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THE BIBLE AND SEX

In this paper, given at the recent VI Symposium on Sexual Ethics (26 May 1978), Mr. Peter Cousins, now Editorial Director at the Paternoster Press, gives a comprehensive account of biblical teaching on sex. He shows beyond doubt that, for example, popular ideas about what Paul thought are very wide of the mark.

Any attempt to understand the Bible's teaching about sex must, of course, begin with Genesis 1 - 3. Irrespective of the date when this material reached its present form, it contains — regarded from one angle — the deepest thinking about reality of an immensely influential community; seen from a different viewpoint it represents the self-disclosure of the Creator of reality. Recent years have seen an interesting confirmation of the importance of stories about sexual origins and relationships. Even in our supposedly scientific age, *The Naked Ape*[1] has been denounced as sexist and has been answered by another 'myth'[2] of human sexual development which claims our attention not so much because of its scientific accuracy as because of its implications for the rôles of man and woman today. It is regrettable that Christians have tended in the past to concentrate so much on the supposed historical and scientific implications of Genesis 1 - 3 that they have overlooked its parabolic significance. And yet — as we shall see — the New Testament itself shows the way to interpret these stories and their relevance to attitudes and conduct.

Many people who have tried to relate Genesis 1 - 3 to similar material in other Middle Eastern cultures have found the attempt brought enhanced insight. There is a useful summary by David Payne,[3] and von Rad's commentary on Genesis[4] assumes this approach. Apart from Genesis, we shall scarcely comprehend the distinctive

nature of the Hebrew understanding of sexuality, which is at the same time far more positive and yet far more cautious than that of Israel's neighbours. The question is raised even before the sixth day and the creation of Man. For the command to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gen 1:28), goes beyond a human attempt to give divine sanction to something that happens in any case. The divine command must be seen against the cultic backdrop in which sex was itself deified. Venus, Aphrodite, Astarte — these goddesses (or should one say this goddess?) of love and sex — were not pretty figures dreamed up to decorate valentine cards. Even a Christian poet and dramatist could write of 'Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée'[5] as if the goddess were some predatory animal hunting down her victims. The Middle East saw sexuality as divine: it offered the possibility of experience that transcended reality; it could destroy as well as uplift; it encompassed the mysterious origins of new life. (We may note in passing that in this respect sexuality is no different from other aspects of the 'natural' world, all of which are deified in polytheism and all of which are demythologised in the Genesis stories.[6])

When the animals are told to 'be fruitful and multiply', the narrative affirms two things. First, that sexuality is not autonomous; it forms part of the Creator's purpose and — like everything else — is subject to His will and is to function in accordance with His command. Second, that sexuality is in no way evil. All that God made was "very good"[7]; in fact, God invented sex. It could indeed be argued that the whole biblical attitude to sexuality is summed up in these two affirmations: that sex is good and that it is not autonomous.

The creation of Man is first mentioned in Genesis 1:27. The divine statement of intent ('Let us make Man in our own image...') is followed by an understated but unmistakable indication that Man is not complete apart from the existence of two differentiated sexes. "So God created Man in His own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female he created them." Here there is no hint at all of any primacy for the male, no suggestion that the image of God in Man is primarily masculine or that there is anything derivative about woman. Few have wished to follow Barth in his suggestion that the image of God in Man is constituted precisely by male-and-femaleness.[8] But it is hard to disagree with what he argues in the same context: that this word underlines the immense significance of human sex differentiation. Man and woman are structurally and functionally different, however much cultural variations or the divine imperative may modify the

manifestations of this distinction. I define myself and orientate myself in terms both of actions and of self-awareness with reference to my sexuality. Stereotyping of sexual rôles is not supported in the Bible but the narrative rules out the possibility that I may find fulfilment or a 'higher' way of serving God by achieving some sort of essentialised super-humanity that transcends — as if that were possible — the givenness of my sexuality. I am not thinking in this context primarily about homosexuality — although that too is here shown to be no part of God's purpose — but of what might be called the higher unisex which is found also among devout Christians but never in the Bible.

The statement that "it is not good that man should be alone" (Gen. 2:8) introduces the account of how God made woman from man's side. It relates naturally to Genesis 1:27 especially as it is followed by the expressed intention: "I will make him a helper fit for him". Certainly the word 'helper' might by itself imply inferiority but this is ruled out by the word translated 'fit'. Kidner paraphrases: "a help as opposite him"[9], while von Rad sees the word as containing the notion of similarity as well as supplementation.[4a] This view is supported by the way in which the narrative underlines the isolation of man. He can name the animals that are brought to him, an activity that witnesses to his authority over them, but the episode concludes with the verdict that "there was not found a helper fit (= as opposite to) for him" (Gen. 2:20).

The account of the creation of woman emphasises the mystery of the existence of Man in two sexes; the 'deep sleep' concealed the origin of woman. But she is made of the same stuff as man, a fact from which Paul (Eph. 5:28f) later draws some very practical implications. And it is no accident that this narrative culminates in the first poetry to be found in the Bible, as the man, frustrated by his failure to find a companion among the animals, cries: "This one at last, bone from my bones, flesh from my flesh; this shall be called Woman; for from man was this taken."

In the face of this story it is remarkable how often we are told that for Hebrew thought the chief purpose of marriage is the procreation of children. On the contrary, the story says everything about companionship and nothing about children. What it does imply about marriage, however, extends on and into the New Testament. First, we note that at this first marriage it

was God Himself who gave away the bride; marriage in fact entails God's giving this man and this woman each to the other. "God himself", says von Rad, "like a father of the bride, leads the woman to the man." Here is the origin of the saying of Jesus about "what God has joined together" (Mk. 10:6-9), and of the idea that husband and wife are responsible to God for how each treats the other.

Two comments by the narrator further explicate the nature of marriage. First, it is said that marriage means that a man 'leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh' (Gen. 2:24). It is being literalistic to interpret the first part of the verse as referring to a hypothetical matriarchal period in Hebrew society when a man was received into his wife's family. The primary emphasis is descriptive and aetiological: here, the writer says, lies the explanation of the intensity of love which drives a man to break even the closest ties in order to be united with woman. Love, which for the Old Testament is 'strong as death' (S of S 8:6), derives this imperative strength from the fact that it unites what was originally one. Having grasped this point, we can see that the phrase, 'one flesh', which has been so tediously explicated, is primarily not a theological one, but is grounded in the language and thought of the story itself. Yet the use of the metaphor has profound implications. It entails the corollary that divorce must be more like a surgical amputation than the termination of a contract.[10] And it is difficult to overlook that flesh is the medium through which the whole personality communicates its varied emotions, longings, joys and fears — compare, "My whole being (lit. my heart and my flesh) cries out with joy to the living god" (Ps. 84:2).

G. von Trobisch[12] draws attention to the immense significance of the 'leave and cleave' pattern of marriage within the clash of cultures that he encountered in Africa. The 'leaving' passes judgment on any marriage pattern that involves the mere absorption of either partner within the extended family of the other. The 'cleaving' implies fidelity and permanence and — ultimately — monogamy. He also utilises the insistence on companionship within the new relationship as an argument against the tendency to see woman as a breeding animal and marriage as a means of increasing the family's strength. Derek Kidner[9] sees it as significant that leaving must precede cleaving: premarital intercourse is not the biblical pattern.

The narrator's second somment is that "the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Gen. 2:25). At one level, this is a simple aetiological story: the narrator is preparing the way for his explanation that clothing is a consequence of sin (Gen. 3:7). At a more sophisticated level, he asserts that sexual shame too is a result of sin and in making this point he implies that nakedness within marriage is in some sense a symbol — even a recreation — of Man's original unfallen state. Man and woman are intended to live together in innocence and without shame. But it is difficult not to see a further level of meaning as one relates the comment to marriage. For the narrator is pointing out that the man and the woman were totally exposed to each other; their relationship precluded any sort of 'covering up'. It may not be too fanciful to refer to Paul's anticipation of a time when in God's presence he would 'know as I am known' (1 Cor 13:12) — a passage that deals, perhaps significantly, with love. Many married couples who find they have to work hard in order to achieve openness and transparency within marriage have come to see such a significance in this verse, which runs counter not only to 'Victorian' prudishness (a far wider phenomenon than the adjective implies) but to every attempt to establish a schizoid refuge by talk of rôle differentiation.

Genesis 1 and 2 establish marriage not as a sacrament but as one of God's creation ordinances, intended for Man everywhere and having certain characteristics which — not surprisingly — are found to some degree all over the world. All patterns of marriage evolved or devised by human societies are more or less imperfect approximations to the creation ordinance here described.[13]

The Fall narrative in Genesis 3 throws a great deal of light on the way in which sin has modified marriage. (Not, of course, by the introduction of sexual intercourse: *that* interpretation of eating the forbidden fruit is ruled out not only by 1:28 but also by 2:24f.) The first point to be noticed is the way in which the action of one partner affects the other. There is no hint that the man sinned by accepting the woman's initiative, for the narrative is not at this point concerned with degree and sub-ordination, but each is shown as sinning and both as a result are afraid to face God (Cf. 1 Tim. 2:14). The sequel is hostility between the man and the woman. The 'one flesh' relationship is broken as the man blames the woman (v.12) for the predicament they are in. The relationship is further damaged because the man now begins to dominate his wife and she — in spite of the suffering she endures in childbirth — to crave for him.

Kidner comments: "...control has slipped from the fully personal realm to that of instinctive urges passive and active. 'To love and to cherish' becomes 'To desire and dominate'. While even pagan marriage can rise above this, the pull of sin is always towards it".[9]

Thus it is not surprising that the Old Testament includes material which shows a degree of sexual exploitation. Polygamy was practised for a variety of reasons. The desire for a large family was clearly an important factor (cf Jud. 8:30; 12:8), so was love (2 Sam. 11), and — in the case of kings — political considerations (e.g. 1 Kings 3:1). The rights of the first wife are safeguarded in Exodus 21:10f. In the same context (Exod. 21:7-9), the rights of female slaves are stated and in Deuteronomy (21:10-14) a woman captured in war is placed sexually 'out of bounds' for a month, although the reasons for this are not clear. It may also be noted that the taboos connected with menstruation will have limited a man's sexual use of his wife or slaves.

However, polygamy is nowhere commended. The law of levirate marriage does not come under this heading (Deut. 25:5-10) and the cases of Jacob and Elkanah (1 Sam. 1:1-8) graphically illustrate the problems associated with polygamy. In the course of time, it was urged that the equality of treatment demanded by Exodus 21:10 ruled out the possibility of polygamy. It is in any case difficult to reconcile with the 'one flesh' and 'cleaving' concepts.

Exploitation is far removed from the idyllic picture of sexual love presented in the Song of Solomon and from the exhortation to loyalty and mutual joy in Proverbs 5:15-19. Proverbs refers more than once to the benefits of a happy marriage (12:4; 18:22; 19:14) and the portrait of the ideal wife in 31:10-31 shows a very competent lady exercising a great deal of responsibility. Interestingly, Paul echoes this (1 Tim. 5:14), expecting a woman to be mistress of her home. It may also be relevant to cite Abigail (1 Sam. 25) as a wife who knew how to manage affairs for her husband's good. The rich woman of Shunem (2 Kings 4:8ff) certainly seems to have enjoyed considerable freedom of action.

In respect of sexual activity outside marriage, the Old Testament makes clear distinctions and in one respect applies a double standard.[14] It is uncompromisingly hostile to every kind of sexual deviance and to adultery where a married woman is involved. The list in Leviticus 20:10-21 includes adultery with

the wife of a Hebrew (cf Deut. 5:18; 22:22); incest (cf Deut. 23:1); homosexuality between men; and bestiality (cf Exod. 22:18). Homosexuality is discussed by David Field[15] and by Roger Moss[16] (Exeter 1977), both of whom argue that the biblical prohibition, repeated by Paul (Rom. 1:27; 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10), refers to all homosexual intercourse and cannot be restricted to prostitution or the activities of bisexuals. They see the prohibition as grounded in the creation order rather than in these apparently isolated vetoes.

The prohibition of adultery with a married woman includes intercourse with one who is betrothed since this was regarded as equivalent to marriage. The death penalty is to be enforced upon both partners though an exception is realistically made if a betrothed girl is raped in the country since she was presumed to be helpless (Deut. 22:22-27). It should however be noted that the stipulation that two witnesses must be available to give evidence (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6; 19:15) will have made the carrying out of the death penalty very rare. (Num. 5:11ff describes a strange ritual for use when a husband merely suspects his wife of unfaithfulness.)

It was regarded as far less serious to rape or seduce a girl who was not betrothed. In this case, the rapist must pay a bride price of fifty shekels and marry the girl with no possibility of ever divorcing her (Deut. 22:28f) and the seducer must pay the bride price and marry her provided her father gave permission (Exod. 22:16f).

Intercourse before marriage entails the possibility that a bride might be discovered not to be a virgin. The high significance attached to virginity in a bride is seen in Deuteronomy (22:13;21) where the death penalty is prescribed, although there is also a proviso that the bridegroom who makes an unfounded allegation shall be whipped and heavily fined. In addition he must keep the slandered woman as his wife with no possibility of divorce.

How can we explain these laws? Clearly there was an economic factor involved. A wife and her children were in some sense the property of the head of the family and succession rights were involved in the case of sons. The prohibition of coveting the neighbour's wife, ox and ass(Exod. 20:17; the order is different in Deut. 5:21),would not be couched in quite those terms today. (All the same, we may note in passing, it is still true

that adultery involves theft, if not of a person then of the commitment which belongs to the defrauded partner (cf 1 Thess. 4:6). But in Israel as in other cultures the severity of the law against adultery with or by a married woman owes something to the possibility this entails that a man may have to bring up another man's child who may grow up to possess the family inheritance. Similarly, the payment of compensation to the father of an unmarried girl who has been raped or seduced is not to be seen as a fine so much as restitution for an asset lost and compensation for the prospect of having to continue supporting a daughter whom no other man will marry. The same holds good in the case of the bride who is not a virgin.

Yet something more is surely involved when Nathan does what would scarcely have happened in other neighbouring societies and denounces David's sin with "Thou art the man!". It was for a different reason that the prophetic historian comments: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (2 Sam. 12:7; 11:27). Adultery breaks the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. Not only is Israel committed to keep the covenant made at Sinai which explicitly forbids this sin so that to sin thus is to sin against God (Ps. 51:4 as traditionally interpreted). David's sin against Uriah is, so to speak, a horizontal breach of the covenant with Yahweh which should govern all relationships within the covenant community.

After the exile, we find a further insight made explicit. Malachi (2:13;16) condemns divorce using an argument which applies also to adultery as a breach of "the covenant between you and the wife of your youth". This understanding of marriage as involving a covenant between man and woman has been immensely influential. It is perhaps implicit also in the story of Hosea's relationship with Gomer (Hos. 1-3).

Malachi's words go a long way towards prohibiting the double standard in sexual morality. The words which commence Job's great oath of purgation have a similar thrust. Job declares himself guiltless of adultery (Job 31:9-12) but he goes further than this; (vs. 1-4): "I have made a solemn promise never to look with lust at a girl." Taken in conjunction with the inwardness of the tenth commandment, it shows that the Old Testament contains, implicitly at least, a standard higher than many casual readers give it credit for.

In Malachi (2:16) we read: "I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel." Certainly it is remarkable that the Old Testament contains no law of divorce. A passage in the book of Deuteronomy (24:1-4) which at first sight seems to contain such a law, turns out on closer reading to refer to the remarriage of a couple who have been previously married, then divorced and now wish to remarry. Such a remarriage is forbidden as 'an abomination' although no reason is given. It may be that the possibility of such a remarriage is seen as threatening the stability of the second marriage, which is thus strengthened by the prohibition. Here divorce is presupposed and two assumptions are made: first, that it may occur because of some defect in the wife; second that the divorce entails the drawing up of a legal document. This procedure obviously means that the husband must take time to consider his decision. But it is impossible to gather what sort of 'defect' was regarded as a ground for divorce; the rabbis were still arguing about this in New Testament times, when the school of Shammai interpreted it as unfaithfulness while the school of Hillel understood it as anything that might displease the husband. It should be noted that the woman was free to remarry although the possibility is not envisaged that she might herself seek a divorce. The only occasion on which divorce was made obligatory was when Ezra took steps to end the mixed marriages that threatened the survival of Israel's faith (Ezra 9, 10).

We have already seen that the Old Testament attitude to sexuality is one of whole-hearted acceptance; this develops quite naturally into a rabbinic view such as the following: "R. Jacob said: 'He who has no wife lives without good, or help, or joy, or blessing, or atonement'. R. Joshua of Sikhnin (Sogane), in the name of R. Levi, added that he is also without life. R. Hiyya b. Gammada said that he is not really a complete man and some say that he diminishes the divine likeness."[17]

Yet as we have seen, chastity was highly valued, and there were also many taboos connected with sexuality, referred to below. One reason for this pronounced polarity was undoubtedly the sexual element in the religions of Israel's neighbours. Cult prostitution entailed legitimising fornication and adultery as well as homosexual activity. Deuteronomy (23:17, 18; cf Lev. 19:29) refers to this situation when it forbids Israelites of either sex to become temple prostitutes. It is not at all surprising that sexual imagery ('adultery', 'fornication') is so often used by the prophets to refer to Israel's apostasy from Yahwism, since almost inevitably this figurative unfaithfulness

involved literal unchastity. In any attempt to understand the biblical view of sexuality, we must take account not only of the positive note struck in the Genesis stories but also of the negative influence of contact with what might be called the 'demonic' aspect of sexuality.

This sense of mystery and power of sexuality may underlie some of the miscellaneous laws and taboos observed in Israel. All emissions from the sex organs rendered a person ritually unclean and although one might hypotheticate medical or quasi-medical reasons in the case of morbid discharges or menstruation, it is impossible to extend this to seminal emmision. No doubt the reason for this taboo, as for the others, is lost in history, but it will certainly have inculcated either reverence for the mystery of sexuality or a feeling that sex in some way defiles or weakens a man.[18] If we consider circumcision we find a very significant innovation in Israel. Whereas some of her neighbours practised circumcision (Jer. 9:25, 26) as a puberty rite and the Hebrew word for a relation through marriage is derived from a root referring to circumcision,[19] presumably referring to circumcision as prefacing marriage, the custom has in Israel been taken out of this explicitly sexual realm and has become merely a symbol — received in infancy — of membership within the covenant community. Yet this mutilation of the male genitals, placed at the heart of the covenant relationship, will hardly have failed to affect the community's perception of sexuality.

Attempts at surgery to reverse circumcision became of importance during the later Hellenistic period, when some hellenised Jews wished to exercise naked in the gymnasium. This was in itself a break with Old Testament tradition for Israel was strongly opposed to nudity. This is a motif in the narrative of the Fall (Gen. 2:25-3:21) and exposure of the sexual parts is frequently referred to by the prophets as a sign of humiliation. (See e.g. Isa. 3:26; 47:1-3.) It is an emphatic contrast to the sexuality of her neighbours' religion when Israel prohibits the construction of an altar with steps on the grounds that this might lead to an officiating priest exposing himself (Exod. 20:26). A later requirement was that priests wear linen shorts for this explicit purpose (Exod. 28:42f). It is not surprising that there should be many other regulations affecting the priests. Physical defect would disqualify a man from offering sacrifice and among the defects is mentioned being a eunuch; but it is more significant that this condition — often associated with pagan worship — is mentioned elsewhere in isolation as disqualifying altogether from

membership of Israel (Lev. 21:16;23; Deuteronomy 23:1). We may perhaps place in the same category as freedom from physical defect the stipulation that the high priest must marry a virgin — not even a widow, although this particular restriction did not apply to the priests (Lev. 21:13f; cf. v. 7).

It is not surprising that some modern critics have been so impressed by such laws that they have categorised the Old Testament attitude to sexuality as hostile and (in a pejorative sense) puritanical. In favour of this viewpoint it is also possible to cite a substantial number of euphemisms for sexual and excretory functions.[20] Negative Christian attitudes to sexuality have undoubtedly been able to draw upon an Old Testament tradition. But this is a very one-sided interpretation for it overlooks the strongly positive treatment of sexuality within marriage which we have outlined. And when its cultural background is taken into account, the Old Testament is comparatively free from sexist tendencies.

In the New Testament we find the basic attitudes of the Old Testament reaffirmed and also transcended. This holds good in three broad areas: marriage, sexual purity and the status of women.

Although Jesus was unmarried, he regarded marriage highly. When he was invited to take sides in the controversy about what was meant by the term 'matter of uncleanness' justifying divorce in Deuteronomy (24:1-4), he formulated a principle of great importance. Although Moses had tolerated divorce, this was no part of God's original purpose but a concession to human imperfection or 'hardness'. Jesus bases this verdict on an appeal from Deuteronomy 24:1-4 to Genesis 1:27, which he interpreted as setting forth God's original and continuing purpose for marriage, that it should be an organic union ('one flesh') and thus in principle at least indissoluble. There seems no room for reasonable doubt that he did assume the possibility of divorce and remarriage in certain circumstances — unless we are to assume that 'Matthew' contains material which is wholly opposed to the teaching of Jesus. In the controversy about this 'Matthean exception', it has been all too easy to overlook the significance of the saying: "What God has joined together, man must not separate". This is usually interpreted as a pious commonplace affirming that all marriages are somehow 'made in heaven' and calling for a response only from lawyers in divorce courts, who are prohibited by it from dissolving marriages. In fact, Jesus

was doing as He so often did — throwing the disputed issue back at his questioners and demanding a response. The saying warns all who hear — including husbands and wives — against doing anything to harm a marriage. God's purpose is that man and wife should be one; to threaten this unity in any way is to frustrate God's will (Mark 10:1-10; Matt. 19:1-12).[21]

In the Epistles we find that a common ingredient in the ethical teaching is an affirmation that marriage is good and a warning against adultery and fornication (See 1 Thess. 4:3-8; Heb. 13:4; 1 Pet. 3:7). 1 Timothy (4:1-5) is of especial interest because of its explicit denial of the perverted asceticism which was later to pass as orthodoxy, regarding marriage as evil or at best an inferior state.

In 1 Corinthians (7:10) Paul refers to the teaching of Jesus and in verses 12-14 supplements it with his own, urging that marriages are not to be terminated on religious grounds. But in verse 15 he seems to permit a Christian partner who has been deserted the freedom to remarry. This stipulation is important since it seems to imply that marriage is not totally indissoluble.

Elsewhere, Paul introduces a principle which is revolutionary in its implications. It is not surprising, in view of Paul's Jewish background, that he should have disapproved of sexual abstinence within marriage, except for limited period.[22] But it is remarkable, in view of Paul's apparent views about the subordination of women, that he should state not only that 'a wife is not the master of her own body but her husband is' but also its corollary, that 'a husband is not master of his own body but his wife is'. This thesis of mutuality is so radical that many people in the twentieth century have not yet absorbed its implications.

But it is not so surprising when we read Ephesians 5:21-33. For here Paul takes the 'one flesh' motif and utilises it in a most remarkable and creative manner. We may distinguish two elements in his reshaping of this traditional concept, already singled out by Jesus. First, Paul applies it to the relationship between Christ and the church. The fact that he calls this a *mysterion* and that the Vulgate translated the word as *sacramentum*, has misled some Christians into regarding marriage as a sacrament. This is not the case. Marriage, unlike the gospel sacraments, is not required of, nor is it peculiar to Christians. Nor is a promise or gospel word attached to it. Nor is it dominical.

It is true that the prophetic tradition — we may cite Hosea and Jeremiah in particular — had spoken of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel in terms of the marriage covenant. But Paul goes further than this: he utilises not the concept of covenant but that of organic unity as expressed in the 'one flesh', a much closer bond. In addition, he uses the comparison not simply, as in the Old Testament, to show how God's people should behave towards Him, but to provide a pattern for relationship within marriage. The husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church — sacrificially. The submission shown by the wife is to parallel that of the church towards Christ. There is, of course, something repugnant to many people today about a view of marriage which sees the responsibility of the wife in terms of submission. But before we take issue with Paul, it is important to note several things. First, that in the case of both submitting and loving, we are speaking of behaviour which is obligatory for all Christians: Paul begins this passage by exhorting *all* to 'submit yourselves to one another'. If we were to attempt a legalistic approach to his words, we should find ourselves pointing out that the wife is not here instructed to love her husband! It seems as if Paul is giving not so much a general set of instructions about marriage as a statement of the implications for marriage of viewing it in the light of redemption as well as creation. The second point is that not only does Paul decline to prescribe a dominating role for the husband, since he parallels submission with love rather than e.g. leadership; he also makes an all but intolerable demand by requiring that the husband's love resemble that of Christ for the church. If we bear these points in mind, we are still left with a view of marriage that conflicts with much that we take for granted in the twentieth century western world, but it is undeniably a high and demanding one and as different as could be imagined from the sexist exploitation that has too often been confused with it.

It has been suggested that there is some inconsistency between the high view of marriage in Ephesians 5:21-22 and the attitudes expressed in 1 Cor. 7:1, 8, 9 where Paul apparently regards marriage as little more than an unfortunate necessity imposed upon those who have not the gift of celibacy, as a hindrance in the work of God and a hazard in difficult times. To understand this viewpoint, we must take account of the context. Paul is dealing with questions posed by the Corinthian church and seems here to be trying to shift their attention from the detailed matters that were concerning them to broader, redemptive considerations. He is uncompromisingly opposed to asceticism:

God has given Man a sexual nature and this requires — generally speaking — an outlet. (1, 8, 9). But it must be recognised that marriage imposes demands and responsibilities which hinder total commitment to Christian service of the kind that Paul was involved in (32-35). In addition, Paul is at this time strongly convinced that the church is facing the tribulation which must precede the *parousia*, the birth-pains of the new age, and sees in this a further disincentive to marriage (26-31). Indeed, this same reasoning leads him to counsel a 'sitting loose' to all kinds of involvement in routine living (29-31). Apparently Paul's attitude changed as the *parousia* was delayed and circumstances changed. Nevertheless, his teaching here is neither inconsistent with Ephesians 5, nor is it without relevance to Christians in certain situations today.[23]

A similar problem is posed by the life-style and by one saying of Jesus. In spite of the positive view of marriage referred to above, we have to recognise that Jesus did not Himself marry and that in Matthew 19:12 he speaks of some people as being eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. In one sense, there is nothing new about this, although it seems counter to the thrust of the Old Testament thought. For Jeremiah had been similarly situated. In spite of his warm and emotional personality, marriage had been out of the question for him because of his circumstances and destiny (Jer. 16:1-10). Ezekiel's situation following the death of his wife was not dissimilar; his mission also required him to ignore his natural impulse to mourn (Ezek. 24:15-27). In spite of this Old Testament precedent, the saying of Matthew 19:12 represents an important innovation. Although the Essenes, for example, practised celibacy, Judaism as a whole saw little possibility of fulfilment outside of marriage (see the rabbinic quotations above). Jesus, however, affirms that a person who is incapable of marriage may use the single life to God's glory and indicates a possibility of voluntarily choosing such a life in order to serve the kingdom. Although the word 'eunuch' refers to physical defect, the principle may also be applied to emotional conditions that preclude marriage but not the service of God. In fact, while the saying in no way prescribes or affirms the superiority of the single life, it establishes it as a valid setting in which the calling of God can be followed, and thus has important implications for Christian discipleship and for the status of the unmarried. The example of Jesus perfectly illustrates the thrust of the saying.

Another saying of Jesus which might be interpreted as hostile to marriage is Mark 12:18-27 and parallels. If, in opposing the crass literalism of much contemporary teaching about life in the resurrection, He denies that marriage will exist in the new age, does He not devalue it as a present reality? To pose the question thus is to answer it. To say that marriage has no place in the world to come neither denies its value in this world nor does it imply that the values enshrined in marriage will be lost. Paul Jewett comments:- "Exegetes have too easily inferred from Mark 12:25 that where there is no marriage there will be no male and female, because the theologians have traditionally understood the distinction between male and female in terms of marriage. There is good reason to argue, however, that it should be the other way round: marriage should be understood in terms of the male/female distinction, the latter being the more fundamental reality. If this is so, then it does not follow that a life without marriage and procreation is a life that knows no fellowship of male and female. In this respect it must be remembered that Jesus did not say that in heaven there will be no men and women, but only no marriage and giving in marriage".[24]

There is only one New Testament passage which, if literally interpreted, seems to imply a preference for virginity above marriage. In Rev. 14:4, the 144,000 seen with the Lamb are commended as 'virgins'. A literal interpretation would however be almost intolerable in a book which, more than any other in the New Testament, reflects Jewish attitudes and which therefore can be scarcely be interpreted as favouring asceticism. F.F. Bruce therefore suggests that by defiling themselves with women the Seer means having intercourse outside of marriage and that 'virgin' here implies purity.[25] L. Morris understands the word as a metaphor based on OT usage and implying spiritual faithfulness.[26] R.H. Charles excises the passage as secondary on the grounds that it is out of keeping with the book as a whole and that the whole section is suspect.[27]

If the New Testament endorses the Old Testament commendation of marriage (although providing for the possibility of a vocation to celibacy) and likewise urges the importance of chastity although not sexual abstinence within marriage, it similarly attaches great importance to sexual purity. The reasons for this insistence are not altogether different from those which we have seen to underlie the Old Testament hostility to the sexual mores current in adjacent cultures. For the New Testament writers also live in a culture which is overwhelmingly hostile to sexual purity.

So long as the setting is Jewish and Palestinian, there is little need for warnings against sexual sin. Certainly, Jesus tells the woman taken in adultery to go and sin no more but equally He can assume that the rich young ruler knows the commandments, including "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (John 8:11; Mark 10:17-19). In the world of Greece and Rome, however, the church faced a very different situation. Not only was fornication provided for in the worship of Aphrodite and in eastern cults, but for men in particular sexual promiscuity, hetero- or homosexual, was regarded as natural and in no way reprehensivle. William Barclay, commenting on Ephesians 5:1-8, cites Cicero's *Pro Caelio*: "If there is any one who thinks that young men should be absolutely forbidden the love of courtesans, he is indeed extremely severe. I am not able to deny the principle that he states. But he is at variance not only with the licence of what our own age allows, but also from the customs and concessions of our ancestors. When indeed was this not done? When did anyone ever find fault with it? When was such permission denied? When was it that that which is now lawful was not lawful?"[28]

It is true that even paganism disapproved of certain behaviour: in 1 Corinthians 5:1 Paul says of the man who had an incestuous relationship with his step-mother that "not even the heathen would be guilty of it". But there is plenty of evidence to confirm the black picture he paints in Romans 1:24-27. It was at this point above all that the Christian ethic conflicted most obviously with that of society in general. But it was not to be tolerated in the Christian fellowship: believers were forbidden to associate with Christians who behaved thus (1 Cor. 5:9-11). Recently it has been argued that Paul was concerned to forbid only casual and promiscuous extra-marital relationships. It is obviously true that the degree of evil involved in extra-marital sex relationships may vary, and that some relationships of this kind are associated with unselfish and loving attitudes but since the creation ordinance implies a one-flesh and unconditional commitment it is hard to see how a biblically based judgment can condone such relationships without qualification.

But it would be wrong to see the New Testament church as obsessed with sexual sin. In the same context, Paul also disfellowships Christians guilty of greed, idol-worship, slander, drunkenness and theft. Nor may we interpret this concern as arising from any fear of or hostility to Man's physical nature.

Indeed, Paul's argument against fornication in 1 Corinthians 6:15-20 is based explicitly on an interpretation of the 'one-flesh' view of sexual intercourse which emphasises its psychological and spiritual implications.[29] At no point in the New Testament is sin located in Man's physical nature as such, witness the inclusion among 'works of the flesh' of idolatry, witchcraft and jealousy (Gal. 5:19-21).

In Matthew 5:21-48 we find Jesus Himself equally uninterested in singling out sexual sin as especially heinous. His reinterpretation of the Law condemns not only lustful thought but also murderous anger, vengeance and selectivity in kindness. Yet by focusing on the inward attitude rather than the outward action he formulated a revolutionary principle. Although there are rabbinic parallels[30a] this word of Jesus modified Christian thinking more profoundly than the rabbinic sayings affected Judaism. Not only did He extend the absolute demands of God into Man's innermost attitudes and character, He also in effect constituted every human being as guilty of adultery.[31] In respect of sexual morality, as of all other, the New Testament leaves no room for self-righteousness.

No less revolutionary was the attitude of Jesus to women.[32] In spite of Klausner's claim that the status of woman in Palestine at the time of Jesus was high,[30b] it is clear that the disciples' surprise when they found Jesus talking to a woman would be a normal reation (John 4:27).[33] Jeremias points out that a woman had no right, for example to bear witness, since it was concluded from Gen. 18:15 that she was a liar. In a constantly repeated formula women were classed with Gentile slaves and children.[34] Even today, the Jewish Prayer Book includes a prayer, "Blessed art thou, O Lord... who hast not made me a woman." By the standards of His time, it was amazing that Jesus should have had a group of women disciples, referred to in Luke 8:1-3. Contrary to a rabbinic dictum that "If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery",[35] Jesus encouraged Mary of Bethany to listen to his teaching (Luke 10:38-42). No wonder women were 'last at the Cross and first at the Tomb'.[36]

In spite of the obsessively repeated suggestion that he was a woman-hater, Paul emulated Jesus in his attitude to women, as may be seen from the number of times they are mentioned by name in his letters. "He treated women as persons: we recall his commendation of Phoebe, the deacon of the church in Cenchreae,

who had shown herself as helper to him as to many others (Romans 16:1f), or his appreciation of Euodias and Syntyche of Philippi who worked side by side with him in the gospel (Philippians 4:2f). The mainstream churches of Christendom, as they inch along towards a worthier appreciation of the ministry of women, have some way to go yet before they come abreast of Paul."[37] It was Paul who affirmed that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28).

The significance of this development for sexual relationships is immense. Where the only possible relationship envisaged between men and women is an overtly sexual one, there are two possible courses of action: society either accepts a degree of promiscuity or it imposes rigid controls which limit contact between the sexes in the interests — as a rule — of safeguarding the proprietary interests of men. But by requiring an attitude of complete chastity, Jesus opened up the possibility of a new kind of relationship.[34] This relationship is in effect adumbrated in Mark 3:31-34. Here Jesus extends his family to include all who accept God's kingly rule, and having said here that these are his 'brother, sister...mother' he later promises that whoever leaves hom and possessions for Him will "receive a hundred times more houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children..." (Mark 10:30). To imagine that the New Testament usage of 'brother' and 'sister' in the community derives merely from a notional and abstract development of the concept of God as Father is to misunderstand one of the most important motifs in the Christian attitude to sexuality. When Paul tells Timothy to "treat the younger men as your brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, with all purity" (1 Tim. 5:1f), he is pointing the way to a new type of extended family which unites men and women, married and unmarried, in a new supportive relationship which offers the possibility of expressing maleness and femaleness without overt sexuality. It is no less relevant today than it was two thousand years ago.

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2 Elaine Morgan, *The Descent of Woman*, 1972.
3 *Genesis One Reconsidered*, London 1964
4 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, Old Testament Library, ET London 1972, (3rd. ed.), (a) p. 42.
5 Racine: *Phèdre* I.3.

6 'Genesis 1 strips creation of this mythological character... The God of the Genesis creation story is not one of the forces of Nature, not even the supreme fertility god or Nature with a capital N. He stands over against the world as its sovereign creator...wholly other, the transcendent God' (R. Davidson, *Genesis 1-11*, Cambridge Bible Commentary, London 1973, p. 14).

7 Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and finally — with a difference — 31.

8 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.1.41; III.2.45; III.4.54, 152.

9 D. Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, 1967, p. 65.

10 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 1952, p. 83.

11 R. Davidson, *Genesis 1-11* in The Cambridge Bible Commentary, 1973, p.38.

12 G. von Trobisch, *I Married You*, IVP.

13 For a thought-provoking discussion of the relationship between legal marriage and the marriage bond, see Paul Ramsey, *One Flesh*, Bramcote, 1975, pp. 17f.

14 In Genesis 38, Judah has intercourse with a woman he believes to be a prostitute (12-18) but is incensed when his widowed daighter-in-law turns out to have behaved similarly (24).

15 David Field, *The Homosexual Way — A Christian Option?* Nottingham, 1976.

16 Roger Moss, *Christians and Homosexuality*, Exeter, 1977.

17 Gen. R. Bereshit. XVII 2. Cited from *A Rabbinic Anthology* C.G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, 1938.

18 Two passages that may be cited in this context are Psalm 51:5 and Exodus 19:15. Psalm 51:5 has sometimes been misunderstood as implying that sexual intercourse is sinful in itself. But the parallelism between *brought forth* and *conceived* makes it clear that emphasis is being placed here not upon the sexual act but rather upon the beginnings of human existence, so that the Good News Bible is right to translate 'from the time I was born / from the day of my birth'. As for Exodus 19:15 (cf verses 10, 12, 13), this is paralleled in 1 Samuel 21:1-5. Both passages can indeed be interpreted in the same way as 1 Corinthians 7:5, where sexual activity is not regarded as in any way evil, but may be abstained from when undivided attention is to be directed elsewhere and towards more directly spiritual ends. For this view, see B.S. Childs, *Exodus*, Old Testament Library, London 1974, p. 369. But the Old Testament passages at least seem likely to be influenced by the idea that seminal loss entails the expenditure of

psychic, if not of physical force. (We may compare the nineteenth century euphemism, 'to spend'; and the neurotic segregation of athletes in training from female company.)

19 See H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (Eng. Trans. 1966), p. 203.

20 See O.J. Baab in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Nashville, 1962 S.V. 'Sex', pp. 298f.

21 For a careful discussion see NIDNTT III, (Exeter, 1978) pp. 535f.

22 1 Cor. 7:3-5. See also vss. 36-38 which are probably addressed to couples who lived together in a celibacy which, however laudable by the standards of Greek thought with its mind-matter dualism, was perverse when judged by the 'one flesh' doctrine of Genesis 2.

23 F.F. Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Free Spirit*, Exeter, 1977, p. 267, interprets this as an *argumentum ad hominem*, cf. H. Chadwick, *Jour. NT Studies* 1955 (May), pp. 261f.

24 Paul Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, Grand Rapids, 1975, p. 34. See also I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, Exeter, 1978, p. 741.

25 F.F. Bruce, *A New Testament Commentary*, Glasgow, 1969, p. 654.

26 L. Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, 1969.

27 R.H. Charles, *Internat. Crit. Commentary*, Edinburgh, 1920.

28 W. Barclay, Daily Study Bible, *Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, Edinburgh, 1954, p. 191.

29 It is usually assumed that sinning 'against the body' here implies that the physical body of the sinner is involved in sexual sin in a way that is unique and unlike that entailed in other forms of sin. But there may be something to be said for the interpretation suggested by John Ruef in his Pelican New Testament Commentary (Harmondsworth 1971): "Paul is here continuing his theme of identification with Christ through the faithful community...not only is the meaning of the sexual act perverted but the meaning of faithful membership in the body of Christ as well" (p. 48).

30 Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1925, p. 385. (a) Cited on p. 385 (b) pp. 195f.

31 We are all "below the line," for we are all adulterers, some within legitimate marriage and others outside it. Because a man does not "dissolve his marriage" in the sense in which that term is used in civil law, he cannot, on that account, pride himself on his observance of the Seventh Commandment' (Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, Eng. Trans. London 1937, p. 353).

32 C.F.D. Moule (*The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, 1967, pp. 63-66) writes feelingly about this, contrasting it not only with that of contemporary Judaism, but also with that of the apostate church.

33 Cf. the rabbinical sayings cited by L. Morris in the New London Commentary, *Gospel of John*, 1972.
34 J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, Eng. Trans. 1969, pp. 374-376.
35 *Sot.* 3:4.
36 Cf. Jewett, ref. 24, pp. 94-103.
37 Bruce, ref. 23, p. 457.