

READING THE BIBLE FOR ALL IT'S WORTH

Chastity and Eroticism No. 5

August 12, 2001

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We are, once again, paying attention to the Bible's characteristic manner of stating its doctrine -- by presenting the polarities of truth in counter-position to one another, but rarely showing any interest in reconciliation or synthesis. The truth, as Charles Simeon put it, lies not in one extreme and not in the middle, but in both extremes. After two Sunday evenings devoted to introducing this way of reading the Bible and appreciating its teaching, we have considered over two separate Lord's Days particular examples of this *dialectical* presentation of the Bible's doctrine. First we considered the matter of the tension produced between the twin biblical emphases on the necessity of maintaining purity of doctrine and life in the church, on the one hand, and, on the other, the necessity of maintaining the unity of the body of Christ, no matter the differences of doctrine and behavior that often separate Christians from one another. Second, we took up the tension produced between the emphatic assurance that believers are always given in the Bible that all of God's promises will be fulfilled and that they will enjoy his blessing in this life, on the one hand, and, on the other, a great deal of reflection in the Bible on the fact that it is hard to tell in many times and circumstances that God *is* blessing his people or keeping his promises to them.

Tonight, I have chosen another subject among the literally countless ones I might choose. It, again, is a matter of the Bible's ethical teaching, as was the subject of fidelity to the truth counterpoised to the maintenance of the unity of the church and people of God. I chose tonight's subject also because it so well serves to demonstrate that this polar, or dialectical presentation of the truth, this distinctive biblical pedagogy, is used for *every* part of the Bible's teaching, for subjects both of the weightiest theological kind and of more ordinary importance. Here is a matter of importance, to be sure, bearing mightily on the happiness and fulfillment of human beings, an area of life in which great dangers lurk, great temptations are posed, but it is just a single part of the Bible's ethics of Christian living. Nevertheless, it too, is presented dialectically in the Bible.

My subject then is the continuum of human sensuality, with its two opposite poles: the chastity, modesty, and spirituality required of Christians on the one hand, and the celebration of physical beauty and abandonment to sexual pleasure on the other.

Now, the first pole, that of chastity, modesty, and the emphasis on spiritual character and spiritual traits over against physical, is found everywhere and emphatically in the Bible.

However impolitic it may be in our culture and in our day, the Bible commands us to live chastely and modestly. It forbids fornication and adultery and is pitiless in its condemnation of those who commit these sins.

1. We have a large class of texts that teach us, and women especially, to be modest and to dress modestly.

We have, for example, the sarcastic treatment of Israelite women by the OT prophets, who scorn their vanity and their open sensuality (e.g. Isaiah 3:16: "The women of Zion are haughty,

walking along with outstretched necks, flirting with their eyes, tripping along with mincing steps, with ornaments jingling on their ankles.” *Remember that, now.*)

In the NT we have Paul in 1 Tim. 2:9: “I want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.”

And, Peter in 1 Pet. 3:3-4: “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.” It is noteworthy that the woman, sitting on the beast in Rev. 17:4, is decked out in just this fashion that Peter here condemns.

It is not for nothing, obviously, that there have been churches that have taken the position that make-up and hair styling are not permitted Christian women.

2. We are likewise taught to consider much more important the spiritual character than the physical appearance

Peter made that point in the text we just read.

But, we have as well Proverbs 31:30: “Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.”

3. We have a large class of texts warning of the seductive power of sexual temptation – even elaborate descriptions of such temptation – such as those given in Prov. 5, 6, and 7. And special emphasis is placed on the especially egregious character of this sin. We have the father’s terrible warnings in Prov. 5-7 of the shame and the death that will overtake the young man who sins in this way and we have Paul in 1 Cor 6:18: “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body.”
4. We have illustrations of men undone by such temptations – Samson and, above all, David, but others as well. “Flee youthful lusts,” warns Paul, and we are shown why many times in the Bible.
5. We have the Bible’s own example of chaste and modest speech in regard to this entire area of life -- so unlike our modern world. (All things do not benefit by being brought into the light; photographic film, e.g.)
6. And, we have in catalog after catalog of sins that the godly do not commit and the sins that will be punished in hell, the various sexual sins. “Do you not know,” Paul says in 1 Cor. 6:9-11, “that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor...homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers...will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some

of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” And in Rev. 21:8 the “sexually immoral” are placed among the cowardly, the unbelieving, and the murderers, among others, who will be cast into the lake of fire at the end of the age.

No wonder if someone might have come away with the idea -- as many have through the ages -- that the Bible regarded sex and sensuality as a necessary evil, something to put up with as little as possible so that children might be born to the church. Chrysostom denied that Adam and Eve could or would have had sexual relations before the fall; Augustine allowed that sexual procreation was lawful, but he also thought that sexual passions were themselves sinful. Origen actually believed that, had sin not entered the world, the race would have been propagated in some other way than by sexual union. Gregory of Nyssa held that Adam and Eve had been created without sexual desire. The Reformers and, especially the Puritans realized that these were clearly mistaken ideas, but even they did not always go as far in the celebration of human sensuality and sexuality as the Bible does, in part, I think, because they continued to treat the Song of Songs as a book about the love of Christ for his church and not, as it actually is, a poem in praise of erotic love in marriage.

For the fact is, there is another pole on this continuum of truth concerning human sensuality taught in Holy Scripture. And, once again, statements are counterpoised to the ones above that seem, at first glance, to be in virtual contradiction, and never is any effort made to resolve the tension thus created.

1. I heard a Christian College professor recently say that he had come to be sensitized to the pressure our society puts on women to be attractive and had concluded that he should never compliment any of his female students by reason of her appearance. *But you would never learn that from the Bible. It is always complimenting women on their appearance!*
 - a. Rebekah: “was very beautiful” Gen. 24:16
 - b. Rachel: “was lovely in form and beautiful” 29:17
 - c. Esther: “was lovely in form and features” 2:7
 - d. Abigail, Bathsheba, Tamar, Vashti, Job’s daughters, among others are said to have been beautiful or lovely to look at.
 - e. Deut. 21:10: “When you go to war against your enemies and the Lord your God delivers them into your hands and you take captives, if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife.” The assumption is that the attraction is physical. You won’t have had a relationship with her, obviously, to grow enamored of her personality or sense of humor!

2. Then, there are texts that celebrate *the cultivation of beauty and appearance, just in the way that Paul and Peter might be supposed to have frowned upon*. As universally in human culture, this cultivation of beauty is almost always mentioned in reference to *feminine* appearance.
 - a. Cosmetics were used in ancient Israel (2 Sam. 14:2) and, so far as we can tell, with no stigma attached to their use. (Esther used them and the text seems not to reflect unfavorably on that fact at all.)
 - b. And we can be the more sure of that because of the very positive remarks about jewelry and

perfume that are scattered about the Bible.

1. Song of Songs 1:9-11; 12-1; 4:9-10, etc.
 2. Prov. 1:9
 3. Especially. Ezek. 16:9-14! Not to put too fine a point on it, the Lord dressed up Israel in the very way Paul and Peter *seem to* condemn!
3. Then there are a great many texts that celebrate the erotic attractiveness of men and women. A number of them are in *Proverbs*, which is, in Dr. Waltke's phrase, an "earthy" book. For, example, consider Prov. 5:19, where the Father proposes to his son an erotically fulfilling marriage as the true antidote to sexual temptation. Here we have breasts not for the purpose of suckling an infant, but for their sexual attractiveness to a man.

But, preeminently, we have the *Song of Songs*, the Bible's own celebration of erotic love and sexual attraction between a man and a woman.

- a. The *Song*, as we know now, is a collection of erotic love poems. This was known long ago, but has been confirmed many times over and in very definite ways by the comparison of the *Song* to the Ancient Near Eastern love poetry that has been dug up and translated over the past century and some. It's imagery, its language is typical of love poems from that time and place.
- b. You know, of course, that through the ages the church justified the place of the *Song* in the canon of Holy Scripture by treating it as an allegory. It was treated as an account, not really about the love of a man and a woman, but as that love as a picture of the love between Christ and the church. Very typical is this statement of Gregory the Great: "Kisses are named, and breasts, cheeks, thighs are named in this book. By these words the sacred discourse is not [made ridiculous]. We learn in the expression of this our own love, the ardor with which we should burn for the love of God." Gregory did think that if the *Song* was really about human erotic love there would be something ridiculous about *that* being in the Bible.
- c. But, of course, that is what the book *is* about! And it is not an allegory of the love of Christ for the church. There are many proofs of this, but the most important one is simply the fact that the love described in the *Song* is not *agape*, it is not love *in spite of*. It is, rather, *eros*, love *because of*. If we are to gain an understanding of Christ's love for the church from the *Song* we would have to conclude that the reason Christ loves us so much is because we are so lovable, so attractive, so desirable. And we know that is not right! And, as well, there is the age old problem of knowing what anything actually means in the *Song* if it is interpreted allegorically. My favorite example is 1:13 – "My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts." – which one church father took to be a reference to Christ between the Old and New Testaments! Really? How would one know?
- d. No, the *Song* is about the love of man and woman with a strong accent on the sexual.
 1. 1:2 Love and wine are brought together. The basis of the comparison is that both of them produce pleasant physical sensations. This is love with physical connotations, not love as a broader or more abstract idea. You have this juxtaposition of wine and love in the ANE love poems as well. One text from the *Cairo Love Songs* (No. 23;

- 1300-1100 B.C.) reads: “I embrace her, and her arms open wide, I am like a man in Punt [Punt was a town on the Somali coast known for its myrrh trees], like someone overwhelmed with drugs. I kiss her, her lips open, and I am drunk without beer.”
2. Or, consider 1:9. “I liken you, my darling, to a mare harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh.” Now what does that mean? Well, Egyptian chariots, as everyone knew in those days, were pulled by stallions not mares. The presence of a mare would sexually excite the stallions. Israel knew of a battle tactic in which a mare would be released among the chariot horses to divert their attention. The lover is here describing his beloved as a mare among stallions, as the focus of sexual attention and ardor. She arouses desire in him.
 3. Or, consider the descriptions of the man, of which there is one, and of the woman, of which there are three in the *Song*. They are all highly erotic descriptions of the human form. You have the woman in 4:1-7 (described from her head to her chest), the man in 5:10-16, the woman again in 6:4-9 (here her head only is described), and the woman once more in 7:1-9 (from her feet to her head). The sexual character of the description is beyond doubt. Look, for example, at 7:6-9. The female form he is describing produces great desire in him and great pleasure. Paul may have said, “Flee youthful lusts,” but here the man is giving full rein to his desires as they are provoked by his young fiancée’s body! Charm may be deceptive and beauty fleeting, but there is an awful lot of attention to physical beauty in the *Song*!
 4. Then, take note of the chaste explicitness of the description of sexual desire in 4:9-15. And take note of the imagery here. It is all sexual imagery (“spring” and “fountain” are both used in Prov. 5 of sexual love and are found in ANE love poetry; “garden” is a euphemism for the woman as an object of sexual desire or, even more explicitly, of the sexual parts of a woman’s body. ANE love poems contain these images. In one the king “plows his garden.” But, you will notice the chastity of all these images. While the adults are getting red in the face, the children think they are talking about horticulture! It is all metaphor, but, once understood, very explicit and powerful metaphor.) The aphrodisiacs in vv. 13-14 are also mentioned among the wares of the prostitute in Proverbs 7! The illicit lovers of the brothel don’t know anything about love making that the chaste lovers of the *Song* do not know! Now, in v. 12 we have virginity, anticipation. She is a *sealed* fountain, and a garden *locked up*.
 5. We come to sexual consummation in 4:16 and 5:1. Remember, the chapter divisions are not original to the text; in fact were added two thousand years later. This is the exact middle of the book and the author has emphasized it by placing it there: 111 lines of poetry before 4:16; 111 lines after 5:1. And reading it there can be no doubt about its meaning or the celebration contained in these expressions of sexual fulfillment. There is much, much more in the *Song* that is explicitly erotic that I will forbear to point out to you in this setting. But, when this book was read at Passover each year, the husbands and wives would nudge one another! But, you get the point, this erotic fixation on one another, this pleasure in physical love and desire, the hunger for sexual fulfillment, all of this too is in the Bible and emphasized in its pages. The delight in the physical form, the enhancing of beauty to increase the pleasure of the eyes and so on. It is all here just as unmistakably as Paul and Peter’s admonitions regarding modesty and chastity.

Now, the point of this dialectic, as with all of the dialectics we have considered, is clearly this: God does not summon us to be partially modest and spiritually minded and partially lusty and erotically fixated on our spouses. He calls us to be both! He calls us to be modest sexual enthusiasts! He warns us, on the one hand, against the pride that accompanies beauty. As Simone Weil put it in what I think to be a very profound observation, “A beautiful woman looking at her image in the mirror may very well believe the image is herself. An ugly woman knows it is not.” He warns us of the grave danger to our godliness, our salvation, our very lives in this world that sexual temptation poses. He absolutely forbids sexual activity outside of married love. It is a great worry that there are so many Christian young people nowadays who are ignoring or minimizing this part of God’s law and of the Bible’s teaching. I am on the board of Covenant College and we know and the administration knows that there are far too many young men and young women who are promiscuous. God will not be mocked. Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap. Beware all of you!

But, on the other hand, our Heavenly Father also wants us to enjoy his good gifts and has made sensuality and the practice of erotic love an important part of happy and healthy living. Chastity is abstinence from sex before one is married and the enthusiastic practice and enjoyment of it afterwards! Christian young people ought never to be given the impression that the Scripture simply forbids them these pleasures; only that they must wait in order to be able to enjoy them perfectly and safely.

You cannot perfectly synthesize these emphases. You must let each stand alone and give each its proper due. Life will be happy and holy if you do.