

THE BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND ETHICS OF SEX No. 10, 9/16/07

“Singleness” [Leaving considerable time for Discussion of the material covered in the course; encourage them to be ready with their questions and comments.]

Let me begin by reviewing the ground we have covered in this class. It was a class, we said about sex, in the sense of sexual desire and practice, with its attendant sins, tribulations, satisfactions, and fulfillments.

1. We began with a justification for the course, paying attention to the place given to the subject in Holy Scripture and its dominant role in the formation and malformation of human life and culture. We noticed some of the ways in which sexual questions were dominating our social and political life at the moment and the influences that have brought us to this place. Sex has a place in our world greater in some ways than at any time in man’s history. As Malcolm Muggeridge once put it, “Sex is the mysticism of a materialist society.” Or, in other words, to turn upside down the words of the Apostle Paul (Rom. 8:6): “To be carnally minded is life.” It is, in a very real way, the religion, the spiritual reality that draws the people of this culture on. [Cited in W.F. Buckley, *Nearer My God*, 201] We are, as some social critics have styled us, the porn culture not simply because sex is everywhere, but because sex defines the culture, is its reason for being, and the evidence of that is everywhere.
2. We looked at the creation of man as male and female in Gen 1 and 2 and how God made the two sexes fundamentally different orders of being though together his image-bearers in the world.
3. We considered the subject of sexual differentiation in biblical teaching and the controversial character of that differentiation in our culture nowadays. We considered the importance of embracing those differences and their implication for the practice of love and sexual love in particular.
4. We looked at the consequences of the Fall for the sexual life of man and woman.
5. We looked at sexual sin and the special place given to such sin in Scripture and considered why that was.
6. We looked at erotic marriage as the biblical antidote to sexual sin in Prov. 5 and 1 Cor. 7.
7. We considered at some length the elaboration of that ideal of the erotic marriage as that ideal is set before us in Proverbs and supremely in the Song of Songs. We considered, with the help of Prof. Jack Collins, the interpretation of the Song of Songs, with its emphasis on both the purposively erotic nature of married love and the loving and romantic context of that eroticism.
8. Finally, we considered the connection between sex and procreation.

In this class we have been thinking about sex as a passion leading to acts that consummate the relationship between a husband and wife: erotic passion in its various dimensions. Even the early lectures in this class devoted to establishing the fact that men and women were profoundly different had in view the way those differences affect the sexual life of a marriage.

But, of course, all people don't marry and whether man or woman the single person as well is part of the sexual reality described in Holy Scripture and observed in the world. I saw recently an interesting comment by a PCA preacher on the statistics that everyone is now talking about indicating the disinterest in reproduction in the Western world. Tim Keller, of Redeemer Presbyterian in NYC, summarized some of those statistics and you might then have expected him to make the point that the Bible teaches a high view of the family and of children and that it is right that Christians should find a reason to bring new human beings to life when a society that has no idea of living for the future and is finding family relationships so problematic should find no motivation for doing so. But Tim didn't take that tack. He clearly did not want to tell his congregation that the Christian faith was, in the nature of the case, pro-family and pro-children. And it isn't hard to see why. 80% of that large congregation is single! And so he spent his time in conclusion talking about the fact that the Bible also recognizes a calling to the single Christian life.

Well, that is true. Still today most people and most Christian people marry. The family is the biggest contributor to the future of the kingdom of God in the world. But not all of them do. And what of sex for them? Well not the erotic expression of life, certainly; the Bible is clear about that. But consider this. In what I take to be a very perceptive comment, Robert Farrar Capon, whom I quoted last week, reflected on the sexual nature of the single man or woman.

“In order to be a father, a husband, a wife, a mother – you still have to begin by being a man or a woman.” [*Bed and Board*, 46] “...the planet houses two different sorts of rationality, two different kinds of freedom, two different brands of love: men's and women's” [48]

“Suppose I wrote a book called *The Sexual Life of a Nun*. You know what people would think. They would be curious – or shocked. They would expect to find it either a big joke or a compilation of slightly prurient propaganda. How many would be able to see that, on the real meaning of the word *sexual*, it is a perfectly proper title? For a nun's life is utterly sexual. She thinks as a woman, prays as a woman, reacts as a woman and commits herself as a woman. No monk...ever embraced his life for her kind of reasons. He couldn't if he wanted to. Of course she omits, as an offering to God, one particular expression of her sexuality; but it is only one out of a hundred.” [49]

Now, to be sure, singleness is not always a calling, perhaps it isn't usually a calling, if by calling we mean a sense that one has been summoned to be single and has embraced that summons. John Stott didn't decide to be single; indeed, he expected to marry. It just never happened. And there is many a Christian woman who would love to be married and have children but has not found a man she would marry. There are other reasons why people are single than that they decided, in the Lord's words, “to make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God.” I have mentioned to you before the roll of the slain in the First and Second World Wars that was inscribed below the pulpit at our church in Aberdeen, Scotland. Obviously, given the nearly even distribution of males and females in a society, every one of those men represented a woman who would not marry.

The homosexual population of NYC is approximately 500,000. That means there are half a million women more than the available men. Singleness is a calling to be embraced in some cases, it is an affliction to be borne in others. Widows and widowers are single not by choice and so many divorcees.

Indeed, it is not entirely clear what callings require singleness and what do not. Paul was unmarried as an itinerant preacher but Peter was married. Ministers have been married as a rule, but there have always been famous bachelors among them. The great Presbyterian preacher of the first half of the 20th century, Clarence McCartney, was a bachelor; so my pastor in Aberdeen, William Still. Many missionaries went as bachelors or spinsters to the field, but many went married; some married men took their wives and some left them behind (e.g. David Livingstone). The important Reformed theologian of the 20th century, the Scot John Murray, who taught for years at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, was a bachelor until after his retirement, but married upon returning to his homeland. Most seminary professors are married.

Elizabeth Elliot once interviewed Gladys Aylward, the missionary in China, whose story is told in the movie, *Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, in which she is played by Ingrid Bergman. In that interview Elliot asked Aylward about her singleness and she pointed a bony finger – she was an older woman by this time – at Elliot and whispered with great intensity, “The Lord called a man for me from England, *but he never came!*”

But, whether we understand how all of this plays out, how a calling to singleness is discerned, it is perfectly clear that the Bible teaches that there is a certain superiority to the single life. The fact that our Savior himself was single certainly suggests this, but Paul says so clearly in 1 Cor. 7:32-35. **READ** Protestants have often tried to work around these verses, for fear of giving comfort to celibate Roman Catholic priests and nuns, but the words speak for themselves. The problem with celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church is only that it is required of everyone who would take orders. Peter was married!

I don't want to elaborate this point in any detail, but only to draw out a few implications.

1. Important as the erotic dimension is to life, it is not the be all and end all of a happy or fruitful life. There is at least one sense in which it actually diminishes life from its perfect state. I say that fully aware that the Bible clearly expects most people and most Christians to marry and, once married, to enjoy an erotic life.
2. It is a sign of the fact, also explicitly taught in Holy Scripture, by our Savior no less, that the erotic life is a feature of life in this world and will not be in the world to come – or certainly so it seems. There will be no marriage or giving in marriage and we will be like the angels. So far as we can tell, angels are not sexual creatures in the same way that human beings are (though there is the interesting teaching in Genesis of cohabitation between demons and women). This too is a fact to ponder, especially as a means to putting the sexual dimension of life into its proper place. There are higher and deeper things and these should get our first attention in life: things that last forever. Sex is not one of those!

Now: what questions and comments.