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Churchman

EDITORIAL

Choose life

Some years ago a friend of mine told me of how her third child, the baby of the family, had embarrassed her at school. His teacher had asked him whether he would like a younger brother or sister, and he replied that he would rather not have one, since he did not want to make his parents have sex a fourth time. As adults we can laugh at his naivety, but the little boy perceived something which can all too easily escape the minds of the more sophisticated. This is quite simply that human sexuality, and sexual relations, stand in our midst as a sign of life. Without them, there would be no continuity, no history, and no humanity of any kind. It can hardly be an accident that when God gave his covenant to Abraham, and said that it was to endure from one generation to another, he sealed it by giving Abraham a sign which bore witness to this continuity in a way which would be fully revealed in sexual contact, the only way in which that continuity could be realised.

Today it has become very fashionable to discuss human sexuality in all sorts of different ways, but the essence of the matter, human life, is curiously ignored. Read the tracts put out by various feminist and homosexual organisations and observe the vocabulary they use—freedom, equality, justice and (of course) love—but life is never mentioned. All the emphasis is placed on the self—self-esteem, self-expression, self-affirmation—when in fact, the purpose of sexuality can only be fulfilled in the context of the other. In the words of the Bible, it is the means of the union of two separate people into one flesh, the essential foundation for the procreation of the next generation, which is also the creation of a new kind of relationship which needs the one-flesh union if it is to grow and mature as it should.

Once it is divorced from this context, human sexuality is reduced to a physical force without any higher meaning. Of course it is true that not all sexual contact results in procreation; in fact, very little of it has this result. In many cases, procreation is a physical impossibility, but no-one has ever suggested that this should lead to the end of sexual relations within the context of

marriage, and it is false to claim—as some have ignorantly done—that the Christian church has ever thought (or taught) otherwise. Yet when all the reservations and qualifications have been made, the simple fact remains that human sexuality is a sign which bears witness to the significance of life, and to the power which is given to the human race to bring new beings, created in the image and likeness of God, into the world. It is this divine dimension of childbirth, caricatured and mocked though it has been by a thousand sentimentalists who insist on portraying babies as little angels, which gives sexual relations their sacred character and contributes to the common Christian understanding that matrimony is something holy.

Of course, the church also bears witness to the fact that matrimony is not an end in itself, nor is it meant for everyone. Our generation has the misfortune to have inherited a century or more of romanticised marriage, in which couples were expected to live ‘happily ever after’ and the wedding ring was a magic solution to every problem.

I well remember being at a boys’ camp where one of the teenage campers confessed that he was having a problem with masturbation, to which the speaker merely replied: ‘Get married.’ Stupid advice at the best of times, but the lad was only fourteen—as he immediately pointed out, to general laughter. Sadly, this kind of thing was all too common in the not-so-distant past, and we are paying a heavy price for it now, as the reality of broken dreams comes home to so many.

But nowhere is the impoverishment of our pastoral understanding of matrimony more obvious than in the way in which many people today still confuse celibacy with sexual abstinence. If we look at the New Testament, we find that celibacy is a holy calling even more elevated than matrimony, one which is given to a limited number of heterosexuals as part of their vocation to ministry. The Roman Catholic church has overdone this of course, and made it a law for everyone seeking ordination, but that is no reason to deny that there is an important kernel of truth behind their unfortunate distortion. Yet nobody ever mentions this in evangelical circles, where celibacy for the service of God is regarded with the same incredulity as seeing leprechauns. The result of course, is that there are many unhappily married couples in full-time ministry—merely because one (or both) of them would not be accepted as

single pastors or preachers.

This misunderstanding becomes especially painful when we read that many Christians currently advocate a life of celibacy for homosexuals, evidently oblivious to the fact that this counsel, if it were to be followed, would merely lead to the suspicion (already prevalent in some quarters) that all celibate people are gay. It is stupid advice, rather along the lines of that given to the pubescent fourteen-year old. Sexual abstinence, which is what these Christians really want to see, may look like celibacy to the untrained eye, but in fact it is a different concept altogether. In the New Testament it was assumed that married couples would practise it in times of fasting and prayer, and it can be found in the Old Testament as well—especially among soldiers preparing for battle. It is something which is enjoined on all who are not joined together in holy matrimony, whatever their age or sexual orientation may be, for the very simple reason that sexual intercourse is a fundamental part of that sacred bond. An unconsummated marriage is no marriage at all, as even the Roman Catholic church has always admitted. But once consummation has occurred, there is a holy union between two people who have become one flesh until the day that one or them dies—another aspect of the matter which has been downplayed in recent years, as the church has been overwhelmed by a tidal wave of divorce.

The current crisis in the church over homosexuality is a wake-up call to Evangelicals, who must now rethink their entire perception of these fundamental matters. We have inherited a complex situation in which easy answers and simple formulae are almost certain to do more harm than good. On the matter of broken marriages, we have come to accept that there are now many divorced people who should be encouraged to remarry, and for whom remarriage may be a form of healing for the failings of the past. That truth however needs to be balanced against the fundamental holiness of lifelong matrimony, and the message that divorce is a tragedy to be avoided if at all possible is one which we desperately need to recover. It will take a generation for the effects to be felt across the board, but that is no reason not to begin the effort of teaching the young, in particular, what the consequences of failure in this area are likely to be.

Where homosexuals are concerned, there is likewise no simple answer, not

least because homosexuals come in so many different guises. For example, many of them are (or have been) married and have children. In some cases, like that of Gene Robinson, the so-called bishop of New Hampshire, divorce has been welcomed as a liberation—the freedom to realise one’s true identity. Mr. Robinson is by no means unique in this respect, but it should be obvious to everyone that here there can be no compromise. A man (or woman) who walks out of a freely contracted marriage in the name of self-fulfilment is doing something which is wrong in the eyes of God, and no church can condone it, whatever the excuses given to justify it may be. Very different are those people who, for reasons which may be impossible to understand fully, have a homosexual orientation which has been present all their lives. Some of these people have accepted this, and others have done their best to resist it, but in neither case has the orientation altered. What are we to say to them?

Some sincere Christians believe that it is possible to ‘heal’ this kind of homosexuality and produce a change in orientation. Many homosexual organisations scream blue murder when they hear this, but the truth surely is that such reorientation is possible in some cases. In matters of sexual orientation we are dealing with a spectrum, and it would be foolish to deny that there are instances of people who can move further along that spectrum in the direction of heterosexuality (just as some gay groups encourage movement in the opposite direction), even if this is not universally true. For those who can be helped in this way there is every reason to provide a pastoral ministry which will encourage them, not least because quite a few people have found themselves in a homosexual environment as a result of difficulties in their lives which have overridden their basically heterosexual orientation.

The real problem which we have to face is that of people for whom this is not a realistic option—a minority, to be sure, but a recognisable group nonetheless. Some of them have found happiness in committed same-sex relationships, though whether sexual intercourse has played a major part in this must be open to doubt. In the recently publicised case of Canon Jeffrey John, for example, not the least interesting aspect of the matter was that his relationship has been ‘celibate’ for years—something which could be said for any friendship and makes us wonder why this particular relationship has been classified as ‘homosexual’ at all. Once again, we are faced with one of the tragedies of our time—the widespread loss of same-sex friendship, which has made recourse to

homosexuality seem almost inevitable in some cases. Men used to be able to take refuge in clubs, pubs and sports grounds, but now it seems that they have to claim to be gay just to get away from unwanted female company. Modern males need to rediscover each other as friends, a development which (if only the feminists would allow it) would go a long way towards re-establishing a proper sense of masculinity in our society, and reduce the attraction of what are euphemistically known as 'same-sex relationships'. As for lesbians, it is almost always the case that they have been abused by a man at some point in their lives, so that creating standards of acceptable male behaviour would benefit them as well. If that could happen, sexuality would recede into the background, and most of what we call homosexuality would effectively disappear. The few remaining cases could then be dealt with on an individual basis, as they always were in the past.

Above all, we need to recover a sense of the holiness of sexuality as a gift of God which is designed to bear witness to life. Homosexual practice, like any form of sex which denies this aspect, is a message of death, not of life, because it perverts the instruments of procreation into something which is incompatible with the thing signified by them. Jesus told his disciples that he had come into the world that they might have life—and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). In the more abundant life, self-fulfilment is not an aim but a by-product; it comes when we give ourselves fully and completely to others. In holy matrimony, that is expressed when the husband sacrifices himself for his wife as Christ sacrificed himself for the church, and when the wife submits to her husband as the church submits to her Lord (Eph. 5:24-5). This is not easy, and if there is anyone still around who belongs to the 'happily-ever-after' school of matrimonial thought, he or she should be removed from the ministry immediately. There is no sense in any of us pretending that commitment is anything other than a challenge, which often means carrying our cross for the sake of others whether we feel like it or not. Young people in particular need to be reminded of this, as they are the ones who will have to pay the price for the failures of the present generation, and it will take more than good intentions spiced with romance to get us back on the right track.

The way of the cross is a way of death—but it is death to self, death to sin; death, in effect, to death itself. Calvary is not the end, but the first step towards a new beginning—a new life, which is manifested to the world in the

resurrection of Christ and given to us, in its first fruits, by the indwelling presence of his Holy Spirit. In its deepest meaning, the cross is not a sign of death but the tree of life—the life of the risen Christ, the only life worth having because it triumphs over death and takes us from this world into God’s eternity. Human sexuality is given to us as a sign of this life, because we are made in the image and likeness of God. We must honour it, celebrate it and above all protect it from abuse, so that the divine image in us might be changed from glory into glory, until at last we take our places in heaven around the throne of grace.

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