

Sex and the Single Life

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What is it that Christians ought to say and do about the issue of sexual relations between single people? This question currently presses most painfully upon the life of the churches. The real issue is not whether the churches ought to adopt a new sexual ethic, but whether the new sexual ethic they are in fact in the process of adopting is one that is “worthy of (their) calling.” Let me explain.

In 1982, *Newsweek* magazine published the results of a poll carried out by two scholars at Johns Hopkins University. It showed that one out of every five young women who reach the age of fifteen admitted to having had sexual intercourse. By the time these young women reach sixteen the figure rises to one in three, and by the time they are seventeen the number is one of every two. If we add to this the sexual activity of young men of the same age, of gay men and lesbian women at a later stage of life, and that of unmarried and divorced heterosexual couples, it becomes clear that the sexual practice of people in our society is quite different from that held to be normative by the traditional teaching of the churches.

The notable change in behavior that has taken place over the past thirty years would not be of such great significance if it were not accompanied as well by a change in the way people think about sexual relations. There have, after all, been many periods and places where sexual practice has been quite loose. There have as well been periods and places where it has been quite strictly controlled. Changes in behavior are not new, but the way in which we as a society are now beginning to think about that behavior is quite new.

James Nelson’s very popular book, *Embodiment*, provides an exemplary instance of revisionist Christian thinking on this subject, and it does so for two reasons. The first and most obvious is that what he has to say captures so well the essence of the revisionist argument, and second it makes clear that the argument of the revisionists is the same whether they are speaking of heterosexual or homosexual relations. This second point is important because the two issues are usually treated separately—as if what one argued about relations between members of the same sex was quite different from what one might argue about relations between people of different sexes. Though these two cases may be distinct, the issues in both are not all that different. In large measure, they engage the same points, and thus it is a mistake in moral reasoning to address them as if they were utterly discrete issues.

The line of argument Nelson himself follows makes this very point and shows it to be a line that is quite explicit in the arguments being made by the new reformers. What he has to say about sexual relations between single people, be they heterosexual or homosexual, is of a piece with, and in the end but an extension of, what he says about marital relations themselves. The basic point to be made about all forms of sexual relation is that they are supposed to be a means for the “expression of love” and so also for the establishment and maintenance of “communion.” They are, therefore, appropriate only when a certain degree of “loving commitment” is present. When this degree of love and commitment is present, they are acceptable. It is simply the case that sexual relations are “natural” to “embodied” life, and so may be (and indeed usually are) necessary for the wholeness and fulfillment of individuals no matter what their marital status, sexual orientation, or gender identification may be.

The moral acceptability of these relations, then, is seen to depend not on an undertaking the terms of which are set by Divine providence but on the motivations and intentions of moral agents, and on the nature and consequences of

their acts. The acceptable motive for a sexual relationship is love; the acceptable intention is that “each genital act should aim at human fulfillment and wholeness.” “Fulfillment” and “wholeness” in turn are said to involve emotional sustenance, healing, and, most of all, growth for the parties involved. As can easily be anticipated, in this scheme of things the sexual act itself is to be judged not on the basis of goods that are internally related to the act itself (unity and procreation), but on the basis of whether or not it is “loveless.” A loveless act is one that is “coercive, debasing to others’ sensitivities, utterly impersonal, [or] obsessed solely by physical gratification.”

Nelson’s point is easily grasped, but it is easy to miss its staggering implication, namely, that there is, properly speaking, no special ethic for sexual relations. Sexual acts are to be judged in the same way all other acts are to be judged: on the basis of whether they promote flourishing and avoid harm and coercion. Sexual acts, like all others, have no particular goods or ends that are proper to them, and for this reason, like all acts, are to be assessed only on the basis of intention on the one hand and results on the other. There is, as Nelson says, no act that is “inherently right or wrong.”

Nevertheless, precisely because moral acts are relative in this way, in all sexual relations certain promises are necessary if the parties involved are not to harm one another, affront one another’s dignity, or illegitimately rob one another of their liberty. Thus Nelson insists, as do most of the new reformers, that in all sexual relations there ought to be present “commitment,” “openness” (or “vulnerability”), and “care.”

Now these universally mandated promises are to be not made in relation to the particular undertakings that might arise out of individual needs and desires. Neither are they mandated by the intrinsic nature of the acts themselves nor by the set nature of the undertakings of which those acts may rightly be a part. They are mandated simply to promote “respect for persons” and so to insure that their rights are not trampled upon. These promises do not derive from undertakings or from a moral character intrinsic to human acts. They derive instead from the need to protect the rights of individuals to choose their undertakings and so contract by means of promises for particular goods in the sexual market place.

In making this argument, Nelson speaks with the voice of our culture, and in so doing gives expression to the views of a significant number of Christians as well. It is clear that what he says applies to marital relations, adulterous relations, and to relations between single people both of the same and of opposite sex. There is no special line of reasoning needed for any of these forms of relationship because each is but another form of expressing love with a view to the establishment and maintenance of communion and for the promotion of growth.

The objections to this position are well known. It is, say many, quite contrary to the plain sense of Scripture. Critics further insist that terms like “commitment,” “vulnerability,” and “care” as used by the new reformers are, when compared to the vows demanded in the marriage rite, both extraordinarily limited in their content and vague in respect to the matter of duration. This limitation of both the extent and duration of the bond that ought to link people in a sexual relation has the effect of making such relations increasingly unstable and at the same time of trimming the virtues required of the agents involved in them.

Critics point out further that the new reformers must make a division in principle between the sexual and marital goods of unity and procreation and thereby make licit forms of “baby making” that have, in principle, no connection with “lovemaking.” The point is also made that if the arguments of the new reformers are applied, as usually they are, both to heterosexuals and homosexuals, they effectively erase the moral significance (for sexual relations) of the sexual and gender-related differences between men and women.

In response, proponents of Nelson’s position charge that the understanding of the Bible held by defenders of the

“traditional ethic” gives undue authority to specific texts. These are after all relative to time and circumstance and are subject to judgment on the basis of whether or not they serve the purposes of love. Advocates claim further that the “traditional ethic” has plunged people into precipitous and disastrous marriages. They note that the traditional ethic takes no account of the vastly extended period that now exists between the onset of puberty and the age when marriage is possible and appropriate. They remind their readers also of the fact that there are now an extremely large number of permanently single people and that, if they are homosexual, marriage is out of the question for them altogether. They go on to assert that these people are nonetheless sexual beings with needs and desires that must not be ignored if they are to have healthy and full lives. They point out that sexual relationships are “natural” to human beings, are part of the world created by God, are good, and that no one ought to be denied such a relation simply on the basis of marital status or sexual orientation.

The above arguments and counterarguments are well known. It is clear, however, that the parties to this debate in large measure simply talk past each other. Neither engages the point the other is trying to make. One reason for this failure to engage in genuine debate is that the parties to the disagreement have very different views both of moral agency and the nature of the moral life. This difference is an extremely important one to note for the simple reason that the ideas of the new reformers enjoy an increasing appeal—their notions about moral agency and the nature of the moral life cohering so well with the views about these matters that now are characteristic of American culture.

This coherence can be seen in the place of honor now given two words that serve to sum up both moral agency and the moral life. The words are “person” and “self,” and the adequacy of the position of the new reformers hinges largely upon the adequacy of these two words (as now used) to account for the nature of the moral life and the nature of moral agency. Person and self are the words that carry our present-day moral universe, and it is sad to note that the more traditional arguments about sexual relations have failed to take their meaning and power into account. As a result, the traditional views still officially held by the churches seem to many people strangely out of place. The same cannot be said of the new reformers. They trade upon the current power and meaning of these words, and thus their arguments present themselves with enormous force.

Force of presentation and strength of appeal do not, however, imply anything about adequacy. Here, the focus will be not on “persons” and their “rights” but on “selves” and the various attendant notions that give this conception its resonance and power. It is really the notion of the self that provides the greatest support for the view of promises and undertakings we have been tracking. It lies at the heart of revisionist arguments about sex, and these cannot be assessed apart from an analysis of the significance and adequacy of “the self” as a moral notion.

What, in a moral sense, do we convey when we refer to people as “selves”? Charles Taylor has pointed out that there are three assumptions that serve to give the self its moral definition. The first is that the self does not define people by social status and role but by inwardness, by a subjectivity that gives each moral agent depths. These depths make each self an “individual.” The second is that the self’s proper sphere of activity is “everyday life” rather than, let us say, the mythical landscape of heroes or the heavenly one of saints. The third is that each self has abilities and that the point of everyday life is to discover those abilities and put them into operation. In this way the self grows, discovers its depths, and finds the satisfactions everyday life is supposed to yield.

Along with these notions of self come three moral ideas that direct and limit the self’s activities. The first is benevolence. Each self ought to act in a generous fashion toward all other selves so that each self can find the conditions necessary for its growth and development. The second is justice understood first of all as the guarantee of rights. Each self has dignity and as such should be accorded rights that protect that dignity and allow the self to pursue its good without undue impediment. The third moral idea is that suffering can be and ought to be eliminated from daily

life. Indeed, the elimination of suffering, in a way that would strike people of previous ages as wildly utopian, has become a major social imperative. In the moral world inhabited by “selves,” suffering is in no way seen as either an inevitable or as a useful part of life.

Even this brief summary of Taylor’s account of the self ought to make clear the “fit” between contemporary notions of moral agency and the views of the new Christian reformers. If we further assume that “sexuality” in some way defines the inner depths of the self, and if “sexuality” is thought to stamp the powers and abilities the self is to discover, develop, and exercise in the course of daily life, then, all other things being equal, it makes sense to say that sexual relations ought not to be tied to anything like set undertakings. To speak of sexual undertakings in the way implied by the traditional marriage rites of the churches is to deny people access to a basic human good from the start and for reasons that are difficult if not impossible for modern people to grasp.

Indeed, the traditional teachings of the churches seem neither benevolent nor just, and are most certainly believed to cause suffering. Given the present social climate, those not involved in a sexual relation are bound to feel a keen sense of insufficiency (and perhaps exclusion). Lacking such a relation, people are apt to feel that their lives are lacking a basic good, and it therefore makes no sense to most of them to say that, because they are not married, cannot marry, or ought not to marry, that they ought also to abstain from sexual relations.

Assumptions like these about “sexuality” are just those that Michel Foucault says accompany modern ideas about the “self.” In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault says that “sexuality” now serves the same purpose as did the word “soul” in the Middle Ages. At that time, “soul” provided its users with a way to unite the various aspects of human identity and, in so doing, gave it significance. It is now the function of the word “sexuality” to do the same thing. Thus “sexuality,” “self,” and “identity” are closely linked by present usage—sometimes to the point that the notions meld one with another. Denial of one’s “sexuality” is akin to denial of “oneself” and so also one’s basic “identity.” It is, therefore, easy to understand why more and more people believe that it is wrong to deny a sexual relation to oneself or to anyone else simply on the basis of marital status, sexual orientation, or gender identification. To do so is tantamount to denial of one’s sexuality and so oneself. A denial of the self’s basic needs is in turn both harmful and an infringement of each persons right to pursue a full and whole life.

The close relation that exists between the notions of “sexuality,” “self,” “identity,” “fulfillment,” and “right” makes clear the links between the ideas that underlie the revisionist proposals of the new reformers and those upon which modern political society is founded. In both the bedroom and the public square, the purpose of social relations is the pursuit of private life plans and personal well-being. This is the modern agenda and it is limited only by the principles of no harm and no coercion. It appears that the ideas about “self,” “promises,” and “undertakings” that have since the seventeenth century become increasingly dominant in the political realm have at the same time seeped into the more intimate spheres of life. In short, ideas that now dominate the public arena control also the debate about sexual ethics. The basic question for theological ethics is what the church ought to conclude about this spread of ideas from the public to the private realm.

Their spread in fact constitutes both a gain and a loss, and the arguments we are now having about sexual ethics will not progress until both the gain and the loss are taken into account. First, what needs to be said about the gain? The major difficulty with “the traditional teaching of the church” is that it has taken little account of individual circumstances. The particular desires and needs of men and women have too frequently been submerged into undertakings and sacrificed too easily to the demands of institutions. The appearance of the twin notions of person and self within Western consciousness serves to counter the tendency to swallow up individuals in collective purposes.

For this reason, the emergence of the sexual self is an important moral event. To have it recognized that we are

sexual selves, related in freedom to our ends, with depths to plumb, powers to be used and developed, and that we (all) can do these things in the course of everyday life is in fact a giant moral leap forward. The strength of the new reformers' position is that it recognizes the good of this step in a way that more traditional views have often, though not always, failed to do.

On the other hand, the chief problem with the view of the new reformers is that it fails to recognize that a sexual self, liberated from undertakings that have a moral claim upon it prior to any of its particular intentions and choices, has no satisfactory way to make moral judgments about what it intends, chooses, promises, and then undertakes. The loss connected with the modern view of the self is that, as usually conceived, the self has only the option of following the prompting of its own depths. It therefore appears in the unattractive guise of a dog chasing its tail.

Like "the person" that is so important to the political thought of modern liberal society, the sexual self that is so important to modern reflexive consciousness appoints its own ends. It need not search out the nature of the undertakings God has appointed for it and then struggle to confirm its desires, intentions, choices, promises, and undertakings to those appointed ends. Neither the person nor the self is now thought to flourish within a providence that directs the undertakings of their lives. Rather, both are said to flourish or not as a result of the intentions and choices that flow from their inner depths. As James Milhaven has so clearly stated, it is now up to the autonomous self to "figure out what will be good for those concerned and how this good can be realized, just as it is up to [him], not God, to act and make the good a reality."

If the inner depths of the self are given this sort of authority, it can only mean that the most insistent prompting of the self is always taken as definitive of the self's true nature and good. The self's depths are set up to be judge of the self's depths. Even Locke recognized that it is unsatisfactory to make each "person" the judge in his own case, and surely the same thing is true of "selves." To take this view is to adopt the very dubious proposition that if one has desires and inclinations and they are powerfully presented from the depths of the self, they are, by virtue of the strength of their presentation, both "natural" and "good." To take this view is also to condemn the self to what Auden once called "promiscuous fornication with its own images." Apart from the undertakings that present the self with its arena for action and so its true calling, the self inevitably collapses into itself as it chases about panting after its own productions.

From what has been said thus far, it is obvious that the liberty of individuals to pursue private good is the major moral concern of the new reformers and for this reason their ethical views can fairly be seen as a variety of the contractarian social ethic now increasingly characteristic of political society. Indeed, the fundamental point here is that the strong appeal of the proposals being made by the new reformers is due to the fact that they cohere so well with the way in which we now understand political life and with the way in which we represent ourselves as moral agents.

As one might expect, however, if the reformers' arguments share the strengths that come from coherence with the modern view of the nature of moral and social agency, they also suffer from the weaknesses of these views.

Long ago, Aristotle pointed out that moral arguments are not like geometrical ones. In ethics, there are no deductions to certain conclusions. Moral argument is cumulative rather than deductive. It serves to establish a burden of proof rather than certainty. And when push comes to shove, the traditional teaching of the churches has greater strengths than does the position of the new reformers. (See my "Undertakings and Promises: An Anatomy of Sexual Ethics," FT, April 1991.) That teaching makes more sense of marriage and divorce. It is better able to illumine the moral character of familial relations. It can even give a better response to the particular moral problems posed by contemporary accounts of the moral life and moral agency based as they are upon the twin notions of

“person” and “self.” In respect to this last point, the traditional teaching can provide persons and selves with undertakings about which they can make promises

and, in so doing, discover, rather than collapse into, themselves.

In short, a strong case can be made for saying that, as both the common good of society and the particular good of citizens is now threatened by political voluntarism, so also both the common and particular good of lovers (and families) is threatened by the voluntaristic and limited nature of the promises and undertakings that typically characterize the new reformers’ account of sexual relations. Despite a strong climate of opinion to the contrary, it is more adequate to argue that, in both the public square and the bedroom, as William Werpehowski has put the traditional view, “persons flourish in and through patterns of relationship that are themselves taken to be normative,” and that, in respect to its teaching about the undertakings and promises that ought to accompany a sexual (or political) relation, the church would do well to seek to preserve (again in the words of Werpehowski) “an account of the goods of human relationship against their collapse into the desires or interests of autonomous individuals.” It is sensible to conclude in respect to the moral problems before the churches that they ought to defend rather than retreat from their traditional teachings and in so doing face squarely rather than turn away from “the pathos of Christian ethics today.”

If the churches choose to face this pathos, however, they will at the same time face pastoral issues of fearful proportions. Because the primary intention of the new reformers is to say yes to forms of sexual relations heretofore condemned by the churches, they have a much easier pastoral task than do those who continue to hold to the traditional teaching. To defend this teaching is to appear to be a “no sayers” in the eyes of a culture for which the word “no” has less and less appeal. The pastoral question, therefore, is whether or not the churches, in passing on their traditions about sexual relations, have more to say than “Don’t do it.”

The truth is that they do—that the pastoral import of the traditional teachings of the churches is more fundamentally positive than negative. Their positive character is readily apparent in the surprising yet simple example that follows. Strange as it may seem, there is no need for someone who holds traditional beliefs to deny that there may be much good in the sexual relations single people enter into. Many of them produce a genuine, though limited, community of life, and in them people often learn far more than they knew before about the nature of love. A person would have to be blind to miss these and other goods that are often present in relationships which for other reasons are not right.

Indeed, if the teachings of the churches are properly understood, it becomes apparent that the good found in these relations in fact derives from what Christians have to say about the goods of the sexual division, the goods of sex, and the goods of marriage itself. The churches have thought that God created men and women for mutual society, and that, as men and women, they are neither to avoid nor despise their life together. The social relation between men and women is intended in creation for every man and every woman, and it is given to them so that they will not be alone. The first word beyond “no” to be spoken is that a sexual relation is not necessary to escape loneliness, but social relations between men and women are.

It is God’s intention that contra-sexual social relations be entered by all, but that sexual relations per se be contained within the more specific bond of marriage. Within that bond, protected as they are by promises of fidelity and permanence, sexual relations nourish the unity of the couple, lead to the procreation of children, and provide a most immediate way for a man and a woman to learn what it is to love another as one loves oneself. It is the belief of the churches that this providential ordering provides the framework within which our sexual lives can best serve not only our well-being, but also the more general purposes of God. These are the goods in one way or another

sought in all sexual relations.

Observations like these make it obvious that Christians have far more to say to single people than “Don’t do it,” and that they have far more to say to married people than “Go right ahead.” The teachings of the churches about God’s providential will for sexual relations are rich and complex. Their truth helps define the fullness of our lives, and apart from a full, vigorous, and positive statement, both single and married people will find it difficult to glimpse the full extent of the promises God has etched in their sexual natures.

If Christians are asked to say “no” to sexual relations outside the bond of marriage, it is because they are called upon to honor God by saying “yes” to a providential ordering of life intended both for the glory of God and our individual and common good. What we know, however, is that we more often say no to God’s providence than yes, and for this reason we know also that if God is not our reconciler and redeemer as well as our creator, we are lost. God in Christ, however, is our reconciler, redeemer, and creator, and when our sexual lives are viewed from this perspective they take on greater significance than first we imagine. They become a part of the way in which we learn to be disciples of Christ.

The struggle necessary if we are to direct our sexual energies to their appointed and life-giving ends becomes, in Christ, a battle with an old self that refuses to honor God and insists upon its own way. In the power of the Spirit, this old nature must be put off and a new one put on. That old nature is driven by desires, some of them sexual, that are connected to self-serving ends. It is the teaching of the churches that both married and single people are called to say yes to this struggle and recognize it as part of the “upward call of God.”

For most, a struggle with unfulfilled sexual longing is anything but part of an “upward call.” It seems instead a destructive, repressive, and self-deceptive form of denial. It is the belief of Christians, however, that entry into this battle leads men and women away from precisely these life-destroying habits and stratagems and toward a life that is open both to God and to their fellow men and women. To say “yes” to life in the Spirit is in fact the only way to end self-deceptive denial and harmful repression. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth and life rather than repression and denial. It calls for us to present ourselves at each moment to God as we are, with as much knowledge of ourselves as we can muster, with all our desires and intentions exposed, and in so doing ask for guidance, help, and the transfiguration of our lives. God will not answer yes to many of the desires presented, but in saying no he will say yes to deeper desires and deeper loves-both for God and for the men and women with whom God has surrounded us.

God will also speak a word of forgiveness over our inadequacies and failures and in so doing provide us strength to be even more truthful and more compassionate. Sexual desire is a very powerful one, and at the moment it is given full license by our society. Everything that confronts single people conspires to say “just do it.” It is increasingly rare for a single person, at one point or another, not to be involved in a sexual relation. In Christ, however, these relations need neither to be trumpeted nor denied. They can be brought before God, and as they are presented they will be judged with far more truth and love than we can muster. Another thing the churches ought to say to single people beyond “no” is come among us and present your life to God as it is. The upward call of God always begins from the place one starts and it takes place in a fellowship of friends who are also seeking to subject their loves to the truth and love of God in Christ.

This observation calls to mind another thing the churches have to say to single people about sex. Most people who enter even the most casual sexual relation are not promiscuous. They are, however, lonely. Beneath our disordered desires lies a loneliness brought about by a failure in the common life God intends for all men and women. The churches in America in many ways simply contribute to this loneliness. Their common life too frequently is not

formed as a society of friends who share one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism. It is rather formed around the needs and expectations of the bourgeois family. Single people at best are tolerated. Nevertheless, the view that sexual relations are intended for marital rather than general social relations is linked to the idea that close bonds between men and women, both single and married, ought to exist in all of life's dimensions. Because of these bonds, sexual relations themselves are not necessary as a cure for loneliness. What is necessary is the fellowship of men and women in Christ. This is the word beyond "no" the church has to speak to single people. If it dares to speak, it will find not only that its common life is transformed beyond all recognition, but also that its teachings begin to appear to single and married people alike as a treasure to be shared rather than as a burden to be inflicted.

This discussion of the pastoral task that lies before the churches suggests that the ethics of sex ought to be placed within the full context of the Christian life and the churches' pastoral ministry. Only in this way will what Christians say escape the twin evils of punishing legalism and boundless freedom. To place sexual relations in this full and more adequate context, Christians ought to understand them as part of an undertaking that encompasses all aspects of their lives. That undertaking is holiness of life and its end is not repression but joy unconfined. This is the heart of the Christian life and it is the chief business of the pastoral ministry.

Holiness of life summarizes better than any other notion what the Christian life and the pastoral ministry are about. The Christian life is rooted in the ancient command, "You shall be Holy for I the Lord your God am Holy." The holiness of life known to Christians is based first in the alien righteousness that is imputed to them. It is based not upon their purity of heart and life but upon their faith in the cross and resurrection of Christ.

Holiness is also reflected in a way of life into which disciples enter more and more as, in the power of the Spirit, they engage in a struggle to conform their lives to the pattern of life they see in Christ Jesus. In this way they learn to imitate God and so share in God's life. One aspect of the pattern of life they are called to imitate requires that they honor God by honoring as well the way in which God intends for men and women to join their lives in and through sexual relations.

If holiness of life is understood in relation both to justification and sanctification, then sexual relations can be included within its compass without the repression and deception that so often accompany their discussion. Indeed, if we include sexual relations (and their absence) as part of a wider account of the Christian life, we will learn, as our lives are drawn further and further into the life of God, more about the undertakings God sets for us by making us male and female. In the light of these undertakings, all the promises we make to one another about our sexual lives will be seen in truth for what they are. In this process we will learn more and more about our bondage to self-serving and imprisoning desire. We will also learn more about what freedom means for us as sexual beings. We will learn more and more about the joys life holds when our desires are ordered to the undertakings God appoints for us. In short, if the ethics of sexual order and sexual liberation, which now contend so fiercely one with another, are joined to an ethic of holiness of life, we will learn how necessary each is to the other.

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