

# Sex for Christians

*The Limits and Liberties of Sexual Living*

Revised Edition

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## CHAPTER TEN

### *Sexual Freedom in Marriage*

One way to kill the joys of sexual relations in marriage is to box them into a frame of moral rules. The one thing necessary in married sex is freedom. But if it is a mistake to weigh all sex relations on a scale of right and wrong, it is disaster to measure them only by manuals of sexual performance. Free sexual life in marriage is not achieved by great sensations. Moral sexual life in marriage is not gained by finicky obedience to rules. There is a morality for sexual relations within marriage; but it is not a morality of rules, not even of the single rule — “don’t commit adultery.” If marriage were related to sex as a fence is to a pet dog, all we would need for a moral sex life would be to abstain from adultery. But marriage is more than a fenced enclosure for sex: it is an opportunity to let sex be a creative force woven through the partnership. So, while we will ask questions about the rights and wrongs of sexual behavior *within* the partnership, our purpose is to point the way to sexual freedom. We have discussed fidelity in general already; now we will be talking mostly about positive fidelity in the arena of physical sex. So when we use the word “sex” here, we will most often have genital sex in mind.

## 1. MORALS AND EXPECTATIONS

Christian morality must deal with married sex in terms of how people actually feel and think about marriage. Married people today tend to think of sex in marriage as a means of communicating love and tenderness, as a means of mutual self-fulfillment. That is, they think positively about the potential for sex to enrich their own lives. They do not think of marriage as an institutional device for keeping sex within bounds; they think of sex as a promise for making their lives happier in relationship with each other. And sexual ethics must filter into the real consciousness of married people and touch down on their actual experiences.

It is not difficult to pinpoint factors that have changed the role of physical sex in marriage.

(1) The almost universal acceptance of a variety of contraceptive devices has allowed couples to engage in sexual intercourse without thinking beyond it to the possibility of pregnancy. This means that they can concentrate on what sex does for them as persons — or what it fails to do.

(2) Erotic love is idealized as the motive for marriage. The ideal marriage is based on the erotic attraction that each person has for the other. This makes the quality of sexual relations more important to a marriage: that affects the feeling of a couple's attraction for one another, and in turn touches the sensitive nerves of their marriage itself.

(3) Our sexually saturated culture has made us more aware of our sexuality and has led people to expect and demand large benefits from sex in marriage. This has opened the door to feelings of disillusionment and frustration; married people are less willing to resign themselves to unsatisfying sex than they used to be.

(4) Women are more conscious of their own active roles in sex. They no longer see themselves having something done to them, as passive, tolerating plumbing fixtures for their husband's needs. They expect as much from sex as men do.

(5) People think of sex as a means of communication. Thus, far from being a mere release of tension, sex is expected to communicate the deeper feelings of personal love. This means that when sex fails to communicate love, it threatens the marriage based on love.

We do not have to decide whether the sexual expectations people bring to their marriages are good or bad. But we do have to realize that what people think they ought to expect from sex in marriage determines the kinds of moral concerns people have about sex in marriage. The situations in which moral questions arise are shaped by what people expect from sex and what people feel they ought to expect. For instance, people who have both moral sensitivity and a high expectation from sex may be caught in a conscience problem about the techniques to use in pursuit of sexual happiness. And they may have reason to wonder about the moral feelings they carry into marriage when that morality prevents them from giving the sexual responses their partners look for. The moral side of sex gets especially sensitive when one's sexual experience, far from delivering the joys our culture tells us we have a right to expect, is acutely frustrating and painful. In short, sexual morality in marriage is mostly about how we respond as persons to the possibilities and disappointments of sexual relations in a climate of inflated expectations.

## 2. THE BIBLE ON SEX WITHIN MARRIAGE

The Old Testament encourages a voluptuous sex life within marriage. The creation stories, for instance, validate rich erotic expectations: male and female are created for each other, and they are meant to find in each other's sexuality the promise of wholeness for themselves. Only after the Fall is there a prediction of male domination; before the Fall, male and female are partners in sexual development. The Song of Solomon is the Old Testa-

ment's clearest celebration of sensual anticipation. Its erotic excitement pulsates with sensuality: "O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth! For your love is better than wine, your anointing oils are fragrant. . . . Draw me after you, let us make haste" (1:2-4). And further on: "I am sick with love. O that his left hand were under my head, and that his right hand embraced me" (2:5-6). We do not know how this raptured couple fared after ten years of marriage, but their expectations of sex were high. We can only guess that, double standards and male chauvinism notwithstanding, Old Testament couples expected a good deal of pleasure from their sexual life in marriage.

The New Testament gives very little concrete counsel on sex within marriage. Since God's grace and not sexual joy is its major theme, this is not surprising. Still, the morals of married sex could hardly stay out of the picture completely. In Paul's household talk, the question of how married people *should* relate to each other sexually does come up, and he is usually pretty austere about it. He talks of the "rights" each partner has with regard to the other (I Cor. 7:3-5): the contract of marriage gives partners "conjugal rights" to each other's bodies. He also issues some negative generalities that apply to marriage relationships: partners in marriage ought to avoid fornication and uncleanness (e.g., Eph. 5:3-4). But Paul does not provide case studies of fornication within marriage; he assumes his readers would recognize it if it happened. The command for husbands not to cause wives bitterness (Col. 3:19) could also apply to their sex lives, but he leaves us to work out the details. On the positive side, the apostle tells husbands and wives to submit to each other out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:20), just as he tells wives specifically to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18). It remains to be seen how notions like "rights" and "submission" contribute to a sexual morality for marriage at a time like ours, when the overwhelming question is how to make sex a positive, creative experience within the sensitive personal relationships of marriage.

In order to fit biblical morality to modern marriage, we will have to do more than quote texts that refer to marriage and sex. We need to see where real problems lie within modern marriage and do our best to bring the whole moral perspective of the gospel inside the sexual scene. We will have to ask how Christian love — the self-giving love of Christ shed abroad within us — ties into the sexual experience of married people today. How, for instance, does Christian love function when sex is a bore and an agony for a married couple? What does Christian morality have to tell us about adventures into novel sexual practices that our fathers probably would have only allowed into their dreams? How does Christian morality filter into a marriage where adultery is not the problem, but where good sexual relations have become an arena of conflict instead of a connecting link of love?

### 3. SEX WITHOUT CONCEPTION

Most married people today simply assume that conception is a secondary issue in their sexual relationships: whether or not they have children, they feel that their sexual life is not first of all for conception but for the deepening of their love. And they are right. There is no way to make the Bible endorse the idea of sex for conception only. But this does not remove sex from conception completely. Conceiving children is so intimately related to the sexual life of married people that it is morally risky to ignore the connection completely.

In making the decision to forego children couples ought to ask themselves serious questions about their motivations. Are they ruling out children so that they can have more freedom to do what they want, buy what they want, go where they want, when they want to go? Are they eliminating the conception factor from sex purely for egotistical reasons? What about the validity of sociological or ecological motives? There is no moral route to

legalism here; no one is wise and informed enough to legislate for everyone else. But the morally responsible couple will ask why they set the limits they do. One very pessimistic reason given for having no children is that the world is in too sorry a state to inflict it on children. While such a view may sound noble, it is not appropriate for Christians. To surrender to so deep a pessimism is to abandon all hope, all faith in providence, all belief that God has a future for our world.

Conception is deeply interwoven into sexual relations; the fact that we have to contrive ways of avoiding conception is a hint of how deeply it is interwoven. It is doubtful whether modern couples can rid themselves of all feelings that sex is intimately tied to child-bearing. So when they decide to have no children, they ought to face their own deepest attitudes very openly. Does the decision stem from a self-doubt about their own abilities to be parents? Does it come from a bewilderment about their own role and meaning in God's world? If feelings of self-doubt are at the bottom of a childless marriage, the moral issue becomes a brand new one. It becomes a challenge to begin a new search, not simply for good sex, but for new faith in themselves.

I think, however, that we should not press the tie between conception and copulation beyond what the facts can bear. It may be true that sexual satisfaction, like human life in general, needs to be geared to a good beyond itself to sustain an enduringly deep personal partnership. But it is also true that many partners first discover the possibilities of sexual union only after their child-conceiving days are over. Freed from concern about conception, free to concentrate on their relationship and their own joys, couples often first discover that they can communicate as persons through freely loving each other in the most physical way possible.

So, the moral question of freedom from conception is: are we using our freedom responsibly? Freedom from conception may open the gates to new possibilities of personal closeness and

sexual fulfillment. But sexual egotism can, in the long run, be self-defeating.

#### 4. HOW MUCH SEX?

If sex is good once a week, it is great every day. It is as simple as that. Only legalistic hang-ups, to say nothing of antisexual hang-overs, could make frequency of sexual intercourse a moral issue. But the frequency of sex is a problem, if only because some people feel that it is. The moral question is not a petty matter of counting the number of times per week that a Christian couple may decently have sex. Again, the moral question is how people can and ought to deal with their relationship when the frequency of sex has become a problem *for them*.

Some fifty years ago a scenario for a couple might have gone like this: Ken, thirty, is a vital person who desires sexual intercourse with his wife very frequently. Maybe he thinks it is expected of him to show his virility; maybe he just enjoys it. But his wife cannot understand how a decent person would want sex so often. She goes along but is secretly ashamed of her husband's animal appetite. She suspects she is being used instead of loved, becomes increasingly resentful, and, at the same time, less and less satisfying as a sex partner. Meanwhile, Ken uses his wife's hostility to justify his roving eye.

Today a scenario might look like this. Peter, forty-five, is subject to chronic mild depression. He is harassed at work, angry at his wife's sloppy appearance, and is just too tired and preoccupied to get turned on to sexual relations. So he finds all sorts of good reasons to avoid sexual contact. His wife Martha has come alive to her sexuality in powerful and restless ways; she is at a sexual peak in her life. She interprets his indifference to sex as indifference to her. She is probably at least half right, for when he does have sexual intercourse with her, it is a passionless,

unimaginative routine. She is resentful, agitated, and hungry. He feels half guilty and half angry.

A woman who feels that her husband demands too much of her may have either a warped view of sex or a sense of her own inadequacy as a woman. Or she may just despise her husband. The husband who shows little sexual response is probably either bored with his wife or allowing his own psychic problems to go unattended. Or he may have a hangover from his own antisexual religious training. There are a legion of other possibilities lurking behind such problems. But what are the moral obligations involved in situations like these? We could appeal to Paul's word on "conjugal rights." Marriage does entail rights, after all, even though they are of a special kind. When two people get married, each contracts to grant his/her partner the right to sexual intercourse. Each "has it coming"; it is his "just due." And something is wrong, morally, when married people get into moods that curtail the rights of their partners. But appealing to rights is a poor solution for a modern marriage. No wife would be satisfied if she thought her husband made love out of obligation; sex out of duty is not a promise of joy for people who expect sex to be the free expression of love.

What use, then, is morality when love fails? Can we turn romantic desire on again because we have a duty? Nothing could sound more grimly unreal to romantics than dutiful love. And yet, it is not unrealistic. The ancients believed that Eros was a demon; moderns may believe it is chemistry. But common sense tells us that much can be done for eros by willing it. Eros fails because we fail as human beings: we fail to communicate our feelings; we fail to tell our partners what annoys and angers us; we fail to tell our partners what they could do to be more attractive. And eros fails because honesty fails. Eros and will are not strangers; to restore eros, we do not have to wait for impulses from the gods of love. We can be turned on because we both will to discover each other's attractiveness and to make ourselves as

attractive as we can. We may not ignite a fire of passion or erupt a volcano of desire, but we can at least will the way back to adequate love.

Meanwhile, the reality of agapic love has a unique potential. Agapic love could be an offensive put-down of a partner: to signal to a sexual partner that he is loved in spite of what he is — the way God loves sinners — is a sure disaster to sex. But agapic love has staying power when eros cools down. It works by sustaining a regard for the other as a person even when the flames of desire are grey ash. Agapic love is the permanent foundation on which the lines of communication can be reopened. It provides the power to do the "works of love" that can prime the pump of eros. Agape is not the direct solution to extinguished sexual desire in marriage: it is no substitute for eros. But it is a firm personal basis for a genuine effort to restore eros again.

The moral issue is never "how much sex" but whether physical sex is being integrated into a pattern of personal dedication. What happens "between the times" is more important than how many times. If both partners are dedicated to the personal life of the other and to their growth together as persons, the question of frequency will be answered in terms of concern for the needs, desires, and the conscience of the other person.

## 5. SEXUAL VARIATIONS

Is there a limit to sexual play in marriage? Are some forms of sexual experiments off-limits for proper couples? Is Paul hinting at "kinky sex" when he suggests that fornication is possible within marriage? Should a person think his/her partner seamy if he/she suggests oral sex? Is there a line between affectionate foreplay and sick sex? The "joys of noncoital sex" are out in the open now; maps of erogenous zones and guides to unexplored techniques are available on any bookrack. Eyeball-to-eyeball copulation is

now just one of very many forms of human sexual experience. But even in marriages where no holds are barred in sexual play, there is often still a lurking suspicion that only eyeball-to-eyeball coitus is a proper sexual activity for Christian married people. Couples may throw off inhibitions in the abandon of passion; but the light of morning finds some of them wondering if they were just a bit "unnatural" the night before.

There are a number of reasons why sexual variety has come to be regarded as decent. For one thing, classy books about sexual techniques have popularized styles of lovemaking that many couples hardly dared to fantasize about before. For another, the liberation of sex from the purpose of conception alone implies that, if copulation is good without conception, then other kinds of nonproductive sex are equally good. Before, the link between sex and conception made other nonconceiving kinds of sexual acts seem unnatural; now one orifice is considered as good as another as long as it brings pleasure. The clinical discovery that the clitoral orgasm is as splendid a physical experience as the vaginal orgasm has also helped to liberate couples from the rule of traditional practices. But perhaps the specter of sensualism is lurking here also. It may be that sexual pleasure has become the false god of our time, and thus some people may have developed an insatiable appetite for ever new and exciting sexual experiences. But it is more likely that partners have simply discovered that there are many ways of sharing sexual pleasure — and that any of them can be a good way of sharing love.

But what about the biblical morality of this? We could check a concordance to see if a text might apply; but the Bible is either exceedingly particular or very general. The book of Leviticus lays down some odd rules about not having sex while one's wife is menstruating. In one place it condemns to exile a man and a woman who have sex during the woman's menstruation (Lev. 20:18), and in another place decrees only that they are "unclean" for seven days and one is not to enter the temple for that period

(Lev. 15:19-24). (Since it is hard to guess how anyone would know, one has to presume that each couple was on its honor.) The rules against bestiality and homosexuality touch on noncoital sex, but they do not apply to relations within a marriage. Other than this, the Old Testament sets few ground rules for sex within marriage; and the ones it gives are obsolete by almost any interpreter's standard.

Perhaps the key notion in the New Testament is Christian liberty. Nothing is unclean in itself, says Paul (Rom. 14:14), and this presumably includes sexual variety. But does he really include sex in his proclamation of Christian liberty? Certainly not without limits: sex with someone other than one's spouse is definitely not part of freedom from the law. And the writer of Hebrews urges Christians to "let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and adulterous" (Heb. 13:4). He most likely means only that married people are to keep their bed exclusively to themselves; but the possibility of a "defiled" bed does raise the question of kinky sex. Still, if the marriage bed is honorable for coitus, why not for a variety of other sexual play? Christian liberty sets us free from culturally invented "moral" taboos; and since there is no rule from heaven, it is likely that the only restraint is the feeling of the other person. For example, if one partner has guilt feelings about oral sex play, the Christian response of the other will be to honor them until he/she adjusts his/her feelings. On the other hand, if the partner has only aesthetic reservations, and if these are rooted in some fixed idea that sex is little more than a necessary evil anyway, he/she has an obligation to be taught, tenderly and lovingly, of the joys of sex in the freedom of Christ.

Another dimension of the morality of sexual variety is the fact that God made us body-people. Bodies are meant to play and — we can add — to be played with. There is nothing more natural than body play, and it would be strange indeed if body play were off-limits only for sexual activities. Body play can be an

adventure of tenderness and an exploration into the potential of pleasure hidden in our need for love. "All things are permitted," except coercion and violation of conscience.

This leaves us in a twilight zone where everyone is simultaneously both free and responsible. Any couple exploring new territories of sexual activity ought to feel free and open for discovery of new avenues to delight. The Christian word is: "Try it. If you like it, it is morally good for you. And it may well be that in providing new delight to each other, you will be adventuring into deeper experiences of love."

## 6. SPIRITUAL SEX

A young person with scrupulous feelings that sex is a necessary evil may feel liberated by the thought that sex is the sacrament of love. Here is a concept that makes sex noble and beautiful — an erotic means of grace. Sex can be spiritual; this possibility appeals at once to the biblical vision of copulation as a life-uniting act and to the romantic notion of sex as personal communication. But it has its pitfalls: overspiritualizing life can be very taxing. A sacrament is "a visible sign of an invisible grace." But how do sacraments work? It seems absurd to think that sexual intercourse can create love; thus the old Catholic notion that the sacrament brings grace simply by being performed will not survive in sex. Yet it is true that one way to fan the ashes of eros is exciting sexual intercourse; it cannot create love, but it can help rescue it from slow death by boredom.

The sacramental idea of sex also has trouble with the notion that the sacrament blesses only if we think and feel piously at the crucial moment when we take it. Translate this into sex, and we get something like this: since intercourse is the sacrament of love, we ought to think and feel deep personal thoughts of love while we do it. This means that sexual intercourse ought always to be

a conscious I-thou encounter. We should look far beyond the physical delights into the soul of the other person. When we feel spiritual about the other, sexual intercourse is doing its sacramental job.

This is not Christian piety but romantic fantasy. Morality has to be realistic; it is not moral to put too heavy a spiritual burden on sex. Not every occasion calls for a Hallelujah Chorus, and not every shrub can be a burning bush. There is a time for laughter and a time for tears, and there is a time for conscious personal feelings and a time for sheer physical play. Sometimes we eat and drink to the glory of God by simply relishing a good piece of beef; not every bite has to be wed to a prayer. We play best with another person when we hardly think about his sacred personhood and just share the game with him.

If sex is enjoyed within a living environment of committed love, it is a sacrament even when people have thoughts only for the physical experience. Sex should usually be a game, played for the fun of it; and just as games may be played with only the game in mind, so may sex. Inflated demands for spiritualized intercourse can be a sexual killjoy: they can make both partners uneasy with fear that the spiritual grace of sex will pass them by, leaving only its carnal delights. Then the delights can turn into shadows of fear and guilt that one or the other is falling from grace and capitulating to the flesh. Deep personal awareness of love should sometimes break through the sexual language of the night. If the hallelujah never sounds, something is wrong. But the point of sex is that it find its *setting* in a personal love — not that every act of sex be a rapturous spiritual experience. Too much spiritualization can quench passion; and when passion dies, sex is neither spiritual nor fun.