

## The Purpose of Sex

### *Toward a Theological Understanding of Human Sexuality*

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#### The Nature of Human Sexuality

##### What Is Sexuality?

... [S]exuality is a dimension of our existence as embodied persons. There are only two ways to be human—as male or as female. At its core, this embodied existence includes a fundamental incompleteness, one which is symbolized by biological sex and is based in our fundamental sexuality. Through sexuality we give expression both to our existence as embodied creatures and to our basic incompleteness as embodied persons. In this way, our sexuality calls us to move toward completeness. It forms the dynamic that lies at the basis of the uniquely human drive toward bonding. Sexuality forms the foundation for the drive which moves male and female to come together to form a unity of persons in marriage. But this yearning for completeness also forms the basis of the interpersonal and religious dimensions of existence.

Sexuality, then, both links and separates humankind and the rest of the life order. Although sex and even sexually derived bonding are evident in the animal world, in humans sexuality offers a potential for forming personal unity that goes beyond that found among animals. Because it is less strictly oriented to procreation, it fosters the type of unity of persons spoken of as love. This potential for the sharing of love, which has its basis in sexuality, gives to humankind a special status in creation: we are called to be the image of God.

#### Sexuality and Our Essential Being

*Sexuality* denotes more than the physical distinctions that allow for the differentiation between male and female in reproductive roles, for it encompasses all the various aspects of the human person that are related to existence as male or female. This understanding suggests that sexuality is so all pervasive of the human person that it must be considered an essential dimension of what it means to be human. How we think, how we view the world, and how others view us are all affected by our sexuality. . . .

Christian theology, specifically the doctrines of creation and resurrection, support[s] the thesis of the essential nature of human sexuality. God created us embodied beings, and in the resurrection we will be recreated in like fashion. Together the two doctrines confirm a basic anthropology that includes our sexuality.

##### *The Doctrine of Creation*

In contrast to that of the Greek philosophical tradition, the Hebrew understanding of creation resulted in a basically nondualistic anthropology. Greek anthropology tended to speak of distinct substantial entities, generally termed body and soul. The Hebrews, however, viewed the human person as a unitary, embodied being. The most succinct statement of the forming of humankind is found in the opening chapters of Genesis.

In the first creation story, God is presented as simply making humankind, just as he had made the other aspects of the universe, including other living things. There is no indication that humans are to be viewed apart from the material world. They are created in the divine image, but their special creation entails no fundamental dualism in humans that gives higher status to one part of the person, the soul, which is non-material in substance, in contrast to the material body, so that the soul constitutes the “real” person. In fact, the only “dualism” in the text is the male/female distinction.

The second narrative offers more detail. God’s creation of the man occurs in two steps. He forms him from the dust of the ground (material) and then breathes life into him. But even this is not to be interpreted as meaning that God constituted the man as an ontological dualism. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the fact that he is an animated being, animated by the life principle from God, just as the animals, which are likewise spoken of as “soul.” In this narrative, as in the first, the important distinction that arises from creation is the dual aspect of the first human pair as male and female.

From the perspective of the Genesis stories, then, humans are the creation of God in their entire being. God created animate material creatures, each of whom comprises a unity of being. In the Genesis narrative the human person is the whole person, the embodied person.

### *The Doctrine of Resurrection*

The basic non-dualist anthropology of the Old Testament forms a context for, and is reaffirmed in, the doctrine of resurrection. In fact, the resurrection offers the ultimate critique of all dualist anthropologies, for it declares that the body is essential to human personhood. Rather than the body being shed in order for the person to enter eternity, as taught by the Greek tradition, the human person enters eternity as an animated body, as an embodied person transformed in one's entire being through the resurrection. God's creation of humankind as animated material beings is not a temporary act. Instead, the creation of the first human as a synthesis of the material from the earth and the animating principle, evidence in Genesis, actually belongs to the human destiny as God's creation. God's intent is that humans exist as embodied persons.

This intent is confirmed by the resurrection of Jesus. The main purpose of the post-resurrection stories of the Gospels as well as the Pauline appeal to the witnesses of the appearances is to indicate that the Risen Lord was recognized as none other but Jesus of Nazareth, the one who had been crucified. He had passed through the event of transformation into eternal life; yet, Jesus remained an embodied reality. His disciples touched him, ate and conversed with him, and knew who he was. With the exception of the case of the Emmaus road disciples, he is presented as recognizable by sight to those who had known him. This would seem to suggest that the basic masculine features of Jesus of Nazareth were preserved through the transformation experience of the resurrection. The Risen Lord had remained the recognizable Jesus.

### *Implications for Human Sexuality*

The anthropology inherent in the Hebrew-Christian doctrines of creation and resurrection indicates that sexuality is a constitutive part of the human reality as an embodied existence. With a view toward creation Genesis 1:27 declares, "God made them male and female." There is simply no other way to be a created human being except as an embodied person, and embodiment means existence as male or female. This close relationship between embodied existence and being male or female is in keeping with the discovery of modern psychology that identity formation is closely connected with our sexuality. We see ourselves as male or female, and this fundamental sexuality becomes the primary and deepest aspect of our existence in the quest to determine who we are.

The doctrine of the resurrection indicates that the foundational role played by sexuality in determining identity is not destroyed in eternity. Resurrection means that our entire person, including our body, passes through transformation. But because existence as an embodied person means existence as male or female, our sexuality must participate in the event of resur-

rection as well, and by necessity, for it is a part of the total person who undergoes transformation.

### *Embodiment in Christian Theology and in Secularism*

The emphasis of biblical anthropology on the human person as an embodied and therefore a sexual being offers a corrective to the secular outlook widespread in Western culture today. The biblical doctrines of creation and resurrection imply that our sexuality is basic to our sense of self and foundational to our understanding of who we are as God's creatures. God intends that we be embodied beings who are either male or female. Further, because our sexuality is the product of God's intention, it constitutes an essential aspect of the way we stand before God. Humans are responsible before God to be stewards of all they are, a stewardship that extends to the sexual dimension as well, for our existence as male or female is essential to our being. The Christian, therefore, takes the Pauline admonition seriously, "Do you not know that your body is a temple 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 honour God with your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Secular anthropology, in contrast, tends to view sexuality largely as an activity, not as a constitutive aspect of our being. Sexual expression becomes thereby an activity in which the self engages. When viewed in this manner, sexuality is more readily separated from the self. The secularist differentiates between "Who I am" and "What I do," seeing "What I do" as external to "Who I am."

This attitude toward human sexuality in general and the sex act in particular is readily linked with the modern understanding of the basic nature of the human person. In contrast to the more socially oriented viewpoint characteristic of much of Christian tradition, there has been a growing tendency in the modern era toward a fully individualistic understanding of human nature. The human person, the modern view maintains, is an independent self, whose essence is to make choices in freedom. The self is fundamentally a free decision maker. The sex act, in turn, is viewed as one vehicle for the expression of the freely choosing self, a means whereby the individual as a free agent of action actualizes personal freedom. In keeping with this understanding the code words of the modern sexual revolution include "self-expression" and "self-actualization."

The Christian viewpoint differs radically from the modern secular alternative. Because of our view of the human person as a unified being, we simply cannot follow those who maintain that the body can be indulged without affecting the essential person. Because we are created as embodied persons, we cannot relegate the sexual dimension of our existence to the realm of the non-significant, as having no bearing on our relation to God. We refuse to

view our fundamental identity as human beings in terms of freedom. The human person is not primarily the freely choosing self, as if our existence as male or female were external to our essential nature. Because of its mistaken understanding of sexuality, therefore, the sexual revolution is in the final analysis an illusion.

## The Social Purpose of Our Creation as Sexual Beings

Human beings are sexual creatures. The individual dimension of our fundamental sexuality is obvious. But equally important is the corporate dimension of human sexuality. We are not sexual beings in isolation from each other. Rather, our individual sexual nature is closely linked to our situation as social beings. Sexuality is significant for community. The basic purpose of our existence as sexual creatures is related to the dynamic of bonding, in that sexuality forms the fundamental drive that leads to this human phenomenon. The close relationship between bonding and sexuality is borne out by the biblical documents.

### The Old Testament: The Family Bond

Human sexuality and the drive toward bonding play an important role in the Old Testament. Perhaps the most powerful statement of the relationship between the two is presented in the story of the creation of the woman in Genesis 2. According to the narrative, the creative act that brought the first woman into existence was the outworking of the divine intent, "I will make a helper suitable for him," called forth by the divine observation of the situation of the first man, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). Although the man enjoyed a relationship with the animals, none was an appropriate bonding partner for him: "But for Adam no suitable helper was found" (v. 20). The Hebrew term *helper* also refers to one who saves or delivers and is used elsewhere with reference to God in relationship to Israel (Deut. 33:7; Ps. 33:20; 115:9). God's desire, then, was to create another who would deliver Adam from his solitude by being a suitable bonding partner for him, not merely sexually, but in all dimensions of existence. In contrast to his response to the animals, Adam immediately senses a bond with the female, bursting forth in joyous declaration: She is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."

The narrator concludes the episode with the application of the story to the phenomenon of male-female bonding: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (v. 24). The phrase moves beyond procreative unity to encompass the entire bond enjoyed in marriage. Hence, the narrator's comment presents the awareness of a fundamental personal incompleteness ("for this cause") as the dynamic lying behind the phenomenon of the two actions, "leaving and

cleaving." This awareness, in other words, results in the drive for the bonding expressed in the relationship of husband and wife.

The Old Testament, however, finds a further outworking of the relationship between sexuality and bonding. What transpires through the union of male and female, although completed in marriage, does not end with husband and wife as an isolated union. Rather, this intimate bond becomes a first step toward the establishment of the broader human community.

The Genesis narrative carries significant implications. Because we are sexual beings, as isolated individuals we are fundamentally incomplete. Our sexuality not only participates in our incompleteness, it also allows us to sense this incompleteness, and incompleteness that in turn moves us to seek community through bonding. For many, the primary place of community becomes marriage and the family. But even in the case of unmarried persons, the drive to community, while not specifically oriented toward genital expression, is nevertheless based in the awareness of the incompleteness of the human individual apart from community.

Our sexually based sense of incompleteness also forms the dynamic lying behind the search for truth, a search which ultimately becomes the search for God. We long to have our incompleteness fulfilled, and this longing gives rise to the religious dimension of life. The message of the Bible, beginning already in the book of Genesis, claims that in the final analysis the source of this completeness is found in the community that focuses on fellowship with the Creator.

The drive for completion in fellowship is not surprising, because it is in keeping with the theological assertion that we are created in God's image. Just as God is the community of the trinitarian persons, so also God has created us for the sake of community, to find completion in fellowship with each other and together with our Maker.

### The New Testament: The Bonded Community

In the New Testament era, an important change occurs. Now the primary community is no longer presented as the physical family, entrance to which occurs through natural familial heritage. Rather, the central community is the church. More important than physical ancestry (who one's parents are) is one's spiritual ancestry (who one's heavenly Father is). The highest loyalty is now directed to Jesus, and the primary bond is that which binds the disciple to him and thereby to the community of disciples.

This change in outlook was inaugurated by Jesus himself. It is embodied in his demanding challenge to discipleship, summarized in his admonition, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37). At the same time he promises to the loyal disciple a larger, spiritual family to compensate for the loss entailed in leaving one's natural

family for the sake of discipleship: "I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age . . . and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:29–30). But what Jesus demands of his followers, he fulfils himself. He too forsook family for the sake of the cause of the kingdom of God, counting as his true family "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt. 12:50).

Jesus' view was carried over into the early church. The Jerusalem believers, for example, looked to the community of discipleship as their primary focus of fellowship and loyalty. They were bonded to each other, and as an expression of this, they held even their material possessions in common (Acts 4:32–35).

The Genesis narrative, then, indicates that God created us as sexual beings. Our sexuality has a purpose, for it is a primary force that places in us the drive toward bonding. This drive leads to the development of social communities, beginning with marriage, family, tribe, and finally larger societies. For the Christian, however, this drive is fulfilled ultimately only through fellowship as part of the society of disciples who enjoy fellowship with God through the corporate community of believers in Christ. . . .

## Conclusion

What then is the purpose of sex? God created us as sexual beings, in order to bring us to one another and to himself. God's overarching design is that we reflect the divine image by being moulded by his Spirit into the community of redeemed humanity sharing in fellowship with the Creator. To this end, our sexuality depicts our fundamental incompleteness as solitary human beings and forms the dynamic that causes us to come out from ourselves in order to become whole persons through relationship with each other and ultimately with God. As Augustine noted so profoundly, "Our heart is restless until it finds rest in thee." This restlessness, related as it is to our fundamental sexuality, points forward to the consummation of God's activity in the eschatological community of his eternal kingdom. It is in view of the biblical vision of this consummation, the vision of the day when God's dwelling will be with us, that all Christian ethics, including the Christian sex ethic, and therefore all Christian ministry must be oriented.

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## For Further Reflection

### Case Studies

*Pornographic videos.* Hannah and Charles have been married for fourteen years and are active in their church, but they are experiencing problems in their sex life together. Charles says he is bored and has difficulty getting sexually excited without some help. He wants Hannah to watch pornographic videos with him before having sex. Hannah did this a few times, but feels that it is wrong. Charles says he selects only "mild" videos and that if Hannah does not go along with his wishes, he will be unfulfilled and in danger of yielding to temptation at work. Should Hannah cooperate? If not, what might she do to help Charles? What fundamental principle or principles regarding sex in marriage is Charles failing to grasp?

*Heavy petting.* Jeff and Cynthia are college juniors and are very much in love. They are planning to become engaged soon and to be married the summer after graduation. Each is a Christian and feels sure that "this is the one for me." When together, however, they are finding it increasingly difficult to control their sexual desires. Recently they started "helping" each other to orgasm by hand. After all, they say, they are still saving the best for marriage. To them, their "heavy petting" is really a way of relieving sexual pressure and thus preventing them from going "all the way." What are the moral issues involved in Jeff and Cynthia's case? Is their behavior appropriate for Christians? What principles inform your view?

### Glossary

**Adultery:** Voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than his or her marriage partner; also includes voluntary thoughts of such activities.