
*“EQUAL TO THE ANGELS”:
A NEW VIEW FOR OUR
CHURCH’S DEBATE ABOUT SEXUALITY
by Dr. J. Warren Smith*

Whatever side one is on, or wherever one’s sympathy lies in the United Methodist debate over homosexuality, all of us grieve over our seeming inability to reason about our ecclesial life together and its witness to the Gospel. At Annual Conference, a colleague commented, after a resolutions debate on this topic, that the quality of our arguments has become less substantive over the years. Perhaps we are just tired, so we have grown impatient listening to each other’s views. Perhaps we are impatient because we think we have already heard all the arguments.

BEYOND THOSE PREDICTABLE PASSAGES

I would suggest another reason for the unsatisfactory debate about homosexuality in The United Methodist Church. To date, the debate has focused almost exclusively on whether the Bible condemns homosexual conduct and, if it does, whether its teachings on human sexuality are relevant today in the face of some psychiatric claims about sexual orientation. This way of framing the debate, however, has proven inadequate because neither appeals to the Bible, nor appeals to modern science, are sufficient for coming to a decision on the matter.

An interpretation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 and Romans 1:26-27, while an appropriate starting point for Christian reflection, is not in and of itself sufficient to settle the matter. Simply determining the meaning of Leviticus does not answer the larger question: Why do we accept these Levitical prohibitions but ignore others, such as the dietary prescriptions? (Though it could be noted that Article VI--Of the Old Testament, from The United Methodist Church’s Articles of Religion, declares that “no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the [Old Testament] commandments which are called moral.”)

Moreover, Paul’s argument in Romans 1 employs an argument from natural law: engaging in homosexual relations is exchanging “natural relations for unnatural relations.” A similar argument from natural law appears in I Corinthians 11:2-16, where Paul reasons that men should not have their heads covered in church but women should (vs. 14-15). In no United Methodist church that I know, however, is it expected that women enter church with their heads covered. Why do we completely overlook Paul’s argument from natural law in the case of head-coverings while accepting the same argument against homosexuality?

Furthermore, consider the Bible’s position against homosexuality and on slavery. It can be said that the former is outdated and no longer reflects the general scientific and moral sensibilities of modern society, while the latter is no longer accepted because it conflicts with our modern notion of human rights. But by making modern, Western custom normative for judging Biblical teachings, we strip the Bible of its ability to speak prophetically to the Church and to the world. When is the Christian life to be countercultural, and when does it simply mirror the norms of the larger society?

Obviously, we have failed to give any criteria which distinguish those Biblical teachings that are normative for the Church from those that are not, and those Western norms the Church accepts from those determined to be unacceptable.

MOVING THE SEXUALITY DEBATE INTO “THE STORY OF THE WORLD”

Up to this point, we have also failed to begin reasoning from a distinctly Christian-theological framework that guides our interpretation of Scripture and our analysis of modern Western culture. But homosexuality in particular, and human sexuality in general, can be rightly

understood only when discussed within the framework of theological anthropology (that is, teaching on human nature). In other words, sexuality cannot be analyzed as an isolated dimension of human experience. Instead, it must be examined within the larger context of the flourishing or happiness proper to our human nature -- what the ancients call *eudaimonia*. A Christian understanding of human flourishing must be based on an understanding of human nature grounded in Christology (teaching on the person and work of Jesus Christ) and eschatology (teaching on the Last Things).

When the fourth century Cappadocian pastor and theologian Gregory of Nyssa (A.D. 335-394) began his treatise On the Creation of Humanity, he described his aim: "to leave nothing unexamined of all the things that concern humanity -- of what we believe to have taken place previously [i.e., at creation], of the results which are expected to appear afterward [i.e., at the general resurrection of the dead], and of what we now see." A full and proper understanding of human nature cannot, he says, be rightly understood by looking only at the life of the human being right now. Rather, we must look at human nature from the perspective of salvation history -- what Dr. Robert Jenson calls "The Story of the World" -- stretching from creation in the beginning to the general resurrection at the end.

The question that troubles Gregory, and that sparks the writing of this treatise, is this: How can human beings whose present existence is characterized by suffering and misery be made in the image of the supremely blessed God? His answer is that we do not now bear the divine image as God intended from the beginning. Due to sin, that image, while not completely erased, has been corrupted and distorted. We cannot, therefore, rightly understand human nature as God intended it to be by looking at man's present desires and orientation. Instead, we must look at the Biblical accounts of the creation of human nature in the beginning and of the perfection of human nature at the general resurrection. For Gregory, eschatology is critical for a Christian understanding of humanity because it shows us God's purpose for humanity. Even as one cannot rightly understand what an acorn is without having seen an oak tree, so too we cannot understand what God intended us to be at creation without seeing what God has determined we will become at the resurrection.

How do we who live in this world see what we shall become? Where is the oak tree that gives us a vision of what our acorn-like nature will grow into? Gregory's answer, not surprisingly, is Jesus Christ. Christ, as the Father's co-eternal Son, becomes in the Incarnation the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). The divine Word, who becomes flesh and strikes His tent in our midst (John 1:14), makes the spiritual and incorporeal Godhead known in physical form. As the Father's perfect image, Christ is the divine image after whose likeness humanity is created. He is archetypal humanity. As the image of God participates in the creation of man, Jesus Christ reveals not only the nature of His Father but also perfect humanity. Thus Christ is the new Adam (Romans 5:14 and I Corinthians 15:22,45), who by His perfect obedience reconciles us, His fallen brothers and sisters, to God the Father. By His death and resurrection, Christ does not merely accomplish a forensic redemption in the merciful judgment of the Father, but He redeems actual human nature, indeed all of creation, by inaugurating the new creation. When the women at the tomb and the disciples in the locked room see the resurrected Jesus, they do not see merely a resurrected man. They see resurrected humanity! They see what we shall become: a humanity that has put off corruption and mortality, and has been clothed in divine incorruption, the likeness of God's glory and holiness.

As Irenaeus (A.D. 130-202) put it, Jesus Christ is the "recapitulation" or "summing up" not only of all previous revelations of God, but of humanity itself. He is perfect humanity bearing not only the image of God's rational nature but the likeness of God's holiness. He is what God willed that Adam's race would become. Gregory of Nyssa shares this view. For this reason, Gregory explains that when Colossians describes Christ as "the firstborn of all creation," it does not mean that the Son is the first creature. Rather it means that the resurrected Jesus is "the firstborn of the new creation."

This new creation inaugurated by Jesus Christ's resurrection becomes the lens through which we understand human nature as God wills it to be. The new creation revealed in Christ becomes the model by which we think about the life to which we are called in the present.

Anyone who is in Christ is a new creature, not merely because sins have been forgiven, but because through the forgiving waters of baptism, the believer is, as Ambrose (A.D. 337-397) expresses it, made a participant in Christ's resurrected humanity by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit's indwelling, the resurrecting power of God, that will liberate us from bodily corruption, is already at work sanctifying us and liberating us from the residual power of sin (Romans 8:9-11). The life of the resurrection, therefore, is not some theoretical possibility or distant reality -- though, to be sure, we still groan with creation in travail as we await in hope Christ's return in glory. Although the vestiges of sinful desire linger, Paul exhorts us to grow into the full stature of Him who is our Head by a proleptic (or foretasting) participation in the life of the resurrection. In other words, we let the vision of our life in the general resurrection inform our manner of living in the present. The eschatological destiny, for which we hope, determines the way of life we live, and the goals we pursue, in the present age. Our eschatological end, manifest in the resurrected Jesus Christ, reveals what Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) called "the nature and destiny of man."

CHANGED FRAMEWORK, CLEARER VISION

How does this Christological and eschatological view of human nature inform our view of sexuality and sexual practices? How does this vision of our eschatological destiny frame our understanding of sex? Or to put it most simply, what does the resurrection have to do with sex and homosexuality? Theologians of the early Church recognized the connection because they took eschatology more seriously than we do, and because they confronted difficult passages of Scripture that we often sidestep.

One of those passages, that is important to this matter, is Jesus' conversation with the Sadducees about marriage and the resurrection (Luke 20:27-40). After laying out the hypothetical story of a woman who was married to seven brothers in succession, the Sadducee asks Jesus, "So whose wife will she be in the resurrection?" This is a classic *reductio ad absurdum* that tries to show the foolishness of the resurrection -- by proving it leads to ridiculous consequences that are inconsistent with Mosaic prescriptions about remarriage. If there is a general resurrection, then there will be polygamy in the Kingdom of God! Absurd! Jesus dismisses their foolish question by knocking out the central premises, namely that marriages in this life will exist in the resurrection. "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are *equal to angels* and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection" (Luke 20:34-36, RSV, emphasis added). Jesus' logic is that in the resurrection there will no longer be marriages, since there will be no need for them. After all, in the resurrection, death will be no more. We will then be like the angels who partake of God's incorruptibility and immortality, so there will no longer be any need for procreation to replenish the human race. Marriage, the only context in which sexual relations are holy, will, therefore, cease to be.

Jesus' implication is that, whatever other goods come from marriage, its primary purpose is procreation. Earthly, sexual marriages will be replaced by the spiritual union of Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, to His bride, the Church. Here Jesus reveals our eschatological destiny: to be "equal to the angels" who live an asexual existence content with the highest pleasure of beholding God's glory and singing hymns of praise in an eternal thanksgiving. This is the proper end of human nature. This spiritual pleasure in God constitutes true *eudaimonia*.

IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

This understanding of human nature and destiny, informed by creation and eschatology, has several important implications for how Christians today should think about sex.

First, sex plays an important roll in God's design for the present age. It is the means for perpetuating the species. The procreative telos of sex means that it cannot be viewed primarily

as recreation or pleasure for pleasure's sake. It is our participation in God's ongoing work of creation and, as such, is holy. While sex carries with it pleasure that strengthens the bonds between husband and wife, its pleasure should not be isolated from the context of family wherein offspring of that union can be faithfully raised and nurtured.

Second, the value of sex lies exclusively in this age and will have no place in the resurrection, because there will be no need for procreation. In other words, the good of sex is entirely reserved for the present time, but it will pass away. Whatever goods are proper to holy sexual unions in this life are either left behind at the resurrection or accomplished through some asexual means.

Third, since sex will not be part of our eschatological existence -- when our nature comes to its perfection intended by God in the beginning and made possible by Christ's resurrection -- it is essential neither to human nature nor to human flourishing (*eudaimonia*), in other words, the fulfillment of the highest ends proper to our nature. Were sex *essential* for human happiness, it would necessarily remain part of our eternal existence in the resurrection. Since it is not essential to human happiness in the fullness of God's Kingdom, it is not essential for human happiness in the present life.

This point challenges a fundamental assumption of modern American society, namely that sexual expression and fulfillment are essential for human happiness. One is not living a fulfilled life, our society insists, unless sexual desires are met. This assumption leads to the popularly held conclusion that denying anyone the right to satisfy sexual desires denies the ability to live a happy and fulfilled life and therefore is fundamentally unjust. However, when we think about sex through the lens of an eschatological anthropology, we see how unmerited is the exaggerated importance our society places on sex. Since sex is not essential to human flourishing, the Scriptural regulations about sex do not unjustly deprive any class of people what is necessary for their fulfillment. Rather, Scripture's teaching on sex, when understood within the theological understanding of human nature and destiny, is rightly seen as ordering our lives toward, and preparing us for, the resurrection destiny for whom we were created.

ALL ARE CHALLENGED

This view does not "target" people with homosexual or bisexual or any other sexual desires. Its implications hit home for those called heterosexual as well. True human happiness depends, not on sexual intimacy with another human being, but on fellowship with God through trusting, faithful obedience. Therefore, Jesus did not impose an impossible or unfair burden when He prohibited remarriage after divorce. Nor is the Church depriving heterosexual couples, young and old, an essential element of happiness by calling them not to engage in intercourse outside the covenant of marriage.

The life of chastity is not easy. It is fraught with many of the same temptations and frustrations experienced even by married couples living in healthy relationships. But for faithful Christians, of whatever sexual orientation, the good news of the Gospel is that in the resurrection those struggles will end when we are "equal to the angels." Then the hard life of self-discipline, that characterizes our present struggles, will be replaced by the peace of resting in the One in whose perfect love we find perfect happiness.

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