



**The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies  
in Religion and Ministry**



The Inaugural John E. Boswell Lecture  
Pacific School of Religion: The Center for Lesbian  
and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry  
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**A Gay,  
Male,  
Christian,  
Sexual Ethic**

by Dale B. Martin



# The John E. Boswell Lectureship

## The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies in Religion and Ministry At Pacific School of Religion

The John E. Boswell Lectureship Fund, established at CLGS in 2006, supports innovative historical and religious scholarship in and for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities and provides a high-profile venue for presenting that scholarship to wider audiences.



In 1980 John Boswell published a book that historian of sexuality Michel Foucault called “a truly groundbreaking work.” *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* charted bold territory in both historical and religious scholarship, setting a new benchmark of academic excellence for gay and lesbian studies. Equally significant, if not more controversial, was his 1993 book, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe*, in which he tried to show historical precedence for the religious blessing of same-sex relationships.

Although John Boswell died from AIDS-related illnesses in 1994, his trail-blazing efforts in historical scholarship continue to shape and inspire academic, activist and faith communities of all traditions.

Contributions to this important lectureship fund, as part of the CLGS endowment, will help to ensure that Dr. Boswell’s legacy endures for many years to come.



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**T**he *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a second-century Christian document, relates the story of how St. Thecla became a Christian and even an apostle. As a young woman from the elite class, she is engaged to be married to a wealthy upper-class gentleman. But then Paul comes to town and preaches his gospel of sexual renunciation. According to Paul in this early Christian document, people can be saved only by the complete renunciation of sexual activity. The resurrection is promised only to those who avoid sex entirely.<sup>1</sup>

Thecla is captivated by Paul's message of salvation by asceticism—along with many other women, both old and young, and even many young men. In fact, she seems totally enamored at least with Paul's preaching if not with himself. She announces to her mother, who is distraught with the news, that she will not get married but will instead give her life to Paul's gospel, which demands complete virginity. Thecla baptizes herself, cuts her hair short, dresses like a man, and goes off to become an androgynous, ascetic apostle of the gospel of renunciation and salvation.

I always face a challenge teaching this text to my students. They cannot understand why all the young people in the story are so captivated by the idea of *avoiding* sex. Why, given the choice, would *anyone* repudiate sex completely and freely choose instead a life of no sexual contact? How could that “gospel” convert so many? They are puzzled when they come to realize that not only was the call to asceticism compelling for the characters in the story, but that sexual renunciation was a powerful attraction of Christianity for many people—even, or maybe especially, young people—in the ancient world. What kind of “good news” is that?

I have to explain to my students that in the ancient Greco-Roman world, sexual intercourse was almost universally assumed to be one cog in a wheel whose other cogs were birth, life, disease, death, and decay, followed all over again

by another round of sex, birth, life, disease, death, and decay, and sex, birth, life, disease, death, and decay. For ancient people, sex was automatically linked to death and corruption. Sex was necessary because birth was necessary because so many people kept dying at such a distressing rate. Because of the high rate of mortality, especially child mortality and death for women during childbirth, just for the population of the Roman Empire to remain constant—not to grow, just to remain stable—every woman who survived to child-bearing age—usually 14 in the ancient world—had to give birth an average of five times.<sup>2</sup> Five childbirths for every woman! Just to maintain the population.

When Christianity began offering salvation from death, many Christians took that as an attempt to break the unending cycle of death. One way to break that cycle—to nip the process of death and decay in the bud, so to speak—was to avoid sex in the first place. With eternal life offered as an answer to the problem of death, births were no longer needed. Many early Christians, therefore, seem to have assumed that the avoidance of sexual intercourse was the most powerful blow they could deliver to crush the tyranny of death. Stop sex, and you stop the dreaded cycle of death at its beginning.

Of course, that's not what sex means to my students. I have to explain to my 20 year old students, who weren't even born yet, that two events that became highly significant first in the 1970s seem to have forever changed the meaning of sex. I refer to the feminist movement and the ready availability of reliable birth control, especially through "the pill." With reliable birth control, heterosexual sex has become radically decoupled, at least in the minds of most people of our culture, from procreation. And the feminist movement of the 1970s forced people to begin thinking of women as equal to men. The prior assumptions that linked sex to birth and made the sex act proper only when it embodied the hierarchy of male over female came apart beginning in the 1970s. Since the 1970s, the

very meaning of sex in our culture has changed radically. The problem is that Christians and churches haven't come to grips with that fact.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the meaning of sex has changed many times for human beings through history, and thus, as we should expect, the ethics or morality of sex has changed correspondingly. In the ancient Near East the woman was practically the possession of the man, and her value was dependent on whether she produced heirs for him.<sup>4</sup> When barren Sarah gives her slave Hagar to Abraham for the production of an heir, there is no hint in the text that any of this is considered wrong. When Jacob bargains with Laban to procure first Leah and then Rachel, no one is condemned. When Rachel gives her slave Bilhah to Jacob to produce children, and Leah, not to be outdone, gives Jacob her slave Zilpah for the same purpose, there is no hint in the text that anything wrong has been done (Gen. 30:1-13). Sex between a male head of household and his various wives, concubines, and slaves was for the purpose of procreation, enlarging the household and its prosperity and longevity. Sex was moral when done for that purpose because that was what sex meant.

The Bible never condemns David or Solomon for their many wives. David is depicted without a blush as an old man who stays warm by sleeping with a virgin (1 Kings 1:1-4). Multiple marriages were considered completely moral—well, for the man, for whom sex obviously meant something different than it did for women, which again shows that the *ethics* of sex depends on the *meaning* of sex. The laws of marriage in Deuteronomy consider it perfectly natural and moral for a man to be able to divorce his wife for whatever reason (it doesn't mention any such opportunity for the woman). One thing it prohibits is for the same man to take the woman back as a sexual partner after she has subsequently been "defiled" by another man (Deut. 24:1-4). The law of Leviticus does prohibit a man from having sexual relations with the female slave of



another man, but the offending aspect of the action is that by doing so the man is harming not the woman, but his fellow Israelite by sleeping with his slave (Lev. 19:20). Paul reflects the same sensibility when he tells the Thessalonian converts not to pursue another man's woman, not out of concern for the woman—she's not mentioned—but because that would constitute “defrauding” the *brother* (1 Thess. 4:6). In the ancient world, sexual intercourse was generally understood as existing for the purposes of the household and its structure and economy. Ancient ethics of sexuality reflect a desire to protect the possessions and interests of the male head of household. The morality of sex reflected the meaning of sex.

But the shifting meanings of sex can be seen already in early Christianity. Paul urged his converts to avoid sex entirely if they were able (1 Corinthians 7). If they experienced desire, they were permitted to have sex within the confines of marriage—not in order to *express* their love or desire, but to extinguish desire entirely.<sup>5</sup> As I have already pointed out, some of Paul's later followers, represented by the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* among many other texts, took his message further, teaching that salvation would be won only by the complete avoidance of sex. Others of Paul's followers, represented by 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, urged both marriage and sex, again for the good of the patriarchal household. This author condemned asceticism and attempted to fix women firmly as childbearers and inferiors within the household and the church modeled on the patriarchal household.

Elizabeth Clark's book *Reading Renunciation* highlights the lengths the church fathers went in their attempts to read the entire Bible as supporting their own asceticism, including the stories of randy patriarchs from the Old Testament and the *anti*-ascetical Pastoral Epistles.<sup>6</sup> The early church's preference for asceticism extended even to doctrine and excommunication. In the fourth century, Pope Siricius along with Saints Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine condemned

a Christian named Jovinian for heresy merely because he taught that married Christians were just as virtuous as celibate Christians.<sup>7</sup> The fathers of the church declared that it was *heresy* to teach that marriage was equivalent in virtue to celibacy. Throughout Christian history, official Christian doctrine (not just opinion) taught that sex within marriage was of inferior virtue to celibacy. This is the opposite of what most modern American Christians assume, even though those same Christians usually assume, and sometimes falsely claim, that their views of sex and marriage represent “the traditional” Christian view. No, it was only with the rise of the Puritans and others influenced by the humanist movement and the Protestant Reformation that Christian teachers started saying that marriage was of equal and sometimes superior virtue compared to celibacy. That change in the meaning of sex and marriage was a radical reversal of sixteen centuries of Christian doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

Thus a huge change in the meaning of sex and marriage came about in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a change of which we are obvious heirs. But the changes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were also huge. Before, although Christians had reversed previous assumptions that virginity was preferable to sexual activity and that marriage was only the “lesser option” for Christians, they still assumed that the meaning of sex was defined, largely, by its role in procreation. And they assumed that sexual intercourse enacted the proper hierarchy of God-ordained nature. The man, as the penetrator, was superior, and the woman, as the penetrated, was inferior. Homosexual sex was “unnatural” in this view because, people assumed, either a man would have to be penetrated—which was “unnatural” whether he was penetrated by a man *or a woman*—or a woman would have to be the one penetrating—again, with either a man or another woman.

With the rise of the feminist movement even Christians began thinking of men and women as equals. The idea that

femaleness itself was inferior was rejected. The hierarchy of the sex act was replaced by the notion of egalitarian complementarity: male and female are equal and complement one another. But notice: this development was a radical overturning of centuries of thinking about the meaning of sex. These days both liberal and conservative Christians tend to think of sexual intercourse as something that should take place between one man and one woman, treated equally, and that it is entirely appropriate to have sex just for the enjoyment of it. In fact, “self help” books written by and for conservative Christians advise people how to have a happy, joyful, “fulfilling” sex life, even when procreation is not the goal.<sup>9</sup>

The problem is that Christian theology and ethical teaching have not caught up with the radical change in the “meaning of sex” that we have experienced in the past 40 years. If sex isn’t just for procreation anymore, then why can’t two men or two women have sex? If the meaning of sex is basically to express love or have fun, why can’t two men or two women express their love by means of sex? If sex is best when it is between two people who treat one another equally and fairly and want to give themselves to one another, why limit that to only a male-female couple?

Churches don’t know what to tell people about sex because they don’t know how to think about what sex *is*, what sex therefore *means*. And this is true not just for homosexuality, but also for heterosexuality. Churches don’t know what to tell older people about sex, people who have already lived through and seen the end of one or more marriages. A 75 year old woman in the Presbyterian church wants and needs male companionship and intimacy. She gets to know an 80 year old gentleman in her community. They enjoy one another’s company and decide to live together. Both of them have plenty of money and do not need the financial resources of the other. They both have extensive families already and complicated finances, and marrying would upset their families and

unnecessarily complicate things. So they decide not to marry, for what seem to me and to them perfectly understandable reasons. Most churches don't really know what to tell such people.

Young people are delaying marriage these days often until their 30's. There are pressures on them to finish college or professional school or graduate school, to become more mature and financially independent before starting a family. So increasingly, good Christian young people delay marriage. Are they expected to avoid sexual intimacy entirely at a time when their hormones are raging? What sense does that make? Many churches don't know what to say.

For centuries, teenagers were taught that masturbation was a sin. After all, if the purpose of semen is to create babies, it is a sin to waste it on mere pleasure. Churches no longer believe that, and they also don't have any sensible way to talk to young people about masturbation. And yes, masturbation is a kind of sex. But it is a kind of sex whose meaning is no longer addressed by churches. What is a kid supposed to do? The fact is, churches and Christians don't know how to treat sex because they don't know what sex is. They don't know how to articulate a "meaning" of sex that matches the lives of many of their members.<sup>10</sup>

An added issue comes with the realization that sex is not one thing. It is many things. First, sex is not the same thing for different people at different stages of life.<sup>11</sup> Sexual intercourse between newlyweds, who may have decided to "save themselves for marriage," will necessarily be a different kind of experience from sexual intercourse for a couple who have been married for 20 years. It will feel different. It will be conducted differently. It will *be* something different. The sex experienced by a couple who are desperately trying to have a child will be different from that between a couple who desperately want to avoid a pregnancy. Sex experienced by an older couple

who have lost previous partners of many years and who are tentatively trying it out with someone new, for the first time in years, will be different from sex between a couple who are frantically in love for the first time. Sex is different when experienced at different stages of life and with different people.

Second, there are many different activities that may be considered sexual. We should stop thinking of sexual intercourse as only one thing. There are actually many different ways to have sexual intercourse (here meaning some form of penetration), even physically and biologically, not to mention psychologically. But even other things are sex: even if people don't want to allow me to call masturbation "sex," certainly it may be fair to talk of mutual masturbation as "sex." What about oral sex, some of which does not involve penetration of any sort? I've certainly always considered oral sex to be sex, even if high school students and Bill Clinton don't. Even if one does not count oral sex as "sexual *intercourse*," surely it is still "sex," isn't it? But why exclude many other activities, such as passionate kissing, touching, erotic massage? If sexual activity is any combination of physical intimacy with eroticism, which I think is a fair definition of sex, then there are many different actions that are sex.<sup>12</sup>

So sex is not one thing. It may be one physical act when done in one context with one partner, and a different physical act done in a different context with either the same or a different partner. I argue that if we are going to discuss a reasonable ethics of sex, we have to give up outdated and simplistic notions of what sex is and discuss what the meaning of sex is for real Christians in real life.<sup>13</sup> An ethics of sex must address what sex is. For us. Now. In all its varieties.

I don't know what sex is like for many other people. I've been told that sex is different for women than it is for men. I don't want to get into any fights with women or anyone else over what sex means for women. I'm not really sure it is any of my

business, since I don't have sex with women. I've been told that sex for people in marriage is different from sex experienced by unattached and sexually active gay men. I don't want to get into any fights with married men—and certainly not with their wives—about the meaning of sex for them. And some of my lesbian friends, though certainly not all, tell me they believe sex for lesbians must be different from sex for gay men, at least judging by the way they hear their gay male friends talk. And there is no way I'm going to get myself into trouble by attempting to speak for lesbians. I actually have, rarely, had sex with a woman. I don't *think* I ever have had sex with a lesbian. I *can* say I've certainly never had *lesbian* sex. I think. But I have known lots of gay men—and I mean that in the biblical as well as nonbiblical sense. I've had lots of sex with lots of men, gay, straight, and bi. And I've talked about sex with lots of men, gay, straight, and bi. Even here again, though, I don't intend to speak to the issues of straight or bisexual male sex. I'll let them speak for themselves. I'm comfortable as a gay man. So I'm going to talk about gay male sex.

This is my project and its limitation. “A” sexual ethic because I don't propose my ideas as being *the* ethic for anyone, much less everyone. “A gay” ethic because I'm not addressing the meaning or ethics of sex for anyone but homosexuals. “A gay male” ethic because I believe lesbians may need a different approach to sexual ethics if they experience sex differently, about which I know nothing. “A gay male Christian” sexual ethic because this thinking and reasoning is being done self-consciously in the context of Christian faith, informed by Christian scripture, tradition, doctrine, and community.

So that's my topic, a sexual ethic designed for gay Christian men, and quite possibly suitable only for them, and quite probably not for all of them by any stretch of the imagination. But it does seem to work for me, and has for many years.

Another point: I believe the only way we can reason reasonably about sexual ethics must include one central way we reason about all ethics—that is, by means of analogy. People often talk about sexual ethics by looking first for prooftexts in scripture, or a series of rules we will all agree on, or some other foundational principle. But that’s not really the way we think about ethics most of the time—*except* when we’re talking about sex. So I say we should drop the simplistic “the Bible says” kind of approach, or a “rule following” approach and use a more reasonable form of reasoning: using analogy to think about right and wrong in sex in the same ways we think about right and wrong in other aspects of our lives.

Take for instance friendship. People seldom talk explicitly about an “ethics of friendship,” yet we all work with notions about right and wrong with regard to how we treat our friends and how we expect our friends to treat us. We know, for example, that it is unreasonable—we could say “wrong” or “unethical”—to get angry or upset when someone who is really just an acquaintance does not act toward us with the same warmth we would expect from a close friend. In fact, we may feel it is wrong when someone we consider only an acquaintance demands more intimacy than we are prepared to give. What might a Christian ethic of friendship look like? I suggest it would promote behavior that expressed the kind of loving action appropriate for the kind of friendship involved, and that discouraged the kind of behavior inappropriate for the kind of friendship involved. Precisely what would constitute good or bad behavior would depend on what kind of friendship it was. Christian ethics promotes behavior that expresses love appropriate for the relationship in question. So I argue that when we talk about what sexual behavior is appropriate for Christian gay men, we should reason by analogy from how we would talk about what behavior is appropriate among Christian friends.

Another and different analogy: eating. Just as eating is, among other things, the expression of a biological and psychological impulse, and even a “need,” so I insist that the same applies for sex. Some people might answer that although sex arises from an impulse that is biological, it is not a “need.” But I would disagree. I have come to believe that for me, at least, sexual intimacy *is* a need. Sure, I wouldn’t die without it. But I do become depressed without it. In order to be a happy, fulfilled human being, I for one actually *need* erotic physical intimacy on a regular basis. And I believe many other people are the same. Or to take the analogy in a different direction: we might say that eating is necessary for living, but that we could get along perfectly well by eating only very boring and unpleasant stuff. Most of us think, though, that eating good food, interesting food, a variety of food, is necessary for our happiness, even if not for mere survival. In the same way, to insist that gay men, because they won’t *die* without sex, still don’t have a *need* for sex and should therefore give it up, strikes me as unreasonable. One could make the same argument about eating tasty food, but no one does.

One last example of analogy: play. I’ve seen few books on Christian ethics that include an ethics of play. But we certainly do have senses we share about right and wrong behavior in play. Even if play is not so serious—though many times I think it *is* actually serious—we work with an implicit if not explicit ethics of play. We know when someone is not playing fairly. We know that it is not good for someone to take what is simply a game—we’re just “playing” after all—so seriously that people may be hurt. We know that if one is to play properly, one must submit oneself—though admittedly only for the duration of “the game”—to the “world” presupposed by the game. We teach our children an ethics of play, even if we don’t really think about it as “ethics” in the same way we think about “business ethics.” Now again, sex is very like play in many ways. So when we think about the ethics of sex, we should raise analogy to an explicit, conscious level and consider



whether our assumed notions of right and wrong in play might inform how we think of right and wrong in sex.

In fact, the combination of these three analogies could provide fruitful indicators for how we should change the way we have traditionally thought about sex. Like friendship, sex is interpersonal, yet may be intense or not at various levels. Like eating, sex arises from strong biological needs and impulses and expresses something biologically true about the fact that we are bodies. Like play, sex is something we may throw ourselves into, use our imaginations for, and practice in order to escape the mundane and everyday. Sex, like play, is something we value because we momentarily lose ourselves in it. When someone asks a question about the meaning and ethics of a sexual activity or relationship, we should triangulate the question by thinking how we would think similarly about friendship, eating, or play.

But enough with the preliminaries. Now finally comes the moment when I give you my gay, male, Christian, sexual ethic, and I can do it even briefly and in a nutshell—though “unpacking” it and defending it may take much longer. Here it is. Drum roll, please.

Sex is good and Christian when it is done in a way that embodies love appropriate for the relationship in which it occurs.

Note here first the centrality of love. I unabashedly take my lead from the Gospel quotations of Jesus when he summed up all the law in the dual command to love God and one’s neighbor. Paul also, in Romans 13, said that the entire law is contained in the command to love one’s neighbor. Note that Paul here doesn’t mention even the command first to love God, which I believe could be taken to mean that Paul considered that the love of God was itself embodied in the love of other human beings: if you don’t love other human beings, you by definition are not loving God. And if you truly

love God, loving other human beings will come automatically. Augustine focused all his ethics and interpretation on love. He taught, as I have emphasized elsewhere, that no interpretation of scripture could be true if it did not promote the love of God and of neighbor.<sup>14</sup> I start out, therefore, and in good company, by insisting that any ethic that is truly Christian will be centered on what I take as the most central tenet of Christian ethics: love.

Of course, we must remind ourselves, especially when we talk about sex, that “love” in this Christian sense has nothing necessarily to do with a feeling. Love in Christian ethics is not romance or giddy feelings or any particular feeling at all. Love is wanting and pursuing what is in the best interests of both ourselves and the other. Love is desiring and working for, as best we can without rendering harm to ourselves, the good of and for the other.

But now note: the *meaning* of love will change somewhat when it is applied as a guiding principle to different human activities and relationships. What “the loving thing to do” is may be one thing when applied to friendship and something else when applied to eating or play. It may indeed be loving to say something critical and perhaps even cutting to a friend, but only when the relationship is strong enough and the friend is in the kind of state so that the criticism may help rather than harm. Showing physical affection to a friend may be the loving thing to do when the friend is comfortable receiving it, but it may not be the loving thing to do if it will mortify the friend on an uncomfortable public occasion. It is impossible to say ahead of time, in a prescriptive fashion, exactly what action is loving or unloving—and therefore Christianly right or wrong. But the criterion will nonetheless be love. The *meaning* of love will change according to the situation and the kind of relationship.

It may be completely fine to enjoy a large, even huge and luxurious, meal when surrounded by loved ones and family on

a holiday. To eat even remotely that way when surrounded by hungry children in a refugee camp would be grossly unethical and un-Christian. Think also what may be ethical with regard to self-harm. It might be fine for me to encourage one friend to indulge in lots of dessert, whereas encouraging my diabetic friend to do the same may be very unethical. Offering a stiff drink to one acquaintance may be hospitality, while urging the same on another person whom I know to be an alcoholic would be unethical. What is the loving thing to do with regard to food and eating depends on the situation and the relationship in question. I'm saying it may also be with sex.

We already think this way when it comes to much heterosexual eroticism (again, I'm using analogy!). *If* we do not limit "sexual relations" only to genital penetration, as I think we shouldn't, we can see that we already use this way of thinking about other forms of physical erotic intimacy. Most people in our society, at least nowadays, see nothing wrong with an unmarried man and woman kissing one another passionately; but we also agree that there are situations when kissing someone passionately would be wrong—in the case of me and the wife of my jealous boss, for instance. We think it is okay for underage teenagers to kiss erotically, though we would think it unethical for an adult man to kiss an underage girl erotically. We think about the particular kind of physical intimacy linked to the erotic by thinking about what is appropriate for the kind of relationship between the two people. Many people extend this way of thinking to other physical acts, such as "getting to first, second, or third base." I'm saying we reason ethically this way because we almost instinctively feel that erotic intimacy is appropriate when it is appropriate for the kind of relationship between the two people (I say "almost instinctively" because it isn't really "instinct" but "culture"). I'm arguing that we extend this way of thinking analogously to gay sex.

So let's see how this simple rule may apply to gay Christian men. "Sex is good and ethical when appropriate for the

relationship.” Some male couples I know both want to be married. I am personally, as perhaps a bit more radical Christian, not very interested in pursuing gay marriage. I’m not convinced that marriage is the answer for us gay men, certainly not for myself. I have argued elsewhere that state recognized or ecclesiastically enacted marriage is an exclusive and exclusionary institution.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, *if* there are benefits conferred by the state or the church with marriage, then I believe it is simply unjust to allow those benefits and marriage to heterosexual people while denying them to homosexual people. So although I would prefer that the state and the church get out of the marriage business, as long as they are in the marriage business it is simply unjust to deny gay people the opportunity to marry. For those gay men, and there are some, who would like to express their sexuality within marriage—sometimes also along with committing themselves to monogamy and sexual exclusivity with their partner—I believe their sex in that situation may be quite ethical from a Christian point of view, as long as they practice Christian love toward one another. I know male couples who have been together for 20 or 30 years, adhering to monogamy and sexual exclusivity the entire time—or at least that’s what they tell me, and I have no reason to doubt them.

But what about single men? I believe sexual activity with other men is perfectly fine for them. In fact, if they are dating someone and thinking about living together or getting married, I think they *ought* to have sex with one another, in many different ways and circumstances. I believe sexual compatibility, which in my experience can be discovered only by actually having sex, is important and seldom predictable. So I regularly counsel young men not to fall too much for another guy and certainly not to make him their “boyfriend” until they have had quite a few rolls with him in various piles of hay. Try it out first.

Some young men these days, unlike years ago when we old guys were in our twenties, are not attracted to the “swinging”

gay life with lots of sex with lots of different guys. I meet many young men who retain the ideal of “meeting Mr. Right” and setting up housekeeping as soon as possible. Here again, they may practice Christian gay sex, but for them the challenge may be to have sex without forcing the other into their expectations. They may have to work hard to be honest about their feelings and expectations but to allow the other man what may be different feelings and expectations. In some circumstances, the loving thing is to hold off on too much commitment so as not to freak out one’s date. The most loving thing to do in this context may be to be as honest and open as possible, to realize that one may have to negotiate with the other, and to be open-minded to other and new ways of thinking, living, and loving.

For many of us older men, who have been in relationships of various types throughout much of our lives, a committed, long-term relationship with another man may not be possible—even if we wanted it, and some older guys *don’t* want it. To expect us to be sexless because we can’t or won’t “settle down” with *any* “Mr. Right” is, in my view, unreasonable and even cruel. As I’ve already confessed, I find that I *need* sex, on a regular basis. And yes, I need it in a physical as well as a psychological way. But I, like many older gay men, have also found that there are whole stretches of our lives during which it is just not possible to have either a husband or a partner. But we may also practice a Christian ethic of sex.

Many men, for instance, have regular pals they get together with. “Friends with benefits,” some call it. I won’t here use the vulgar term that is actually more popular among men. You probably know what I mean. I believe such relationships are perfectly fine. In that context, of course, one must perhaps modify one’s expectations and behavior so that the particular physical intimacy enacted is appropriate, in a loving way, for the kind of relationship enacted. One must be clear on one’s expectations and desires and respect the expectations and

desires of the other man. If one cannot give to the other what he wants, one should be honest about it and perhaps not have sex with that friend. If the understanding between the friends is that this is just friendly play, neither man should seek to “fall in love” and attempt to coerce the other into a different kind of relationship. As in a Christian ethics of any kind of friendship, sex between friends should be done with mutual respect, honesty, and out of true concern for the other’s good.

What about sex *among* friends? That is, sex that involves more than two people? I must admit, I have not often pursued group sex, and have turned down offers of it, because I’ve tried it and found that it is too distracting and in some cases even disturbing *for me*. I usually feel a bit guilty if I’m completely drawn to one guy in the party and turned off by another. I get distracted feeling that I have to give “equal time” and energy to everyone. That’s my problem, so I seldom have had group sex. But I don’t think there is anything necessarily wrong with it. Again, as long as everyone is honest, on enough of the same page, and treats everyone involved fairly, I believe group sex can be fine for some people and completely healthy. Again, the key is how to express real concern for the other in a way appropriate for the kind of relationship being enacted.

So back to couples. I have friends who have been together for five or ten or twenty or thirty years and for whom sexual exclusivity has never been important to them. They’ve talked about it, usually many times, and they’ve decided that though they cherish a certain emotional exclusivity between themselves, mere sexual exclusivity is not important for them. They aren’t the jealous types, or at least not when it comes to sex. I know men who will get very upset if they feel that their partner is becoming too *friendly* with another man, and leaving themselves out too much; but those same men couldn’t care less whether their partner has sex with other men.

I have friends who were exclusive in their partnership with one another for some years, and then decided they wanted

to bring other men into their sexual relationship. Some couples I know have completely “open” relationships. Others have a rule that neither of them should have sex without the other also included. And others have a rule that either may have sex outside the relationship, but they *shouldn't* tell one another about it. Different couples have discovered, each in their own way, that “sex” just doesn't mean the same thing in every occurrence. So they have devised different mechanisms to protect themselves and their relationship though not remaining sexually exclusive. Is this wrong? I say, only if it is not done in love and if it ends up harming them. But I know too many cases in which such relationships have gone on for years, and for the life of me, I can't see anyone being hurt by it. In fact, the sexual openness of the relationship, many men will tell you, is precisely what has helped keep their relationships permanent, solid, and loving. This may sound incredible to other people, especially straight people, and perhaps especially women. But I know it to be a fact.

Let me bring up one of the most controversial relationships: sex between strangers, what may be thought of as “anonymous” sex: sex in a park, in a forest, or from an encounter over the Internet or a chat room that ends up in someone's apartment. Can that kind of sex be Christian? I think so. Of course, as always, care needs to be taken. Concern for one's own safety must be high. But with the proper precautions, even merely playful sex with a man you have just met, or whose name you may not even want to know, can be Christian.

So what would be some of the particulars about the ethics here? First, a Christian in this situation would again need to be as honest as is appropriate for the situation. Unwelcomed demands on the other man must be avoided. Allowing oneself to be manipulated into actions unwillingly should be avoided. The other man and his feelings and needs should be respected. You should do your best to give him what he wants

in a reasonable way, and you may expect him to provide what you want in a reasonable way. And “reasonable” in this case means what may be reasonably expected given the kind of relationship involved.

Note that in this case, as would be the case in a friendship, the *level* of intimacy may not be demanded imperiously by one party. This is the way we treat behavior in the case of acquaintance and friendship (again, analogy). If I meet a woman in a bar and we have drinks and a few laughs—and that is that—I should not phone her a week later berating her for not calling me the next day. (“We had drinks! You *must* be my next very best friend!”) I must not demand a level of intimacy she is not prepared to grant. In the same way, if I have had just “play sex” with someone, I may not demand a level of intimacy or commitment from him he is not prepared to offer, and which he never indicated he wanted.

One of the most important things for me about a Christian ethics of sex, as you may have noticed, is the need for honesty and communication. Because so much depends on treating the other in a loving way, and yet with a stranger or someone I don’t know well I won’t necessarily know his expectations and feelings, communication is necessary in order to avoid harm. But even in this kind of situation—sex with people we hardly know at all—the sex can be done in a Christian and loving manner, even when it demands or expects no further commitment.

There are many other issues I’ve not addressed. What about sadism or masochism? I could speak to those, and you may be able to foresee how I would do so, but I won’t do so now. And of course, that is not particularly a gay issue. What about prostitution? I would address that issue as being one primarily not about the sex itself but about economics and justice. To address issues of prostitution, I would insist we do so in the context of a discussion of the morality of capitalism, labor,



and the inequality of power in the exchange of money for services. In my view, prostitution is less about sex than about the justice of labor and exchange. But again, prostitution is not particularly a gay issue.

For most other issues, if we are talking about sex, which I define as physical intimacy motivated by or expressing eroticism, what makes it Christian or not will be addressed by this question: is the activity done in a way that expresses or acts out love for self and the other that is appropriate for the kind of relationship in which the activity takes place? I'm not saying this will be applicable for others. Sex may indeed *mean* something else, even *be* something else for different kinds of persons. Sex may not mean the same thing for straight men, straight women, bisexual persons, lesbians, transgendered persons—and many more we could name—as it does for many gay men. Sex may mean something different even for different gay men. This is just where I have ended up after many years of needing to be a sexual being but wanting to do so as a faithful Christian. It is not a final answer. But it is at least “a gay, male, Christian sexual ethic.”

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Much of this argument is taken from my article “It’s About Sex... Not Homosexuality,” in *Reflections* (Yale Divinity School) 92.1 (Spring, 2006), 24-29. An English translation of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* may be found in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. J. K. Elliott, 364-372 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

<sup>2</sup>Bruce W. Frier, “Roman Life Expectancy: Ulpian’s Evidence,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 86 (1982): 213-251, at 248; E. A. Wrigley, “Fertility Strategy for the Individual and the Group,” in *Historical Studies of Changing Fertility*, ed. C. Tilly, 135-154, at 148 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). See the discussion of this data for the context of early Christian asceticism in Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*:

*Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 23; Marvin M. Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 38; Marvin M. Ellison, *Same-Sex Marriage?: A Christian Ethical Analysis* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004), 143-145; Marilyn McCord Adams, "Hurricane Spirit, Toppling Taboos," in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies: Sexuality and the Household of God*, ed. Charles Hefling, 129-141 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley, 1996), at 129; Barbara J. Blodgett, *Constructing the Erotic: Sexual Ethics and Adolescent Girls* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2002), 7. Note also how "dated" the attitudes toward different sexual activities may sound to us from James Collier, *The Hypocritical American: An Essay on Sex Attitudes in America* (Indianapolis; New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964).

<sup>4</sup>For one discussion of household relations in the ancient Near East and Israel, see Jon L. Berquist, *Controlling Corporeality: The Body and the Household in Ancient Israel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), see esp. 60-63 for comments on how radically different ancient "marriage" (if we may anachronistically call it that) was from modern.

<sup>5</sup>See Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox), 65-76.

<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup>For a fuller discussion of the controversy, see *Sex and the Single Savior*, 116-121, and especially the works of David Hunter there cited.

<sup>8</sup>See *Sex and the Single Savior*, 103-124.

<sup>9</sup>One popular author is Kevin Leman, who has published, among other titles, *Sheet Music: Uncovering the Secrets of Sexual Intimacy in Marriage* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House, 2003) and *Sex Begins in the Kitchen: Creating Intimacy to Make Your Marriage Sizzle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2006). See also Bill and Pam Farrell, *Red Hot Monogamy:*

*Making Your Marriage Sizzle* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2006). (Evangelicals like to “sizzle,” apparently.)

<sup>10</sup>One book that contains different essays at least attempting to address the changed situations for Christians is Hefling, ed., *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies*, cited above, n. 3.

<sup>11</sup>See Ellison, *Erotic Justice*, 34-35; Blodgett, *Constructing the Erotic*, 10.

<sup>12</sup>An entertaining essay illustrating this fact is Greta Christina, “Are We Having Sex Now or What?” in *The Erotic Impulse: Honoring the Sensual Self*, ed. David Steinberg, 24-29 (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1992); reprinted in *The Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, 3d ed., ed. Alan Soble, 3-8 (Lanham; Boulder; New York; London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997).

<sup>13</sup>I sometimes refer to my goal here as “empiricism with a small e,” by which I mean that I want to keep an open mind and an eye out for what we may actually observe, yet I do *not* mean to invoke some kind of philosophical “Empiricism” that would trust the senses for accurate epistemological access to “the real.” Our observations are never simple reflections of “nature” or “reality” or whatever. They are always interpretations. Yet I still urge that we do our best to practice observation as honestly and open-mindedly as we can: a “small e” empiricism. For a few other calls for this kind of observation in ethical reasoning, see Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York and London: Continuum, 2006), 155; Charles Hefling, “By Their Fruits: A Traditionalist Argument,” in *Our Selves, Our Souls and Bodies*, ed. Hefling, 157-174, see esp. 169-171; Blodgett, *Constructing the Erotic*, 11.

<sup>14</sup>For fuller treatment, see *Sex and the Single Savior*, 49-50, 165-169; and Dale B. Martin, *Pedagogy of the Bible: An Analysis and Proposal* (Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 84, 85.

<sup>15</sup>*Sex and the Single Savior*, 121-124. See also Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 81-147.

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