

Christian Unity and Sexual Ethics: Fear, function and flourishing

It is a little daunting for me to address you in the aftermath of the Primate's Meeting on this topic that was chosen months ago. Emotions may be high and passionately held opinions diverse. You have much to be grateful for in the unanimous decision to walk together despite differences on the subject of human sexuality, a decision we in the United Reformed Church made in 2007. Indeed many of your discussions are resonant of those we have had and continue to have in my branch of the Church universal. And you have much to reflect upon and some things to grieve. The Communion is on a journey, as is the whole Church of Jesus Christ, seeking to grapple anew with the role and function of sexuality in human life. ¹

I come to you as a practical theologian interested in the integration of sexuality and spirituality. I will be talking this evening about the dynamism of the Christian tradition in the area of sexual ethics, the link between sexuality and spirituality and what that means for pastoral care, and the necessity to take human suffering and human flourishing seriously as we wrestle with Church doctrine.

My subtitle is *Fear, function and flourishing*. "Fear": My thesis is that the power of sexuality is a fearsome thing, and that from the beginning Christian doctrine about sex arose in a cauldron of an anti-matter dualism which elevated the spiritual over the material, wariness towards sexual desire, and misogyny which saw women as the gateway of the devil (Brown 2008, 153, referencing Tertullian). Yet the tradition was intellectually lively from early on, with argument and disputation enabling a dynamic evolution. Augustine's dis-ease with concupiscence which viewed married, non-procreative sexual intercourse as sinful in the 4th century was augmented in time by a valuing of sexual relationship in marriage for the good of the "mutual society" of the spouses. Slowly the church has been coming to an understanding of the good of sexual love beyond procreation, whilst retaining a desire to limit that good to heterosexual marriage. ²

"Fear" is related to "function": Is procreation the primary function of sexuality? Would you all please stand? Welcome to the ancient near east; each of you is an infant newly arrived in the world. Give a borning cry. Half sit down – you seated did not make it to your first birthday. Another segment: and you did not make it to your fifth birthday. Another small segment: you standing made it to your 14th birthday and are sexually mature. What is your

¹ That we are on this journey at all is due to the perseverance of lesbian, gay and bisexual people called to stay in the Church despite being rejected, condemned or worse in some parts of the Body of Christ. I give thanks for them and their sacrifices, and pray for the time when they will no longer be crucified on the rigid planks of doctrine and biblical literalism. Note that because I am talking specifically about sexuality, I am not addressing matters regarding transgendered people – a topic just as worthy of serious consideration but beyond the scope of this talk.

² The Roman Catholic theologian Margaret Farley reviewed sex in Christian tradition, concluding that *the fundamental struggle...has been to modulate an essentially negative approach to sexuality into a positive one, to move from the need to justify sexual intercourse even in marriage by reason of either procreation or the avoidance of fornication to an affirmation of its potential for expressing and effecting interpersonal love* (Farley 1994, 64).

primary concern? [most babies!] Most women sit: life expectancy was 25- 40, women's life expectancy being ten years less because of death in childbirth or from the complications of multiple pregnancies. A few more sit: left standing are those who come into old age, a rarity mostly reserved for the genetically lucky who survived famine and warfare.

In biblical times a fertile woman needed to produce five live births to replace their generation (Carr 2003, 49-50). Suddenly we understand the focus on procreation in Hebrew biblical sexual ethics which allowed polygamy, levirate marriage, concubinage, and the rape of prisoners of war and servants in cultures where women were sexual and domestic property with no right to refuse sex. Even the Bible manifests dynamism in sexual ethics as Jesus relates to women with charity, lifting them from the category of disposable property by taking away men's right to divorce (Mark 10:1-16; Matthew 19:1-12). In Matthew's version of the story, the disciples' respond *well if that's the case, it's better not to marry*.

We no longer live in a world where people are under pressure to procreate. What is our understanding of the godly function of sexual expression now?

Which takes us to "Flourishing". Sexuality and spirituality are both fundamentally relational and embodied, each integral to identity, development, relationship and creativity. The relationship between sexuality and spirituality can be sacramental, *in which [bodily] action, intelligibly though not visibly, produces effects in the spiritual order* (Timmerman 1993, 145). Roman Catholic theologian Joan Timmerman notes that there is reciprocal growth between one's sexual health and spiritual growth: *becoming aware of sexual power and capable of managing it is also the key to spiritual adulthood. Our sexuality provides rites of passage that ... contain spiritual tasks and achievements... These moments in ...sexual development...are not just indicia of change, they are instrumental in causing the shift from child to adult, alone to connected, consumer of the emotional resources of humanity to generator of life and love* (Timmerman 2005, 578-579). Our sexuality, in other words, calls forth our growth into mature and faithful adulthood whether we are straight or gay.³

When Christians "condemn the sin but not the sinner", they are denying a God-given purpose of sexuality and shaming people for expressing the love that leads to their sexual and spiritual maturity. Requiring homosexual people to be celibate forces them to abandon one of the ways we learn to love through bodily experience and contravenes the Christian understanding that celibacy is a gift not a rule. Good pastoral care for people straight or gay engages, critically and constructively, all the sources of theology: scripture, tradition, reason and experience – not for the purpose of shoe-horning people into the requirements of doctrine but for enabling them to grow in moral agency and love (Grosch-Miller 2014).

The contemporary tumult over sexual ethics begs us to work to deepen our understanding of the role of sexuality in human life that we may look again at our doctrines that touch on

³ Rowan Williams suggests that sexual expression can reflect and draw us into the self-giving vulnerability of love, which mirrors the life of God (Higton 2004, 142). This is true regardless of whether the sexual expression is heterosexual or homosexual. When we seek to "act in ways that reflect the character of God" in our sexual expression (*ibid.*, 140), recognising the vulnerability, mutual openness and risk in it, we learn how to love.

it, taking seriously human suffering and human flourishing as we seek to understand the divine purpose and promise.

We must do that together, engaging the whole Body of Christ. Christian unity is a spiritual reality whether we agree with our Christian brothers and sisters on all matters or not. We are together the Body of Christ full stop. Our expressions of division mar this spiritual reality and compromise our Christian witness; we know that. Does this mean that we must quash dissent or abort the process of dynamic evolution that has been our inheritance from the beginning of the Christian story? Of course not. What it means is that we must, as the Primates and the United Reformed Church have done, assert that we will continue to walk together despite our painful disagreements. And it means that we must never silence our fellow Christians but rather continue to share in deep wrestling and conversation.⁴ I will leave it to you to conclude whether the suspension of the American church for three years is necessary for the unity of the Anglican Communion. I only note that it removes important information from important discussions and perhaps denies the spiritual gift of prophecy of that Church.

I give thanks for the grace of Presiding Bishop and Primate Michael Curry of the American Church whose response to the suspension is a model of humility and possibility. He said: *It may be part of our vocation to help the Communion and to help many others to grow in a direction where we can realize and live the love that God has for all of us, and we can one day be a Church and a Communion where all of God's children are fully welcomed, [and] this is truly a house of prayer for all people. ... [W]e must claim that high calling; claim the high calling of love and faith; love even for those with whom we disagree,... and that we will do, and we will do it together.*⁵

We are, as Archbishop Welby has said, one in heart if not one in mind.⁶

God bless the Body of Christ as together we struggle to grow in our understanding of the body's grace and the place of sexuality in human life. Amen.

⁴ Change requires courageous people who choose to live "divided no more" (Palmer 2000, 31-35) and to speak the truth of their suffering and flourishing that the conversation might be broadened and structures might be reformed. Brave pioneers challenge unjust structures and take risks in love that humanity may grow in grace and truth. ("Letter from Birmingham City Jail", Washington 1991, 289-302)

⁵ <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/episcopal-church-presiding-bishop-and-primate-michael-curry-actions-anglican>, accessed 21 January 2016.

⁶ Davies, Madeleine, "Our divisions are obscene, Welby tells Primates", *Church Times*, 15 January 2016, p. 2.

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