

Homosexuality Calmly Considered A Theological Look at a Controversial Topic

**by
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Recently, a doctor friend of mine told me of a conversation with a colleague about the present debate over homosexual marriages. The colleague had said: "Well, who really cares? It really is a private personal matter, isn't it?" My friend was not sure how to respond. He was a bit caught short when I suggested, "God cares!"

Today the whole question of this change in the understanding of the nature of marriage and of human sexuality is discussed from numerous angles. For some, the conflict is a moral issue; for others, a legal or political issue. For still others, it's a matter of changing social customs and a social institution. If no intelligent Creator God made all things nor had rational purposes when he designed us, then such thinking is understandable. With no design in life, we are left on our own. If, however, there is a God who intentionally made us male and female, then he really should not be left out of the discussion. In fact, what he thinks may be the missing element in all the confusion, the key we need in the chaos. If the Bible is correct, human sexuality and marriage are more theology than biology, sociology, law, or even morality.

The biblical story of creation gives us remarkably suggestive indications of an approach to the whole matter that is very different. It lets us know that our sexuality, from its point of view, is not the result of impersonal natural evolutionary processes. Rather, it is part of the blessing of God given with a loving concern for eternal good.

According to the Bible, when God created the first human, he placed him in the midst of his creation, which is spoken of as a garden. Man is told to examine all the creatures that God has made and to give them proper names. When Adam has finished that examination of all other creatures, he realizes that no other creature is comparable to himself. So God acts to alleviate Adam's loneliness. He takes from the man's own body a part from which God forms the first woman who is to be the man's companion. She is not a replica of him, but their differences are complementary. That simply means that they were made for each other so that the completion of the one is found, not in herself or himself, but in the other. The remarkable and unique beauty in this story Paul will recognize later in I Cor. 11:11. It affirms the equality of the one before the other. The first woman is taken from the first male and all subsequent males come from the female. Their equality before each other is established but in such a way that their relatedness, the fact that each is made for the other, is dramatically portrayed. Their very self-definition is in terms of each other, and the fulfillment of the one is to be found in the other.

Their sexuality provides an amazing potential. Because of the differences between them, a woman's femaleness is by definition the potential for motherhood-the experience and relationship in which a woman normally finds a joyous and unique fulfillment. But she has no capacity within herself alone to realize that possibility. She needs her male companion for that. The male by his very maleness has the potential for becoming a father. In that experience and relationship, a man finds a fulfillment like nothing else that he will experience. But he, like his companion, has no capacity in himself alone to find that fulfillment. He needs her. Each has the capacity to confer upon the other the fulfillment of his masculinity or of her femininity. Furthermore, the fulfillment in motherhood and fatherhood is not complete in itself. The greater richness for each is found in the result of their love that they now share. As Richard of St. Victor suggests, love never quite reaches its complete

fulfillment without the lover, the beloved, and the by-product of that mutual love.

The historical significance to all of this must not be ignored. The very future existence of the human race and the fulfillment of the divine purposes for God's own creation hang on our sexual differentiation. So we find Genesis telling us that God commands that first couple to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth. And the capacity to do that is considered by the Genesis account to be the result of the blessing of God. God has a profound interest in their sexuality. It is crucial to the fulfillment of his purposes in human history. A same sex relationship can never fulfill the potential that God built into the heterosexual one, a fulfillment that our very beings indicate is proper. The homosexual relationship is by definition inexorably sterile and that very sterility is God's own sign that it is not an intended part of his order for his children. This is more than law, politics, biology, sociology, or morality. It is a matter of the essential nature of human personhood and is rooted in the ultimate purposes of God for his human creatures.

Genesis even tells us that our sexual differentiation has overtones that are more than simply natural. It carries within itself something of the very imaging of God. As the text says: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (1:27) Much has been written across the centuries about the "imago Dei," the image of God. Usually, it has been identified with our rational, moral, or political nature. The context in Genesis, though, has to do with marriage, childbearing, and God's purposes in creation. God is the creator and the giver of life. It should be noted that only through our sexuality can we as humans ever be a part of a creative process in which we share with God in producing something totally and uniquely new. I speak of the creation of a human person, a human soul. God created the first two. He has given to the human person the privilege, in union with another human that is different from herself or himself, the capacity to

be a part of the replication of what God himself did in Eden. We can together bring into existence eternal souls the worth of which is defined for us by nothing less than Calvary itself. A same-sex relationship has no such potential.

The biblical text also gives us some intimations that the proper context in which this male/female relationship is to find its expression is in a covenant between a male and a female in which their commitment to each other transcends the noblest of all other human commitments. Only one's devotion to God is to be above the devotion of the one sexual partner to the other. Note the words of the text: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." Genesis 2:24. This was written in a context where the family was the basic social unit with the highest claim on one's loyalty. (The fact that the commitment of the man is recognized more pointedly than that of the woman may be a clear indication that the One who gives us this text knew well the stronger tendency for deviancy in the male, so it puts the higher obligation for the sanctity of the home on him.) What is without question here is that the man is to give a higher loyalty to the one who is to be his wife and can make him a father than he is to give to those who gave him his own life. And it is in that loyalty that the children who are the result of this covenant will find the security that they will need for wholesome personal development. This relationship is what we have historically called marriage.

It seems clear that God had multiple purposes in mind when he made us male and female. He built into the male and the female a deep and profound attraction for each other. One can make a strong case for the fact that this pull is the strongest single passion that one normally will know at the human and natural level. We speak of this as the erotic impulse, the call within one person to possess another person for sexual fulfillment. This erotic element is at the heart of the marriage relationship. It is such a powerful part of one's sexual life normally

that it is easy to conclude that the erotic and the sexual are the same, that the erotic exhausts our sexuality. Our society, because it has lost its biblical frame of reference, accepts this sameness as unquestionable. The Scriptures and life itself let us know, though, that the erotic is not the exhaustion of human sexuality. Human sexuality actually transcends the erotic. The erotic is only one expression of masculinity or femininity. We see this in two ways. In children before puberty, masculinity and femininity can be delightfully obvious with no erotic coloring at all. One only has to observe a little brother and sister from a loving home to know that a boy is not a girl and a girl is not a boy. Their sexuality makes each different from the other in most delightful ways. Their likes and inclinations reflect their sexual differentiation. Puberty introduces the erotic element. It is only in the stable and loving family that one gets the opportunity to see the true nature of sexuality and that a person of the opposite sex can be more than an erotic object. The recognition of this difference has a powerful and determining force in humanizing and personalizing male/female relations.

This is one of the reasons that the sexual abuse of a child is so destructive. The child becomes an impersonal object, used to meet another person's own selfish desires. This is the prostitution of the child's personhood. It introduces the erotic element into his or her life before the child is ready and depersonalizes and desecrates a relationship that within proper marriage is the most personal, the most beautiful, and the most sacred of all human associations. A psychological freedom is lost that one badly needs in a fallen world.

That human sexuality is more than just the erotic is affirmed by Scripture when it tells us that human marriage will not exist in heaven. Yet there is no indication that the resurrection will strip us of our maleness or femaleness. The reason is that our sexual identification is not an accident of our being. It is who we are and it transcends the erotic. Human persons are either male or female, and that sexual differentiation transcends time, which is at the

heart of the Biblical understanding that the relationship of the church to Christ is that of bride and groom. The relationship of bride and groom here is a temporal analogue designed by God to foreshadow the eternal relationship that the church will have with Christ through all eternity. We see this in the biblical picture of the culmination of human history in what the book of Revelation calls "the marriage supper of the Lamb." Marriage is God's chief pedagogical device to prepare us for that. The reality is that the God of Scripture seems to like us. In fact, the purpose of human history, according to the Scriptures, is to bring us into the very love life of the triune God. From the Pentateuchal command to love the Lord our God with all of our hearts to the New Testament insistence that love is the fulfilling of the very law of God, it becomes clear that God is seeking to bring us into the fellowship which God the Father and the Son and the Spirit share with one another—the fellowship of self-giving agape love that Wesley calls "the joy of heaven." The family is God's prime tool to teach us how love and personal respect go together, and marriage is his unique instrument to guide us into a version of total self-giving love that is an analogue of God's own inner life. No other social institution and no other human relationships can do this in the way that marriage and the family can. That means that for God the proleptic element in our sexuality and the prophetic character in marriage and family will find their fulfillment beyond the resurrection where earthly symbol will be replaced by heavenly reality and eros will find its fulfillment in agape.

This understanding explains for us the fact that the Scripture puts such an emphasis upon the importance of marriage while yet making room for celibacy for some. Jesus speaks approvingly in Matthew 19:12 of those who for the sake of the kingdom of heaven renounce the privilege of marriage. Paul in I Corinthians 7:7-11, 19 speaks of some who do not marry because they are called to that state. One has only to think of persons such as Francis of Assisi or Francis Asbury to know that celibacy is the only way that some can fulfill their divine calling. Does

this mean that they are to be pitied because they have missed a fulfillment that the rest of us have had the privilege of experiencing? Not necessarily. The proleptic character of our sexuality means that a personal relationship to Christ in the here and now can fulfill the cry of our being for Another. Symbol can be passed over for the reality to which it points. A friend once told me of the deaconess who had influenced him most profoundly. He said that she was the most fulfilled person whom he had ever known. When asked why she never married, she responded simply: "I came to realize that my need for love was so great that I knew that no mortal man could ever meet it but that Jesus could. And he has!"

Part of the glory of the creation is that it can carry just such imaging with it of the life of the Creator who made and maintains it. God is the source of our life. He is creator, sustainer, and he is the original Father. The idea of God as Father is not a human concept that has been injected by us into our relationship to God. The exact reverse is true, though our social scientists and religious anthropologists have largely lost sight of this relationship. Before Adam was created, in the mystery of the relations among the three persons of the divine trinity, one person was Father and another, Son. (Ephesians 3:15) The original family was not a human one. It was in the very life of the triune God. Man is made in the image of that God. The use of familial terms to describe God is no human projection. God's idea of what we should be and how we should relate both to one another and to him originates in his own triune and familial character. And none of this imaging could be possible apart from our sexuality. In fact, its possibility is implicit in what it means for us to be female and male.

This means that in the home we have our best opportunity to learn the essential character of God. No other institution combines order and self-giving love like the family. Here we learn to obey our parents in a context of sacrificial and self-giving love. Here we can see the possibility that love and law are not by definition antithetical. The family is God's special tool

intended to enable us to conceive the God of Sinai and of Calvary as one without any inner contradiction in him. Thus we can honor, glorify, and worship him and lovingly trust him at the same time. If the family is destroyed, God's prime tool to enable us to think him as he is no longer exists. The idea of a homosexual marriage finds none of these themes inherent within it or compatible with it. Such a union can never do what God's ways can do. The biblical view of human sexuality is not an outmoded perspective that time has made irrelevant. Rather, it is the key to social health and to our human future in God.

The Biblical view is unique, and its distinctness from alternative views in human history is rather clearly seen. One has only to compare it with the understanding of human sexuality that Plato reports in a Socratic dialogue. In the Symposium, Aristophanes explains that original human nature was different from that of humans as we now know them—not two sexes but three with each having a dual nature: the male, the female, and a third creature that was a combination of male and female. Primeval man was round with the back, the front, and the sides forming a circle. Each person had a head with two faces set atop the neck. The two faces were looking in opposite directions. Each person had four hands, four feet, four ears and was equipped with two identifying genital structures. The three sexes were a reflection of the sun, the moon, and the earth. Man was the child of the sun, the woman of the earth, and the man-woman of the moon. These creatures turned against the gods and attacked them. The gods did not want to lose their sacrifices, so they hesitated to destroy them, but they could not abide their insolence. Zeus decided to cut them all in two to diminish their strength and to increase their number. That would weaken them but increase their profitability for the gods. So Zeus divided each one.

The result was that the original male creature was divided into two male halves. The original female was divided into two female halves. And the original male/female creature was divided into two halves, one male and one female. Now

each half felt its incompleteness and longed for reunion with its other part. This was Aristophanes' explanation of the erotic. The half of the male, cut away from his other male half, yearned for union with his lost half. The half of the female, cut away from her other female half, yearned for union with her lost half. And each half of the original male/female yearned for the other half. Thus Aristophanes could explain homosexuality, lesbianism, and heterosexuality. And all was because of Zeus' curse on human insolence.

The differences between this and the biblical view of the explanation of human sexuality is rather clear. What must not be missed is that in one story, the erotic which we experience is the result of a divine curse, while in the Genesis account, it is the result of the divine blessing. Sexuality at best in the one is utilitarian and self-centered; while in the other, it is a divine gift to introduce us into the possibilities of creative love, human and divine. One view is rooted in divinized nature, Zeus, while the other finds its origin in the eternal purposes of the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Somehow, the biblical view seems to fit human needs far more than the mythic version of Aristophanes. It gives a theological explanation for and a basis for the two most precious institutions that society has yet experienced. It certainly indicates that God cares about marriage and family and that he cares seriously.

The extent of his caring is indicated in the numerous admonitions against what the Bible considers immoral and unethical. Much of the current discussion of human sexuality wants to categorize the biblical commands on sexual behavior as culturally determined and out of date. We are told that now we have an advanced understanding, that it is as wrong to be negative toward the homosexual lobby and its lifestyle as it was wrong once for the church to defend slavery or oppress women. This, if the foregoing discussion is correct, is a misreading of the Bible. As we said before, the basic issue here is theological, the question of the divine purposes for marriage and family.

Slavery was never claimed to have its analogue in the nature of God. The Scripture indicates that the family does. The oppression of women finds no basis in the creation story. The equality of women is very clear, dramatically clear. But the equality indicated there does not indicate sameness. Part of the glory of the biblical account is its recognition of the God-given differences in which we can rejoice.

The questions about sexual practice and marriage are not matters of culture in the Bible. Leviticus 18, that bete-noir of the gay-lesbian lobby, makes this very clear. God tells Moses that because He is Israel's God, Israel is not to live like the Egyptians whom they have left in Egypt nor like the Canaanites in the land to which he is bringing them. Then follows a list of instructions on sexual conduct that is the noblest found in the ancient world. They are not based on culture. They are based on the nature of Yahweh and indicate his purposes for human life. Incest, pedophilia, bestiality, adultery, homosexuality, and the sacrifice of children are forbidden. One would expect the church to stand up and boast of such a passage because of its concern for the weak and the defenseless and of its support for what is good and holy. Yahweh was not happy with a culture where a prostitute was called a holy woman (qedeshah) and a homosexual was identified as a holy man (qadosh). This is one of the chapters that has been background for the Christian view of the sanctity of human personhood and its protest of the dehumanization and depersonalizing of the most sacred human relations. The basis of it all is the nature of the God who brought Israel out of slavery and gave to us Jesus, the Beatitudes, I Corinthians 13, and Calvary. Apparently, he does care.

But we have decided that we can understand the mystery of human sexuality without reference to the One who designed it and made us male and female. The results are not pretty. First, we divorced our sexuality from procreation. That high privilege to partner with God became an unnecessary obligation. The depreciation of the sanctity of human life that has resulted is enough to make one weep (God

must). The natural result of my sexual freedom came to be seen as a curse to be escaped even at the cost of the death of the innocent. Then we divorced our sexuality from marriage. Instead of its being part of a covenant of mutual, total, and life-long unconditional commitment, it became the privilege of the moment. And the responsibility of one sexual partner, especially the male, for the other was gone. Now we want to divorce our sexuality from gender. The result is that the most natural civilizing instrument in our world and the greatest instrument for stabilization in our lives is up for grabs. Our sense of community is disappearing as a nation and as the church. Rights and responsibilities, above all to the one who made us and will graciously give us that next breath, are no longer connected.

Four remarkable passages in Jeremiah have an echo and a development in the book of Revelation that seem pertinent here. The first is found in the seventh chapter. This was a chapter that Jesus had in mind when he found the worship in the temple in Jerusalem offensive and cleansed the temple. Jeremiah tells of a society, his own, where the alien, the fatherless, the widow, and the helpless have become prey. Stealing, perjury, murder, and adultery are commonplace. Even the house of God is a "den of thieves." God reminds Jeremiah that he had left the former holy place, Shiloh, because of such conduct. So he tells Jeremiah that he will withdraw his presence from this, the Holy City. The mark of his absence is significant. God in 7:34 says: "I will bring an end to the sounds of joy and gladness and to the voices of bride and bridegroom in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem . . ." The sign of the absence of God is the disappearance of the joyous music of the bride and bridegroom. Three other passages in Jeremiah make the same claim that the presence of the sound of the song of the bride and bridegroom are the evidence of the presence or absence of God and that when God goes, his blessing goes with him and his judgment remains.

Even more dramatic is the development of this truth in Revelation 18. This chapter gives us one side of the culmination of human history. It is the picture of the final collapse of that part of God's creation that has rejected him. John pictures it as a great city, the city of Babylon. He speaks of it as the Great Whore. The sign of the ultimate judgment of God is described in 18:21-24. When God goes, the sounds of the harpist, the minstrels, the flutists, and the trumpeters are no more. The artisan and his crafts are no more. Profitable labor as reflected in the grinding of mill is no more. Nothing is clear because the light is no more. The summary judgment on the desolations is found in the words: "The voice of bridegroom and bride are no more." When marriage as God planned it goes, God goes with it. We are talking about more than biology, sociology, and morality. We are talking about theology.

"Who cares? After all it is a private matter, is it not?" Apparently God cares and cares more than most of us ever dreamed. Perhaps we should let him back into the discussion!