

**“Breaking the Silence:  
Beginning a Conversation about Sexuality in the Church”  
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman  
First Baptist Church, Raleigh  
Sunday, September 29, 2013**

**Introduction - Why Would We Talk about This Subject?**

I shared the following story at the last deacons meeting, and even though one deacon suggested that I upgrade my humor, the story bears repeating. An older ladies’ Sunday School Class in the church I served in Richmond in the 1990’s had just finished a lesson shaped by Smyth and Helwys literature. I don’t remember what text was used but the topic related to sexuality in some way. Bernice, who was 85 at the time, was undone. “Here I am studying a lesson on sexuality for the first time in my life. I’m 85 years old and I’m still a virgin!” “Well, Bernice,” one of her classmates replied, “Are you bragging or complaining?”

I will not comment on the question with which this story ends, but I share this story at the beginning of this series because it illustrates a simple reality – we haven’t talked very much about sex in the church. If a faithful church lady, virgin or not, can reach the age of 85 before studying a single lesson, something is wrong. How many lessons have we studied, how many sermons have we heard, how many Wednesday night programs have we attended which dealt with sexuality? Charles Petty recently led a Wednesday night study and provided an overview of Biblical texts, but this was a way of setting up this series.

We haven’t talked much about this topic, at least not in an intentional way with the whole church. If we have talked at all, it has been in small groups or with friends we trust will share our biases, and often much of our conversation has been negative and highly anxious. To be clear, when I say “we,” I am referring to the Church with a capital C, not just our church, but THE Church, all churches. The Church hasn’t talked about this subject very much and our silence is a large part of why we have difficulty talking about the more controversial and

emotionally-loaded sub-topics. Anything that is buried for this long, yet a part of everyday life, takes on layers and layers of extra power because of the secrecy. It is long past time we break the silence.

So, why do we need to talk about sexuality? To begin with, because it is such a central part of life. It's not just Freud and contemporary American society who are obsessed with sex. It is all of us, whether we admit it or not. There is a continuum of interest which varies throughout certain life stages and we are not all exactly the same. I'm not suggesting that everyone is thinking about this subject all of the time. But it is a part of life for all of us and anything this central to our existence involves responsibility and thus merits reflection from a Christian perspective. If our faith informs all of our decisions and actions, how can we leave out this part of life?

But we need to talk about this subject not only because it is such a central part of life, but because it is a gift from God, indeed the first gift noted in scripture, and like all other gifts, this one comes with privileges and responsibilities. Genesis 1:27 says that on the sixth day of creation God created humankind in God's own image, male and female God created them. In other words we are gender differentiated right from the very beginning. We are sexual beings. It is God's first gift to us and since at the close of this day of creation, God says it is very good, we have to assume this word of affirmation applies to the whole of who we are, including our sexuality.

But, as I say, with all gifts come privileges and responsibilities. Back to Genesis 1, the text says we are made in the image of God. What distinguishes us from other parts of creation? What is unique about human beings? What does it mean to be made in the image of God? Some suggest the difference is that we have souls while other creatures do not, but in Jewish thought we do not have souls, we are souls. There is no dualism between body and spirit. Further, in the Hebrew, the animals are *nephesh hayah*, living souls. Our uniqueness in the text is not related to the matter of soul. It is related to something we have that no other part of creation has – dominion or responsibility.

The critical question is as to what exactly this implies. Some say this means we have power and authority over all the earth, the right to do

as we please. God has put us in charge. In reality the concept involves more of a sense of responsibility to care for the earth and all its inhabitants with the One who made it. We are stewards, not owners, according to this sacred narrative; we have a place of privilege, but in this capacity we have much responsibility.

So it goes with all gifts, especially the gift of sexuality. With the gift comes both privilege and responsibility. Thus, we need to be aware of what this involves, we need time and space to learn and grow, and this requires that we break our silence.

We need to talk about this subject because it is such a central part of who we are and a vital part of how God has made us, how God has gifted us. We also need to talk about it because there is so much woundedness related to sexuality. Almost all studies agree that somewhere around 1 out of every 4 women in our culture have been or will be abused at some point in life. Much of this abuse is sexual and almost all has some gender component. 1 out of 4, that's a lot of people. Men are not immune to abuse either. Nor are church members immune.

It seems silly to say that, but I have to say it because sometimes we function as if these issues are out there in the world, not right here in the church. They are out there and right here. So, there is a great deal of woundedness if we only consider various forms of abuse.

Yet the woundedness is not restricted to matters of abuse. It also includes people who function with minority identities – gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered – no matter how we understand them and no matter what we think sacred tradition says about sexual identity. In the third week of this study, Diane Lipsett will explore in detail some of the texts that must be considered in this realm, so I don't want to go too far down the path of biblical interpretation on this point this evening, but no matter how we come out on these issues, and we will not all agree, real people still struggle with these issues every day, feeling like who they are is not understood or accepted; experiencing bullying and abuse; being denied certain rights and privileges others receive.

I cannot tell you the number of individuals and families I have tried to care for over the course of 31 years of ministry wherein these issues have been at the heart of the struggle, but I have to confess that

this is also a very personal issue for me. I recall the friend whose murder was never fully investigated because he was one of *them*, one family member who nearly took her life and another who took his largely due to challenges of self-acceptance related to identity, a church member in another setting who suffered through horrendous side effects of black market transgender surgeries he pursued because traditional surgery was so expensive, and so many more stories of family conflict, alienation, hostility and violence. No matter where we come out on biblical interpretation, real people are hurting.

But lest some of us feel left out on the woundedness list, it is not only the abused and people with minority identities who struggle with matters related to sexuality. I have been asked to help care for almost as many people who struggle with deeply painful and debilitating matters of guilt and shame related to sexuality simply because of the bad messages they received somewhere in life, often as children or adolescents. Whether these words were used or not, the lessons many people have learned are that sex is bad or dirty, some sort of necessary evil; that it shouldn't really be enjoyed, especially by women; and that it's best just not to talk about it, much less do it!

To be sure, there were more subtle and refined forms of the message, including the notion that it is bad and dirty until marriage, then you just turn a switch and everything is "O.K." Well, not everything... but it's not quite so bad. Still, the takeaway leaves attachments of guilt and shame even when people no longer believe the teaching. A change in cognition alone does not remove the residue of emotion. So, many people struggle in this way, because guilt is the gift that keeps on giving, and Catholics are not the only ones who gifted with guilt!

There is a wonderful scene in the movie *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* in which one of St. Francis' followers sees a woman kneading bread while bending over and revealing a bit of cleavage and obviously the follower lusts after her. He falls to his knees in confession and repeats through tears over and over again, "Father, forgive me! Father, forgive me! Father, forgive me!" Francis comes along, touches the man gently on his shoulder and says, "I think He heard you the first time." He then proceeds to say that celibacy is not for everyone. Perhaps he should

marry and thus, prove faithful and experience God's pleasure in another way. It is a wonderful comment on forgiveness but also the depth of guilt that is stirred by matters related to sexuality.

If so many people are wounded in so many different ways related to sexuality, and we really believe the church is called to respond with healing wherever there is woundedness in the world, our calling here seems pretty clear.

Last but not least, we need to talk about this subject because silence does not help. Having a conversation like this doesn't guarantee that all wounds will be healed, we will all eventually agree on the most difficult issues, and thus at the end of night 4 we will hold hands and sing Kum Ba Yah. But talking doesn't create challenges that don't already exist. If we do this poorly, we can make some things worse, but we can also make many things better by creating space for voices to be heard, wounds to be named and joyful possibilities to be discovered.

Furthermore, a "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy in all of the areas I have named and many others (such as human trafficking, prostitution, pornography, sexual addiction) benefits no one on a practical level. And on theological level, I cannot find the place in scripture where pretense and hypocrisy are recommended qualities for Christian community. Rather we are called to drop the masks with each other, be who we are, share our gifts and wounds, be honest, care for each other and challenge each other to grow.

### **How We Will Talk about It**

So, enough talk about why, how will we talk about this subject? Carefully, very carefully, honestly, but very carefully with some boundaries and guidelines agreed upon up-front. With any topic that is as emotionally-loaded as this one, we need to be careful. We cannot pretend that emotions are not involved and thus will not be allowed in the room. But we need to name and manage our emotions and employ some principles which will help create safe space for all to participate.

What we are talking about is civil discourse, something that is almost non-existent in this day. But at this point we have an opportunity

to model something good and healthy for our culture. Rather than simply reflecting the values of our culture, where the one who shouts loudest and most often gets heard, we can offer an alternative – space where people speak and listen respectfully, where everyone’s voice matters, where no one need walk away feeling more wounded, and where everyone has an opportunity to learn and grow.

So, what does “careful” mean? First, clarity with regard to goals is helpful. We have designed this series as an educational process, not a decisional one. No votes are planned, no changes in the character of the church are envisioned, no decisions have been reached already such that what we are doing is simply allowing you to catch up on something we, whoever “we” is, have already decided. There is no agenda other than the agenda of learning more about what we believe and what informs it, and what others believe and what informs their belief.

Does this mean we are guaranteeing that the church will never make any decisions vis a vis any of these issues? No. No one can guarantee that. In fact, that would constitute a kind of agenda, a predetermined decision for the church, by which the future church would not be bound to abide. What we can say is that our goals are educational, our methods will confirm that these are the goals and the proof will be in the pudding. I say all of this because trusting the process will help free us to participate in ways that will lead to growth.

So, clarity with regard to goals is helpful and so is clarity about our methods. There will be some presentation up-front each week. This week, you are stuck with me and you have read about the presenters who will follow, both virtual and live presenters. The hope is to provide substance and focus for the second half of each study which will feature you in dialogue and conversation. In a way, your wisdom is the real wisdom on the table, your questions are the most important questions, your hopes and fears are central. But around some of the topics, we want to provide some knowledge base for the conversation.

A member of another church once told me that a series a colleague had designed didn’t provide enough substance up-front. “All we do in our group,” she said, “is pool our ignorance!” Most of us have had that

kind of experience, but it won't happen here because none of us is ignorant on this subject and we will provide some substance up-front.

Yet, while it is helpful to seek clarity with regard to goals and methods, the heart of our sensitivity needs to lie in how we talk with each other and here I would call attention to some principles Carter shared in an email and then add a thought. In the email, he notes that there will be facilitators in the small groups and he has spent time preparing them for this task. We are grateful for this extra level of commitment... The facilitators will help keep each group mindful of the principles which are as follows.

- When we learn together we treat each other in a Christ-like manner.
- No one has a monopoly on understanding or truth.
- We must listen to one another with respect so that everyone has the opportunity to share.
- No one is forced to share anything he or she chooses not to share.
- We must assume every Christian has integrity and treat each other accordingly.
- We assume that we will sometimes disagree and that is OK.
- We accept our differences with each other as friends and strive to learn from each other.

It is a great list and if we can treat this list as a kind of covenant, we will free everyone to participate and have a good experience.

The only thing I would add is that a covenant like this only works if we hold each other accountable. I say this because I have been here before in many types of studies and almost always, no matter how hard we try, we at least bump up against the edges of some rule and have to choose either to ignore what we said we agreed on or check ourselves and get back on track.

In a similar conversation in another setting, one dear friend who remains a friend to this day, made an angry outburst in a large group setting. Tension filled the room, I allowed a brief silence so that

everyone could take a breath, but before I could speak another church member made a light yet loving comment that got us back on track. The boundary crossing was not ignored but nor was the man demeaned. A little emotion came out, we clarified our agreement and moved forward.

The next week my friend met me at the coffee urn after dinner before the study began. He said very solemnly, “My wife says I made an ‘a’ double ‘s’ of myself last week.” After a brief silence, I said, “Are you waiting for me to confirm or deny.” He laughed and said, “No. I just got a little worked up. I know my views on some of these things are different from yours and those of many of our members, but it doesn’t mean I think any less of you or them. I just don’t know that I can ever get to the place where I agree.” “That’s not a problem,” I said, “Agreement was never the goal. Talking to each other, more honestly, like this, was.” It was one of the best conversations I have ever had.

There is one other thing I feel a need to say about how we will have this conversation. Humor will be allowed, as I have tried to demonstrate already. There is much joy here and where there is heartache, we can’t cry all the time. Laughter can be cleansing. But we need to practice the same level of sensitivity with our humor that we practice in every other way. Every issue we talk about, every issue I have named, will be more than an academic issue for someone in the room. Is everyone with me here? Just think about this always, especially in regard to humor.

Most insensitivity comes from just not thinking. For example, in 2009 during the worst of the recent economic recession, a pastor of a mega-church in Texas called for a week of “congregational copulation” as a kind of stress relief. I am not making this up... He urged every married member to enjoy the bonds of matrimony without thinking about how many of his married congregants were struggling with various emotional, physical and relational challenges that would make this request/command sound more like a curse than a blessing, not to mention those not married (roughly half of most churches). How could a pastor be so insensitive? The irony is that at the end of the week the good pastor had to confess that he had been unable to take his own advice due to an overload of work and subsequent fatigue.



TMI, I know... So, let's just think before we speak and listen with our hearts and allow the Spirit to make something good of this.

## **A Framework for Christian Ethics**

So, with all of this in mind, what do we want to say about sexuality and sexual expression and how does our faith inform our beliefs and practices in this arena of life? In dealing with any ethical or theological issue or subject, there are a number of sources of information to consider and different ways to organize the sources, but one of the most common frameworks for understanding is the Wesleyan Quadrilateral developed by John Wesley. Wesley said there are four primary sources for Christian decision making - scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

Some argue that in Baptist life there are only three sources because we don't value tradition as authoritative. This is a matter of semantics. We have all sorts of traditional ideas, such as how to do Baptism and which hymns are the good old hymns, that we treat as if they have great authority. No matter what name we give to such beliefs and no matter what category we place them in, they still shape our decision making.

So, our decisions about any matter, including sexuality, will be shaped first by scripture. What does the Bible say about this subject and what does it mean? Obviously how we understand a text, how we interpret, makes a great deal of difference, as does the matter of which text or texts we are willing to consider. We will talk about these things more. For now, suffice it to say that interpretation is critical. The old mantra, "The Bible says it, I believe it and that settles," doesn't work because the Bible says so many things about any subject. Yet, however we understand the texts, as Christians we have to consider the texts, those which confirm our biases and those which do not.

Second, our views will be shaped by the traditions of our faith. For most of us in Baptist life, this means sermons and Sunday School lessons, things we have heard all of our lives, things we have been taught. We may not be able to name specific teachings about sexuality, but even if we cannot, the way we read the texts and even which texts we consider, is shaped by tradition, whether we realize it or not.

Third, our beliefs and actions are informed by reason, knowledge, information, learning that applies to any area of life. It just makes sense that we use the knowledge we have. Doing so doesn't shut out the voice of scripture. God gives us minds and asks us to use them. Part of how we do this is by benefitting from the growth of knowledge.

The obvious challenge comes when new knowledge seems to conflict with some idea in scripture which has been presumed to be sacred and unchanging, for example, when we learned that the earth was not the flat center of the universe. It took quite some time to sort out what to do with this new knowledge in relationship to faith. So, if we have learned new things about sexuality through biology, psychology and other sciences, there will be similar challenges ahead.

Fourth, again in Wesley's scheme, beliefs and actions are informed by personal experience. No matter what we believe scripture says, tradition teaches and reason asserts, if our experience does not square with all of this, we may come out somewhere different. Does this mean that our subjective experience trumps everything, including God's Word? No. But it may mean that our experience calls us to reconsider what we think God says, even through scripture.

For example, scripture contains 326 references to slavery, all but 2 of which either condone slavery or accept it as a cultural reality. The Genesis narrative talks about a curse being put on Ham after they flood. Assuming Ham was dark skinned, many interpreted this text as an affirmation of the inferiority of dark-skinned people and after considering the cumulative evidence about slavery, concluded that enslaving people of African descent was not only "O.K." but the natural order of things, a practice blessed by God. A re-reading of the texts as guided by reason and personal experience has led to a different view!

Ethical decisions are shaped by scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Yet I'd like to add 2 considerations. First, in the realm of experience, relationships are critical. The people we know change our perspective on life. Whatever we think about issues like race, ethnicity, world religions and sexual identity, the real people we know who wear any identity of "other" from us have a profound impact on our beliefs.

Second, responsible decision making that pays attention to all of the areas of information I have named still has one other thing to do in a Christian context - we ask for the Spirit's guidance in all that we do. In John 16:12-13 Jesus says there are many things he would teach his disciples but they/we are not ready to hear them. Thus, God will send the Spirit to guide us further into truth. God didn't die or lose God's voice when Jesus ascended or when the canon was closed. God is still alive and God still speaks through the Spirit who is with us always.

I say all of this to help us reflect upon what we believe about certain matters of sexuality and to understand better what others believe. Sometimes people we know and love, people who know and love God and Jesus just like us, people who read the Bible and value its wisdom, believe something different from us even about sexuality. Understanding how and why is critical to our experience of Christian community and the process begins with being more reflective about why we believe what we believe. It is rarely as simple as we think.

I have shared with some of you the story of a project I had for an evangelism class years ago. I was in a small group which had the assignment of assessing the worship service at a large evangelical church as a stool of evangelism. I warned my classmates that as soon as the pastor learned where I was on staff, we might have a problem. They thought I was being paranoid but as soon as the pastor learned where I was on staff, there was a problem. Still we continued the interview and I tried to find some connection with this fellow minister. Ironically he said worship was not a tool of evangelism. It was the time when decisions of faith were celebrated. The real work consisted of personal witnessing and with a very specific approach.

At this point, I asked him how he had come to Christian faith. He paused and told a moving story about having grown up in a dysfunctional home. Addiction and abuse were commonplace until strangers came knocking at his home and witnessed to his parents who then became Christians and were genuinely transformed. His young life changed dramatically for the better and in time he too came to believe.

At this point, I asked him if he had ever considered how much this experience had shaped his view of evangelism. There was a long

silence. Emotion filled the room. Obviously he had never made this connection before. The wall between us had fallen. But just as quickly as it had, he put it back up and returned to the interview. He was not interested in an enduring connection.

We have all sorts of strong views about many issues in life, especially sexuality. Where did these views come from? Reflecting on this question is critical for our health as individuals and as a church.

### **What the Bible Says**

So, what does this Bible say? More than we can consider this evening, but I want to say a few words in the way of overview, offer some guidance about interpretation and then explore a few passages.

First, with his permission, I have copied the handout Charles Petty provided for his Wednesday night program in the spring. You don't get what Charles said about these passages, you will have to talk to Charles and pay extra for that, but this provides an overview of passages for those looking for a little light bedtime reading. You can even pick your topic depending upon whether you are interested in a little inspiration or feel a need to confirm your judgment of someone else.

The only thing I would add is that this list doesn't include every passage. For example, Malachi 2:13-17 details God's dislike of divorce and names unfaithfulness as the culprit. Amos 2:7 condemns the sin of father and son having sex with the same slave girl. Apparently they should choose separate slave girls... Anyway, there are many texts and it is worth noting, just in the way of overview, how many texts speak to certain sub-topics and which ones Jesus addressed in any way.

So then, let me offer a few words about interpretation. We all do it. We all interpret scripture whether we realize it or not. For starters, if we are reading an English translation, we are already interpreting because, as Elmo Scoggin used to say, every translation is an interpretation. And make no mistake, in some of the most talked-about texts which relate to sexuality, translation makes a difference.

But so does understanding the text, appreciating its context and assessing the distance between any cultural assumptions and ours. I

have already noted the volume of texts which address slavery in some way and basically none in ways that speak a final word of truth from God on this subject. Consider also a passage like Deuteronomy 22:28-29 which says that if a man rapes a virgin who is not betrothed, he must pay her father 50 shekels of silver, marry the girl and never divorce her. That may have been experienced as justice in some time but not in ours. In like manner, that passage in Amos about a father, son and the same slave girl we would have to see as a culturally limited form of justice.

Reason and experience and the teaching of the Spirit require that as we consider certain texts, we assess not only what they say but what they mean, and how they functioned in their contexts in relationship to how they do or do not in ours. In addition to all of these things, there is a need to be consistent in our interpretation, aware of all texts that might speak to the subject, and cognizant of the movement or progressivity that is found within the canon. All scripture is authoritative but some parts are weightier than others. For example, the words of Jesus matter more to Christians, more even than the words of Paul, they just do.

So, with all of this in mind, let's examine those early scenes in Genesis again. For here we have a formative set of texts. In Genesis 1 male and female are made in one holy act, both are made in the image of God, each reflects a part of who God is. Think about what this means... Male *and* female reflect the character of God!

In Genesis 2 we have a second creation story where man is created and then woman is created from his "rib" we translate, but a better translation would be "side." A chunk of Adam, which means "man" or "mankind" really, Hebrew has a different word for an individual man, *ish*. Anyway, this chunk of Adam becomes Eve which means living. Then Adam speaks those words we have heard read at so many weddings. "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman (*ishah*), for out of Man (*ish*) this one was taken." Then, the storyteller says, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and they were not ashamed."

We know what the text says, but what does this mean? Well, I need a couple of hours and I have a couple of minutes. But we can hit

the high points. The text is talking about a kind of connectedness between two people that alters reality profoundly, alters the very definition of family. A man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh. Every word carries weight. We might assume that in patriarchal society, the woman would leave her family, but that is not what the text says. The man leaves his family. The whole notion of family is transformed by a single union.

In fact, the term "one flesh" (*basar*) means "family" or "kinship." We think of this text as referring in a vague way to the physical bond of a man and woman, a most intimate physical bond, but the point here is more about kinship. Two people are connected in every way - physically, emotionally, psychologically, financially, spiritually - this is the goal. But what "one flesh" is talking about is kinship. Two people are bonded in every way imaginable for life. Some suggest that when the author says the man "clings" to his wife, this is a reference to the act. But again details get in the way. The Hebrew term *dabaq* is used 54 times in the Hebrew Bible. Nowhere does it refer to sexual intimacy.

Now, I'm not trying to take all the fun out of the text. It does imply intimacy. It just doesn't name it as directly as we might think. When the Hebrew verb *yada*, "to know," is used, often the implication is intimacy. When a man "knows" a woman, a child is born. There are also texts which talk about God's command to be fruitful and multiply. So, procreation is one of the goals of this intimacy.

But procreation is not the only goal named in scripture. Consider The Song of Solomon, a whole book in the Bible, right after Ecclesiastes if you are looking for it, which affirms the place of pleasure in sexuality. We find more affirmation of pleasure in the Hebrew Bible than the Christian Testament, and thus, not surprisingly, Judaism is more open in addressing sexuality than Christianity.

For example, while teaching a common texts course with a rabbi at Wake Forest Divinity School, I learned that in Jewish thought intimacy in marriage always receives a blessing from God but it receives a double blessing when it is experienced on the Sabbath. What we could learn from our Jewish friends! The New Testament offers some affirmation but we have spent too much time reading Paul through Augustine,

neither of whom needs be the sole source informing a Christian theology of sexuality...

But, all kidding and serious commentary aside, physical intimacy is affirmed in scripture as a gift from God, part of the marriage experience, given for at least two purposes - procreation and pleasure.

But the Genesis 2 story, while including all of this, is actually about much more. It's about a solution for the problem of loneliness - a life mate to form family ties with, another human being to share everything with, a kind of covenant relationship which mirrors the covenant we have with God.

This means two things. First, the bond is enduring. The goal is a relationship based on mutual love and affection which endures for life. Real human beings do not always attain this goal. In fact, human beings in the Bible mess up almost every goal imaginable for marriage and family. So, divorce is an option from the very beginning of the covenant community. By Jesus' time, this option is used a bit too often and in cavalier fashion. So, he has some strong words of judgment, but they need to be heard in context. Divorce is granted as an option because human beings are imperfect, but the goal is a life-long relationship characterized by mutual love. I don't have time to say much more, but even in a patriarchal context, it is amazing that a text like Ephesians 5 really does talk about mutual love and respect, not one way submission.

But the goal is a life-long covenant. Think Hannah and Elmo Scoggin, married 70 years, a magnificent journey of being with and there for each other through all of the ups and downs, reaching that place at the end that Bill Cosby calls The Twilight Zone of marriage where each see the quirks and idiosyncrasies of the other and loves them.

But there is a second assumption in this text and in the Judeo-Christian view of a life-long bonded relationship - the bondedness exists in every dimension of life - physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. This is why I say that, while marriage is sacred, having a legal document doesn't guarantee this kind of deep bondedness. The goal involves so much more than a legal arrangement. In fact, it is quite separate from the legal arrangement. Many legally married people have never experienced the kind of bond the author of Genesis describes.

Yet, there is another implication of the biblical vision of bondedness. Sex cannot be just a physical thing without losing some of its richness and beauty because the goal is to connect two people intimately with every aspect of our being.

This is why some of the boundaries exist. Some exist to retain loyalty. Unfaithfulness violates trust and threatens the sanctity and longevity of a relationship. But whenever we attempt to separate the physical from the emotional and spiritual, our experience is reduced, diminished, cheapened. It's not an arbitrary kind of punishment from God. It is a natural consequence of how we are made. But we need to be careful about not growing smug in our piety here because there are many ways to cheapen God's gift.

In the movie *Hardcore* George C. Scott plays the role of a very conservative Christian father who is searching for his teenage daughter who has run away from home and gotten caught up in prostitution and pornography. Along the way, he receives help from a woman in the business and they have one conversation that has stuck with me much longer than the rest of the movie which I do not recommend.

After getting to know the father, this woman tells him something like this, "You know, you and I view sex in pretty much the same way." "Really," he says, "You've got to be kidding!" "No, no, we do," she says, "I think so little of sex, I don't care who I have it with. And you think so little of sex, you basically don't have any. So, yea, we're pretty much the same."

Sometimes from the least likely source comes profound wisdom. Far too often the Church and the Playboy mentality have committed a common sin - cheapening a sacred gift from God - just in different ways. Playboy says, "This is just a physical thing," luring people away from a deeper, richer experience. And the Church says, this is a dirty and shameful thing, or at the very least, a dangerous thing to be avoided or locked away in silence. Our calling is to reclaim the gift in all its beauty and complexity, exercise appropriate responsibility, yet also experience the pleasure of God in our own appropriate pleasure.



## Conclusions

I don't want to oversimplify things. Sexuality is a powerful gift, one with the potential to do great good and evil. It is a lot like nuclear power in this regard. It can give life and it can take life. And there are many topics I have not had time to explore. But I think we have to begin by acknowledging that this is a gift, a sacred gift. So, it is basically good, not evil or dirty. And it is intended not just for procreation but pleasure and as a means of connecting two people in a life-long covenant relationship. As such, there are responsibilities. There are boundaries, the crossing of which has consequences, natural consequences, which affect relationships profoundly.

More than anything else, it is "O.K." to talk about sex, even in the church, especially in the church. We haven't done a very good job with this gift over the past 2,000 years. Oh, we have used the gift and lots of babies have been born. There is no question about that. But when we consider the joy God intended and think of the wounds we have inflicted, we realize we have plenty of room for improvement. My prayer is that we are beginning that journey tonight!