

WHAT IS SEX?

by Ray C. Stedman

Would it be an exaggeration to say that this is undoubtedly the most popular theme in the world? Sex is used today to sell everything from prunes to motor cars, from aardvarks to zwieback. Recently I saw an advertisement for overshoes (and what could be more prosaic than overshoes?) which displayed great letters an inch or so high spread across the top, spelling S-E-X. Underneath, in fine print, it said, "Now that we have your attention we would like to tell you about the overshoes we sell." If any further proof were needed of the popularity of this subject, this week someone saw the subject advertised on the bulletin board outside the church and said, "Wow! You are going to have a full church next Sunday!" And they were right!

Already there have been, I must report, some raised eyebrows at the idea that a subject like this would serve as a basis for a sermon from a Christian pulpit. But we are now in a series on "The Christian and Moral Conditions," and how can one preach a series on moral conditions without coming to grips with the subject of sex? And why should we avoid this subject? I make no apology for this message. It is only one of several I intend to preach on this general subject. I do want, however, to make one thing crystal clear. None of the messages on this subject will be approached from a negative point of view.

No one is more aware than I of the lopsided sensuality of our day, the grotesque over-emphasis on sex that exists. But this does not call for more scathing denunciation, for fire-and-brimstone from the pulpit. We have had plenty of that. I read recently a very insightful thing. One writer said, "The hunger of the world's people today is for affirmations. Everywhere people are asking, 'Can't you do something more intelligent than make loud noises against something? We know what you are against, please tell us what you are for.'" One of the reasons for the terrible ignorance about sex today is that the church, by and large, has not taken the time to declare what the Scripture has to say about this, but has contented itself with denunciations against the abuses of sex. Negativism never helps very much. There is a place for it, but nothing much is accomplished until a positive declaration has been made, and this is what I intend to do on this subject of sex.

The Bible is full of sexual themes. Anyone who has read it through knows this. This is perfectly understandable, for the Bible is the book about life. It is the book that goes with human beings, and since sex is very much a part of our lives, the Bible understandably would have a great deal to say about it. In the very first passage in the Bible on this subject (Genesis 2), you find a wholly positive approach to sex. This passage suggests all the elements which are later developed in full throughout the rest of Scripture. I propose that we thoughtfully review this passage and discover for ourselves the four great facts about sex which every human being should know.

The first great fact is that sex is God-given.

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." {Gen 2:18 RSV}

It may come as a surprise to some to learn that sex was not originated by Playboy magazine, and that Henry Miller and Tennessee Williams are not the ultimate authorities in this line. As a matter of fact, Satan can offer absolutely nothing in the realm of sexuality -- not a thing, except distortion and hollowness. It is God who created sex, and this verse clearly indicates that God had the distinctions of sex in mind when he made the male. The pronouncement, "It is not good that man should be alone," indicates that woman was no mere afterthought with God. Man was not yet complete when only the male existed. For the full thought of God about humanity, two sexes are necessary, and God makes this clear. About everything else in his creation he said "It is good," but when only the man stood there, God said, "It is not good," indicating there is more to come. He moved on, then, to the creation of woman, thus revealing that all that is possible in sex in terms of ecstasy and fulfillment was planned and provided for by God. He likes sex, and he intends his creatures to like it as well. He made man and woman to be different, and it is not ribald to say with the French, *vive la*

difference!

There is no question but that the present "sexplosion" so widespread today is a reaction to Victorian prudishness. But libertinism and Victorianism represent extremes, and both are extremely wrong. Victorianism is as anti-Christian as wife-swapping, and equally destructive to what God had in mind for human beings in the making of sex. I know it is popular today to paint evangelical Christians and the Bible as essentially antisexual and priggish, treating sex as a kind of necessary evil, but you find no such picture like that in the Bible. The Bible handles the subject of sex forthrightly and frankly. Here is an excellent summary of what it has to say about sex, taken from Dr. William Coles' book, *Sex and Love in the Bible*:

"Sex is good. It is the creation of God and all men are expected to enjoy it. No prudishness or squeamishness is appropriate. Sex is not an occasion for shame or embarrassment. All members of a family must learn to use their sexual drives responsibly, but they do so by facing the facts openly, not by hiding behind blinders, pretending that life is asexual, that such matters are never discussed in polite society.

"One thing conservatives need to learn: it is not the open treatment of sex in our society that is wrong, it is the context of that treatment. Nothing is to be gained by a conspiracy of silence. Our so-called sex-saturated society needs as its antidote not a return to repression and ignorance, but a discussion of sex in its proper context."

The Hebrews saw all of life as one, as related to and governed by the Lord of the Covenant. There were no watertight compartments sealed off from his sovereign rule. There was, in short, nothing secular anywhere in existence. All of life was hallowed by his presence and his will. What our times require is what the Old Testament possessed -- a full, frank and open facing of the facts of sexuality in human life, but in the context of divine sovereignty. Sex is sacred, as all human existence is sacred. It cannot be used selfishly or irresponsibly without serious damage to the very structure of one's being, to the whole network of one's interpersonal relationships.

The Bible begins on that theme and declares that the first and important thing to know about sex is: God made it! This is the starting point in any adequate study of sex in the Bible.

If we attach any importance to the order in which this subject is presented in this passage, we shall find the second declaration to be a very interesting one. Verse nineteen declares that sex in humans is different than sex in animals.

"So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for man there was not found a helper fit for him." {Gen 2:19-20 RSV}

It is most significant that God did not immediately create woman after creating man. This is quite different than the process he followed with regard to the animal world. There is no such delay indicated in the creation of the two sexes in the animal world, but when it comes to man there is a deliberate delay. (Incidentally, it might relieve a problem in some minds to read verse nineteen, "So out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field," because, of course, the creation of the animals preceded that of man, as recorded in chapter one, and this reading is quite consistent with the Hebrew text.)

Why did God parade these animals before Adam? It is obvious from the passage -- that Adam might give them names. This certainly suggests a good deal more than merely the inventing of labels for a long stream of animal life passing before him. The names that Adam gave to the animals were names that grew out of some basic characteristic of each animal.

For instance, the Hebrew word for lion is the word "violence." What could be more appropriate for the animal that is called "the king of beasts?"

Adam, in naming the animals, had to observe them and study them carefully. Therefore, this evidently did not

take place in an afternoon while all the animals walked by, but probably occurred over a long period of time. But when he had finished he had learned a great deal about the nature of the animals -- he had to in order to name them.

One thing was very pronounceably noticeable to him: There was nothing in animal life that corresponded to himself. There was nothing physically in the animals that corresponded with his physical being. Not in temperament or soul-quality did he find a counterpart in the animals. That he was looking for something like this is clearly indicated by the exclamation he gives when woman is brought to him. He says "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," {Gen 2:23 RSV}. This is not the last time that a man has said "At last!" when a woman arrives! But this does indicate that Adam had been looking for something specific in animal life and now he says, "At last I have found it."

Here lies the essential difference between the Catholic and Protestant views of sex. The Catholic view sees little more in sex than the word found in Chapter 1, Verses 27-28:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and said to them, "Be fruitful multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it;" {Gen 1:27-28a RSV}

This view recognizes in this passage one of the great purposes of sex, the propagation of life. Man shares this capacity for fruitful increase with animal life, and Catholic thought sees birth control as a denial of the divine purpose in sex. But Chapter 2 reveals considerably more. It makes clear that sex in man is different than in animals and has a specialized purpose beyond procreation. That specialized purpose is brought out in the third great declaration about sex in this passage.

This deeper fact is found in Verses 21-23: Sex is a total, psycho-physical whole, and, therefore, both powerful and mysterious:

**So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept he took one of this ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,
"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of man." {Gen 2:21-23 RSV}**

Notice, again, no animal was made in this manner. God did not make two human beings and bring them together with the admonition, "get acquainted and discover one another." Instead, he takes one human life and splits it in half, thereby making two, and the two are never complete until they are reunited. This is what lies behind the mystery of sex.

Now what are we meant to understand by this strange story of Eve being made from Adam's rib? I do not intend to discuss this from a scientific aspect. I am quite prepared to take the account literally. I do not think there is any conflict with science in this area, since neither science nor Scripture speaks in enough detail on this subject to create conflict. But I am quite sure there is more to this than simply a report of the first surgical operation, complete with anesthesia. Surely this is intended to teach that sex is deeper than the merely physical; it touches the whole physical and soulish makeup of man; it is psycho-physical. It is involved in every part of our life, not only physically, but emotionally, mentally, and volitionally as well. It is this fact that makes the sex drive so powerful. Sex is a powerful desire to enter into a total union with another personality, to discover the "secret" of another, to possess him or her in the total framework of human experience. In a phrase -- the urge to merge!

Sex is such a powerful instinctive drive in human life that we can never ignore it or take it lightly. It is as irresistible as spring.

My home is situated between two schools, a high school in one direction and a grade school in the other. I

often see the children coming home from each, some from one direction, and some from the other. It is very interesting to notice how they travel. The children from the grade school come in bunches, but they are always bunches of the same sex -- groups of boys or groups of girls, but never boys and girls. But the young people coming from high school act quite differently. They are the same children who, a year or two before, were in the grade school, but now they no longer walk in bunches of boys and girls; they now come in pairs, in various degrees of entwinement. Now I am neither accusing or condoning the entwinement. I am simply pointing out that there is a psycho-physical force here which cannot be countermanded; it must be reckoned with. It is a perfectly natural thing.

The deep sleep into which God caused Adam to fall when Eve was made suggests something of the eternal fascination of sex. We can never fully understand this strange and powerful drive, and nothing quite so much tortures us and yet delights us as the mystery of our sexuality. One thing therefore is clear: It is so deeply rooted in our natures that we can never treat it adequately on the physical level. Thus all books and pamphlets which treat sex on the physical level are superficial, and therefore inadequate. Sex is much deeper than that. It touches the whole of human makeup in its total experience.

That brings us, then, to the last declaration of this passage on sex, in many ways the most important. The fourth thing the Bible has to say, in much fuller detail later but exemplified here clearly in principle, is that sex is regulated and purposeful.

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.
{Gen 2:24-25 RSV}

Here we come to the divinely intended boundaries of sex. Simply because sex is so total it must be fulfilled only under conditions which make a total union possible -- in a word, marriage! In marriage, as all of us know, it is intended that a woman give her husband all that she is and has, and the husband likewise. The woman gives up her old life with her parents, her home. She renounces her father's name and takes her husband's name. She leaves behind her past; in a very real sense she begins life totally anew in a wholly different environment, with a completely different base of reference. Likewise, the husband. He gives his wife everything -- his name (which stands for all that he possesses), his life, his interests, his body -- all. Their lives are intended to merge and blend until they become indistinguishable. That is what is meant here, "and they become one flesh."

The Lord Jesus confirmed the importance of this when, asked to pronounce upon marriage and divorce, he said, "Remember, in the beginning, God made them male and female that they might become one flesh," {cf, Matt 19:4-5}. That is the great purpose of marriage. Anything short of this is partial, abortive, frustrating, and, therefore, destructive. This is the whole point about sex outside of marriage. Therefore, it is not mere whim that causes God to forbid extra-marital sex, as the critics of Christian views of sex maintain, it is God's love and concern for humanity that leads him to make this prohibition.

Premarital and extra-marital sex is a way of cheating yourself of the full glory that is intended for man in sex. As in all the rest of life, you simply cannot have your cake and eat it too. One destroys the opportunity for the other. Every experience of sex outside of marriage destroys something of the totality possible within marriage: That is an inviolable law of life. This is why Paul writes to the Ephesians, and says, "Stay completely clear of immorality and fornication. Do not let someone deceive you by plausible words about these matters for they will do so if they can. They will tell you that this business of restricting sex to marriage is prudery and poppycock and humbug; that life can never be complete unless you give full rein to your sexual impulses and you might as well do it with the first willing person of the opposite sex you can find," {cf, Eph 5:3-11}. Paul says. "do not let them kid you that way, with plausible words. For, for this cause comes the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience."

Now the wrath of God, in this context, is not a lightning bolt from heaven. It is not some fearsome catastrophe, some judgment that falls suddenly without warning -- an auto accident or some terrible sickness -- it is not that. The wrath of God is the invisible, almost imperceptible, but irresistible deterioration of life, the brutalizing of humanity, the vulgarizing of life. The reason we are suffering from this terrible tempest of

neurosis and psychosis and mental anguish today is because we have disregarded these restrictions. But God has not placed them there to torment us, but to protect us. This is what this passage declares to us. We cannot give ourselves in totality to another person except as we give everything -- our name, our position, our place, our home, our heart, our life, everything! Because we *cannot* do that in sex outside of marriage, we, therefore, treat our partners in that kind of sex as though they were simply objects for our own satisfaction. We do not see them any longer as human beings, whole persons, but we treat them as things designed to give satisfaction to us. They become objects of pleasure, only. Thus we become something less than human.

In confirmation of that, let me quote a very forthright but revealing statement from a defender of free sex. This is, he says, the proper attitude toward sex.

A girl is like a sports car or a bottle of Scotch or an Ivy League suit that is meant to be used and enjoyed by man. But always with flair, with polish. There need be no entangling, no stifling alliances or obligations. Girls are playthings, and once enjoyed will have to be set aside and replaced with others new and fresh.

That is the dehumanizing that results from a violation of the principles of sex.

Furthermore, this means that every change of mates means we have less and less of our real selves to give. We can only give ourselves in totality to one person. If we are constantly changing mates, as is the practice of so many these days, we will find that we have less and less of our real selves to give, and, therefore, our relationship tends to become merely physical rather than whole-souled. There is a continuing experience of superficiality in marriage. This is why Hollywood stars, with their penchant toward many marriages, find that each one is less satisfying than the others. The unrestrained use of sex changes it from a wild rushing torrent, making possible high excitement and delight, into stagnant flood waters that inundate the whole countryside in which we find ourselves wading continually. Therefore, it loses its ecstatic seductiveness, and mystery, and becomes bland, insipid, and, eventually, tasteless.

But within marriage, within the limits of God's provision, sex provides a unique and distinctive ecstasy that is impossible to find elsewhere, simply because elsewhere it can never be total. Besides the full, unrestrained joy of physical union in marriage, there can be achieved that total knowing of another in his or her total, psycho-physical makeup that is fully satisfying to the deep-seated drive within every human being to know and possess another human being. There is nothing like it outside of heaven! This is why the Apostle Paul, in Ephesians, says that the union of a man and a woman in marriage is like unto that union of Christ and his church. There is simply nothing like it except spiritual union.

This is what is meant by Verse 25, "the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." We are never ashamed, of course, of that in which we find full and total satisfaction. Their nakedness was more than merely physical -- there is no argument for nudity here. Their nakedness meant a total knowing of one another, an unrestrained enjoyment of one another, body and soul. That is what marriage is meant to be. That is why the writer of Hebrews says, "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled," {Heb 13:14 KJV}.

Perhaps the most descriptive words of what real marriage is intended to be, especially from its sexual point of view, is found in the Song of Solomon. Here is a frankly sensual love poem, and yet it is chaste and reverent all the way through. It is a beautiful description of what God intends the psycho-physical makeup of marriage to be.

**I am my beloved's,
and his desire is for me. {Song 7:10 RSV}**

**Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
jealousy is cruel as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
a most vehement flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.**

**If a man offered for love
all the wealth of his house,
it would be utterly scorned. {Song 8:6-7 RSV}**

Notice, in Genesis 2, that the very next word in Scripture after this suggestive description of God's intention in sex is the story of the Fall; the introduction of the principle of evil into human life, that spirit of independence from God which has spoiled and marred all the glory that God intended in sex. But note also, as you read through the Scriptures, that this is restored and made possible again to redeemed lives.

Now, I am suggesting by this that in Christian homes, where the man and wife are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, it is possible to learn again, and to achieve again, all that God had in mind for this union of the sexes in its total psycho-physical makeup. Therefore, Christians must lead out here, as elsewhere, to display to the world in visible terms exactly what the divine intention was in making two sexes -- that eternal seeking to merge again in mystery. And, when our Christian homes display this, the world will stop much of its bewildered, aimless, blinded search for meaning in sex, and stop, look, and listen to the beauty and the glory and radiance of what God intended marriage to be.

This is why the Scriptures speak so frankly and forthrightly about these matters, and why every Christian heart should give careful attention to what they have to say.

Prayer

Our Father, we confess, with shame, we have long neglected a subject that is of great concern to thee, that we have not taken the time to think thoughtfully and intelligently about this, the most powerful and most beautiful of forces in human life. May we bring our sexual lives to thee, Lord Jesus, and place them under thy control, that in the glory of thy Lordship they may take on that beauty and radiance that is thy intention for them. In Christ's name, Amen.

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