The Ethics of Sex in the New Testament

MARRIAGE THE NORM

1. It defies. According to our Lord's teaching, it is what comes out of a man which deifies him and thus makes him unfit to approach God. From within, from the heart, come all these evils - and the long list in Mark 7: 20-23 (Mt. 15: 18-20) includes theft, murder, adultery and porneia. Apart from this, there are a variety of ceremonial defilement from without, that seems to have taken upon itself. Such a view would be an affront to a public opinion which regarded illicit sex as evil. 'We were not born to the flesh, but to the spirit,' said the Jews with indignation (Jn. 4: 23, 24). Wives are to be subordinated to their husbands and husbands are to love their wives. These two injunctions must not be separated but taken together. (husband and wife; love and subordination), let not man (he-man or human) put asunder (Mt. 19: 6).

2. Marriage, then, is the normal rather than the exceptional. But there is room for celibacy. In reply to points raised by the Corinthians Paul asserts that it is for the propagation of Gospel (1 Cor. 7: 2-7). In this spirit of the New Testament Christianity is not only spiritual but also physical. Human and wife should render to each other their physical due (1 Cor. 7: 3-4). This other does not derive except (1) by agreement; (2) temporarily; (3) for a specific purpose, prayer; (4) with a view to resumption.

ILlicit SEXUAL ACTIVITY

All this is within Christian marriage. But there are such persons as the pornos and the porne, who are sold to the lusts of the flesh. These words, I believe, interlocutory, and reflect to illicit sexual activity, fornication and adultery. (References to support the interpretation: 1 Cor. 6: 9ff.; Eph. 5: 2); Am. 7: 17; Je. 3: 2, 3, 7, 8 all in LXX.) We must therefore consider what the New Testament has to say about 'every kind of licentiousness' (W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 1957, p. 669).

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Charles Gore, 1928, Pt. III, p. 88.)

(f) Further, don’t associate with it (me odwocoseio, 1 Cor. 5: 9-11). The rule is not absolute, or the Corinthians would have to depart from the world. You could not move far in Corinth without encountering sinners. Bishops, including such tasks as shopping — must be carried on; but there should be no social friendliness or Christian fellowship with notorious sinners (1 Cor. 5: 11). This is partly discipline, no doubt; but Paul may well have had in mind also the fact that ‘bad company ruins good character’ (1 Cor. 15: 33). This is the cloister in the world.

(g) Further still, don’t even speak of it. vióde onanazésethe en heimín (Eph. 5: 3). How terrifying is the word sin in details may make us familiar with it, and this could be the first step to its practice. The Victorians were not entirely wrong.

(h) Finally, to sum up, it is against the law (1 Tim. 1: 9f.). The Christian man does not want to offend by his presence. Christ is the end of the law. But the porneías need the message of the law — in this case the Decalogue.

3. Politically, into a positive direction. porneía has many and varied forms and temptation is everywhere. In view of this he advocates marriage for each man and each woman. This is not a concession to the flesh but a pastoral directive. Not everybody has the charisma for the unmarried state; marriage is natural and is a divine institution. Let them therefore embark on Christian marriage.

4. Illicit sex will be judged. ‘Marriage is honourable among all.’ (Keep this counsel, 1 Cor. 7: 1). The seriousness of such a judgment is shown by the fact that those who perpetrate unlawful sexual conduct will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5: 21; Eph. 5: 5; Rev. 21: 8; 22: 15). How terrifying is the word evil! This truth should be proclaimed from the house-tops.

5. Now why is this kind of sin so serious? It is because:

(a) porneía is the death of the deeds or products of the flesh. If ‘body’ means ‘man as made for God’, ‘flesh’ means ‘man in his distance from God’ (A. T. Robinson, Worship in Pauline Theology, 1952, p. 31). As Calvin said, ‘flesh’ means all that is not in Christ. It may indeed stand for the human person as such (‘the Word was made flesh’) or be used in the neutral sense of ‘human nature’. It may mean ‘pre-Christian’ or ‘before conversion’ ‘when we were in the flesh, in our sinful and self-righteous past’ (Rom. 6: 11). It may mean ‘bodies of lusts or passions’ (1 Cor. 5: 3). It may mean just sinful, impure activity — as old Adam suggests a bridgehead for sin, the corrupting element, the involuntary accomplice rather than the criminal (W. J. Davies, Paul and Roman Judaism (1948, 1952) p. 19). However we describe this elusive word, we see its characteristic work in Romans 7. There we see man under the law as viewed by the man freed from the law (cf. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ET by G. W. Bromiley, I, 1964, pp. 311, 384).

(b) Such a sinner sins against his own body (1 Cor. 6: 18). He violates the temple of the Holy Spirit.

(c) He breaks away from Christ. Shall I donc apart members (limbs) of Christ and make them porneiés melé? (1 Cor. 6: 15).

(d) He unites with a harlot (1 Cor. 6: 16). He becomes one body with her. This is reminiscent of Genesis 2: 24 and Matthew 19: 5. The result is a sort of counterfeit marriage. In the nature of the case it is only temporary and only physical. But a marriage has been set up and there is a permanent bond between them, whatever their future course. Sin is thus committed against the divine institution of marriage.

(e) The body is not for porneía but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body (1 Cor. 6: 13). He has right in it now and we ought to use it. ‘In a good and use­ful way’ (2 Cor. 8: 9). Its resurrection is placed in jeopardy.

6. But there is a gleam of hope. The judgment may be averted. Even porneía may be the instrumentality of God (1 Cor. 6: 12; cf. Rev. 2: 21; 9: 21). And Paul could look round the church at Corinth and without mentioning names could remind them of the trophies of divine grace in their midst. Porné will not inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But God had washed, sanctified, and redeemed your bodies in flaming splendour — you had yourselves washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ — and staying with Him. ‘Go and sin no more.’

DIVORCE

We must now consider the question of divorce. Is marriage binding until death us do part or are there reasons in which a separation of marriage may take place? In this discussion we ought not to forget that Joseph is described as a righteous man who nevertheless intended to divorce Mary (Mt. 1: 19). Could a righteous man still divorce his wife?

The relevant references are Matthew 5: 32; and the Markan tradition of Matthew 19: 3-12; Mark 10: 2-12; and Luke 16: 18. Decision largely turns on the exegetical phrases parektos logos porneías in Matthew 5: 32 and mé epi porneía in Matthew 19: 9. They seem to be widdily attested. Stauffer in a fine exposition of marriage (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, I, p. 650) states ‘Matthew . . . in both cases introduces a qualification which blunt the saying and is obviously designed to justify practices which are, conformably to the . . .’. These casuistic clauses can hardly derive from Jesus. This is a value-judgment rather than textual criticism and it would be obvious only to certain persons, and I am not sure that it is not petitio principii.

The disciples’ reply, which T. W. Manson characterizes as insolent as well as spiritually blind (The Sayings of Jesus, 1949, p. 215), prompts the rather neglected statement of Jesus: Not all chérósion ton logon touton all’hous dédota. Not all have room for ‘this word. The verb is used in John 2: 6 and 21: 25 (in the former ana is adverbial); cf. A. Schlatter, Der Evangelist Johannes, p. 69), and in 2 Corinthians 7: 2. It appears with abstract nouns in 4 Maccabees 7: 6 ‘thou didst not befriend with unclean meat thy belly that had room only for purity and purity’. Not all have room for this word; it is thus only for those to whom it has been given. This reminds us of the charisma of office and power and the analogy, rigorism in the matter of divorce is a gift. But what of those who have been denied the gift?

3. Politically, to see the divine idea in view of an existing situation, the hardness of heart of men. So, can we argue, our Lord saw that some, not necessarily with hardness of heart but with lack of gift, could fall short of the divine ideal if faced with evidence of a marriage partner’s porneía? Could separation be followed by re-marriage? It would seem that, after every effort has been made for the salvation of a partner, if he or she separates it is to be allowed to take its course. In such instances the partner who is left is bound not to separate (ou dedoublías: 1 Cor. 7: 15). This is an agonising situation for partner and pastor alike: not the ideal, certainly not the rigorous ideal for those with a ‘gift’; but freedom to serve Christ in a new Christian union.

I do not proclaim all this with a ‘thus saith the Lord’. I submit it for the discussion of learned and Christian brethren.