

Sexual Relationship and the Command of God¹

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I

TIME and usage often effect changes in the meaning of words and ideas, such that they cannot be employed accurately without risk of misunderstanding; they may also become charged with an adventitious emotional content which renders them embarrassing, and leads to the substitution of vague and imprecise euphemisms or circumlocutions. This has happened in the case of 'sex' and 'sexual'; I am sometimes advised that they should not appear in a public notice, or be used in the pulpit, and it is clear that the time has come when they must be rescued from the gratuitous associations with which prudery and timidity have invested them. I have to begin, therefore, with the question, What is sex?

Etymologically, and in scientific usage, 'sex' simply denotes a condition of masculinity or femininity—and there is nothing inherently disconcerting in that. But to most people to-day 'sex' suggests, and means, male and female considered with reference to the act of coitus, for which they are mutually adapted, and to all that tends towards, surrounds, or is implied by that act. Courtship and marriage come into the sphere of sex, because the one looks towards a physical consummation, while the other regularizes coition; but into this sphere also come prostitution and every kind of sexual deviation or abnormality, and complete inanity is reached in a contemporary verb, 'to have sex', which means, 'to engage in coitus'. A similar conceptual narrowing, due to this obsession with the physical, is to be seen in the term 'sexual intercourse', which is accepted in common usage and has been written into the law of the land as a synonym for coitus, although it really means the mutual social relationship of man and woman. And I have no doubt that the term 'sexual relationship' at the head of this paper will have led some readers to a confident anticipation of its contents!

For the Christian, the meaning of sex must be determined by the creative purpose of God as it is revealed in Scripture. It was God's will that man should be "good", that is, *inter alia*, not solitary. He resolved, therefore, to create man after the pattern of His own multi-personality: "Let us make man in our image"—that is, a unity of persons in relation; and so He created male and female, and "called their name Adam". 'Man' is thus a differentiated duality of male and female, a biunity, reflecting as far as finitude permits, the nature of his Creator; he is an *imago Dei* in terms of relation. So runs the later (P) account, but the earlier (J) account of the creation does not

¹ A Paper read to the Chapter of the Liverpool Rural Deanery on 3rd February, 1953.

conflict with it in essentials. There, the protoplast is not merely a male lacking a female; he is Man—though the myth must not be pressed in the interest of any theory of a primal androgyne. He is Man, and as the first Adam God casts him into a “deep sleep” during which the divine surgery is performed, and the female is created; he falls asleep as Man, and wakes as the male. The inner meaning of sex is a mystery; it is God’s secret—something of which man knows nothing until God discloses it in the way He has chosen. And we learn immediately what that way is: God brings the woman to the man; the man welcomes her with wonder and reverence, and acknowledges her as ‘Thou’—as the ‘other’, without whom he is incomplete. We are not told of the woman’s reaction to the man—and this, perhaps, partly explains why the Holy Spirit moved the Fathers of Jamnia to include the Song of Songs in the canon of Scripture. But the meaning of the passage is clear; it is by entering into relation with the woman, and supremely by becoming ‘one flesh’ with her through their coitus, that the man comes to understand what God did in that “deep sleep”—and through her relationship with the man that woman also comes to understanding.

The first point, then, of a Christian theology of sex is this: ‘sex’ means the creation by God of a humanity differentiated into male and female, whom He has destined to find the meaning of their manhood and womanhood through the relationships in which they fulfil themselves and form together an *imago Dei*. The meaning of sex cannot be discovered by means of biology and physiology (though these will tell us how the reproductive and other mechanisms of the sexes function), nor by observing human conduct, particularly in its degenerate or depraved phases. It can only be learnt from God’s creative purpose, and through relationship. This is one of the most profound facts that we have to teach our contemporaries. Sex must be understood primarily in terms of human personality, and not of physical function; it is the former that gives significance to the latter—that makes the coitus of man essentially different from that of the animals.

We must reject, therefore, not only those explanations of sex which have been disseminated by materialistic thinkers and secularists, and those crude notions which are so widely current to-day, but also those theories about sex which have their origin in human speculation, or have been propounded in the interest either of a social *status quo* or a revolution. One such theory, congenial to the feminist, is that sexual differentiation is only a superficial phenomenon, and that man and woman, though rendered dependent upon one another for procreation, are otherwise independent and mutually unnecessary. This view represents male and female as virtually two distinct, almost heterogeneous, species of the genus *Homo*. Another and opposite theory, widely current from ancient times, regards the male as the human norm, and the female as a deviation therefrom; woman, in the words of Aristotle, is *hōsper arren . . . pepērōmenon*¹—an opinion perpetuated in theology by Aquinas, who termed her, in regard to her individual nature, *mas occasionatus*,² a “misbegotten” or “deformed”

¹ *de gen. animal.*, ii. 3.

² *Summa Theol.*, I, Q. xcii, 1 ad. 1.

man. It is important to recognize that both views are single-sex views, that they proceed from situations in which man and woman have been brought into opposition and conflict by sin, and that in the latter case the theory is undoubtedly a rationalization. It cannot be over-emphasized that much of our confusion about the meaning of sex is due to the fact that questions have been asked and answers given almost exclusively from the male side, and often in the male interest—a point to which I shall revert later.

II

Having discussed the nature of Man as created by God, we can now proceed to consider what sexual differentiation means in terms of human life and relationship, and what commands God lays upon the two sexes.¹ God's call to Man is essentially a call to be human—that is, to be a 'being-together-with-others'; and this life of belongingness with his fellows attains its exemplary expression in the relationship between man and woman, of which the most significant, though by no means the only form, is the 'one flesh' union of marriage. There is no such thing as an abstract 'humanity'; Man exists either as man *or* woman, or as man *and* woman—and God's call to him is a call to find the meaning of the first aspect of human existence in the second, that is, to discover the meaning of sex through relationship.

We cannot recognize this call of God to man without making certain affirmations about sex as seen in the light of His will and purpose. First, sex is a good thing given to Man by his Creator, not merely as part of, or as an adjunct to, the procreative mechanism, but as something integral to human belongingness itself. Hence we must repudiate the Augustinian-Thomist theory that a certain (if not easily definable) element of evil is inherent in physical sexuality—for the act of coitus has been appointed as a relational instrument as well as a means of procreation. Again, God's command is concerned with Man as a whole, and not, therefore, with 'sex' in the current and restricted sense. Therefore we must resist any attempt to narrow the scope of sexual ethics and sexual theology to that which only concerns the physical, and in particular, we must guard against using the term 'moral' in a merely physico-sexual sense.² Yet again, God's command to Man demands no repudiation of, or emancipation from sex, even in its physical aspect, as a necessary condition of spiritual progress or a deeper consecration in the service of religion. It will be seen that these affirmations strike directly at certain traditional Christian or ecclesiastical assumptions which have no warrant from the Word of God, and can be traced in many cases to the impact of oriental, stoic, and neo-pythagorean influences upon the thought of the early Church in the realm of sex.

Turning now to the command addressed by God to man and woman, we see that it means, first, that each must be true to his or her own sex; each must affirm God's creation of them as male or female. One must

¹ In what follows, I have been considerably indebted to Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, pp. 127-202.

² As, for example, in the phrase 'moral welfare', which generally means the welfare of those who have sinned by the misuse of their physical sexuality.

neither deny one's sex, nor try to transcend it. Between man and woman a boundary has been set; the fact that its location may be uncertain, and has, in fact, seemed to vary from time to time, does not affect the basic truth of this proposition. God has put man in *his* place, and woman in *hers*, so that in every situation their respective approaches and contributions, their potentialities and functions, are different and complementary, and cannot be interchanged. But Man is assailed by the temptation, not only to usurp the place of the opposite sex, but transcend all sex in an endeavour to attain a condition of existence in which sex does not matter, and is at most a superficial and insignificant attribute. There can be no doubt that rejection of this particular command of God is often due to an attempt to escape from the tensions and the obligations of living in belongingness with the other sex, and may sometimes be prompted by the opinion that sexuality is inherently evil, or that the other sex constitutes a temptation to 'sin'. But however motivated, it amounts to a denial of one's essential humanity.

It must not be assumed that because man and woman are commanded to affirm their sex, and to stand as what they are, they know and can define, even in general terms, the meaning of their manhood or womanhood. That, as I have already said, is a mystery—it is God's secret. The individual, in isolation, can never explain the enigma of personal existence expressed in the questions, Why am I a man?—Why am I a woman? An understanding of the meaning of one's sex can only be mediated through relation with another of the complementary sex—and even then, it will be but an imperfect and limited understanding. When a man and a woman enter into a particular relationship (of whatever kind, it does not matter, so long as there is a genuine encounter between 'I' and 'Thou'), it is given to them to know—for *themselves* alone, and in and through *that* relationship alone—something of the meaning of their manhood and womanhood, in terms of *that* relational meeting; and the deepest understanding of all is attained through the act of coitus by which, as the Bible says, man and woman 'know' one another. But such an understanding of the meaning of one's sex is always a *particular* understanding, from which no general inference can be drawn; the meaning of sex, as such, remains God's secret, only to be disclosed and apprehended by Man through sexual relation.

The second command, therefore, addressed by God to man and woman, is a command to live in relationship and belongingness, one with the other. This command is addressed to all men and all women, and not simply to the married; men and women are human in so far as they respect the integrity of their sex, and seek one another in relation—not in so far as they are married. Marriage, admittedly, is the exemplary form, the end, and the centre of sexual relationship, but man and woman are, by the law of their nature, oriented towards one another and necessary to one another, not merely for marriage and parenthood, but for all the manifold concerns and enterprises of social and political life. God has destined them for partnership in all things, and not only in the business of procreation and of domestic affairs; the 'partner', says Barth, is not only the husband or the wife, but

the particular 'other' of the complementary sex who crosses our path as mother, sister, father, brother, friend or fellow-worker. Hence he sees the whole field of sexual relationship as a series of concentric circles, with marriage at the centre, and a vast ramification of 'decentralized' sexual relationships extending throughout human society, enriching the common life and work through the creative impact of man and woman upon one another, and the resultant cross-fertilization of mind and spirit.

If this idea of 'decentralized' sexual relationship seems, on first acquaintance, to suggest dangerous possibilities, that is mainly because our reaction to it is controlled by the contemporary obsession with sex as a physical thing. Our view is conditioned, too, by other factors. The revolt of the Reformers against clerical celibacy and the exaltation of virginity over marriage, and their partiality for Old Testament patterns of social polity and family life, tended to produce a correspondingly undue elevation of the married state, and a disproportionate emphasis upon the procreative function. Consequently it was taken for granted that sexual encounter was principally motivated (consciously or unconsciously) by a desire for physical sexual experience; and where the possibility of such experience was precluded, the tacit assumption was that men and women somehow put aside their sexuality, and met as 'neutral' beings on a 'neutral' ground—not, that is, as true men and women in a relationship of belongingness. But immediately we renounce this obsession with the physical in sex, this apprehension of coitus, this assumption that man and woman have only one thing in common and that there can be only one end in their relationship,¹ we begin to see the immense potentialities latent in the life of belongingness to which God calls us.

III

I have already mentioned the enrichment and elevation of the whole common life of mankind which could result from obedience to this command of God to the sexes to live in belongingness together. But the command is important in other respects, of which I will mention three.

First, it entails some modification of the common assumption that the unmarried are excluded from all sexual experience. From the exemplary relational experience of union in 'one flesh', and from the psycho-physical experience of coitus they are, of course, excluded by the ordinance of God under which marriage has been appointed as the only sphere in which the specific 'sexual act' is permissible. But sexual experience is more than marriage or coitus. It embraces, as we have seen, a wide range of creative and integrative relationship between the sexes, in which the unmarried can properly claim a share through their various friendships and other associations—and realization of this can go far towards mitigating the sense of frustration

¹ I wish to make it clear that in pleading for a sense of proportion in regard to the physical aspect of sexual relationship, I have no intention of undervaluing its importance in the common life of husband and wife. In this connexion I may refer to what I wrote in *The Mystery of Love and Marriage* (S.C.M. Press, 1952), pp. 54-67.

which sometimes embitters the lives of the single, particularly if they are women.

Second, it is impossible to consider the responsibility for relationship imposed upon Man by this command of God, without considering also certain typical evasions or neglects of responsibility. Barth castigates all one-sex orders, societies, and institutions, both religious and secular, as clear disobedience to God's command, unless they have the character of urgent, emergency expedients. We may feel that this condemnation is too sweeping, but we cannot ignore it. Certainly it drives us to examine many features of Church and social life. Viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*, we may perhaps justly regard Christian monasticism and the religious orders as 'urgent, emergency expedients' evolved in the face of a crisis which has not yet passed, and which may never pass. But this does not mean that we must accept them as inherently right; the command of God sets a perpetual question-mark against them, as it does against any segregation of the sexes. What then are we to say about one-sex institutions such as schools and colleges? No doubt their continuance is bound up with the maintenance of a certain social pattern, and sentiment and a wealth of androcentric argument would be rallied to their defence; but again, the question-mark stands. The family, the natural unit of society, is a co-educational institution, and co-education is certainly a powerful safeguard of the child's natural development, and a deterrent to homosexual fixations. And we may ask, in the light of His command, whether God ever calls Man, at any stage or in any circumstances of life, to a total and unqualified renunciation of every form of relationship with the complementary sex. Only one answer is possible, and by it we are bound to assess every flight from the tensions of sexual relationship into the deceptive security of a one-sex institution.

Third, the command of God is particularly relevant in the sphere of sociology and politics. No question is more difficult to determine than that of the respective roles and destinies of man and woman in society—or so it would seem, from the controversy that has surrounded it. It is well to recognize that our ideas on this subject, like many of our institutions and customs, owe their character, and often their origin, to the almost immemorial androcentricity of our society—to its domination by, and its organization in the interests of the male. To this situation woman has adapted herself, and not infrequently has found means of turning it to her own advantage; she has acquiesced in, and sometimes even contributed to conceptions of the 'manly' and the 'womanly' which flattered man and gave her power—not least, by enabling her to exploit her physical sexuality.

But from time to time she has attempted to discover her true place in the social order, and has asserted her claim to equality of treatment and opportunity; and we ourselves have seen the course and the conclusion of the most successful of these emancipation movements. Yet even in her revolt against man, woman has paid him the silent compliment of superiority, for she has always sought to emulate him, to do as he does, and to be treated as he is treated. I believe that this was an inevitable and necessary interim objective; but having virtually attained it, woman has clearly not got all she wants—her deepest needs

are still not met, and her most profound problems go unsolved. This is because the 'woman's question', as it used to be called, is inseparable from the 'man's question', which has never been raised. The theology of sex teaches us that in the purpose of God the destinies of man and woman are bound together. There can be no such thing as the 'equality of the sexes', and woman does not want 'equality' with man—except in the eyes of the law, and in matters involving human individual rights. But God has created the sexes complementary to one another, and woman's deepest (if unspoken, and often unapprehended) desire is to realize her complementariness with man, and to live with him in the relationship of belongingness for which they were destined. This, however, cannot be, until man has the humility and the obedience to his Creator to realize that his own role and destiny is not self-evident, and that he and woman together must seek an answer to this profound and insistent question. This, for men, is bound to be a hard saying.

I need only mention in passing the bearing which this has upon the question of the ministry of women. Should women be priests? That is another of the wrong questions which feminists have asked, and it is bound to elicit a wrong answer; but it is typical of the demand that woman shall not be excluded from the 'man's world'. Surely the important question—and one which has not yet been asked—is, What is the particular ministry to which Christ is calling man-and-woman in the Church?

IV

Finally, something must be said about Barth's proposition that God has promulgated an order between the sexes. He insists that in their relationships they are involved in a definite pattern of superordination and subordination which is, nevertheless, *sui generis* because it is set in the context of the new life in Christ, and because it is appointed by God and not devised by Man. The man and the woman both accept their place from God, but he is the 'head', and she realizes her humanity in submitting to his leadership and initiative. Barth illustrates this by saying that their relation is like that of A to B, alphabetically; but Dr. Kathleen Bliss has criticized this, and has suggested that if a literal analogy must be sought, it should be that of music, in which A and B, though preserving their fixed relation to each other, precede and follow one another in an intricate and orderly pattern.¹ I would extend this analogy by suggesting that we can think of the relationship in terms of key as well as of melody; there are, in life, 'A situations' and 'D situations' (in which A is tonic or dominant), and also 'B situations' and 'E situations' (in which B is tonic or dominant)—and they may be major or minor. Plutarch, incidentally, has another musical analogy in his *Praecepta Coniugalium*: the harmonious relationship of man and woman is like that of a two-note chord (in which, presumably, the man represents the bass, from which the chord takes its character)—but this is less felicitous than Dr. Bliss's analogy. She goes on to suggest that Barth's mistake is that he fails to take account of the relation of the sexes to the rest of

¹ 'Male and Female,' in *Theology*, June, 1952, vol. LV, no. 384, p. 212.

the creation. Man and woman are oriented, not only towards one another, but towards the world. While man masters nature, conceptual thought, and the arts, and thus asserts himself over life, woman interprets life, inspires rather than creates the arts, and submits to life—and both his authority and her submission have meaning only in and through life.

None of these attempts to define the order subsisting between the two sexes in relation is entirely satisfactory. Nor is the Pauline doctrine of subordination and superordination, which owes more than I think we are sometimes prepared to admit to the contemporary conception of woman's position—and, perhaps, to a reluctance to draw the obvious conclusions from the Apostle's own teaching that in Christ "there is neither male nor female", and that "neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord". A careful scrutiny of his argument in 1 Cor. xi. 3-16 and xiv. 34-35, and in 1 Tim. ii. 12f (and there is doubt as to the genuineness of the two last passages), reveals both inconsistency and uncertainty, and lends support to the view that he found it difficult to reconcile his insights into the meaning of sex and the nature of man and woman with the traditional attitudes and convictions of Judaic and Hellenistic society. His failure here is hardly to be wondered at, and it must never be allowed to obscure his remarkable grasp of some of the basic factors in sexual relationship—and particularly his profound understanding of the nature of coitus in 1 Cor. vi. 12-20.

I believe that it is premature to attempt to define the order of relation between man and woman. Indeed, I think we shall find that, like the meaning of sex itself, it is beyond definition and full comprehension. At present, no less than in the past, our approach to the whole matter is qualified by the patterns of social order with which we are familiar, and by a functional conception of the difference between the sexes. But the order which God has promulgated between man and woman, like the meaning of sex, is His own secret, which He purposes to disclose through relationship. Until man and woman, therefore, have advanced further than at present towards the attainment of their destined social belongingness, they will be incapable of understanding this order, and will simply continue to interpret the command of God in terms of their own assumptions and empirical conclusions. The order between the sexes must be discovered in and through relation, and it must be recognized that no general law can be inferred from the particular order which may be discerned in any particular relation. Neither the nature of sex, nor the character of the order between the sexes, can be stated in abstract terms; both can only be known (and then, at best, imperfectly) through the dialectic of living relationship.

I have only been able to discuss very briefly one or two of the fascinating questions which this field of studies opens up. But I hope that I have at least shown that there is a real 'theology of sexual relation', and have vindicated its claim upon our most serious attention. We have been moving in a realm quite different from that suggested by the contemporary use of the word 'sex'; yet all that I have said has concerned very nearly the relationships of ordinary men

and women, and many of the most perplexing problems thrown up by the contemporary moral chaos. It is commonly thought that the Christian Church is not concerned with sex (except in so far as it leads to the commission of sin), and that it views the subject with apprehension and distaste. It must be admitted that there is some ground for this view. But the social and pastoral concerns of the Church demand a fearless and realistic concentration of theological attention upon the field of sexual relationship in all its aspects. And there is much to encourage us. The theories of the amoral materialistic and pseudo-scientific thinkers of the twenties and thirties are spent of much of their force, and the initiative lies with us. A new theological approach to sex is beginning to emerge, bringing with it a demand for interpreters, and new evangelistic possibilities. It will not be easy to get rid of the emotional prejudices which have infected the attitude of the Church, nor will it be a congenial task to subject to a critical examination the supposedly well-grounded assumptions of centuries. But this is the challenge with which the contemporary moral situation faces us on the one hand, and the emergence of new theological studies and questionings on the other. So far, most of the initiative has come from the Continent, but a real and vitally important task awaits the Anglican Church in this land.

Parapsychology and the Christian

BY THE REV. J. STAFFORD WRIGHT, M.A.

MOST of us have a friend who knows someone who once had a queer experience. Even scientists can tell ghost stories. But if they were asked whether they thought that their stories were true, they would probably say, "Well, of course, there must be some explanation if we knew all the facts"—by which they would mean some explanation in harmony with the laws of physical science.

That is the difficulty with so many of these queer stories; they are generally not amenable to scientific investigation, and they lack that important quality of being reproducible at will, so that anyone can check them. The scientist says, "Bring your ghost to my laboratory, and I'll look through him for you". But the ghost hunter has to admit that he has no control over the ghost at all. Similarly, if a person has a sudden vision, or awareness of the death, or danger, of a friend in another part of the world, he cannot again deliberately create a similar experience to order; and unless he has obtained cast-iron witnesses to the fact that he had the vision before he could possibly have known of the corresponding event, the whole thing can be dismissed as conscious or unconscious fabrication.

Yet the scientist himself may not be altogether guiltless. Since 1882 the Society for Psychical Research has been investigating with scrupulous thoroughness the evidence for ghosts, survival of the spirit, telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition and other kindred subjects.