

Chapter 8

Sex

Introduction—I grew up in a culture that was white, male dominated. Husbands’ references to their wives, even in mixed company, about their wives included “my old lady,” which had some derivation from Scottish identification meaning, then, “my love.” My acquaintance with the term didn’t ever sound so loving. Rather a demeaning tone was in place. Gals and girls came up, usually indicating that those identified as such were definitely of being inferior to the guys and the real men.

One of my grandfathers consistently referred to his daughters-in-law as “Sally.” That was the generic name for four of them, even when they were all present. He couldn’t remember their given names, nor bothered to get them imprinted in his memory banks. The respective daughters-in-law let it go but understood there was not going to be enough energy given to establish a sense of importance to their given names.

The use of slang terms for wives, women in general, aligned with derogatory references to African-Americans, Native Americans, anyone else who did not look or sound like the white males who assumed they were the dominant characters in the given context.

Animosity, bullying, avoidance of those who were identified as homosexual were observable. In retrospect lots of the self-identification of those who came to be called gay was under the surface of everyday conversation. More often than not it was for self-preservation to remain unidentified as gay. In my growing up years there was no “coming out of the closet” events. There was the possibility of physical, and certainly psychological trauma waiting for such action.

I don’t recall anything from my elementary, middle school, or high school days that could be called sex education. There were health classes, separate gender physical education classes, only cursory attention given to even the physiology of humans in biology classes.

I took a little criticism from some of the brighter students I had in the high school biology classes for the lack of attention to Chapter 47 in the textbook. That was the one about human anatomy and physiology with particular reference to female and male reproductive organs and sexual anatomy. At the time, I was only five or six years older than some of them, not married, and responded with “It’s a long semester, but we just don’t have time to get all the way to the end of the text book”—which in retrospect I wonder why the authors/editors/publishers arranged the text like that.

Any attempt toward making available sex education classes in the schools, even congregations, was usually met by resistance from parents who maintained that sex education was the business of the respective families, not the school or the Church. Of course, those same parents too often did no sex education on their own. Another conspiracy of silence got perpetuated.

Misinformation, cultural traditions, continued to be the educators. Which meant there was tacit sex education going on all the time, no matter how contorted it may have been.

My own theological education had little time for homosexuality as a theme for discussion. The few passages in the Old and New Testaments that had come to be the proof texts regarding same sex relationships gave impetus to a style of open and shut on the cases.

My first writing/editing assignment when I joined the denomination agency dealing with ethical concerns was to do research and writing on homosexuality and the Church. As it turned out, other parties much more expert in both the content as well as experience toward writing something that could be consumed by more constituents were used in the final drafts and publication of the material. But the exercise was still beneficial for me. I had to take a deeper examination of the whole area concerning the Church and homosexuality.

It was the eruption of AIDS into American society with particular infection among young, gay men that brought a new dynamic to my context. Knowing my background in Natural Science and theological ethics, the publishing arm of the denomination for whom I was working tapped me to write a little book, “AIDS: A Christian Response,” primarily for congregational education.

A young lady who was student in the institution where I was teaching then came by. “Since you are working on this book, would you come with me to the local county hospital? I go there each week to AIDS clinic. I think you’ll find some good perspectives that need to be included in the book.” And, indeed I did. During one of my visits, sitting in the waiting area carrying on conversation with one of the AIDS patients, from the exam room area came a loud “NOOO!” with accompanying tear shaped wails. My first thought was that one of the young men had received a prognosis that he had not long to live.

A few minutes later, the young man I thought who was expressing grief walked out of the exam area. He was not the one wailing, but his partner following him out was. It was one of those awakening, transforming, moments for me. All those experiences, instructions, debates I had been in in years past crystallized into the fact, the conviction, the persuasion that those young men demonstrated a love for one another I had not seen in many “straight” heterosexual couples.

What had been merely a word, agape, for years became incarnated. As well, a kind of indictment came to bear upon all those who would consider those young men as unacceptable to be included in their groups, their families, their churches.

From those experiences in the AIDS clinic, I began to adjust class discussions toward the matters of how if and when you find yourself dealing with AIDS, you will be engaging all the major social issues areas—political process, the economy, and human sexuality. These, of course, formed the issues triad I began to address—money, sex, and power.

Again, each of the areas has its own constellation of issues and valuing. With this chapter, some readers will be disappointed that I delineate only a fragment of the “sex constellation.” These, though, can be considered good starting places to move through on your own research and experience toward a fuller understanding about sex, I hope.

The Tacit Congregational Sex Education

The range was and is not too wide of what could be labeled “sex education” in congregational settings. There are those congregations who offer retreats, special programmatic offerings for those children making the transition into puberty. These interactions might be led by physicians or other health care professionals, sometimes psychologists/therapists, those who may have a modicum of theological basis for their conversations.

Little to nothing after those age groups, though. Any advice is couched in “don’t/thou shalt not” language, without any “but here are some things you can do with regard to these raging drives in you.”

Some congregations have mandatory counseling sessions with the pastor or officiating minister and the couple seeking a wedding ceremony in the respective church. Otherwise, the tacit approach is in place. A hitch in here is that fewer weddings are happening in church buildings. Event centers, destination locations, or places near the couple like barns, gardens, friends’ homes, or wineries have taken over the context for vows to be exchanged.

For those who maintain that a church is the only place vows should be exchanged, the assumptions in place are that the congregational group is modeling itself after a biblical perspective of the family. Or at least the biblical view that is promoted from the pulpit and maybe sporadically through the educational ministry of the congregation.

That congregational biblical view could be called the traditional view of family, which frankly has relatively recent development when put over against the longer view and application of Church and cultural history. In short, the points describing the traditional view are as follows. Marriage has some distinct purposes. A great deal of emphasis is made of the matter that the first man and woman, according to Genesis 1-2, became one flesh. So, a union is made. Procreation is also drawn from this passage as one of the purposes of marriage.

Often, the jump is made to the New Testament passages interpreting Jesus’ teaching about what is called the “exception clause” in Matthew. The Greek word *porneia* has often been translated as fornication, adultery, whoredom. The application has been an easy one to consider any divorce, then, to be the fault of the woman, and thus gives a congregation freedom to exclude her literally or figuratively.

The interpretation and application fits easily, as well, with the cultural understanding that men should not be so quickly identified as one to carry responsibility for the marital breakdown. When one learns that *porneia* and its parallel in the Old Testament makes first application to idolatry, then the Matthew passage one can find a bit more twenty-first application.

Rather than limiting the breakdown to extramarital sexual contacts, there are many kinds of idolatry, issues, that can be divisive for a marriage. But, such identification requires on the part of the Church and its ministers, and the congregants, more struggle in the case-by-case matters that come along, each of which requires some slightly different slant for pastoral care, which in fact generally gets overlooked, ironically.

Further, there is an aversion to including anything of the marital patterns that were part of the Old Testament—the multiple wife patterns, for instance, among the Middle Eastern people. Why is that not considered as to how it fit in the Genesis 1-2 pattern, if it does? If it does not, why not? Does the contemporary, mostly conservative realm of Christianity, articulate more of a romanticized, even Disney princess, expression of marriage, and now have baptized it in a selectively interpreted portion of Scripture?

I'm somewhat baffled by the lack of attention to Jesus' statement there would be no marriage in heaven, especially among those ministers whose main theme is getting people into heaven when they die. Also, Paul's statement to the Galatians that the cultural identifiers of ethnicity (Jew nor Greek), financial prowess (slave or free), or gender (male and female) become dissolved (?), merged (?), in the larger flow of ultimacy are of little to no consequence.

What about the pleasure element that is part of being human beings involved in close contact? That omission in any so-called congregational education leaves whatever the drive, attraction, biochemical affinities up to individuals to figure out. This lack is parallel to the general omission of attention to those matters that can be identified as addictive elements—good, virtuous energies that become overstimulated, engaged, in order to find some kind of resolution.

Indeed, the inattention to the sex drives in people are parallel to those drives that result in gluttony and sloth to name a few, as well as overtaking pain pills because nothing else relieves the constant pain.

One huge result of this tacit approach is that the Church has been practically disarmed itself to respond to those expressions of sex, sexuality, family that are more visible in the world culture. The reinterpreted biblical perspectives are delivered through the deontological mode of ethical theory. Ironically that style reinforces the lack of attention to the issues of life. Prescriptive propositions about the most basic elements of human life are increasingly dismissed because of the lack of cultural relevance.

And/Or

The latest US census notes a little over 331 million plus people make up the population. Recent difficulties toward getting as accurate a count as possible leaves the possibility this is probably a low number. Further estimates are that about 6 percent of the US population will identify in one or more of the categories known as the LGBTQ+ community.

We're dealing with rough numbers here as well, but that 6 percent figure comes out just under 20 million people. If these persons were grouped together as a country on the world map they would rank at 59 on the list of 235 countries in the world. If they were their own state in the United States they would rank at 4, with only Florida, Texas, and California more populous than they.

My point—a huge number of people scattered through the United States are dismissed by many of the denominations, congregational groups, congregations, ministers and congregants. The respective letters in the acronym stand for LGBTQ or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning. These terms are used to describe a person's sexual orientation or gender

identity. Those latter two terms become interchanged often but do have some separate meanings. Or, to say another way, the matters of sex in the US and world culture have become more challenging, especially for those folks noted in the foregoing section of this chapter, to understand, much more have conversation with.

These new designations are problematic to those who have maintained that from Genesis Creation accounts, and there are two of them, most specifically I'm thinking of Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:22-23, that humans were created as male or female, a binary creation. According to this designation, one is either male or female. However, the conjunction that comes through Genesis 1:27 is not "or" but "and."

One idea that has to be ruminated over is that both of what we call male and female qualities are in the same individual. And contemporary biology recognizes that those we identify as males and females are born with the mix of both estrogen and testosterone. Though there are mixes of other compounds in those two main categories of hormones. In Genesis 2:22-23, there are apparently separate individuals that are introduced to each other by God, but Adam, the man, himself identifies Eve as flesh of his flesh, for God created her, according to the narrative out of Adam's rib.

In short, with this re-reading, we must recognize the possibilities of gender identity and sexual orientation being beyond only two. For most of us born and reared in the United States we have had a rather provincial upbringing and education in regard to this idea of identity and orientation being beyond only two possibilities.

Gender orientation and sexual orientation can be considered fluid concepts. Native Americans, indigenous people, have had for a long time identified some of their own as "two spirit people." That is they reflected both male and female engagements in life. The two-spirit concept has been discovered in historical documents from Africa and Asia as well. With some Native American tribes, for instance, they recognize that the Two Spirit persons may give presentation of as many as five genders. Obviously, for those who could be called gender conservatives, this is just too complicated to give attention.

Particularly European colonizers excluded these people according to the often Christianized approaches they used in conquering native peoples. That same exclusivist approach to gender identity and sexual orientation continues and forms responses to those who include themselves under the LGBTQ+ acronym. And, these responses often are negative in nature with varying levels of violence associated with the response.

Image of God and Agape

At least some among us are coming to realize that the Genesis creation accounts about human beings are not scientifically based, in terms of what we can call science now. They were intended to capture a deeper essence of God and humans, though, through poetic narrative. There is a paradox from the gender conservatives. They tend toward dismissing anything considered as scientific, but yet interpret Genesis 1-2 as if they are records taken down by someone present at the Creation events. If we narrow the interpretation of these chapters to only "sex" was created,

then we're missing the main point. The intent was to display the transcendent character of God, Genesis 1 along with the immanence of God with humans in Genesis 2. The idea of the "image of God" will remain in a realm of needing exploration from now on. At the least, qualities of God are implanted in humans, and interesting the matters of relating to one another come at the top of the list.

The "helpmeet" concept in Genesis 2 has too often been used as another reason why women should be subordinate to men in all things. But it basically means partner, companion, one who meets life with another. Relationships between God and humans and between humans and humans were intended in the Creation. Notice the rest of Scripture's guidelines, principles. To reduce the matters of male and female to only acts of sexuality, too often thought of only as sexual acts, is to define the "image of God" too narrowly and shallowly at least and at most commit an idolatry, ironically.

It is a short distance from considering women as inferior creatures to making some humans chattel, as well as identifying those with same sex attractions as perverted, even evil. Those categorizations which humanity has created demean, dismiss, profane the "image of God" in each human being. That concept is the first and foremost that we should consider about any person. Can we see the image of God in any human, no matter how much they may represent all that is sacred to us? Do we bother to try to see the image?

Once that principle begins to be more than an abstraction we are on the way to understanding a bit more of the application of agape.

Everyone deserves respect, honor, acts of service, kindness, fairness because they, each one, is made in the image of God. Though agape is a New Testament term it expresses the cumulative concepts in the Old Testament depicting how we are to relate to one another. The language of justice, righteousness, mercy, lovingkindness, and ultimately shalom form the substance of the guidelines Jesus and Paul proclaimed whenever they spoke and acted in agape.

Controversy still arises over whether those of same sex orientation are to be considered as members of Christian congregations. Moreover, are they eligible to be ministers? Women have been declared as incapable of holding the call to ministry, just as African-Americans—or any other minority group in any other culture—have been declared. Each of these are subject to derision from those acting out of toxic masculinity, or those who gravitate toward such. Not so subtly, as well, is a sense of being threatened by these considered unworthy on the part of the derisive ones.

With regard to women in ministry, over the years some of the best and brightest students I've had in classes have been women. Almost one hundred percent of them have led their respective classes in grade point average, their sense of theological reflection, and their pastoral and preaching skills.

They have suffered in too many cases the verbal abuse of male students, the origin of which I've decided comes out of jealousy as well as the cultures in which the men come up in. For many people once the hurdle of recognizing the viability of women to carry the Gospel in forms and

styles that men have done is overcome, it is relatively easy to recognize those of LGBTQ+ individuals also can validly engage these matters.

Conclusion: Can we not realize that categorizing people according to their sexual identity and orientation as being the primary identifier of them abridges the ideas of recognizing the image of God in every person and agape? Indeed, it is complex to attempt to understand the facets of sex, sexuality as anything but being a static state. We follow after millenia of world cultures that have consistently moved away from God's intents creating human beings and how they should relate to one another.

For Further Discussion:

1. If you had opportunity to design a "sex education" program for your congregation, what would it look like and why? Would it be different from anything you were taught from childhood on; or, would those experiences provide rationale for why you develop your program like you would?
2. How should a "Christian" be defined? How do we understand gender identification even sexual practice, to be reason for exclusion? Have you heard a gay preacher who articulates the gospel, as well as offers pastoral care, with a quantity and quality of grace that surpasses straight ministers?
3. What are the challenges toward understanding and applying the concepts of "the image of God" and agape? Do you have ideas toward how the challenges can at least be met?
4. So many matters such as pornography, which has been found in ancient Egyptian tombs, and sex trafficking, as only two examples demonstrate the interface of "money" and "sex." Abuse from church leadership on children, women, and men is more widespread than generally considered. What are ways "sex" can be turned back toward what it was intended to be in Genesis 1-2?
5. Do a biblical review of passages that concern sex, sexuality, marriage and divorce, and any other topics that associate with these terms. How do you respond to the list of passages, the weight of content in them? What are some basic themes, implicit and explicit?