

Personal Standards

J I Packer

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The Standards of Sexual Conduct

God designed human sexuality not only for procreation but also for the joyful expression of love, honour, and fidelity between wife and husband. These are the only sexual relations that biblical theology deems good and holy.

Adultery, fornication, and homosexual unions are intimacies contrary to God's design. The church must seek to minister healing and wholeness to those who are sexually scarred, or who struggle with ongoing sexual temptations, as most people do. Homophobia and all forms of sexual hypocrisy and abuse are evils against which Christians must ever be on their guard. The church may not lower God's standards of sexual morality for any of its members, but must honour God by upholding these standards tenaciously in face of society's departures from them.

Congregations must seek to meet the particular needs for friendship and community that single persons have (Gen 1:26-8; 2:21-4; Matt 5:27-32; 19:3-12; Luke 7:36-50; John 8:1-11; Rom 1:21-8; 3:22-4; 1 Cor 6:9-11, 13-16; 7:7; Eph 5:3; 1 Tim 1:8-11; 3:2-4, 12).

Sexuality is a modern word that labels our biological gender, our experience of erotic attraction and mating urges, and our actions when these feelings are felt, as a single field of interest and study among the human sciences. The study itself is a very modern thing. The way we nowadays concentrate on sexuality, as if the deepest secret of life's meaning is hidden here, is historically unique. Artists, novelists,

encountered.⁵⁹

The New Testament meetings of Christians in Acts and beyond certainly *included* those elements which Campbell wishes to call ‘worship’, but they were not thereby, in the modern sense, ‘worship meetings’. If they were, we should surely find Acts and the Epistles giving them a far different treatment and greater priority. The evidence is rather that their chief motivation was the sharing of a common life in Christ and their chief purpose was to serve God in serving one another. Interestingly, Kendrick actually makes this comment in the early part of his book:

It would be quite correct to announce in a meeting ‘Let’s praise the Lord’ and then proceed to minister to one another’s needs without a note being sung.⁶⁰

Unfortunately, much of what he subsequently says overturns this insight. But at this point it seems to me he is entirely on track. In a meeting of Christians where all the time was given over to the service of one another, God would have been no less served than in meetings where no human needs were attended to and all the time was given to his praise. This is not to deny the appropriateness of our praises, but simply to highlight the response to God for which he truly seeks, for ‘Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world’ (Jas 1:27).

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59 Campbell denies that Luke shares my ‘distaste’ for worship as he himself understands it (OM p 132). However, in *Engaging with God* (Leicester: IVP 1992), Peterson notes that Luke’s only use of ‘worship’ in relation to Jesus in Acts is in the context of the ascension narrative. He continues: ‘Luke did not go on to employ *proskunein* in Acts to describe either initial acts of homage and devotion to Christ or the content and purpose of regular Christian gatherings’ (p 148). Instead, he ‘restricted the term to a quite technical usage, applying it to those engaged on a pilgrimage to honour God in the traditional temple services ... or to the practice of idolatry’ (p 148). Thus, if Luke indeed did not share my distaste, neither does it seem he shared Campbell’s enthusiasm. Instead, he reflects the theology of the Old Testament (where ‘worship’ is specifically an act of homage towards God which, if it has an earthly locus, is focused in the Temple) and the experience of the New Testament (where the Temple cultus gradually falls away in deference to a new community of believers with new ways of expressing their life in God).

60 W p 52

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Sexuality is a modern word that labels our biological gender, our experience of erotic attraction and mating urges, and our actions when these feelings are felt, as a single field of interest and study among the human sciences. The study itself is a very modern thing. The way we nowadays concentrate on sexuality, as if the deepest secret of life's meaning is hidden here, is historically unique. Artists, novelists,

journalists, educationists, pop singers, media people, psychological pundits and counsellors, harp on sex endlessly; the pornography industry is able to rake in enormous sums of money by supplying demand; the advertising industry uses sex to sell cookies, clothes, cars, computers, cruises, cameras, and just about everything else; the sex-soddenness of modern minds can only be called stupendous. This is both demeaning and disturbing, doubly so when social pressure to act out our fantasies is strong, as today it is. The sexual revolution of the sixties that cracked up promiscuity as a recreational and therapeutic good; the establishing among young people in the seventies of a sexually experimental lifestyle; the AIDS plague of the eighties and nineties; and the drumbeat insistence of our pop culture that the greatest happiness on earth is found in good quality sexual intercourse, have together turned sexuality into a topic that is at once fascinating and fearful, titillating and traumatic, in a way that is not from any standpoint healthy either for individuals or for communal life. Bringing sex out into the open was expected to dispel sexual neuroses that had supposedly gripped our grandparents in the days when lifelong monogamous marriage was, if not invariable, at least usual. The effect of doing this, however, has actually been to make us far more neurotic and anxious on sexual subjects, and to render our marriages far less contented and stable, than was ever the case before.

Out of our preoccupation with sex have come ideas that our grandparents would have seen as wacky or worse – for instance, that sexual adventures are the true path of self-discovery and self-fulfilment; that no one can be fully human without genital sex (so much the worse for Jesus, then); that marriages may properly be ended when passion dies, or is kindled elsewhere; that homosexual passions and matings are as natural as their heterosexual counterparts, and that promiscuous homosexuals may properly be proud of what they are doing, and proud to announce it, because of the courage it takes to defy the sexual establishment; and that incest, paedophilia, and pornography are not so bad after all; and that clergy who model the gay lifestyle, calling it good and holy, are perfectly fit to lead the Christian church. Compounding the confusion that these ideas reflect are:

- 1 ferocious advocacy in society designed to make gays a privileged and protected human species;
- 2 ambivalent attitudes of Christians who, feeling guilty of unloving behaviour towards homosexuals in the past, now feel bound as a kind of penance to give gays whatever they ask for; and
- 3 persistent special pleading by some few scholars to legitimize some homosexual behaviour from Scripture and church history. Bible-based

Christian clarity is badly needed in the steamy world of thought.

Biblical Theology: God's Design

Biblical teaching on sexuality, on which Anglicans, with the rest of mainstream Christianity, were unanimous till very recently, can be summarized thus:

1 Our sexual *nature*, as such, is one strand in our identity as embodied persons (souls), or psycho-physical units, as we humans are sometimes called. God means us to live out his image, in which and for which he created us, through the material bodies he has given us. As is often said, God likes matter; he invented it; the whole physical universe displays his ingenuity with it, and the mind-boggling complexity, harmony, and adaptability of the human body is not the least part of this display. As our minds make possible for us modes of thinking, appreciating, planning, and relating that are not possible to animals, so our bodies make possible modes of experience, expression, enterprise and enjoyment that are not possible to angels. Human existence as God devised it is thus more varied and wide-ranging, and richer in its creative fusion of the intellectual and the emotional, than that of any other being in God's world. Now, the proper life's work of humankind, involving all our powers and energies, is to praise, serve, and glorify our Maker, and this requires that we relate both to him and to his creatures – first among these, our fellow-humans – in appropriate ways of admiration, valuation, and love. And this is where our sexuality comes in. Marriage and family are to be the building-blocks of society, and the use of our bodies in marital sexual intercourse (love-making) is meant to be a pilgrimage of mutual excitement and shared pleasure, divinely planned 'not only for procreation' (though there is no procreation without it) 'but also for the joyful expression of love, honour, and fidelity between wife and husband'. That remains the formula for sexual action to the glory of God.

2 Our sexual *disorder* is however great and grievous, and has been so throughout the human race from the start. Humanity as we know it, in both ourselves and others, is fallen, inwardly disintegrated to a degree, and morally and spiritually misshapen. Hilaire Belloc's modern man who 'didn't believe in Adam and Eve / And laughed at original sin' is still with us, but the deepest analysis of the Western sexual mess described above is in terms of original sin in one of its many spheres of expression. Sin is in essence playing God by self-centred self-service, with a mind-set that grabs rather than gives, especially where pleasure is concerned; so it was inevitable that in a sinful world God's delightful but delicate arrangement for the simultaneous joy-getting through simultaneous joy-giving of married couples would suffer. And so it does.

Because sin is self-indulgence, and the pleasure level of sexual action is high, exploitative sex, in which one partner uses the other in order to get a good feeling, abounds both within marriage and outside it, in the world of prostitution, where feelings become in effect a commodity for manufacture and sale. Again, because sin is lawless greed, the passion to possess sexually someone who is not your mate keeps recurring; lust joins hands with the equally sinful desire to dominate, and fornication, adultery, and child sexual abuse take place, if not in the flesh, then in the heart. Once more, because sin is egoism and sexual pleasure is a short-term ego-booster, rapists and seducers force sexual action on others by physical and psychological violence, anticipating a grand euphoric glow when it is done (which glow, be it said, does not always come: see 2 Samuel 13, especially verse 15). Victims of sexual violence are sometimes called sex slaves, but that phrase would apply even better to its lust-driven perpetrators. Finally, because sin, often reinforced by both abusive relationships and inward hurts and fears, misaligns our makeup, there are always some whose natural desire for physical sex is fixed in an unnatural form – homosexual or sadistic or masochistic (that is, getting pleasure from same-sex unions, or from inflicting or enduring cruelty). So many moderns are ‘sexually scarred’ either as practitioners or as victims of sexual egoism and callousness, the ‘love’ that is really self-absorbed lust, and it would be ‘sexual hypocrisy’ (denial of the truth about ourselves) to pretend otherwise. Today’s sexual mess is universal, and one way or another we are all in it together.

3 Our sexual *sanctification*, like every other part of God’s renewing work in us, is real but not perfect in this world, and God’s servants, like others, ‘struggle with ongoing sexual temptations’ – temptations first to impurity of heart, which will then want to act itself out – all through their lives. There are, however, sources of strength for resistance, just as there is moral maturity to be gained through resistance. What Thomas Chalmers called ‘the explosive power of a new affection’ will raise the hearts of the born-again above the mud flats of lust, and enable them to stop their ears against the lie told constantly by sexual desire, namely that its gratification is the most important thing in the world. A habit of watchfulness, and avoidance of persons, places and influences that tempt; fellowship, in which one shares one’s struggles with fellow strugglers; prayer for the Holy Spirit’s help, and keeping the eyes of one’s faith fixed on Jesus as a model, mentor, and master (Heb 12:2); will make a big difference. Counselling may enable homosexuals to redirect their desires, though more often the skewed passions remain, and resisting them becomes a lifelong battle. As for married couples, they find that sustaining the quality of their mating as ‘the joyful expression of love, honour and fidelity’ is by no means as easy as it sounds. For everyone, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, living by God’s sexual standards as they

apply to oneself is a major task.

Congregations are corporately called to mutual nurture in Christ, and this requires of clergy and people together four things in the sphere of sex, as follows:

1 *Commitment* to God's sexual standards, which should be clearly taught in church; not, however, in isolation from the rest of Christian morality, nor in a legalistic way, as a workout in self-righteousness, but as part of the total truth of sanctification by the power of God. A communal cultivating of the virtues of modesty, self-control, restraint, and the capacity to feel shame, all of which our culture undermines, and all of which are integral to biblical holiness, will help very directly in establishing and maintaining this commitment.

2 *Care* for marriages, which are under constant attack in these days, and are not always seen as areas of vulnerability where pastoral support and help are required again and again. It never was the way of wisdom, and it is certainly not so today, to leave the marriages of Christians to look after themselves.

3 *Companionship* with single and homosexual individuals, for whom strong friendships with married and 'straight' Christians prove constantly to be the most potent restraints from sexual lapses. Low self-esteem, which is common among the unmarried and those with same-sex inclinations, makes people specially vulnerable to emotionally-freighted temptations, and slow to reach out in friendship to those whom they see as different from themselves, and that means that the married and the 'straight' must take the initiative in doing the reaching. This is a key element in healthy congregational life – healthy, that is, in the sense of practising authentic love.

4 *Compassion* for those who slip up sexually. While not compromising God's standards at convictional level, God's people must be quick to show neighbour-love to the pregnant unmarried, the unchaste gay or lesbian, and anyone else in sexual trouble. The pattern of neighbour-love in such cases is stated in Galatians 6:1-2: 'Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual [Paul means, you who seek to live by the Holy Spirit's power] should restore him gently, but watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.'

The Family and the Call to Singleness

The family is a divinely ordained focus of love, intimacy, personal growth

and stability for women, men and children. Divorce, child abuse, domestic violence, rape, pornography, parental absenteeism, sexist domination, abortion, common-law relationships, and homosexual partnerships, all reflect weakening of the family ideal. Christians must strengthen family life through teaching, training, and active support, and work for socio-political conditions that support the family. Single-parent families and victims of family breakdown have special needs to which congregations must respond with sensitivity and support.

Singleness also is a gift from God and a holy vocation. People while single are called to celibacy and God will give them grace to live in chastity (Ps 119:9-11; Prov 22:6; Matt 5:31-2; Mark 10:6-9; 1 Cor 6:9-11; Eph 5:21-6:4; Col 3:18-21; 1 John 3:14-15).

The idea of a family is of a stable human unit consisting of a father and a mother united in a permanent monogamous commitment, plus their children, with both generations linked to a wider kinship network (grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, in-laws, and so forth) – a network that is thought of as the family's 'family circle'. Differences from this in particular families and family patterns round the world are modifications of the basic idea. The Bible presents the family as the fundamental building-block of the human community since the world began, and lays upon us by precept and example the task of glorifying God through the quality of our family life. Anthropological and sociological research confirms that the nuclear family, 'extended' when members of the kinship network live in the family home, is society's most primitive institution, and must ever be so if the needs of child-rearing are to be met. As experience constantly shows, there is no substitute for teaching and training in the family circle if we want our children to become mature and wise adults.

In the ideal family home, children find their shelter, space, and food, their base for exploring the world around them, and their primary experience of what an old slogan called 'tender loving care' – care for their health, their growth, their standards of behaviour, their education, their reputation, their interests, their attitudes, values, and beliefs, their relationships, and their future as wage-earners, contributors to society, spouses and, ultimately, parents. In that ideal home children enjoy warm, intimate, and consistently dependable relations with their parents and others in the family circle, and are there given object lessons in self-discipline and prudence, reliability and responsibility, altruism and love, and the nature of manly maleness and womanly femaleness. There, too, they learn practical and social skills, and find patient help when in due course they reach for independent identity as adolescents, for stability in their early married years, and for know-how when their own children come along. The work of parenting, it has been said, is never finished, and in

terms of the ideal this is true. Not all homes are or can be ideal, but we need to be clear on what we should aim at.

To all that has been said the Bible adds one more vital item: that it is in the home that the faith is to be passed on. By word and action parents are to rear their children 'in the training and instruction of the Lord' (Eph 6:2). The family is to function as a spiritual unit, all of whose members pray separately and together. The [Canadian] *Book of Common Prayer* [of 1962] provides a section of 'Forms of Prayer to be Used in Families', and Anglicans not long ago encouraged each other with the slogan, 'The Family that Prays Together Stays Together'. It is the special responsibility of fathers, as heads of their homes, to take initiatives to see that this happens.

Weakening of the Family Ideal

Sadly, current socio-cultural trends in the West pull against the ideal set out above. Some of the main ways in which this happens are as follows:

1 Economic pressures, sometimes backed by feminist dogma, send mothers out to work, and keep fathers away from home through long working hours, time-consuming commuting, and required business travel. Children end up getting less of their parents' time and attention than they need, and experiencing their home as an empty and barren place.

2 Our entertainment culture isolates individuals, young people particularly, thereby reducing conversation, communication, and communal activities in the home. TV, radio, Walkmans, computers, and computer games may be harmless in themselves (that is a matter of dispute, but we can leave the question open); however, they absorb attention and so take time from family interaction, and this is likely to produce adults with less emotional maturity and less fitness for adult relationships than would otherwise be the case.

3 The retreat from monogamous marriage to common-law liaisons and easy change of partners through divorce and remarriage devalues and destabilizes family life, and the children suffer. One-parent families, no matter how devoted the parenting, inevitably lack something, for mother cannot give the children what father should give, nor *vice versa*.

4 The commercially driven youth culture, with its drumbeat insistence that teens should not expect their parents to understand them or feel with them, and so should concentrate on peer-related living, has a cooling effect on family fellowship. This effect is bound to continue.

Domestic violence is often the bitter fruit of emotional immaturity in

married persons, who as adults still experience the blind self-absorbed tantrums of young children and hit out accordingly. More of it must be expected as the maturing ministry of family life is further undermined.

Christians Must Strengthen Family Life

In saying this, the *Declaration* identifies a pressing duty, but being a prophetic rather than a political document it limits itself to generalizations about how this may be done ('through teaching, training, and active support, and work for socio-political conditions that support the family'). It is really up to each congregation to discern what is the best it can do to help its own families and those in its sphere of influence to come closer to the ideal, revaluing and reinvigorating themselves in face of current anti-family trends. A weekly 'family evening', when all members of the family enjoy themselves together, would in many cases be a good start, and in general the more eating, talking, playing, and doing projects together that the family can manage, the better. Some families will need first aid, to restore broken relationships, and members of congregations should be ready to help in this. In Christian homes, seeing discipleship to Jesus Christ as a family project, challenging yet exciting, and helping each other forward in it, must always be part of the pattern, and supporting 'single-parent families and victims of family breakdown' is often most effectively done as a family enterprise.

Singleness

The modern world sees adult singleness as a second-class way of living. Monastic and clerical celibacy were once advocated as a higher life because of Paul's statement that the unmarried have fewer distractions in serving the Lord (1 Cor 7:32-5), but this idea has little credibility today. Paul's other statement, that those who find in themselves a need to get married should do so (1 Cor 7:8-9), is the word that weighs the most, and in our churches there are so many who want to get married, for companionship, for children, or for sexual relief, or, more often, for all three together. This is natural, doubly so among disciples who understand the exalted vocation of the Christian family as set out above; yet some will be disappointed and frustrated in their desire, for no suitable partner will appear. Reminding singles that some are called to lifelong celibacy (see Matt 19:12), and are in fact enabled to sustain it without sexual sin (see 1 Cor 7:1, 7-8) and to use their single condition for freer and fuller ministry, is part of the church's task, while building friendships with the married that support them through the loneliness of their single life is something that all Christians should be ready to tackle.

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