

# Christian Ethics. How Should We Live?

## 11. *Applied Ethics: Sexuality and Marriage*

**Sunday, August 14, 2005  
9 to 9:50 am, in the Parlor.  
*Everyone is welcome!***

*St. John in the Wilderness*

**O heavenly Father, who hast filled the world with beauty: Open our eyes to behold thy gracious hand in all thy works; that, rejoicing in thy whole creation, we may learn to serve thee with gladness; for the sake of him through whom all things were made, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord.**

- Book of Common Prayer, p. 814

# Christian Ethics

*An Introduction*

Edited by  
**Bernard Hoose**

- **“Sex, sexuality and relationships”** by Gareth Moore, in: **Christian Ethics: An Introduction**. Edited by Bernard Hoose, A Michael Glazier Book, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1998. ISBN: 0-8146-5929-2.
- **Gareth Moore**, a Dominican Priest, taught Old Testament and Philosophy at Blackfriars in Oxford.

An Introduction to  
**CHRISTIAN  
ETHICS**

Fourth Edition

ROGER H. CROOK

- **An Introduction to Christian Ethics (4th Edition)**, Roger H. Crook. Prentice Hall, 2001. ISBN: 0-130-34149-5 Chapter 7: *“Human Sexuality and the Marriage Relationship”*
- **Dr. Crook** is Emeritus professor and former chair of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Meredith College

# Background

# Background

## A Traditional View

- Sex was ordained by God in order to bring children into the world. Therefore:
  - Its proper context was marriage, which was:
    - Instituted by God for the raising of children, and
    - Provided children the loving and stable environment they needed for growth and formation.
  - Sexual activity that could not lead to procreation was forbidden and was a perversion of the nature of sex itself:
    - Contraception
    - Masturbation
    - Oral and Anal Sex
    - Homosexuality

# Background

## A Traditional View

- If in reality people honored this view more often in the breach than in the observance, it reflected only the power of sin, not a flaw in the theology.

# Background

## Modern Questioning

- *Today:*
  - The certainties provided by this traditional view have virtually disappeared, and
  - Human sexuality is one of the most controversial and contentious areas of Christian Ethics

# Background

## Modern Questioning

- Some reasons for the modern climate change of thought:
  - Effective contraception has decoupled (or at least rendered more tenuous) the relationship between sex and raising children.
  - Modern psychology has emphasized the importance of sexuality as part of the human person.
    - Sexuality is no longer viewed simply as a function or act, but as an essential and defining part of our character.

# Background

## Modern Questioning

- Some reasons for the modern climate change in thought:
  - The stress in Western societies on individual liberty and taking responsibility for oneself in forming sexual and other personal values.

# Background

## Questions and Goals

- Questions:
  - What is the nature of sexuality? What should its role be in a Christian life?
  - What is the nature of marriage? What should its role be in a Christian life?
- Our goal today is not to provide definitive answers for these questions, but to indicate the problems that arise in trying to find answers.

# Background Sources

- **Christian Ethical Sources:**
  - **Scripture:** although “filtered” through a human mind and the historical context in which the writer lived, we trust it can still give us insight to God’s will and loving desire for us.
  - **Natural Law:** human nature and the creation reflect the goodness of the creator God.
    - God’s plan, intentions, design for world has been “imprinted” in all that God has created – including our own natures, hearts and minds.

# Scripture

# Scripture Caveats

- Caveats:
  - It is especially common in sexual ethics for people to start with a strong opinion about sexuality and then find justification for it in Scripture, rather than be compelled to the view by the force of examining what Scripture as a whole says.
  - One should not presume there is a consistent “the biblical view” on sex, for the writings of Scripture span many ages and civilizations.

# Scripture Prohibitions

- One common scriptural approach to forming a sexual ethic is to search Scripture for acts that are prohibited, and by the process of elimination, come up with those permitted.
- Old Testament Legal Texts are rich source:
  - *Exodus 20:14 (also Deuteronomy 5:18): You shall not commit adultery.*
  - *Leviticus 18:22: You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.*
  - *Leviticus 18:23: Sex with animals a perversion.*
  - *Deuteronomy 22:30, and Leviticus 18:6-18: Incest is forbidden.*

# Scripture Prohibitions

- Old Testament Legal Texts:
  - *Deuteronomy 22:13-21*: a young woman who marries must be a virgin.
  - *Deuteronomy 22:23-29*: rape must be punished.
- Taken together, the Old Testament legal texts seems to imply the only permissible place for sexual acts with another person is marriage.

# Scripture Prohibitions

- Other biblical texts seem to reinforce this view:
  - A condemnation of homosexual acts is implied in:
    - The Story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-29)
      - It can be argued that the crime condemned in Sodom was gang rape, not homosexuality
    - Paul's remarks in Romans 1:18-32 and in 1 Corinthians 6:9
  - The praise of sexual purity and a condemnation of lust are found in the story of Tobias and Sarah (Tobias 6:9 – 7:18)
  - Condemnation of intercourse in marriage using contraception seems implied in the fate of Onan in Genesis 38:6-10
  - Jesus forbade adultery and all lustful thoughts (Matthew 5:27f)

# Scripture

## A Part of a Human Relationship

- Another Scriptural approach to forming a sexual ethic is to recognize that sexual activity is part of a human relationship, and ask what contribution it makes to **Jesus' Great Commandment** that all human relationships must be based on agapeic love:
  - *Matthew 12:29-31*: **'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'** NRSV
  - Also see: *John 13:34, 15:12, 17*

# Scripture

## A Part of a Human Relationship

- The questions become:
  - Is the sexual act an expression of love between the partners?
  - Does it strengthen their love?
  - Is it compatible with love for other people outside the relationship?
  - Does it increase or decrease each partner's capacity to love?
- The “love” here is the agapeic or self-giving love that we discussed in our 8<sup>th</sup> session (Ethics based on Agapeic Love)

# Scripture

## Love and Law

- What is the relationship between this “larger view” and the legal biblical prohibitions against certain sexual acts? What is the relationship between “love” and “law”?
- Some biblical passages on love and law:
  - *Matthew 5:17 (NRSV)*: **Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.**
  - *Matthew 7:12 (NRSV)*: **In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.**

# Scripture

## Love and Law

- Some biblical passages on love and law:
  - *Romans 13:8, 10 (NRSV)*: Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law ... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.
  - *Galatians 5:14 (NRSV)*: For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
  - *James 2:8 (NRSV)*: You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

# Scripture

## Love and Law

- If one accepts the primacy of love as the ultimate measure of the “law,” how should we deal with the apparent biblical injunctions against certain sexual acts?
- *One attitude:* our first priority is to discern what love invites to do and requires us not to do. If the demands of love seem to require a sexual ethic that conflicts with other biblical prohibitions, then perhaps it is evidence that the biblical text:
  - was an opinion of the writer, and was never a true expression of the will of God.
  - expressed God’s will for the society and times in which they were written, but not God’s will for our own society and time.

# Scripture

## Love and Law

- *Another attitude:* If the demands of love seem to require a sexual ethic that conflicts with other biblical prohibitions, then perhaps our understanding of what love demands is flawed or inadequate.
  - God's wisdom is greater than ours, and the Bible is the changeless word of God that we ignore at our peril.

# Scripture

## Love and Law

- Both these approaches can be readily criticized:
  - 1. To say the demands of love allow us to ignore Scripture treats Scripture with far too cavalier and dismissive an attitude.
  - 2. To say Scripture always reflects the timeless wisdom of God ignores the many examples of biblical texts that are clearly biased by the historical context in which their writer lived.

# Natural Law

# Natural Law

## God's Will Imprinted in Our Nature

- God's plan, intentions, design for world has been "imprinted" in all that God has created – including our own natures, hearts and minds.
- Therefore, by studying ourselves, and the design and plan of God's creation, we can come to understand how God intends us to live.
- *Note:* see session 5 for more information on ethics based on Natural Law.

# Natural Law

## God's Will Imprinted in Our Nature

- The Creator of the world has imprinted an order on the human heart that conscience reveals to us and enjoins us to obey. The laws governing the relationship between human beings and states are to be sought where the Father of all things wrote them, that is, in human nature.

- *Pacem in terris*, Pope John XXIII, nn. 1-5

# **Natural Law**

**Traditional Natural Law  
Ethics**

# Natural Law

## Traditional Natural Law Sexual Ethics

- The traditional sexual ethic argued from natural law is:
  - God made us male or female, and gave us sexual organs whose natural purpose is clearly reproduction.
  - Therefore, any unnatural use of these organs (= any unnatural act) is not only an “offense” against nature, but a sin against God.
- This viewpoint goes back to the Greek Stoics, and was later adapted by Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and by Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas in medieval times.

# Natural Law

## Traditional Natural Law Sexual Ethics

- St. Albert the Great (1200-1280) and his student St. Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) argued from natural law that:
  - Certain sexual positions for intercourse were more natural and more respectful of the nature of human beings than others.
  - Any sexual act that resulted in semen not being deposited in the vagina was unnatural and therefore wrong.
    - Thus masturbation, contraception and homosexuality were unnatural because they did not respect the natural purpose of sex and wasted semen.
  - Homosexual acts were also unnatural because they did not respect the differences between male and female and why God created us male and female.

# **Natural Law**

## **Natural Law and Happiness**

# Natural Law

## Natural Law and Happiness

- Thomas Aquinas also discussed another “natural law” approach that can be used to develop a sexual ethic.
- Aquinas argued that God desires human beings to be happy, and therefore God constructed human nature to promote happiness and human flourishing.
  - To act according to our natures will promote happiness; to act against our natures will cause unhappiness.
- This aspect of our human nature might then offer a way to discern what sexual activity is “natural” or “unnatural.”

# Natural Law

## Natural Law and Happiness

- The traditional natural law approach is based on the empirical observation that the primary function of sexual organs is reproduction.
- In this natural law approach, we would have to empirically observe what sexual activities promote happiness.
- Those activities that result in happiness and human flourishing are then “natural;” those that result in unhappiness are then “unnatural.”

# Natural Law

## Natural Law and Happiness

- However, this kind of observation to determine what makes for human happiness is an enormously difficult task fraught with pitfalls:
  - The effect of sexual activity on happiness and well-being is likely to be very subtle, existing on an emotional or psychological plane.
  - Multiple other factors may also be involved, and be difficult or impossible to tease out.
  - Some activities may promote happiness and human flourishing in the short term, but cause unhappiness and misery in the long-term.

# Natural Law

## Marriage and Sexuality

# Natural Law

## Sex and Marriage

- The traditional natural law view of sexuality concludes that sexual intercourse should be confined to marriage. The argument goes:
  - 1. The natural function of sex to have children.
  - 2. Children need a secure and loving environment in which to grow and mature. Providing such an environment is the natural function of marriage.
  - 3. Therefore, sex should be confined to marriage.

# Natural Law

## Sex and Marriage

- Modern natural law ethics recognizes that the natural function of sexual intercourse is more than about having children. Sexual intercourse can also be a profound physical expression of love.
- This natural “expressive” function of sex has also been used to conclude that sex should naturally be confined to marriage.

# Natural Law

## Sex and Marriage

- The argument goes:
  - 1. As physical beings, we find physical intimacy expressive of meaning that reaches to deeper levels of our person than just the physical.
    - If someone punches us, we are not only physically hurt, but on an emotional plane we are wounded by the hostility of the act.
  - 2. We naturally accept more physical intimacy with friends and those we love than with strangers, and greater physical intimacy is often a sign of greater personal intimacy.
    - The affectionate hug of a friend carries deeper meaning than the hand shake we may allow the stranger introduced to us.

# Natural Law

## Sex and Marriage

- The argument goes:
  - 3. Sexual intercourse is the deepest and most pleasurable form of physical intimacy with another person that is available to us.
  - 4. The deepest and most profound human relationship is marriage, in which both partners have committed themselves to be close to each other until death.
  - 5. Therefore, the deepest and most pleasurable form of physical intimacy should naturally be reserved for the deepest and most profound human relationship, marriage.

# Natural Law

## Sex and Marriage

- Such a view is found in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Familiaris Consortio*:
- **Sexuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such. It is realized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death.**

# Natural Law

## Sex and Marriage

- The total physical self-giving would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving, in which the whole person, including the temporal dimension, is present: if the person were to withhold something or reserve the possibility of deciding otherwise in the future, by this very fact he or she would not be giving totally.

# Natural Law

## Reproduction and Relationship

# Natural Law

## Reproduction and Relationship

- Modern natural law theory in both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism have affirmed that one natural function of sexual intercourse is to be a deeply physically and intimate way of expressing love and unity in the marriage relationship.
- Most Christian Churches have de-emphasized the natural function of sexual intercourse as a means to bring new life into the world and, by and large, have accepted contraception.
  - The Church of England accepted contraception in the 1930's.

# Natural Law

## Reproduction and Relationship

- The Roman Church has abandoned the view that contraception is wrong because of the traditional natural law tenet that the *only* natural function of sexual intercourse was reproduction.
- However, Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae* outlined a new natural law theory that insists that the natural function of sexual intercourse has two “meanings” which cannot be separated:
  - 1. The **Unitive Meaning**, expressing the mutual self-giving of husband and wife.
  - 2. The **Procreative Meaning**, the ability to create new life.

# Natural Law

## Reproduction and Relationship

- An act of intercourse must always:
  - 1. Have a **unitive meaning**, that is, be expressive of the loving union of two people in the committed relationship of marriage.
  - 2. Have a **procreative meaning**, that is, always be “open to new life.”
- Because of the latter requirement, contraception continues to be forbidden by the Roman Catholic Church.

# Conclusions

# Conclusions

- Developing a sexual ethic is enormously complex and requires us to wrestle with all three legs of the Anglican three-legged stool, giving none of them short shrift:
  - **Scripture**
  - **Reason** (= Natural Law)
  - **Tradition** (= the sum of the struggles of past generations)