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SEXUALITY

AND SEX

THERAPY

SECOND EDITION

A COMPREHENSIVE
CHRISTIAN APPRAISAL



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ONE

SEXUALITY IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

WHAT IS INTERESTING ABOUT FLYING FISH is their ability to use their pectoral fins to get sufficient speed—as much as 35 mph or more—to break the surface of the water and elevate into the air. They can fly up to four feet into the air and glide along the surface of the water for over 600 feet. They can do this multiple times, touching the surface and extending their flight for sometimes as long as 1,300 feet.¹ While many fish are drawn to the light above the surface of the water, most fish do not have this level of exposure to the world above them. Fish live in the water, under the surface, breathing the water just as we breathe the air. Their blissful lack of awareness is sometimes used to illustrate something about people: we often are unaware of our beliefs, assumptions, and values—our broad worldview—much like fish (with the exception of flying fish, perhaps) are typically unaware of the water they live in.

We have seen something similar happen in training Christians in the fields of psychology and counseling broadly, as well as in sexuality and sex therapy more narrowly. That is, one of the dangers that comes with teaching in a Christian setting is that students can become so familiar with Christianity that they see it up close, sometimes taking it for granted, but often they are far less familiar with other worldviews or perspectives. Other worldviews and other religions can actually benefit from lack of familiarity because the curiosity that accompanies the lack of familiarity deepens the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. There is a risk in not taking the

¹See “Flying Fish,” National Geographic, www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/fish/facts/flying-fish.

time to study what another worldview says about a topic the way we have become familiar with a Christian perspective on a topic.

We would like to spend some time examining what other worldviews and perspectives say about human sexuality and sexual expression. Christianity has important things to say about human sexuality; however, being overly familiar with those claims may make it difficult to appreciate them for what they are, and a lack of familiarity with worldviews that offer competing claims makes us unaware of other views of human sexuality.

We have also been impressed by how often the subtle assumptions of competing worldviews enter into the ways Christians reflect on important issues. As we will see, assumptions from naturalism may keep the Christian from reflecting on transcendent reality, let alone the connections between transcendent reality and human sexuality and its expression. The mental health fields are deeply steeped in naturalism because of their reliance on scientific methodology. While we understand and value the scientific method, it is not the beginning and end of discussions on the study of persons, including the study of human sexuality, so we are challenged to critically evaluate naturalistic assumptions when they conflict with a Christian worldview. The same can be said for humanism, a worldview that has made an indelible mark on contemporary mental health. Yet many of the assumptions in humanism are at odds with a Christian view of the person (theological anthropology), and they must be understood to advance our critical engagement and integration discussions. Finally, pluralism has entered into contemporary discussions, particularly for the next generation of Christians, who are growing up in an age in which sincerity about one's beliefs is often considered trump in comparison to the veracity of one's claims. While we want to encourage sincerity, we need to think carefully about what is right and true—in terms of sexual ethics and morality—as well as what is felt strongly.

One of the best resources for exploring this topic of competing worldviews is the book *The Meaning of Sex* by Dennis Hollinger. He covers many different perspectives. For the purposes of this chapter and to begin to reposition sex therapy on a Christian worldview, we are going to review what we see as the three most influential perspectives in our culture today: naturalism, humanism, and pluralism.

COMPETING WORLDVIEWS

We begin with naturalism, a common worldview encountered within the field of contemporary psychology and the broader sciences in general.

Then we discuss humanism and pluralism, both competing worldviews that are reflected in our current cultural emphasis on human potential and diversity.

Naturalism. The basic premise of naturalism is that there is no reality apart from what exists in nature, as well as what is observable in nature. There is no supernatural or transcendent reality. The preference among naturalists is to value contemporary science, the scientific method, and scientific explanations for what we have confidence to believe in, to claim as constituting reality.

Naturalism can take a few different forms. Some (Goetz & Taliaferro, 2008) have distinguished between strict and broad forms of naturalism. The strict form of naturalism rejects reality apart from what exists in nature but also rejects consciousness. A broad form of naturalism recognizes consciousness but anticipates a future explanation of it. Both forms of naturalism reject the mind and the soul and any kind of true purpose to human experience.

When it comes to sexuality, sex is understood as a natural drive that has been imbued with significance within our sociocultural context. Sex is not in and of itself special or inherently meaningful; rather, it is a natural, biological drive. From a naturalist perspective, for example, self-stimulation or masturbation is “just a form of biological release.” There is no emphasis on the effects of the behavior cognitively, emotionally, relationally, or spiritually. When people raise questions about behaviors such as masturbation, premarital sex, use of erotica, and so on, the questions are considered by the naturalist to be derived primarily from a sociocultural context of meaning imposed on the activity.

Morality and ethics derived from naturalism tend to look to the consequences of actions. So some sexual behavior might be viewed as “right” or “wrong” based on what results from the behavior rather than some other way of determining morality. For example, having multiple sex partners may not be beneficial because of an increased risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Living in a sociocultural context in which people who have made commitments to fidelity do not practice fidelity might be detrimental to society; so fidelity could be valued and infidelity seen as wrong, but more with reference to the consequences rather than to anything particularly substantive about the nature of faithfulness.

Hollinger critiques naturalism's claims. For Christians, nature is from God, but it is not superior to God or even the primary reference point. It is certainly not all there is. We can learn from nature, but nature is also fallen. It is touched by original sin and is distorted. Thus, it cannot provide a reliable basis for morality, as nature itself is groaning and eager for its redemption (Rom 8:22). Indeed, one of the challenges naturalism presents, according to Hollinger, is that it tends to keep people from identifying the abnormal, as we tend to think of the normal as that which merely exists in nature. Of course, many behaviors exist in nature; the Christian argues that the existence of behavior in nature is not a basis for the morality of or participation in that behavior.

Humanism. The fundamental assertion in *humanism* is that human beings are of utmost significance. So humanism is concerned with the welfare of human beings, as they are deemed central to the narrative; they are the source of all purpose and morality (Hollinger, 2009). Humanists are often naturalists in their worldview. In other words, they too tend to see nature as all there is, but rather than see life as having no meaning, they are more likely to see genuine meaning and purpose in life, but they frame that purpose around the welfare and interests of humanity and what it means to be human.

The result of such an understanding of human beings as the pinnacle of existence is that humanity determines what is right or wrong. Human beings do not look outside themselves for moral guidance; they certainly do not turn to the divine or the sacred for answers to ethical or moral dilemmas or for answers on how to live one's life.

A consequence of the high view placed on human experience can be seen in the humanist's understanding of sexual ethics. Sexual ethics is based on human potential; it is based on human self-actualization (or what we have sometimes referred to as "sexual self-actualization") and flourishing (Hollinger, 2009). Such a view rejects any ethical or moral claims by God but would look only to human beings for guidance on one's ethical responsibilities. An example of a humanistic perspective of sexuality is that if the pursuit of happiness is the ultimate goal, it would not matter how someone becomes happy, even if the source of "happiness" were an extramarital affair.

A Christian critique of humanism is that God is the author of the human narrative. Indeed, God is the central figure in the person and work of Jesus Christ. While the humanistic worldview may uphold the perspective of

human nature as fundamentally good, Christians may deem that view incomplete and distorted because the effects of the Fall and resultant sin are denied. Brokenness, including sexual brokenness, is a reflection of our fallen nature, and at the same time presents an opportunity for redemption.

In both humanism and naturalism we also see a tendency to find moral authority in the experience of the organism. This has been referred to as “organismic congruence” (APA, 2009, p. 18). This means that the organism has its own urges and drives that, when met, give a “sense of wholeness” (p. 18) to the organism that can quickly be translated as morally good behavior. A Christian alternative to organismic congruence is what has been referred to as “telic congruence” (p. 18). This refers to living in accordance with one’s values or sense of transcendent purpose or ideals. In other words, the Christian has historically looked outside one’s own impulses to determine whether those impulses are reliable moral guides for living. Telic congruence raises the question of transcendent purpose—do standards exist outside (apart from) the organism? Do these standards provide a moral compass for one’s life? Christians have historically affirmed this position.

Pluralism. The third competing worldview we highlight is *pluralism*. This is the worldview that asserts that there are many diverse beliefs and values, including moral and ethical claims. None is better than the other; none has more of a claim to truth than the others. Pluralism is like going out to dinner at a buffet; there are a variety of food options at a buffet, and people gravitate to one option over another as a matter of personal preference or taste, not as a matter of which item is “better” in any meaningful sense of the word. When we apply this experience to ethical claims or moral values, the pluralist argues that the many diverse beliefs and worldviews that exist are all potentially legitimate and no one belief, value, or ethic stands above the others as true or right.

Pluralism is particularly popular today in Western cultures in which there is a great regard for diversity of thought and experience, where intentions and sincerity tend to be valued above absolute truth or values. As an example, we recently heard one woman say that she would never participate in “naked hot-tubbing” with strangers; however, she felt that if someone wanted to, it was “their business” and they could do “whatever because it’s their preference.” Her own view of right and wrong was for herself and did not speak to values that transcend her personal preferences. “Each to his (or her) own” is the motto of the pluralist.

What is offensive to the pluralist about a Christian worldview is the exclusive claim to truth presented within Christianity. Christianity stands in sharp contrast to pluralism insofar as Christians make claims about God and truth and ethics that are not just one good idea among many. Rather, a Christian understanding is that God has revealed his purposes and will for human beings for how we ought to relate to one another and to God.

When we extend the discussion to the area of sexuality, we see Christianity claims that in God's revealed will are principles for human sexuality and sexual expression. These biblical principles are not mere opinion but reflect God's will and character, as well as transcendent reality that we may not fully appreciate this side of eternity.

We also see today a culture that claims to value pluralism but has indeed merely the appearance of true pluralism. As Carson (2012) observes, "Genuine pluralism within the broader culture is facilitated when there is a strong Christian voice loyal to the Scriptures—as well as strong Muslim voices, skeptical voices, Buddhist voices, atheistic voices, and so forth" (p. 35).

Whereas we used to coexist with different truth claims (what Carson describes as the old kind of tolerance), we now live in a cultural setting in which there is great disdain for anyone who claims truth. As Carson points out,

The media may present popes such as John Paul II and Benedict XVI in a positive light, provided these popes are restricting themselves to ceremony or world poverty, but if they show how their beliefs impinge on social issues such as premarital and extramarital sex, abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia, then they must be bigoted, out of date, slightly bizarre, even dangerous, and certainly intolerant. (p. 35)

These important cultural changes affect several discussions tied to sexuality and sexual behavior, particularly in areas with differing normative moral claims and visions for the human person, including homosexuality, sexual identity, gender identity, premarital sex, extramarital sex, abortion, and so on.

In any case, we encourage students to reflect on the various worldviews that coexist with Christianity in our current cultural setting. In the spirit of engaging in worldview integration, it is important to understand different religious worldviews (e.g., Islam, Judaism, Buddhism), but it is just as important to recognize how competing worldviews found in naturalism,

humanism, and pluralism shape our cultural discourse, particularly in the area of sexuality and sexual behavior.

We find that many Christian students have struggled to contrast their own basic Christian commitments with other worldviews. They are familiar with Christianity but not with alternative explanations for understanding human experience, morality, ethics, and sexuality. We should note too that Christianity has not always taught on sexuality with one voice or in a way that we recognize as correct today. We turn now to that discussion.

CHRISTIANITY

Christianity as a world religion and as a worldview stands in contrast to competing worldviews such as naturalism, humanism, and pluralism. But Christianity or the Christian tradition has its own unflattering history with sexuality and sexual ethics. There are many such instances we could highlight, but one is the medieval Christian view of sex, with its overvaluing of asceticism, which emphasized simplicity and abstinence from objects and activities that might induce feelings of pleasure. As Hollinger (2009) points out, Christian history records a time when asceticism was upheld as the preferred way to be a Christian (a “higher” way of living characterized by chastity, obedience, and poverty) rather than a “lower” way of marriage and sexual behavior in that relational context.

These two contrasting ways of being a Christian (the higher path of asceticism and the lower path of marriage) fueled the notion that contrasted sharply with the “historic Hebraic affirmation of body life and sexuality,” and would be asserted in various forms by Justin Martyr, Origen, Tertullian, and other early church leaders in the West (Jones, 1999, p. 1107). Many Christians also viewed sex in marriage as tainted, a view held by Thomas Aquinas (Hollinger, 2009). This view obviously casts a shadow over a healthy and positive view of human sexuality and contrasts significantly with how Christians understand sexuality and sexual behavior today.

In historical perspective this medieval Christian view of sex reflected a low view of the creation, the human body, and our intended physical existence. It cast a vision of human sin as tied primarily to physical existence (rather than sinful self-centeredness) and suggested that the best response is asceticism (or strict obedience to a life of restraint) (Hollinger, 2009). It also fostered a rather narrow view of sexual behavior, as though it were solely for the purpose of procreation. This would have consequences,

particularly much later in the twentieth century when advances in medical science in the area of contraception meant that sexual behavior was able to be routinely divorced from procreation. These advances had a number of consequences for how people (Christians included) approached sexuality and sexual behavior in terms of single sexuality, sexual practices among married couples, cohabitation, and the broader sexual revolution and consequent liberation movements associated with sexual minority communities (see Herdt, 1996).

Some Christians today undoubtedly retain remnants of what we see reflected in a medieval Christian asceticism in how they may approach the topic of sexuality and sexual behavior. But thankfully there is a sense of historical perspective on medieval asceticism as an extreme response to human sexuality, one that most Christians today would reject in favor of a more balanced view.

One of the most significant recent contributions to a Christian understanding of human sexuality is John Paul II's (1997) *Theology of the Body*. In fact, many commentaries on this dense treatise suggest that it will be many years before the church fully appreciates the theological reflections contained in this compilation (it is a series of 129 lectures given between 1979 and 1984). In his writing John Paul II lays a foundation around sex that is intended to provide freedom for the person to love properly. There are two halves to his work, each containing three cycles. The first three cycles examine who we are as human beings, which for the Christian is tied to creation (an embodied sexuality that existed prior to sin), the Fall (how our embodied sexuality is tainted by our fallen condition), and our destiny in glorification (what an embodied sexuality is in the context of the resurrection) (West, 2004).

This teaching is in some ways similar to what we will present here as we discuss our understanding of a theology of sex as tied to the four acts of the biblical drama: creation, the Fall, redemption, and glorification.

For John Paul II (1997), creation points to a state of innocence that teaches us about three experiences: solitude, unity, and nakedness. Solitude is found in the original state in which Adam “realizes that love is his origin, his vocation, and his destiny” (West, 2004, p. 22). The unity found in the creation story points to the covenant Adam and Eve are to have with one another as persons who are distinct from the rest of creation but are unified in a biological reality, as well as a spiritual and theological reality (West, 2004). The

last original experience in the creation story is that of nakedness insofar as there is no shame for Adam and Even in relation to each other, freely giving the gift of love to each other.

John Paul II (1997) then discusses the fact that human beings are fallen and in the process of being redeemed, but the Fall affects our sexuality in profound ways. He examines lust and adultery in his discussion of our fallen condition. Lust (or adultery of the heart) is when we indulge the pull of lust in the violation of the dignity of another person (and our own dignity) (West, 2004). In our redemptive state, while we do not fully experience a renewed life until eternity, we can “begin to experience the redemption of our sexual desires, the gradual transformation of our hearts” (p. 34). Human beings have a tendency to question and deny God’s good gift of sex, and it is only by and through God’s grace that we are able to live (however incompletely) in the freedom of self and the gift of our sexuality and a life in the Spirit.

John Paul II (1997) goes on to reflect on a theology that touches on the resurrection of the body, celibacy and virginity, the sacrament of marriage, and contraception. Indeed, his is a fully orbited reflection on human sexuality that is tied to theological anthropology, and we would agree with several commentators that the full impact of his writing is likely yet to be understood.

Today evangelical Christians look to Scripture as a source of authority on matters of faith and living. It is given greater weight than other possible sources of authority, such as Christian history, reason, and personal experience. So while John Paul II’s (1997) *Theology of the Body* is a tremendous reflection on theological anthropology for any thoughtful Christian interested in the study of sexuality, in matters of faith and practice, Scripture is the source of God’s revelation about salvation, a redemptive plan centering on the person and work of Jesus. We turn now to a discussion of a biblical perspective on sexuality.

SCRIPTURE

Christians affirm that Scripture is a reliable guide for the believer, “fully truthful in all its teachings” (Erickson, 2001, p. 68). When it comes to how we ought to live, the Scriptures also provide believers with the broad principles for behavior and relationships, particularly in view of what it means

to live in a way that reflects gratitude for God's provision in our lives and a desire to bring honor and glory to God.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16-17)

While we recognize that Scripture is an invaluable source of instruction for right living, we do not read Scripture as a handbook on sexual functioning. We cannot derive directly from Scripture a protocol for conducting sex therapy or for the treatment of the paraphilias or gender identity issues.

So we feel this tension between those who want to treat Scripture as a handbook on sexual functioning, as if there were protocols and manuals just waiting to be written, derived entirely from the Song of Solomon, and those who dismiss Scripture as though it were of no relevance to contemporary discussions of sexuality and sex counseling.

Our position is that in some cases Scripture provides us with clear teaching on questions of morality. In other cases we see indirect reference to topics that inform our moral reasoning (see Rosenau & Wilson, 2006, for a discussion of direct and indirect reference in Scripture, followed by a discussion of God's heart in an area of moral consideration). In other matters we look to broad principles for living, and these principles are relevant to sexuality and sexual behavior.

One way to think about it is that there are general instructions (in the form of principles) that can be derived from Scripture. Marva Dawn, in her book *Sexual Character*, shares a story about the value of looking for instructions on how to live as a sexual being.

Before the personal computer era, I used an excellent typewriter to write books. It has a corrector ribbon that was especially helpful. . . . The corrector and typing ribbons had to be carefully positioned around certain sprockets and divider bars in order not to interfere with each other's functioning. . . . The most amazing thing always happened: I would get out the instruction book. A picture showed me how the ribbons were to be positioned, and written instructions guided me step by step through the process of threading them into place. Voila! I could successfully type and correct!

Why would the instruction book solve my problem every time? It is because the company that built the typewriter wrote the instruction book. Those who know the design of the machine are the ones most able to teach me how the machine can be most effectively used and maintained. (Dawn, 1993, p. 21)

There are many Christians today who would see Scripture as providing meaningful information and instruction on sexuality and sexual behavior. But they might wrestle with whether they can equate the complexity of human sexuality and sexual expression with replacing a typewriter ribbon. After all, each model of typewriter manufactured by a specific company is going to be the same, but people are not all the same. As we enter into discussions of human sexuality, we quickly learn to appreciate the variety and complexity associated with human sexuality and sexual experience. So we want to strike an important balance moving forward in our analysis. While we do not see Scripture as a textbook on human sexuality or sexual behavior, we do see Scripture as providing important information about God's revealed will for sexuality and its expression. There are broad themes in Scripture that we do well to understand and apply in our own lives and in the life of the church.

We see the instruction about sexuality and sexual behavior, then, as less comparable to a manual with step-by-step instructions and more like a map with an overview of the land. It provides the Christian with important information about the landscape and about the terrain. This information is found in biblical principles that we believe can guide our thinking and decision making.

GENERAL THEMES AND PRINCIPLES

The goodness of creation. In this section we want to explore some of the general themes and principles from Scripture that are related to human sexuality and sexual expression.² To begin, the general tenor and the broad themes from the Old Testament introduce us to the goodness of our physical existence, including our sexuality, as well as our utter dependence on and separateness from God. We have only a brief glimpse into the story of creation and the experience of Adam and Eve as free from sin and shame in their physical existence and sexuality. They are revealed to us as having an embodied existence and are then given souls, suggesting a positive view of their inherent physicality, which we shall return to later.

The story of creation also reveals the creature in relation to a Creator. "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness'" (Gen 1:26). It is notable that in the process of creation, God declared that

²Portions of this section are adapted from Jones & Yarhouse (2000) and Jones & Jones (2007).

everything he made prior to man was “good” (Gen 1:4, 12, 18, 21, 25); however, his declaration after creating man, in looking at all that he had made, was, “it was very good” (Gen 1:31). Human beings are a valued (by God) part of the created order, but they remain part of creation. As such, human beings are utterly dependent on God for their existence (Erickson, 2001), which is the case whether they recognize it or not. In other words, humans are part of the created order and dependent on God for their existence whether or not they see themselves in that way.

So, to be human is to be created by God and dependent on God for existence. To be human also means to be separate and distinct from God (Jones & Butman, 1991). Indeed, as we will see, our separateness from God is also reflected in our longing for completion in God, which is tied to our sexuality, as we will discuss later.

Christians have historically understood that God’s intent at creation was to place human beings in a family by bringing man and woman together in monogamous union (Gen 2:21-24), where we also see gender complementarity. From this perspective, the distinctiveness of the person is also retained: in marriage two people become one but do not lose their personal identity.

The reality of the Fall. The Old Testament also introduces us to the Fall and how original sin has corrupted all of existence, including human sexuality and its expression. The consequences of the Fall are far reaching, but we get glimpses into the purpose of sexuality and its complementarity in what God chooses to relate about his relationship with Israel. Indeed, God reveals a very intimate relationship with his people by equating Israel to a wayward wife who prostitutes herself with others while God is a faithful husband.

How does the Fall affect sexuality? Here are a few of the potential effects. First, there is strife built into male-female relations (Gen 3:16). It may be difficult to understand the extent of this (Jones, 1999), but many Christian scholars have devoted time and energy into unpacking the meaning of this for male-female relationships, as we have seen numerous debates about complementarian and egalitarian views of marriage and so on. In our role as clinicians we do not take a position on which of those views most accurately reflects a Christian understanding of male-female relations. We note that the Fall led to strife between men and women that had not been there previously and that could take the form of struggle, animosity, competition, discord, contention, or disunity, particularly in the marital relationship.

In addition to the discord or strife in male-female relationships, there is now the possibility for short-term, selfish gratification (Prov 5:1-6) that can be seen in interpersonal relationships, including sexually intimate relationships. While this can take many forms, in contemporary culture we see it exemplified in the “hook-up” culture, wherein sex is reduced to merely the exchange of fluids or a way to manage stress or meet felt needs. We see it too in the ubiquitous pornography industry, with easy online access and its “no strings attached” promises of sexual self-gratification. Related to this concern for selfish gratification and, in particular, the pornography industry, we should note that we are now able to fragment, objectify, and reduce others, to see and use parts and activities for our own interests and not for anything relational or meaningful in and of itself.

Consistent with this concern, the Christian stands against objectifying others or devaluing them. When we read that Adam “knew” Eve his wife (Gen 4:1 ESV), we understand that the Hebrew word for “sex,” “perceive,” and “knowledge” is the same. The word implies intimacy and fellowship. The Christian considers whether his or her actions or desires make another into an object rather than someone to delight in and to cherish. This is why fantasy can be treacherous: it can invite the opportunity to lose the personhood of the individual who is being fantasized about.

It is important, then, from a Christian perspective to see a person’s value in their *essence* rather than *function*:

The only question is whether I can see the whole person if I do not see him in his relationship to God and therefore as the bearer of an “alien dignity.” If I am blind to this dimension then I can give the other person only a partial dignity insofar as I estimate his importance “for me”—even if this includes far more than his mere *functional* importance for me!—but not insofar as I see in him his importance “for God.” (Thielicke, 1975, p. 26)

In other words, whenever people are valued not for their essence but rather for their functional value (what they can do for me), they become interchangeable and devalued (Thielicke, 1975). It is important that students studying sexuality and sex therapy recognize the many ways that our culture does this (valuing function over essence). As we are an increasingly sexualized culture (see chap. 2), partners (real and imagined) can readily be reduced to vehicles by which people accrue orgasms. While there are many potential consequences to the person and to society, one consequence of

note is that the ease with which pleasures can be met obviates the discipline of self-restraint.

It should also be noted that the Fall was an act of rebellion that itself gave birth to rebellion as a motive in life. Rebellion can be expressed in many ways and often against authority, including God. There are times when rebellion is expressed in and through our sexuality and sexual behavior, as if we are essentially saying no to God's revealed will for human sexuality and its expression.

We can also ask whether another effect of the Fall is that shame is now a part of sexuality. A genuine sense of shame is introduced in the story of the Fall, as Adam and Eve responded to God by covering themselves and hiding from God's presence (Gen 3:8). So it can be argued that one possible effect of the Fall is introducing shame as a part of human sexuality, or at least the potential for shame to be experienced in our sexuality.

We see so far that Scripture affirms the goodness of creation and of our physical existence, including our sexuality. We also see the reality of the Fall and some of the possible effects of the Fall on sexuality. We turn now to how redemption breaks into human history, into the story of creation and the Fall, and what that may mean for human sexuality.

Redemptive elements. We turn, then, to redemption as discussed in Scripture. The Old Testament begins to point us toward a future redemption as found in the person and work of Christ Jesus. We do not have explicit instruction as to what that means for sexuality or sexual behavior, just that a Messiah is anticipated (Is 9:6-7; 11:10).

In the New Testament we see glimpses of redemption in areas of sexuality. Perhaps what comes most readily to mind is Jesus' encounter with those who brought the woman caught in the act of adultery to him (Jn 7:53-8:11). They approached Jesus, as many leaders of that time did, to trick Jesus with a difficult decision he would have to make publicly. They challenged Jesus with the idea that they should fulfill the law by stoning the woman caught in the act of adultery. As we know, Jesus never takes the bait, and he turns their accusation on its head by bringing to their awareness the gap existing between their private sin and their public position against sin. His words to the woman were an expression of grace and mercy, with instruction to make changes to live in faithful obedience to the very law that Jesus came to fulfill.

This tendency to speak to what is in a person's heart is also part of another teaching in which Jesus talks about impure, lustful thoughts that are the

same in essence as having sex with another person (Mt 5:28). This cut to the core of the problem with some of the religious leaders of the day who thought that their behavior justified them before God. To those who understood Jesus' teachings, his response leveled that structure.

Much of what we have as biblical instruction dealing with sexuality and sexual behavior comes through the writings of Paul to the many churches under his care. In Paul's writing we see a preference for singleness that has been all but lost on evangelicals today (1 Cor 7:1-7). The Roman Catholic Church has a high view of being single, but evangelicals often relate to people in the church as though they have not quite arrived if they are not paired off. An example of this in the church is the frequency of sermons about marriage compared with those that address singleness, or where programming is more about couples and children than about a healthy and balanced view of singleness in midlife and beyond.

Paul also wrote about the importance of sex in marriage as primarily a protective measure, as a guard against temptation (1 Cor 7:8-9). He reiterated the teachings familiar to the Jews of that day that sex outside marriage is sin, as was sex with a partner of the same sex.

RELATED PRINCIPLES

To be human is to be relational. Christianity has historically affirmed, then, that from creation, God places people in relationships, in families (Gen 1–2). The families that people are born into, the nature of these relationships that is seen in creation and affirmed by Jesus, Paul, and others in the New Testament, are a lifelong commitment between husband and wife. This has been important in Christianity because it is in this context that God also places genital sex. When we talk about genital sex, we are talking about full sexual intimacy. Christianity affirms that sexuality in general and genital sexual expression in particular are good things, and that while all of us experience and express our sexuality in how we relate to one another, Christianity has historically taught that lifelong heterosexual relationships are God's revealed will for full genital sexual intimacy.

To be human is to be sexual. Christians understand sexuality to be a gift from God, an integral part of what it means to be human. Genital sexual activity is the means of procreation, which not only brings about life and reflects the divine act of creation but also is the basis for family life in all cultures throughout history. But sexuality is more than genital sexual

activity, as we suggested earlier. A Christian understanding of human sexuality is that it reflects who we are as much as or more so than what we do, an observation made by Lewis Smedes in *Sex for Christians*. Our sexuality instructs us of our need for God as we experience in our sexuality a longing for completion in another (*eros*). The marriage relationship, we are told in Scripture, reflects the relationship between God and ancient Israel, and between Christ and the church, the bride of Christ. Interestingly, many of the references in the Old Testament compare the idolatry of Israel to adultery in relationship to God; God revealed how important idolatry is by drawing an analogy based on what humans know about marital intimacy (see Jer 3:8; Eph 5:15-32).

Sex as life uniting and reflective of transcendent reality. Christianity, then, affirms that sex in marriage is a “life-uniting act” that is a physical activity but also one that is tied to transcendent purposes (Smedes, 1994). As Smedes observes, sex has the potential to bring about new life and is the natural means by which a couple can procreate. Of course, not all sex in marriage brings about new life, whether by the intention of the couple or as a result of infertility (which Christianity would see as an expression of the Fall). Nevertheless, sexual intercourse is the means by which new life is formed, and the formation of new life occurs in a specific relationship: heterosexual marriage.

We can already see this in how Scripture points to marital relationships as instructive of the intimacy found in Christ’s relationship with the church. Christine Colón and Bonnie Field (2009) note that while marriage instructs us about Christ’s relationship to the church, it should not be used to idolize marriage or denigrate being single. In fact, singles also reflect important values regarding Christianity, including our primary loyalty and identity as followers of Christ, and a shift in understanding God’s family as tied to salvation rather than lineage. This connection to transcendence can be contrasted with what we see as commonplace in our contemporary culture. Take, for example, the hook-up culture that exists on many college campuses today (Freitas, 2008, 2013). Christianity teaches that even hooking up is much more than just an exchange of bodily fluids, even if the two people engaged in the act insist otherwise. The act itself is tied to transcendent meaning that exists quite apart from the intentions of the people involved. Sex has a spiritual dimension to it such that any sex outside the context of a life union of a man and woman is a violation of the meaning and purpose of sex.

WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS?

In his thoughtful analysis of sexuality and sexual behavior from a Christian worldview, the late Lewis Smedes (1994) asked, What is the goal of studying sexuality? We have always appreciated his answer: “To catch a vision of the place and nature of sexuality in human life and to clarify as best we can the nature of Christian ethics in this area” (p. 24).

One of the first points of consideration for the Christian is that sex transcends genital sex or any specific sexual action or behavior. As Smedes says, sex is something we are, not something we do. Smedes removes the emphasis on behavior as though a discussion of actions would somehow encapsulate a full-orbed discussion of human sexuality. Rather, he prefers we view sex as an important aspect of what it means to be human.

To get at this point that our sexuality is an important aspect of what it means to be human, it may be helpful to distinguish between types of sexuality: *gender sexuality*, *erotic sexuality*, and *genital sexuality* (Jones, 1999).

Gender sexuality. Gender sexuality is the broadest of the three levels. It refers to being a person who is either male or female. Although we will discuss gender identity and related concerns in greater detail in chapter thirteen, Christians have historically understood there to be two biological sexes, and gender sexuality is a reflection of that distinction and complementarity seen in the creation narrative (Gen 2:21-24). By saying this, we are in no way meaning to diminish the experience of those who have an intersex condition or experience gender incongruence, and some would say such rare conditions or experiences are exceptions that perhaps prove the rule, that is, that there are two distinct and complimentary sexes, just as we see reflected in the story of creation.

According to Jones (1999), questions for reflection for the Christian include, Why did God create two sexes? What was God’s purpose in so doing? What are the meaningful differences between men and women, if we can tease those out from our sociocultural context? And how does our gender permeate our lives as we live after the Fall and before glorification? How ought gender to permeate our lives?

Erotic sexuality. The next level of sexuality is erotic sexuality. This refers to the passionate desire and longing for completion in another. The longing for completion is experienced at all levels, including the physical. Erotic sexuality is related to gender sexuality for most people (Jones, 1999). The complementarity of male and female anatomy certainly reflects this,

but same-sex partners can also experience a longing for completion in the other that reflects this level of erotic sexuality. The desire itself is instructive. As an example, Smedes reflects on the feeling of guilt that many individuals experience after masturbating. His opinion is that the sense of guilt is actually a sense of incompleteness and longing for what is actually meant to be—the experience of pleasure in the context of sexual intimacy within marriage.

Questions that arise in the study of erotic sexuality have to do with the place of sexuality in our lives: What place does sexuality have in our lives? How central is it to who we are? What do we do with the desire and longing for completion in another if we are not presently married?

Genital sexuality. The third and final level of sexuality is the most specific. It is genital sexuality. Genital sexuality comprises and focuses on physical acts themselves (Jones, 1999). It is probably the focal point of most evangelical Christians when they discuss sex. We can quickly focus on list making: Which behaviors are acceptable and which are unacceptable? What is right and wrong in terms of sexual behavior? Too often the discussion begins and ends here, with list making. We want to recognize that these are important questions to ask, but a broader, fuller view of sexuality will inform a Christian understanding.

Helmut Thielicke (1975) offers the following observation about genital sexuality or specific sex acts in light of a broader Christian view of sexuality:

He who seeks only the partial—only the body, only the function, and possibly only a part of this—remains unfulfilled even on the level of *eros*, because, having lost the wholeness of the other person, he also loses the other person's uniqueness. (p. 25)

We turn now to an important theological issue for our consideration. It has to do with a proper understanding of our physical nature, including our sexuality.

OUR PHYSICAL NATURE

One of the critical theological issues for evangelical Christians has to do with our physical nature: How central to our existence is our physical nature? We have witnessed a tendency among evangelicals to distance themselves from the natural world in favor of the spiritual world. This is popularly

captured in the hymn by Albert E. Brumley “This World Is Not My Home” (1965).

There is often a tension between living in this world and anticipating the life beyond this world. There is also a sense in which the world we live in, our physical existence included, is “less than” what we are moving toward.

This tendency to devalue life in the present world often extends to our physical existence in discussions about sexuality. In the most extreme forms it can lead to expressions of gnosticism (see Ehrman, 2006; Pagels & King, 2008), in which matter and physical existence are devalued (and ultimately identified as the sources of evil) in favor of the life of the mind and spirit or a secret spark of divine light that is supposedly within us, which is at risk of being quenched by what has become orthodoxy.

However, this seems to contrast sharply with the broader witness of Scripture (and data on historical Christianity, which is beyond the scope of our discussion). Creation, the incarnation, and the resurrection all point in favor of a high view of our inherent and intended physicalness.

We discussed Genesis 1–2 earlier, but we can certainly see in these passages our embodied nature. The story itself reflects that human beings became souls.

The incarnation—the doctrine of God becoming flesh, taking on bodily existence—elevates our view of physical existence. In John 1:14 Scripture reads, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Christ became flesh, and that would be impossible if physical existence were inherently bad.

Finally, the resurrection is understood as the unfolding event that precedes the glorification and consummation of the created order. We are told that there will be a bodily resurrection, although it is unclear the full ramifications of that understanding:

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?” How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of

splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. (1 Cor 15:35-44)

We are told our bodies will be transformed: “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:20-21).

One of the tension points for some evangelicals is how to understand passages that appear to carry negative charges against our physical existence. One of the most widely cited (but misunderstood) passages dealing with “the flesh” is Galatians 5:19-21:

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

As we approach a biblical understanding of “the flesh” (*sarx*) in this context, there are many possible meanings of *flesh*. For example, *flesh* can refer to the aspect of the person that is frail or creaturely. *Flesh* can also refer to the physical aspect of personhood. It can refer to the union produced by marriage and can also refer to the outlook or orientation of the whole person—oriented toward self and in active rebellion against God.

When we look at the list of “acts of the flesh” listed in Galatians 5:19-21, we have to consider which meaning makes the most sense in light of the list given. While we may be tempted to say that Paul is critical of our physical existence in this passage, there are many acts listed that are not tied to physical existence per se (e.g., selfish ambition, hatred). Taken together, each act in the list commonly reflects an outlook or orientation toward oneself and in active rebellion against God. Indeed, that is the flesh that we are to reject. Not our physical existence but our sinful self-centeredness.

As we come into a more accurate understanding of sexuality and sexual behavior from a Christian perspective, we want to consider the purposes of sexuality. Let’s turn to that topic.

PURPOSES OF SEXUALITY

Historically, there have been two primary purposes of sexuality discussed among Christians—procreative and unitive. Sex is the means by which human beings procreate. Male-female relationships have the potential for procreation. The other primary purpose is the unitive dimension of sexuality: two people are united in marriage and in and through sexual intimacy. Genesis 2:24 reads, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

Paul then references this passage in his letter to the church in Corinth:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.” But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. (1 Cor 6:15-20)

So in addition to procreative purposes of sexuality, there are also unitive purposes (see also Mk 10:2-12). Furthermore, additional purposes might include the physical gratification or pleasure that is associated with sexual intimacy (Prov 5:15-19). The experience of pleasure with a loved one is an experience of increased emotional closeness as well.

Sex is also instructive, as we suggested earlier in the chapter when we discussed *eros* or the longing for completion in another. Sex instructs us about our relational nature and in so doing reflects God’s nature as a relational being. This is seen in our longing for completion with another. As we experience that longing, we experience a desire that is only incompletely met in relationship with others, including those with whom we are sexually intimate.

Marva Dawn makes an interesting observation about the love that exists in marriage and the common phrase *to make love*:

The common slang “to make love” does not accurately describe what happens in the sexual union of committed marriage partners. Love is made all the time in marriage—when together we clean up the kitchen, sing a hymn side by side in a worship service, ride our bicycles to the neighborhood park, talk on the porch swing

about the day's work, play a game, plan for the future, or remember the past. Love grows when, apart from each other, we speak lovingly about our spouse, work at our jobs with a sense of the other's support, or plan surprises. (Dawn, 1993, p. 55)

Another aspect of the instructive purpose of our sexuality is that sex instructs the world about the love of Christ for his bride, the church (Eph 5:22-24). Paul instructs husbands to love their wives in the same way that Christ sacrificed himself for the church. That love for one another, that willingness to put the other first, to make sacrifices on behalf of the other, is an important characteristic of love that is meant to be instructive to us and the culture we live in.

In addition to these important theological issues, we want to reflect on the tendency among evangelicals to focus almost exclusively on behavior over other considerations.

YOUR WORKING THEOLOGY OF SEX

As you begin a book on sexuality and sex therapy, it can be important to reflect on a working theology of sexuality. How would you outline your own theology of sexuality? What would you see as the most important considerations? How do specific passages from Scripture inform your theology? Or are there broader themes from Scripture that you see as particularly relevant to a practical theology?

In this chapter we focused on creation, the Fall, redemption, and glorification. Does this organization make sense to you—in terms of the four acts of the biblical drama? If so, how do themes from creation inform your theology of sexuality? In what ways do you see the Fall influencing a theology of sexuality? What is “fallen,” exactly? How does redemption (or various “redemptive structures”) fit into your emerging theology? As you consider glorification, what bearing does eternity have on how we think about sexuality this side of heaven?

In addition to the four acts of the biblical drama—creation, the Fall, redemption, and glorification—are there any specific principles that you derive from Scripture that inform your understanding of sexuality?

How would you compare and contrast your working theology of human sexuality from a Christian perspective with the various worldviews mentioned at the outset of this chapter, that is, naturalism, humanism, and pluralism? What are you identifying as true that would be in conflict with these various worldviews and their assumptions about sexuality, sexual expression, and morality?

BEYOND BEHAVIOR

There is an unfortunate stereotype about evangelical Christian circles and the tendency to make lists. We like to have lists of what we cannot do and can do. This is perhaps no more evident than when we turn to discussions about sexuality and morality.

Here is an excerpt from an email we received recently:

Please forgive my out of the blue e-mail and questions, but I really am in need of some Christian perspective on something. I am a full time student, am employed full time and have been married eight years. A lot of married friends have been expressing their interest and involvement in sharing verbal fantasies (between husband and wife) in the bedroom. Needless to say this idea is extremely exciting. As a result, we have tried it and like it. My concern is: is this behavior healthy? Online articles and relationship books at Barnes and Noble all say yes. However, I cannot find the topic addressed by any Christian author. So my question to you is simple. Is this behavior OK? If so what are reasonable boundaries? Is there a book or article that addresses this issue from Christian perspective?

Is the behavior healthy? Is it OK? What are the boundaries? One problem with lists is that they often do not contain all of the behaviors we have questions about. And if they do create boundaries, context is often neglected and behaviors altogether become reduced to “right” and “wrong.” For example, if a view is taken that “masturbation is wrong,” would that apply in the case of a Navy couple where one partner is deployed and both husband and wife experience sexual tension in the absence of the other? Would it be wrong for them to masturbate while they are on the phone with each other, sharing fantasies in a moment of intimacy? The flip side may be that while it may not be wrong, their distance may be an opportunity to exercise discipline.

When we look at Scripture we see a short list of sexual behaviors that are expressly commanded or approved. The list includes marital intercourse and celibacy. Marital intercourse is commanded by Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth: “The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband” (1 Cor 7:3). Marriage itself is honored in several other passages; for example, Hebrews 13:4: “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” Likewise, celibacy is affirmed in Scripture: “There are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have

been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it” (Mt 19:12; see also 1 Cor 6–7).

There is a much longer list of acts that are expressly condemned in Scripture. The word *porneia*, which originally and more narrowly meant “to prostitute” or “to sell,” was translated in the KJV and NASB as “fornication” more broadly and in the ESV as sexual “immorality.”³ It can also be thought of as “illicit sex.” It would include all sexual intercourse with someone who is not one’s spouse. Other sexual behaviors that Christians have historically viewed as condemned include incest (Lev 18:6-18; 20:11-22), rape or forced sex (Deut 22), same-sex behavior (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1; 1 Cor 6:9), bestiality (Lev 20:15-16), cross-dressing (Deut 22:5), lust (Mt 5:28), and withholding sex in marriage (1 Cor 7).

That leaves a number of concerns for which we receive little guidance directly through Scripture, except through broad principles, not to mention some of the topics above that are being revisited or further contextualized. Concerns often raised today include questions about self-stimulation (masturbation), oral sex, petting, modesty and nudity, fetishism, and birth control. The email we received about fantasy in a marriage is another question raised that is not directly addressed in the context of Scripture.

When Christians do not have clear teachings on matters of morality, they are to look to broad principles to guide their understanding and practical application of what is affirmed and what is condemned in Scripture.

PRINCIPLES GUIDING ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

Which principles should guide ethical decision making? The list making that is common in evangelical circles focuses on acts. This is an important consideration, particularly when there is clear teaching about a behavior. Other principles consider the consequences of a behavior. Still other principles look at character.

It is not uncommon for Christians to fall into either extreme when deciding about gray areas. They either believe that everything not mentioned in Scripture is quite good and to be enjoyed, or they believe that everything that is not mentioned in Scripture directly is to be avoided.

³“Porneia Definition,” Never Thirsty, www.neverthirsty.org/bible-qa/qa-archives/question/what-is-meaning-of-greek-word-porneia-in-bible.

Marva Dawn, in her book *Sexual Character*, reflects on the character of the Christian cited in Paul's letter to the church in Galatia. In that passage, Paul shares, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Gal 5:22-23). In our sexuality, sexual intimacy, and sexual expression, Dawn discusses agape love, contrasting it with love often expressed in the Roman context.

In the Greek/Roman milieu of Asia Minor, men typically loved (with *eros*, "passionate eroticism") their high-class prostitutes, cared for (with *storge* or "family love") their wives, and most highly esteemed (with *philia*, the bonds of common interest) their friends.

In contrast to the Greco-Roman setting, Christians were instructed to love with agape love:

In great contrast, men in the Christian community were commanded to love their wives with an intelligent, purposeful love, directed toward their wives' needs (*agape*). Moreover, this love was to be a symbol for all the world to see of Christ's love for his Bride, the Church. Their love for their wives was to illustrate the profound love that led Christ to submit to death in order to purify the Church. (Dawn, 1993, p. 45)

Joy is also expressed in our sexuality. It reflects gladness and delight in God's design, wonderment at the experience of pleasure, and living by God's revealed will in our sexuality. Peace reflects a sense of satisfaction in our lives. Patience is a "steadfast commitment" to one another, while kindness is our being "beneficial to others."

Goodness is expressed in generous giving, while faithfulness is shown in fidelity. Gentleness is reflected in our courtesy and consideration for one another. The Christian demonstrates self-control by exercising restraint. In 1 Corinthians 6:12, Paul writes about not being brought under the power of any particular behavior: "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything" (ESV).

These sexual character traits, we believe, can be anchored in some relevant biblical principles. For example, we see Scripture teaching an integrated, holistic view (1 Cor 6:16-18), intimacy (Gen 4:1), creation (Rom 1:27), and stewardship (1 Cor 6:19-20).

In terms of wholeness, Christians do not want to isolate what they do from who they are and the relationship that they are in. They do not want to isolate a bodily function (genital sex) from the emotions and relationships they have, nor from the transcendent reality of God and God's purposes and intentions for sexual expression and intimacy.

True sexual intimacy, then, is an expression of this holistic view.

Do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body *with her*? For “the two,” He says, “shall become one flesh.” But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit *with Him*.

Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Cor 6:16-20 NKJV)

In terms of creation, Christians understand that there is a principle grounded in the created order that can itself be ignored. For example, in Romans 1:27, Paul writes, “In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women.” This is not meant as an argument for the origins of same-sex sexuality; we will discuss that in chapter twelve. However, a relevant question for the believer is this: Has God created the body to function in this way naturally? That principle may also be helpful to the Christian who is reflecting on sexual ethics.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

What makes it possible to foster these qualities and characteristics in and through our sexuality? While ultimately these are reflected in the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian, we do see an important principle in the concept of stewardship. Stewardship means seeing ourselves as being responsible for those things we either have been given in this life or otherwise experience in this life. The principle of stewardship can be found in a number of passages in the Bible, such as Matthew 25:21 (where the person faithful over a few things will be made faithful over more), 1 Corinthians 4:2 (where we are encouraged to be found faithful), 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (where our body is a temple that we are to take care of), Romans 14:12 (where we are told we will one day give an account to God), and Luke 16:1-13 (the story of the wise steward).

In the church today most discussions about stewardship are limited to what it means to steward our finances, perhaps in the context of raising funds for a new building (often referred to as a stewardship campaign), and what it means to be good stewards of the environment. Younger readers may resonate more with our application of stewardship, as there has been a generational shift in how we have prioritized taking good care of the local and global environments, in addition to concerns regarding social justice and the distribution of material goods.

Our view is that it can be helpful to extend the discussion of stewardship to the area of human sexuality and sexual expression. In matters of sexuality and the desires and impulses we may feel, it will be important to steward what has been given to us (e.g., a partner in marriage) and what we experience in our desires and impulses (e.g., sexual desires toward people where acting on those desires would be wrong).

A key consideration is that stewardship is not state dependent. The message to single Christians is not “Steward your sexuality until you get married,” as if stewardship were code for practicing abstinence. Rather, stewardship is for those who are single and those who are married. It is a concept that applies to those who are primarily attracted to the opposite sex and to those who are attracted to the same sex. In that sense the principle of stewardship cuts across all of these differences among people.

There are important differences, of course, in ways people find themselves in either the married or single state. Concerning singleness, for example, a twenty-year-old male sexual minority faces different issues from a single heterosexual who lost her spouse in her mid-forties—so we will want to recognize those differences and consider what pastoral care looks like in specific cases (see Rosenau & Wilson, 2006, pp. 68-70). But stewardship reflects a call for all of us to honor God with our sexuality, as our sexuality is not ours to begin with but rather is one of many aspects of human experience that is ultimately God’s, and we can find ways to honor God through our sexuality and its expression.

Stewardship can also be related to our expanded capacity to trust God. When we seek to steward our sexuality, we can invite the Holy Spirit to expand our capacity to trust God as a good and loving Father whose plan for our sexuality is better than our own plan or the plans we will hear about from others and from the broader culture. Stewardship and trust go hand in hand.

STEWARDING YOUR SEXUALITY

What does it mean to you to steward sexuality? Take a sheet of paper and draw a line down the middle vertically. On the left-hand side, write the words Sexual Self-Actualization at the top of the page. On the right-hand side, write the words Stewardship of Sexuality at the top of the page. Now look at the left-hand side of the page. How would you describe messages from culture and personal experiences that are part of a culture of sexual self-actualization? For example, if you heard “Do what you want” as a message about sex, you might identify where you first heard that message, how it was conveyed, and so on. You might also identify messages that have ridiculed a Christian sexual ethic in the media or popular culture. Again, identify that specific message (e.g., “Folks who wait until marriage to have sex are just pitiful!”) and how it was communicated to you. Write these messages on the left-hand side of the page. Some people have written down TV shows or movies that have contributed to the message of sexual self-actualization. Others have added some of their own experiences that were based more on short-term interests than longer-term considerations.

Now look at the right-hand column. What messages from your community, close friends, and your own personal decisions seem to reflect what it means to steward your sexuality? Write these on the right-hand side of the page. These might include decisions to be transparent with close friends about difficult decisions you are facing, times when you have resisted temptation in an area that has been difficult for you, or saying no to one thing so you could say yes to something you saw as better for you so that you experienced delayed gratification in a meaningful way.

We close our discussion of a Christian perspective on sexuality and sexual behavior with a reminder about our first love. For Christians, our first love is God, and God is actually jealous for us. Jealousy is an unpleasant emotion that reflects concern or wariness that the intimacy shared with the one I love will be supplanted by another. It is the sentiment that goes with the statement “You can’t have what is mine!” God is described as jealous, suggesting he does not want to lose the love we have for him to a rival. Indeed, God’s name is Jealous (Ex 34:14), so it is more than just an adjective to describe God or an attribute of God; rather, it is who God is. God is jealous for our love and desire.

Although the focus of this chapter is on sexuality, obviously human love and desire can be directed toward many things that are not sexual: money and possessions are probably two of the top rivals for our interests. When we covet what other people have—money and possessions—we are allowing

our desires to be directed away from God and toward our own self-interest (Jas 4:2-3). At the same time, sexuality does seem to hold a unique place in discussions of jealousy.

Sexuality becomes an area of concern insofar as we allow our sexual interests to reflect things that are not blessed by God, not part of God's intention for sexuality and sexual expression. We can then rightly be described as "adulterous" people when we seek intimacy in and through what the world offers rather than through who God is and what God provides for us (Jas 4:4). We are to be faithful to God, yet we can often drift away from God and his purposes and toward our own sinful self-centeredness. What God longs for is his own spirit that is within us (Jas 4:5). We do not know all of what this entails, but there is certainly a faithfulness to God that is reflected in how we live our lives, what posture we take toward our own sin (a posture of repentance as contrasted with a posture of defiance), and how we form our identity as sexual beings.

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