays to be cautious during dating and for the more passionate it may be better to avoid physical contact!

## **10. Pornography**

Pornography is sexual imagery that is designed to arouse lust. It is vastly popular and extremely easy to obtain. Much of it is socially acceptable. It is therefore no surprise if it causes problems for many (usually male) Christians. However, it falls under the same considerations as 8 above and few Christians would attempt to justify it. Some might try to justify it on the grounds that it can reignite a flagging marital sex life. However, pornography involves being aroused by an image of somebody who is not the spouse and the means do not justify the ends.

## **11. Singleness - Gift or Curse?**

1 Cor 7:7 I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind. 8 To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. 9 But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

Many Christians are single. They may be too young or widowed. They may still be looking for Mr or Miss Right. They may be in a situation where there do not seem to be any potential partners. They may even prefer it that way!

As far as I can tell there are three possible Biblical responses to being single:

- I. Find a mate. Marriage usually does not just happen and most people look for a mate in one way or another. In the Bible parents were often involved. In our society there are other ways of looking. I see nothing wrong in principle with going on singles holidays and using agencies etc, especially if the local church is short of suitable young adults. However a bad marriage can be worse than no marriage. Anybody considering marriage needs God's wisdom about all aspects of seeking a partner. Prov 3:5,6:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,  
and do not rely on your own insight.

In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.

- II. Have the gift of singleness. The word for "gift" in the passage above is "charisma" meaning a spiritual gift - the same word as used in the well known passage on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12. Presumably this gift provides the possessor with supernatural enabling to resist or avoid sexual urges and temptations, thus setting them free to serve God more fully. Such people feel and are fulfilled in being single.
- III. Neither of the above. In practice there are many Christians, both never married and widowed, who are as yet unable to find a suitable marriage partner. Sometimes this is lifelong. There can be many reasons for this and in some societies there can be a shortage of one sex in the local church. Such people can comfort themselves with the knowledge that:

No good thing does the LORD withhold  
from those who walk uprightly.  
O LORD of hosts,  
happy is everyone who trusts in you. (Psa 84:11,12)

Sex and marriage are temporary blessings if they are blessings at all. God has something far superior in store for all of us in the age to come. Meanwhile singles are much freer in many ways. They can enjoy other nonsexual relationships and serve God just as well as married people if not better.

1 Pet 1:13-16. Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

## 12. Masturbation

Masturbation is commonplace and many Christians struggle with this in their personal lives, especially if they are not married. Historically it has often been condemned. Today most people including within the church are tolerant. In practice there is confusion about whether it is a sin or not. The Bible is silent about this form of sexual expression, which might suggest either that it is unimportant or that it is not straightforward.

In the past those who condemned it quoted the passage about Onan.

Gen 38:6-10. Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn; her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother." But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also.

However, this is "coitus interruptus", not masturbation. From the context it seems that his sin was his getting married to his brother's ex-wife, having sex with her and yet refusing to father a

child for his brother. Spilling his semen on the ground was not the issue - presumably his sin would have been just as great if he had used another method of contraception. (Onan's motivation was perhaps that he fancied his brother's wife yet he knew he would receive a much smaller inheritance if a child was born.)

Masturbation is clearly a departure from the original purposes of sex. It also carries an obvious risk of being combined with sinful fantasies. However, it might be done for medical reasons, especially as part of fertility treatment, so there is no obvious Biblical warrant for condemning it out of hand.

A helpful approach might be to regard it as one of the disputable matters covered by Romans 14. This passage refers to different views amongst Christians about eating meat and Sabbath observance, but the principle is far wider. If an activity is:

- not specifically prohibited to Christians;
- done with a clear conscience;
- does not cause other Christians to stumble in their faith;
- done while giving thanks to God:

then it is permissible. Otherwise it should be avoided! In practice avoiding masturbation can be very difficult. I suggest that the three main ingredients for success are: a close walk with God; actively avoiding things that might be arousing e.g. certain magazines; and being distracted with other things.

### 13. Contraception

Contraception is not a modern invention and was used in the ancient world. In section 7 above I mention the problem of the aristocratic ladies marrying slaves. In addition to their problem over marriage, another problem arose. Any children born to the union would be slaves. As a result the women were using contraception to avoid having any children. The church saw this as plainly wrong and the practice was forbidden.

In modern times having children is usually seen as a private matter - a lifestyle decision. If a couple love babies and children they will try to have them. If not, they are more likely to concentrate on their careers and holidays. Morality does not come into it. In the West the Roman Catholic Church's ban on contraception is widely ignored by practising Catholics.

The Bible does not mention contraception except in the special case of Onan (see 11 above). However, God's general purpose for Christians is clear. He wants them to lead fruitful lives.

John 15:12-17 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. **And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last**, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Bearing in mind God's overall purpose for sex and marriage, having children is the norm. However, it is also important that where possible children grow up to become Christian adults. (Obviously the adult children also bear responsibility for this!) Nurturing children properly is

demanding and to avoid overload the size of families generally needs to be limited. God's original intention was presumably that bringing up children was straightforward. However, since the Fall nothing is straightforward. The question then arises as to whether limiting family size should be done by avoiding sex altogether or by using contraception. 1 Cor 7 tells us that ongoing sex within marriage is important (see 4 above), so avoiding sex altogether is clearly unbiblical.

In summary, Any Christian couple should see their marriage as a means of being "fruitful". How this works out in practice is between themselves and God. However, it is clear that bringing up children is God's usual plan. Selfish ambition and pleasure are not good reasons for Christians to use contraception.

#### **14. Guilt, Shame & Forgiveness**

Sexual sin has an extraordinary capacity to make people feel guilty and ashamed or the reverse. While the world is often brazen about sins such as adultery and pornography Christians are often highly secretive. Most of us would probably rather admit to things such as greed or pride! Nevertheless God's forgiveness is just as readily available as for any other sin. A bigger problem is often repairing the relationship with the other partner, especially if there has been physical sex. The other partner should forgive, but may not be able to forget. In such circumstances trust may have been lost for good and divorce may be appropriate. (I cover the issue of divorce in my paper, "Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage.")

#### **Suggested Further Reading**

Christopher Ash "Marriage - Sex in the Service of God" IVP

Mark Quigley  
6/7/06