

Sacred Sexuality

Sexual Ethics in the 21st Century

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 1 Kings 11:1-4, 9-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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On a national level, it seems like Presbyterian Church (USA) has been obsessed with talking about sex for the past four decades. But that discussion hasn't really been about love and sex itself, but rather about who a person is *allowed* to love and have sex with. Yet as a denomination, after many years of intense debates, struggles and some separations, we've come a very long way in a relatively short period of time, at least from a historical perspective.

Now that marriage equality is allowed by both our denomination and the state of Oklahoma, we're shifting into a new dialogue and conversation. And that deals with the issue of entering into a marriage covenant versus co-habitation, regardless of the couple's sexual orientation. From a sexual ethics standpoint, however, I truly believe that **God is not opposed to loving, mutual, committed relationships of any kind.**

Perhaps the greatest point of contention continues to be **role that scripture plays in this debate of sexual ethics.** Specifically, how do the sexual ethics in the Near Middle East and Mesopotamia two to three thousand years ago apply to us today? For you see, **the Bible does not present one clear sexual ethic throughout all its pages.** For instance, in our Old Testament reading from 1 Kings, we learn that God became angry with King Solomon (David's son) on account of his 700 wives and his 300 concubines. The source of God's anger, however, was *not* because Solomon was having sexual relations with 1000 women (evidently all at the same time), but that Solomon allowed them to convince him to worship other god's besides the God of Israel.

So, it seems clear to many biblical scholars today that perhaps **the culture of a particular time and place does indeed play a role, to some extent, in determining appropriate sexual ethics – as opposed to one universal standard that should apply to all people in all places for all time.**

When it comes to sexual ethics in the New Testament, no one has more to say about it than the Apostle Paul. Narrowly interpreted, it seems that Paul takes on a "just say no" attitude when it comes to sex. But that would be a misinterpretation. In this decidedly complex issue, we only have time this morning to look at one of the many things Paul has to say about this issue. We must begin by remembering that Paul's words come in the form of a personal letter responding to particular questions and circumstances that arose in the congregations he founded. We are hearing, then, just one side of the conversation that was taking place. But we can infer that there were some in that church in Corinth (located in modern-day southern Greece) who were pushing Paul's gospel theme of **"freedom in Christ"** beyond its limits. In other words, some believed that freedom from the Jewish laws of the Torah (especially those found in Leviticus) meant freedom to do as they pleased, including sexually.

Paul corrects this line of thinking by reiterating that **freedom in Christ isn't the same thing as a free license to do as one pleases. Or to put in another way, freedom in Christ does not mean that we are free from God and the ways of God.** Paul goes on to apply this philosophy to sexual ethics.

To help me explain this I want to turn to some wise words spoken at the national 2004 Covenant Network of Presbyterians Conference – an organization that just recently held a regional conference here in Tulsa, hosted by College Hill, on the issue of marriage equality in our denomination. At that 2004 conference a sermon was preached by the **Rev. Susan Andrews**, the former Moderator of the 2003 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). In that sermon, Andrews reveals Paul's theological position on the matter of sexual ethics by reflecting on **1 Corinthians 6:19**, **“do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?”** She stated in her sermon:

Paul proclaims that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit - that sexuality is a sacred gift to be used to glorify and enjoy God. And, Paul makes clear that erotic love becomes destructive if it is not shaped by moral and spiritual love.

The apostle is directly confronting the dualism of his day - the thinking that the body and the soul are somehow separate and that therefore, what one does with one's body simply doesn't matter when it comes to the sanctity of the soul.

The question the Corinthians were asking Paul was this: In the surrounding Greek culture, where promiscuity and temple prostitution and even pedophilia is socially acceptable, how is a Christian to understand the holy demands of sexual behavior? Paul grounds his answer in what we call **covenant theology**.

When it comes to sexual ethics, **Rowan Williams**, while he was the Archbishop of Canterbury in England, explained it this way, **“To desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire...it is to ask the moral question: ‘How much do we want our sexual activity to heal and enlarge the life of others?’”** (Eugene Rogers, editor, *Theology and Sexuality*, Blackwell Publishers, p. 313). I think that is a powerful statement and guideline – a sexual ethic that heals and enlarges the life of the other person. In her sermon, entitled “Eros and Ethics,” Susan Andrews continues:

What such a reciprocal and mutual covenant ethic suggests is that asymmetrical - unbalanced - sexual relationships are simply not part of God's vision. Sexual behavior that exhibits power over the other, sexual behavior that focuses just selfishly on me instead of thee, sexual behavior that hides in the shadows of shame instead of unfolding in the sunshine of God's delight - such behavior does not 'heal and enlarge the life of the other'.

Using Williams' critique of asymmetrical relationships, I believe we 21st century Christians must proclaim unequivocally that prostitution, promiscuity, adultery, pedophilia, clergy sexual misconduct, patriarchal heterosexual marriage, furtive [secretive] teenage sexual experimentation, “hooking up” just for casual sex - all of this is wrong - not

because it breaks some antiquated rule, but because it does not heal and enlarge the life of the other [person] - because it does not honor the faithfulness and fidelity of covenant - because it does not glorify God in the temple of sacred sexuality.

Andrews go on to admit, however, and I concur, "I can personally concur with the Rev. Susan Andrews when she admits, **"The context of real people's real sexual lives has led me to a place where I am not always sure about what God forbids. But I know in my body and in my soul what God celebrates."**

So here's the bottom line:

- **Sacred sexuality is about glorifying and enjoying God with the full worship of our bodies.**
- **Sacred sexuality is about reflecting the image of God in us by desiring the joy of the one we desire.**
- **Sacred sexuality is about shaping erotic love with agape love - healing and enlarging the life of the other person - even at the cost of sacrificing our own needs.**
- **Sacred sexuality is about sharing our bodies in the context of covenant - a faithful and monogamous and enduring relationship that reflects the dependable fidelity of our utterly faithful God.**
- **And sacred sexuality becomes - in the wide grace of God's redemptive plan - a way to be beneficial - a way to edify and build up the larger community of God's people.**

In closing, let me quickly reiterate. **There is no dualism in Paul's theology. There is no separation of mind from body, or soul from sensation.** As spiritual people, as sexual people, as ethical people, as beloved people - let us come to a deeper understanding that even though Christ has set us free, not all things are beneficial for us; not all things enrich the lives of others.

So let us strive to live as the scriptures ask of you and me, **"glorify God in your body," which serves as a "temple of the Holy Spirit within you."**

Amen.

Susan Andrews was Moderator of the 215th General Assembly, the first woman in parish ministry elected to the post. She is pastor of Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland. In her 30 years of ministry, she has also served churches in East Hanover, New Jersey, and Allentown, Pennsylvania. She is a graduate of Wellesley College and Harvard Divinity School; she received her D.Min. from McCormick. She was named Preacher of the Year in 2000 by *Lectionary Homiletics*. Susan was a member of the Covenant Network Board from its founding in 1997 until her election as Moderator.