

What we Believe: Human Sexuality

A few weeks back you endured an academic lecture on world views and most of you survived it. I said at the time that what forms your world view is extremely important because it influences the way you approach everything in life. If you believe that we humans are evolved machines, that there was no purpose for our existence because there was no purposeful Creator who made it happen, then there is no absolute basis for any value system except what you choose for yourself.

Then, a couple of weeks ago, we skimmed over some basic beliefs, just a little sample, of the beliefs of a few of the world's largest faith groups. We saw how different the world views are between eastern religions and those of the west. The world view of the eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism is that life is a wheel. You go around and around and around, again and again, until you can escape the cycle of death and rebirth and merge with the One, thereby escaping the suffering and limitation of living in a body. This view tends to downplay a moral code or demonstrating compassion towards others. You may not kill things, but you don't have to treat them with love - your main purpose is to get out of here.

So, world views are hugely important. What you think about life, its origins, its purpose and what makes it valuable, goes a long way in determining how you will act and what kind of impact you will have on those around you. This is absolutely true when it comes to the issue of human sexuality. If you believe that we are descended from other species and that no supernatural 'guiding hand' was involved in that process, then you would have difficulty establishing a moral code around sexual behavior. The community might establish some rules in order to prevent sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancies, but there would be little chance that you would do that on your own. It's much more likely that you would use people for your own pleasure and that you would find a way to justify your selfish behavior in doing so. And, in the modern world, you would find a way to justify the abortions and the treatment of S.T.D.'s and the other social costs that come from sexual promiscuity - and we have.

It was December of 1967 when the young justice minister in Lester Pearson's cabinet, Pierre Trudeau, introduced his Omnibus Bill in the House of Commons. In a media scrum after the session, he quoted a phrase coined by The Globe and Mail's Martin O'Malley, "There's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation." And then he went on to say, "What's done in private between adults doesn't concern the Criminal Code." And he was right. Even though the "Fathers of Confederation" were often acting on Christian principles they had no intention of forming a Christian nation in the sense that we would be governed by the statutes of the Bible. Canada's Criminal Code at the time declared that homosexual acts were a criminal offense and Trudeau changed that. In that omnibus bill, he also opened the door for legal abortions - if a committee of three doctors could agree that a woman's pregnancy would endanger her mental, emotional or physical well-being. The sixties was known as the decade of the sexual revolution - and the revolution has continued throughout the past 50 years since Trudeau's bill was introduced. In a world without an authoritative standard - without any absolutes in

relation to morality - there are almost unlimited possibilities for human action and almost unlimited justifications as to why that action should be accepted by the rest of society. The only strong restrictive force is what happens to be the law of the land at the time. The other restrictive force is the conscience of the individual, a conscience which may or may not be influenced by the principles of Scripture.

What does the Bible say about the issues around sexual behavior and how should those be applied in our day?

At the very beginning, as described in the creation accounts of Genesis, God created man and woman and, in chapter 1, told them to be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. (1:28) In the second account of creation, the story told in chapter 2, greater focus is given to the creation of man and woman. After the man had given names to the animals we are told that there wasn't any suitable or appropriate partner found for Adam and so the LORD God put Adam in a deep sleep, took out one of his ribs and, from that rib He fashioned a woman and then introduced her to Adam. He was thrilled! He said:

*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh
She shall be called 'woman' because she was taken out of man.*

And then the text goes on to say:

*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,
and they will become one flesh. (Genesis 2:23,24)*

So this is the normal pattern for intimate human relationships - a man and a woman separate from their homes of origin, and commit themselves to a one-flesh and exclusive union with each other.

Now, it wasn't an exclusive union in the early history of Israel. Abraham had a child by his servant before he had one by his wife and his grandson Jacob had 12 sons from four different women. The early kings of Israel had many wives - Saul, David, Solomon - so why do we hold to the idea that this one-flesh union between one man and one woman is God's pattern?

In the first place, having sexual relations with someone other than one's first wife was never suggested by God, but was always a human idea. It was Sarah's idea for Abraham to have a son by her maid, Hagar, and it was Laban's trickery that incited Jacob to marry the two sisters, Leah and Rachel. It was Rachel and Leah's idea to offer their maids to Jacob.

In the second place, none of those situations brought blessing. Hagar's child became the father of the enemies of Israel, the Ishmaelites, who made war with Israel for generations. Islam teaches that Ishmael was the ancestor of Muhammad and the Muslim world continues to be at war with Israel to this day. Esau's wives brought strife into the household of Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob's wives had an ongoing fight for his attention - and to bear him children; Gideon's many wives led to a huge family slaughter

where one of his sons, Abimelech, kills his seventy brothers so he can be king - and then the people rise up and kill him.

What about King David, who we remember as a man after God's own heart. Does being a man after God's heart mean that everything he did was blessed by God? No, his family life was a mess. One of his sons, Amnon, raped David's daughter, Tamar, and was killed by Absalom, another of David's sons, who then managed to turn the hearts of the people against David and almost succeeded in replacing David permanently as Israel's king. God allowed many things to be done that were not His will, including polygamy, including divorce, but they did not bring blessing. Even now, when I talk to people about going through a divorce, they never describe it as a wonderful, fulfilling experience. It is always difficult, always painful, and the pain doesn't end when the papers are signed. And having more than one marriage partner at the same time is another of those human acts that doesn't bring God's blessing.

Where do we see from Scripture that one marriage partner for life was God's intention? The first place is in the text we've already looked at - Genesis 2:24 - "for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh."

Another strong indication comes from the prophet Malachi - I'll read a few verses to give the context:

Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because He no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are His. And why one? Because He was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. (Mal. 2:13-15)

This is directed specifically at men who are unfaithful to their wives, who engage in extra-marital affairs, which the prophet calls, 'breaking faith'. Clearly the godly alternative, the one that the LORD expects, is faithfulness to the wife, singular, that each man married when he was still young.

New Testament passages that deal with this include Jesus' discussion with the Pharisees in Mark 10:

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

"What did Moses command you?" He replied.

They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied. "But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and

the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one.”
(Mark 10:2-8)

Whenever Scripture speaks of God’s intention, it talks about one man and one woman in faithful commitment to each other. Whenever we read about multiple wives or divorce or other departures from God’s plan, it’s always seen as a human decision or as a concession to human weakness.

Another verse that bears on this is 1 Corinthians 6:16:

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.”

Notice what that passage is saying - sexual intercourse is compared to marriage. The same verse from Genesis 2 that Jesus quoted in relation to marriage, Paul now quotes in relation to sexual intercourse: the man who has sex with a prostitute is said to be “one flesh” with her. And that was actually the Old Testament pattern, that the act of intercourse made a bond between a man and a woman. You can read that in the story of Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 24, in the relationship between Boaz and Ruth in Ruth 4, and in other examples of what we now refer to as consummating a marriage.

Now, back to 1 Corinthians 6 and let’s read the passage:

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 he who unites himself with the Lord is one with Him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. 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 honor God with your body. (1 Cor. 6:15-20)

What is sexual immorality? Sexual intimacy with someone to whom you are not married. Pre-marital, extra-marital - both are considered outside the bounds of God’s purpose and intention. Here’s how it’s stated in the Trinity Western University Community Covenant, the covenant that has caused such opposition from the secular world, but which is faithful to the Scriptures:

The TWU community covenant involves a commitment on the part of all members to embody attitudes and to practice actions identified in the Bible as virtues, and to avoid those portrayed as destructive. Members of the TWU community, therefore, commit themselves to: (and it lists things like the virtues of love, joy, peace, etc., honesty, encouragement, treating people with respect, being responsible, and then) observe modesty, purity and appropriate intimacy in all relationships, reserve sexual expressions of intimacy for marriage, and within marriage take every reasonable step to resolve conflict and avoid divorce.

The next section contains a clause defining marriage:

Community members voluntarily abstain from the following actions (lists several including slander, stealing, harassment, and then this): sexual intimacy that violates the sacredness of marriage between a man and a woman.

This is completely in line with the Scriptures we've just read.

This is followed by a section called "Areas for Careful Discernment and Sensitivity" and includes a section on "Healthy Sexuality".

People face significant challenges in practicing biblical sexual health within a highly sexualized culture. A biblical view of sexuality holds that a person's decisions regarding his or her body are physically, spiritually and emotionally inseparable. Such decisions affect a person's ability to live out God's intention for wholeness in relationship to God, to one's (future) spouse, to others in the community and to oneself. Further, according to the Bible, sexual intimacy is reserved for marriage between one man and one woman, and within that marriage bond it is God's intention that it be enjoyed as a means for marital intimacy and procreation. Honoring and upholding these principles, members of the TWU community strive for purity of thought and relationship, respectful modesty, personal responsibility for actions taken, and avoidance of contexts where temptation to compromise would be particularly strong.

That's a carefully-worded summary of biblical teaching on sexuality between men and women, and it has meant that Trinity has had to spend millions of dollars in legal fees in order to gain permission to launch a school for nursing and one for teachers - and they are now engaged in a legal battle to open a law school. All of this has to do with the definition of marriage as being between a man and a woman.

So, what about the gay-lesbian-bi-trans people? What does the Bible have to say about the way they identify themselves and about their sexual practices? One thing the Bible doesn't do, which may be a surprise to some, is to condemn the homosexual person. But it does say that the homosexual act is wrong, that the desire comes out of human self-deception and that it falls under God's judgment, just as sex between men and women who are not married to each other falls under God's judgment.

In March I heard Christopher Yuan speak about his journey from being a gay man, heavily involved in drugs and later sentenced to six years in prison for trafficking methamphetamine. He writes very openly about his addiction, not only to drugs but to sex, and about his conversion to Christian faith. One of the chapters in his book Out of a Far Country is entitled "Holy Sexuality" where he describes both the idolatry of drugs and sex and the new attitudes he gained during his prison time:

To live without sex - especially in light of my past life - was difficult to even think about. In the past I always figured that just as I needed food and water, I needed sex. God wouldn't anymore ask me to give up sex than he would ask me to give up on eating or sleeping - or so I thought. But the reality was that for the past two years, I hadn't been as sexually active as I had been outside of prison. I had gone days, weeks, and even months without sex - and survived! I hadn't

developed any irreversible side effects. It wasn't cruel and unusual punishment. Abstinence was not an unreasonable or impossible thing. And as I read through the Bible, I realized there were people who lived their whole lives without sex - like Jesus - yet He was complete and whole.

Christopher came to realize that he didn't have an answer to the question, "Who am I apart from my sexuality?" And he realized that that wasn't right. Ultimately he found that, in Christ, his identity was as a child of God, and that God's call was to holiness.

You can imagine how popular that message is in today's culture, where sex is one of the leading idols of our time. But there are some important factors that are not very often talked about that need to be part of understanding human sexuality.

One is the issue of who decides what gender you are and how you are to act on it. Does God decide, or do we decide? Can we choose to be male or female on the basis of certain feelings we have? And if we choose, then are we making an idol of those feelings? We feel like we should be accepting of whatever people choose - and to a degree we are - but, at the same time, we are recognizing that choosing to place anything ahead of God is idolatry and we can't affirm that.

The second issue is something hidden from any media attention, the pain that this subgroup of our society lives with on a daily basis. Despite the name "gay", this is a group that leads our culture in drug addiction, alcohol abuse, self-harm and suicide. Many people within this community struggle with serious psychological issues and don't find life that easy or joyful.

The third issue is that gender identity issues have become incredibly politicized in the past few years. We now have a situation where, according to what I've been reading this week, school teachers in British Columbia will soon be instructed not to refer to "boys and girls" and not to refer to a child's parents as "mum or dad". Much of what you read and hear is not being done out of compassion for people who are struggling with identity or depression, but as a political tool of raw power - and its purpose is destructive for all of us.

The fourth issue is simply that people who are confused about gender identity and sexual practices often feel rejected and condemned by the Christian church. That is not our role - God loves the whole world, and even when we differ in our views, we still need to show love.