



A Case for Sexual Fidelity

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There is an enormous gap between the reality of people's sexual lives and most conversations in the church about sexual fidelity. This gap could make one presume that ours is an especially sinful generation of Christians, or that this portion of the tradition should be radically reformed, if not abandoned. My analysis rests on an altogether different premise. I believe that sexual fidelity is far from irrelevant to people's lives, but that no adequate case for it has been made in our cultural context.

There are risks associated with such efforts. Over the centuries male compliance with the rules of sexual fidelity was never widespread. Indeed, this double standard is still alive and well. Furthermore, in heterosexual unions female fidelity was often coerced, not only through socio-economic and political structures but also through various forms of bodily mutilation. In some marriages the call to mutual faithfulness slid into male ownership and control of women. Battered wives still report feeling like mere possessions, obliged precisely by their promise of fidelity to remain in abusive relationships.

Likewise many Christians in the gay community experience talk about sexual fidelity with profound ambivalence. On the one hand gay men are condemned for their promiscuity, and the instability of their sexual relationships is often cited as evidence that their sexual orientation is inherently immoral. On the other hand most churches continue by and large to deny communal support and ecclesial blessing to those gay couples who do strive to be faithful to each other. From their

point of view gay people are, if you will, damned if they do and damned if they don't practice sexual fidelity.

As Christians we are deeply divided about how to evaluate both the patriarchal and the heterosexist history of marriage. But those debates are not the focus of this presentation. I raise these concerns only to alert us to the dangerous shape some calls to fidelity can take in people's lives. We should be suspicious of efforts (like this one) to make a case for sexual fidelity. But our caution should not keep us from this task. The critical analysis of patriarchy and of heterosexism should not eclipse efforts to reconstruct meaningful arguments for sexual fidelity.

We cannot afford to keep silent about the importance of sexual fidelity. We need arguments that recognize and endorse the full humanity of women, as well as men, regardless of their sexual orientation. Many forces have eroded our sense of the importance of fidelity.¹ Lovers no longer understand why they should marry. Couples no longer understand why they should keep their promise to forsake others and stay together. The church must speak about sexual

steadfastness and sexual exclusivity in ways that make sense to people. Not every argument will prove to be compelling, but we must strive to understand why sexual fidelity is important.

I. SEX IS FOR LOVE

Sexual fidelity is important because it serves love. It is of instrumental rather than intrinsic value. Its moral significance depends upon the truth of the premise that human sexuality is created (in part) for love. Thus it is necessary at least briefly to explain why sex is for love.

Through our sexuality we find ourselves attracted to and desired by others. That such desires should draw us toward loving communion and friendship with each other and that our sense of personal well-being and communal welfare is tied to these relationships are two important dimensions of what it means to claim that sex is for love. Christians defend the notion that sexual coupling ought to cultivate love in a variety of ways.

One of these ways rests on the axiom that what we know about God tells us something about what it means to be authentically human. This is part of what it means to say that people are made in the image of God. So, for example, it is commonplace now to find theologians moving from premises about the triune nature of God, as Persons-in-Communion, to conclusions about the unitive purposes of human sexuality.

Something like this mysterious divine union may be experienced by humans through their sexual self-giving and reception. In important respects the boundaries between persons in sexual unions blur. Lovers may experience themselves as “one flesh.” Reciprocal sexual self-giving enables people to experience the love of another as the love of self—quite literally to experience the other’s delight as my

¹George P. Fletcher, *Loyalty* (New York: Oxford University, 1993).

own. This experience is a taste of that new heaven and new earth in which my interest is not divided from that of another’s, in which indeed we are reconciled. In “one flesh” unions we have a taste of that delightful communion for which we were made.

Our desire for sexual pleasure and our erotic desire for the beloved are two of God’s gracious ways of drawing us into intimate relationship with another. Casual sex, even when otherwise responsible, shrinks rather than enhances the human capacity for such intimacy. One might stand actively resist rather than merely fall short of building relationship. Such a lifestyle must be condemned.

In contrast, masturbation may be a morally acceptable though imperfect sexual activity. Though by definition nonrelational, it may not only be pleasurable but contribute indirectly to an individual’s capacity for intimacy by providing that person with sexual self-knowledge and experience in safe ways. If it does not entail fantasies that are morally dangerous to entertain, involve the use of pornographic materials, or become compulsive and supplant the drive toward intimacy, then masturbation need not be forbidden.

To claim that sex is for love has direct implications for the evaluation of casual sex and masturbation. But the primary role of this claim in the present argument is foundational. Sexual fidelity makes little sense in our cultural context apart from the premise that human sexuality is designed for love.

II. INADEQUATE RATIONALES FOR FIDELITY

There have been many arguments for fidelity, but several are no longer decisive. A brief review of three of the most commonplace of these will demonstrate that a more compelling case for fidelity needs to be articulated.

First, the requirement that sexual partnerships be life-long is often justified on the ground that the children born of such unions require stability for their proper nurture. This has proven to be quite true. Yet, however important such reasoning may be, it does not explain why couples who know they will be childless by virtue of their old age or infertility, or who choose to be childfree through contraceptive rigor, should not engage in premarital sex. Neither does it explain why couples with grown children ought not amicably separate when the “going gets tough” or simply boring.

Second, many today argue that sexual fidelity is important because it prevents the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. This too is an important rationale for fidelity, but it is insufficient. A strong case can be made that both individual health and the common good are adequately (albeit not perfectly) served by practices associated with “safer” sex.

The third and most common rationale for fidelity may be the least adequate. Many lovers find it difficult to believe that the passionate concern they feel for the welfare of their beloved could ever dwindle. Their love seems so inevitable. They cannot imagine that the delight they feel in the presence of the beloved might waver or diminish. Such romantic illusions about love initially appear to make sense of fidelity, but of course the day comes when love is no longer effortless

and the beloved is no longer only attractive. Many of us mistakenly jump to the conclusion that we simply got involved with the “wrong” person.

III. FIDELITY SERVES LOVE

If we are realistic about love—about the way sin has broken the human capacity to love—then we will expect to wake up sometimes and feel stuck with, rather than drawn to, our spouse. Stan Hauerwas puts it this way: Christians always get involved with the wrong person!² Fidelity is necessary because, though we are created to love, we are not born great lovers and must learn how to love. Fidelity serves that learning process.

1. Hospitality

We must learn to love the “strangers” to whom we are committed and with whom we share our bed. We must learn not only how to welcome guests but must practice hospitality in relationship to our spouses and children. Indeed, as spouses and parents and children grow more intimate—and our illusions about each other are broken—families may grow less rather than more familiar.

Ironically, because of their intimate knowledge of each other, spouses may strike each other as stranger than they perhaps seem to others. Parents and children often think of each other as “resident aliens.” My point is simple: in Christ we are called to learn to love such “resident aliens” (Exod 23:9; Rom 12:13; 1 Pet 1:1; 2:11). When we gather round the family dinner table, having put aside our comfortable illusions about each other, we may find mysterious strangers

gathered there. When our kinfolk strike us as more odd than fascinating, we must take heart. We may be entertaining angels unaware (Heb 13:2)!

2. *Love of Enemies*

Christians know that at times they are not attracted to the “strangers” with whom they live. The love of strangers may be quite difficult. Indeed these folk may be, in all their proximity, the “enemies” we are called by Christ to love. What it really means to love one’s enemies is always a thorny ethical issue for Christians, but given the terrifying reality of domestic violence and sexual abuse in the homes of many, it is especially important that we clarify the meaning of faithfulness in such contexts.

Sexual fidelity is sometimes naively associated with “unconditional” love and forgiveness. Talk of “love alone” guiding family life veils the fact that power is distributed in all relationships, and such naivete may conserve unjust patterns among couples and between parents and children. The truth is, love and justice are interrelated. Justice creates the conditions that make authentic love possible. Authentic love seeks justice at a minimum. It is in this sense always a “tough love.”

Christians know that faithful lovers do not “silently suffer” abuse at the

²“Hauerwas’ Law” may have first appeared in print in his essay “Sex and Politics: Bertrand Russell and Human Sexuality,” *The Christian Century* 95/14 (April 19, 1978) 417-422.

hands of their loved ones. They do not offer those who have offended them cheap grace or forgiveness granted prematurely apart from repentance. On the contrary, fidelity may require all the risks and challenges associated with a resistance to abuse that both ensures the lover’s safety and invites the beloved’s transformation. Blind adherence to an individual or a relationship converts loyalty into idolatry. Such idolatry within the family is as morally dangerous as attempts to love apart from the promise of fidelity.

3. *Shelter for the Naked*

Since people are made for intimacy, we must become unashamedly wide-eyed and naked with one another. Such exposure renders people very vulnerable. The mutual promise and gift of fidelity—of a love that is steadfast and enduring—offers lovers some protection. It enables us to draw each other into increasingly honest and truthful unions with a measure of security without which the level of risk would be inappropriate.³

4. *Communion*

We may forsake others in keeping with our promise to do so, but not primarily because of it. Indeed it is not self-evident why the promise of sexual exclusivity is important in the first place. Love does not seem to demand it per se. In general loyalty demands that we reject any other object of devotion, no matter how tempting, if it sidetracks or derails our primary love. But parents know it is possible truly to love more than one child; friends know this about friendships as well. While there are real limits to the number of intimate relationships anyone can sustain, the practicalities of interpersonal relationships do not necessitate that we limit our friends or children

to just one.

Yet this is precisely what is entailed in the promise of sexual exclusivity. There must be something unique about erotic (as opposed to other kinds of) love. The intimacy aimed at (though only tasted) in “one flesh” unions is so intense that sexual exclusivity is practically (though perhaps not logically) necessitated by it. Given human limitations, the question is not whether it is possible to love with such passion more than one person at a time. The question is whether it is possible to love one person this way, even when one has a lifetime in which to learn how.

Apart from the promise of sexual exclusivity, the temptation to identify a sexual partner with a particular function, like that of bread winner, sexual playmate, reproductive tool, or child care provider, would be overwhelming. The intimacy aimed at and experienced in “one flesh” unions prevents us from reducing and locking each other into such roles.

³Are there structures (other than the promise of fidelity) that ensure lovers that their vulnerability remains appropriate? Karen Lebacqz suggests that the wisdom which sometimes accompanies age and experience may provide single lovers with protection sufficient to ensure that their level of risk is appropriate. See “Appropriate Vulnerability: A Sexual Ethic for Singles,” *The Christian Century* 104 (May 6, 1987) 435-438.

5. Summary

The human capacity for love has been broken by sin. Through the promise and gift of fidelity we are able with the blessing of God to school each other in love. Learning to make love—to give and receive love—requires patience and our full attention. Fidelity makes authentic love-making possible.

When we take up such a sexual lifestyle we are entering into a vocation, not taking off on vacation. Fidelity enables people to offer hospitality to the “strangers” to whom we find ourselves related, to love the “enemies” with whom we may live so much that we demand their transformation, to protect those who risk nakedness before us, and to taste, by forsaking others, the experience of becoming fully “one flesh” and the delightful communion for which we were made.

IV. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

1. For Marriage

Simply because sexual activity takes place within marriage does not mean such activity is always praiseworthy. Fidelity may serve just and loving relationships, but it does not guarantee them. In this sense marriage should not be seen as an antidote for sin. There can be sexual activity apart from fidelity that is morally better overall than what constitutes some marriages. My point has not been to establish the priority of fidelity over justice and love in sexual matters, but more modestly, to make a case for the moral significance of fidelity in relationship to justice and love.

2. For Engagements

How should we evaluate what ethicists call “preceremonial sex,” or the full sexual expression of couples engaged to be married? Traditionally, the church has taught that a marriage is initiated when (1) the couple’s mutual promise of fidelity is (2) publicly celebrated and (3)

sexually consummated. At present most churches teach that it is morally important for this commitment of fidelity to be publicly celebrated before it is sexually consummated. This has not always been the case.

For example, according to the traditions of biblical Judea, the engaged couple were permitted to engage in sexual intercourse during their yearlong betrothal. In the medieval period, the importance of the couple's consent to the establishment of a marriage was emphasized. This led to an increase in the practice of consummating so-called "secret" marriages and consequently to an increase in the number of women and children who had legitimate marital and/or inheritance rights but were deserted by their husbands. Out of this pastoral and legal morass emerged the practice of publicly announcing engagements and publishing the bans of marriage.

In my judgment, it may not be wrong for engaged couples to make love. When a couple announces their engagement they may have begun to make public and to invite communal support for their love. They may have made a lifelong commitment to each other and therefore have embarked on the way of fidelity. They may have begun to marry each other and to celebrate God's joining together

of their lives. There may be nothing wrong with their taking complete sexual delight in one another. But since so much in our culture belittles the value of sexual restraint, I will explore three reasons why waiting until one's wedding night might be morally important. This list is neither exhaustive nor decisive, but includes important, often overlooked considerations.

First, in our culture engagements are taken much less seriously than they were in the past. Engaged couples may not in fact have pledged themselves to each other and may not intend to do so until their wedding. Much about a relationship may be revealed by the extent to which individuals are willing to merge their financial resources and to offer one another reciprocal access to and control over those joint resources.

A word of caution here: I am not recommending that all married or engaged couples open up joint savings and checking accounts. The possibility for the abuse of such trust is enormous. My point is that the risk of being financially "ripped off" or controlled under such circumstances is certainly no more than the risk of being sexually "ripped off" or dominated. In our culture we are warned to guard and protect our financial resources more than we are trained to care for our sexual and emotional treasures. Who we are sexually appears not to be worthy of such precaution.

Second, perhaps engaged couples should refrain from sexual intercourse because this activity may prove to be scandalous for the community. Like it or not, we are called as Christians to live sexual lives that are exemplary for others.⁴ To whatever extent our sexual life is public it may be corrosive, confusing, or edifying to others. Our communal responsibilities may sometimes dictate restraint when other factors do not. That said, it is important to keep the degree to which preceremonial sex may be scandalous in perspective. Clergy sexual abuse is much more likely to discredit Christianity, undermine the church's teaching credibility, or trigger a lapse of faith.

Finally, even the strongest of loves cannot successfully travel the road of fidelity alone. Communal prayers and support are constitutive of marriage. While it is clearly the couple who do the marrying, they cannot marry each other in isolation from the community. In this sense

marriage cannot be a private, merely interpersonal affair. Engaged couples who are not lifted up in prayer and nurtured in their faithfulness—whose commitment is not so celebrated—are well advised to refrain from sexually consummating their love.

In sum, there are some significant reasons to be at least cautious about endorsing preceremonial sex. Yet these reasons do not seem decisive. It may be morally good for some engaged couples to take full sexual delight in each other.

⁴This is especially important for people with church vocations to understand. It is not that we have a double standards—one for professional church workers and the other for laity—but a matter of being realistic about the morally formative power of life in the public eye.

3. For Polygamy and Adultery

The Old Testament does not explicitly forbid non-monogamous forms of marriage. Polygamous marriages were accepted in ancient Israel, especially among the powerful. Indeed many patriarchs and some of the monarchs of ancient Israel practiced polygyny with moral impunity, though even then this was not the normal form of marriage. However, by the time of the common era, virtually all Hebrew marriages were monogamous, though this may have been more for economic than moral reasons.

Furthermore, according to the Old Testament, adultery was a sin that could be committed only against men. It referred to the sexual involvement of a wife with another man. Husbands who engaged in sexual activity with women unattached to either a fiance or a husband were not seen as adulterers.

Jesus' teaching on divorce directly challenged this double standard and underscored the importance of sexual exclusivity. Jesus introduced the notion that husbands could commit adultery against their wives (Mark 10:11). This transformed adultery into a sin against the conjugal relationship. It is not simply the violation of structures designed to ensure the legitimacy of paternity claims and inheritance transfers. In this context the demand for male sexual exclusivity serves no purpose other than the upbuilding of love. Arguments for monogamy can be reasonably inferred from Jesus' teaching on divorce.

Our erotic desire wanders for the same basic reason it wanes. We are not born great lovers, and must learn daily how to love anew even, indeed especially, our beloved. Restricting our sexual activity to just the beloved can be an expression of our availability and presence to the beloved. Non-monogamous sexual unions are morally problematic because secondary relationships provide an easy diversion for our attention precisely when we are most tempted to abandon the work of becoming an authentic lover of our primary partner.

Adulterous relationships are even more problematic. When we have an affair we are paradigmatically unfaithful. We fail to promise our "new love" the patient endurance he or she deserves, and neither the spouse nor our new sexual partner has the attention that is at least possible with exclusivity. We forsake others for the sake of the mate we have chosen, and also for the sake of those forsaken. Affairs shortchange everyone involved.

4. For Divorce

In recent decades theologians have worked hard making theological and moral sense of divorce. But this important work was often done apart from a clear articulation of why divorce is

a moral problem in the first place. This contributed to the fragmentation of Christian traditions about fidelity.

My focus here has been on explaining why lifelong faithfulness should be the normative context in which people make love. Lest I be misunderstood, let me make clear that I recognize circumstances in which such a promise may be legitimately broken. Jesus' teaching on divorce (Mark 10:9) is not properly interpreted as a new law absolutely prohibiting divorce. Neither the Matthean nor the Pauline

communities interpreted it as such; instead they struggled to discern when divorce might be permissible in light of this vision of God's intentions for marriage (Matt 5:31-32; 19:1-9; 1 Cor 7:12-15). My point is quite simply to reiterate that God did not intend our sexual relations to be transitory.

My aim in tracing out any of these ethical implications is not to be judgmental or moralistic. I do not wish to add to my own or anyone's sense of failure and guilt. In regard to divorce, the plain truth is that broken marriages are not morally normative, even though some divorces may be justified. This means that divorce is never a morally happy event. Fuzziness about this truth does not relieve divorced people of their pain.

When Christians focus exclusively on the grief that accompanies divorce, we short-circuit the healing process. While there are a number of important similarities, the sufferings and pains of being widowed and being divorced are not identical. Those who are divorced need to be able to confess their complicity in the failure of their marriage and receive God's word of forgiveness. We cannot bear effective witness to the reality of God's forgiveness if we are unwilling to speak this truth. We fail to provide people who are divorced with adequate pastoral care when we ignore the distinctive moral dimensions of their situation.

5. For Premarital Sex

What are the implications of this argument about fidelity for mature couples neither married nor engaged, yet whose relationships are not casual, but instead just and loving? The Old Testament does not explicitly forbid premarital activity per se, at least not for males. Their virginity served no purpose in the patriarchal clan system. In contrast, the virginity of marriageable females was prescribed. Those women found not to be virgins when they were wed could be stoned to death (Deut 22:20-21). Additionally, while the Greek term *porneia* clearly refers to sexually immoral behavior, whether and when such references to unchastity in the New Testament were meant to include fornication is not at all self-evident. Interpreters must base their translations on inferences that require closely reasoned justification.

I have argued that in order to become increasingly and fully love-making such sexual activity requires the gift and promise of fidelity. Therefore, premarital sex cannot be commended. This is an inference which can reasonably be drawn from Jesus' reconstruction of the prohibition of adultery and his teaching about divorce referred to earlier. It is an inference which coheres with my theses that (1) sex is for love and that (2) fidelity schools us in that love. In my judgment, even when just and loving, premarital sex is not morally normative.

This does not mean that people in such relationships do not experience love. There is truth in the claim that premarital sex can express intimacy, nurture relationship, and make love. I

have not argued that fidelity is necessary for the establishment of minimally just and loving sexual relations. I have not concluded that premarital sex can be prohibited on the ground that it is intrinsically unjust or unloving.

But this argument does establish that premarital lovers will experience less love than that for which they were designed by God. Settling for this—for love without the gift and promise of patience and exclusivity—stems from an underestimation of one’s worth as a beloved child of God. Attempting to love without recognizing the human need to be schooled in it stems from an overestimation of one’s capacity to love. These are the factors which lie behind the growing acceptance of fornication in our world.

The question which remains unaddressed is whether and/or when premarital sex might be morally permitted. Can an exception be made to this norm? The danger, of course, in even exploring what (if any) the criteria might be that could justify such a sexual lifestyle is that our attention will shift from making sense of sexual fidelity to justifying exceptions to it. The case for sexual fidelity must be well established among us if we are to have any hope of discerning what might differentiate mere rationalizations from legitimate exceptions to the norm of fidelity.

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