

Sexual Paradigms in the Orthodox Church

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¹ “2013 Assembly Statement on Marriage and Sexuality,” <http://assemblyofbishops.org/about/documents/2013-assembly-statement-on-marriage-and-sexuality>. A lengthy list of books and articles exploring marriage, sexuality, and gender in the Orthodox tradition up to 1998 can be found in John Breck, *The Sacred Gift of Life: Orthodoxy Christianity and Bioethics* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1998), 60, n. 3.

G. K. Chesterton once said that one should never tear down a fence unless he knows why it was put there in the first place. In this article, I will attempt to explain some of the foundational reasons why the Church has put a fence around its beliefs regarding the nature and purpose of human sexuality. Those beliefs are summarized in a “Statement on Marriage and Sexuality” by the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States:

The Orthodox Christian teaching on marriage and sexuality, firmly grounded in Holy Scripture, two millennia of Church Tradition, and canon Law, holds that the sacrament of marriage consists in the union of a man and a woman, and that authentic marriage reflects the sacred unity that exists between Christ and His Bride, the Church.¹

Regrettably, in dealing with the theological foundations of human sexuality, I do not have space in this article to address related pastoral issues. Nevertheless I wish to encourage love and respect towards those who may disagree with my analysis presented here. Speaking candidly, I do not think the contemporary Church is doing all that well at articulating its moral vision, or integrating it with

pastoral care at the parish level. To advance that ministry, clergy and laity alike must first understand the norms of Orthodox faith, and why the Church believes as it does.

Paradigms for Understanding Human Sexuality

How should those who are committed to careful Christian thinking pursue their research? The methods by which moral decisions are made shape the questions that are asked and the ways in which one reads and interprets the Christian tradition. An ethical conclusion that starts with God’s revelation in Christ is going to look very different than one which privileges human culture over divine revelation. The norms for an Orthodox understanding of human sexuality include a mosaic of biblical, patristic, liturgical, canonical, and iconographic sources.² Ultimately, Orthodoxy has always held Scripture to be the normative, canonical Word of God while acknowledging that the teachings of the church fathers offer the most faithful interpretation of it, even though all of them can and do err at times.

When examining Scripture, there is no evidence in the Old or New Testaments that homosexual acts are an expression of godly love or a means

of deification, despite popular claims. On the contrary, biblical texts forbidding the practice of homosexuality are invariably expressed in a context of moral condemnation:

- “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (Lev. 18:22)³
- “Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another” (Rom. 1:26–27)
- 1 Cor. 6:9–10 states that those who will inherit the Kingdom of God include neither “adulterers nor sexual perverts.”
- In 1 Tim. 1:8–11, Paul explains that the Mosaic law is for, among others, “immoral persons” and “sodomites.”
- “Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities . . . acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust” (Jude 7).⁴

In recent years, considerable effort has been exerted to re-interpret the plain meaning of these texts through an alternate “gay reading” of Scripture. Much of it, however, has been rejected as eisegesis by biblical scholars, even by those who promote a gay agenda such as the well-known Roman Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, who frankly admits:

I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightfor-

ward: we know what the text says . . . [However] we must state our grounds for standing in tension with the clear commands of Scripture. . . and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us.⁵

Johnson’s rejection of biblical authority in exchange for the authority of his own personal “experience” and those of others is a bold and honest admission. While Orthodoxy values the testimony of human experience as one of several signs of God’s will, it can never agree with Johnson that it should be the main source for determining Christian doctrine. Otherwise there would be as many truths as there are experiences. Johnson is correct in concluding that the Bible is clear in its teaching about homosexual practice, even though he disagrees with it. The Church’s consensual tradition on this topic is likewise unambiguous: all homosexual acts are sinful because they have no procreative value (Gen. 1:28), they are a repression of the visible evidence in nature regarding male-female anatomical and procreative complementarity (Rom. 1:26–27), they violate the “image of God” in those who commit them and in others (Gen. 1:27), and they are a parody of the “one flesh” union (Gen. 2:24, Matt. 19:5, Eph. 5:21). This is not to say that homosexual “orientation” is an act of sin even though it is a symptom of human corruption no worse than other

² In this article I would like to have interacted at length with all these sources, but limitations of space require me to emphasize the most basic biblical and theological perspectives of the Church’s tradition.

³ The Mosaic laws concerning human sexual behavior are not to be regarded as being of the same nature as laws about ritual impurity, circumcision, or dietary regulations. Like the prohibition of incest (Lev. 18:6–18), the prohibition of homosexual acts addresses every age.

⁴ By far the most thorough and authoritative treatment of this topic in biblical literature is Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Text and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001). William Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) exposes the hermeneutical errors of equating homosexuality with women and slaves in the Bible.

⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, "Homosexuality & the Church: Scripture & Experience," *Commonweal*, June 11, 2007, <https://www.commonweal.org/magazine.org/homosexuality-church-0>.

⁶ The distinction between homosexual "acts" and "orientation" is a useful modern one that is foreign to the biblical tradition's emphasis on willful behavior.

passions of the flesh that afflict all humans (Gal. 5:19–21).⁶

Beyond human experience as an authority for Christian faith, we must ask about the relevance of scientific advances that have furthered our understanding of homosexuality. Those who are for and against sexual diversity fight fire with fire, choosing to pit one scientific study against another, even though what is considered scientific dogma today may change tomorrow. Several lines of scientific reasoning are used by proponents of homosexuality. One argument uses numerical strength as a means of persuasion by alleging the number of homosexuals to be about 10% of the world's population. Opponents reply that the best studies suggest that only 2–3% are homosexually oriented. Numerical arguments on either side, however, are largely irrelevant. Whether something is common or rare is a separate issue from whether it is right or wrong. Some sins are common, such as pride, while others are rare, like cannibalism.

What are we to make of homosexuality as a mental health disorder? Forty years ago professional mental health organizations declared that homosexuality was no longer a mental disorder. Today some portray homosexuality as a healthy expression of sexual diversity. Yet, whether or not something is defined as a mental disorder has little to do with whether or not it is a sinful practice. Many mental disorders, such as schizophrenia, are not sinful in themselves; on the other hand, many sinful behaviors, such as greed, do not rise to the level of a mental disorder but are sinful nevertheless.

Another defense of homosexuality appeals to the chemical causes of sexual attractions, and the impact of their inability to change a homosexual's feelings and orientation. But are biological causes valid grounds for arguing against the moral condemnation of same-sex preference? The scientific evidence is disputed. We simply do not know why some people experience same-sex attractions or have homosexual orientations. The factors can vary from person to person. The same ongoing debate is true regarding the ability to change one's attraction and orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. Regardless of the outcome of debates over nature versus nurture, the causes of same-sex attraction do not change the sexual ethics of Christianity. A homosexually inclined male, for example, must struggle to overcome his attraction to another male just as a heterosexual man must restrain his lust for a female. Attractions do not justify actions. All disciples of Christ, regardless of their sexual orientation, are to strive to be faithful to Scripture's moral teaching, and that teaching calls us to live in the way that God reveals to be good. We are to focus on our behavior rather than on our attractions or orientation. In Orthodox spirituality, it is the very struggle with fallen humanity that leads to deification.

The use of statistics and medical science in the Church's moral vision can have significant pastoral relevance in helping Christians understand themselves and others in their struggles for purity, but those sources have little relevance to questions of right and wrong. Christian faith certainly ought to learn from science and utilize it wisely in pastoral care, but faith is not founded on medical evidence but



The Hospitality of Abraham (The Holy Trinity), Pskov, late fifteenth–early sixteenth century. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

on God’s supreme revelation in Jesus Christ, to which we now turn.

A Christological Paradigm of Personhood

The starting point for a Christian understanding of sexuality and the nature of the human person is the same starting point as for many other questions in Orthodox theology, namely, the incarnation of the Word (John 1:14). The incarnation is the fundamental dogma of all theology. A theology of sex begins with the apostolic encounter with the human Jesus and the revelation of his saving identity for humanity as a whole. The revelation of the glorified, paschal humanity of the Lord, and not the “old Adam” of Gen. 1–2, makes the person of Christ, the “new Adam,” the primary focus of the Church’s affirmations about human nature because Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s creational purposes. The old Adam of

Gen. 1–2 was “a type of him [Christ] who was to come” (Rom. 5:14). Adam was a lesser shadow of the greater antitype fulfilled in the human Son of God. The incarnation, therefore, provides the basic components for understanding what it means to be human. Those components include the following affirmations: (a) created humanity (physicality) is good; (b) human nature is fundamentally a commingling of material and immaterial, both being sacred; (c) gender identity continues in the resurrection⁷; the physical, male characteristics of the paschal humanity of Christ remained recognizable to his disciples. Sexual identity is an essential part of Jesus’ personality, and personality is retained in the resurrection; (d) human beings are theocentric creatures. We cannot be fully human apart from union with God. Perfect union with God is revealed and healed through the harmonious activity of the divine and human natures, wills, and saving

⁷ Breck, *Sacred Gift*, 70–83.

⁸ Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new ed. (New York: Penguin, 2015), 212. Note also Kallistos Ware, “The Mystery of the Human Person” *Sobornost* 3.1 (1981): 62–9; and “The Human Person as an Icon of the Trinity,” *Sobornost* 8.2 (1986): 6–23.

⁹ The responsibility to uphold the full humanity of others extends to the unborn. While an abortion may solve the inconvenience of a pregnancy, it violates the humanity of a child.

work of the incarnate Logos (*contra* Eutychian, Nestorian, Monothelite, and apthartodocetic constructions). Hence, Christological anthropology is teleological. The incarnation is the ultimate expression of what it means to be human, now and in the age to come.

A Trinitarian Paradigm of Personhood

While biblical texts that deal specifically with the origins of humanity are few in number, they are among the most important for understanding the nature and value of human personhood. The mystery of God’s own Trinitarian character is extended to human existence in the Genesis account where God, in the plural, says “Let *us* make humans in *our* image, after *our* likeness. . . . Male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:26–7). Metropolitan Kallistos Ware explains, “The creation of the human person, so the Greek Fathers continually emphasized, was an act of all three persons in the Trinity, and therefore the image and likeness of God must always be thought of as a *Trinitarian* image and likeness. We shall find that this is a point of vital importance.”⁸

In the Image of God

In what sense, then, does “the image of God” relate to personhood and human sexuality? Exegetically, being created “in the image of God” seems to convey two thoughts together: that humans are “representative agents” of God in managing his world, and we were made “like” God in various ways. Like the perichoretic Trinity (John 14:1, 17:1), humans made “in the image of God” are designed for

relationships and intimacy. Sexuality points to our nature as communal beings. We desire to give ourselves to others and to receive them. The absence of a structured ontology of the individual human person in Scripture is the source of ambiguity in the relationship of terms such as soul, spirit, and body, and their mutual interactions. This ambiguity is reflected in the variations we find among the patristic writers (too numerous to quote) who see humanity as either a trichotomy or dichotomy. The words “image and likeness” have been interpreted by most of the Greek fathers as indicating different aspects of the human person: “image” referring to the soul’s potential powers such as the intellect, and “likeness” as the Christological goal of deification, which we attain gradually by moral choice. The created image originated from the uncreated Son, who is the “image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation” (Col. 1:15)—that is, the agent of creation (John 1:3–4) who “formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Gen. 2:7). The human being, therefore, is at once an ensouled body, and a bodily soul. One’s personal identity and wholeness is bound up with this interconnection. The body is the visible, objective expression of the life of the soul. What happens to the body happens also to the soul, and what happens to the soul happens also to the body. The totality of human experience—including not only sexual experience but also eating, drinking, joy, sadness, sickness, health, and death—is not merely a matter of physicality. Rather, these experiences are those of a human subject and therefore the human soul of a person. The implications for human sexuality direct us during this present



Duccio di Buoninsegna, *The Wedding at Cana*, 1308–11. Opera della Metropolitana di Siena, (Italy).

life to strive for wholeness and health for ourselves and others. If one is to take responsibility for one's sexual life as a human being, it will be exercised in such a way that it upholds the full humanity of the other.⁹ Marriage does not give us permission to abuse and violate the dignity of a spouse, or to use the spouse merely for selfish gratification. That would violate the dignity of the spouse's humanity and ours. We would become less than fully human in that act. To uphold the dignity of one's spouse, there has to be fidelity to the covenantal bond of marriage, in which each one commits to unconditional faithfulness to the other. The penitential canon of Saint Andrew of Crete testifies to the sanctifying effect of marital faithfulness in Ode 9: "Husbands and wives must be faithful to each other, for Christ blessed them by his presence at the marriage in Can ... that you, my soul, might likewise be transformed."

Celibates and Monastics

Just as married people are called to exercise fidelity in marriage, so single people are called to chastity while they are unmarried. Celibates (or consecrated monks) are sexual persons who practice embodiment without genital sex, yet practice love and purity within the bounds of friendship and family relationships. The celibate learns to redirect rather than repress sexual desire. Total abstinence from sex outside marriage is not easy, but required (1 Cor. 6:12–20). It takes the support of a family, parish, or monastic community willing to acknowledge celibates' challenges and support them in their discipline alongside married people in their discipline of fidelity. In friendship or in dating, each must uphold the humanity of the other by protecting the other's purity. This ethical aspect of human sexuality is bound up in what it means to be a

¹⁰ A popular introduction to the desert tradition for parishes or beginning theology students is offered in Bradley Nassif, *Bringing Jesus to the Desert* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

¹¹ In Titus 1:6 and in 1 Tim. 3:2 and 12, Paul explicitly requires monogamous heterosexual marriage for those who aspire to Church leadership as overseers, presbyters, or deacons.

¹² Church canons which prescribe punishment and restoration for adultery, homosexuality, or beholding lewd images include, among others, Apostolic Canon 61, Canon 20 of the Council of Ancyra, Canon 8 of the Synod of Neocaesarea, St. Basil's Canon 7 (First Canonical Epistle), Canons 58 and 62 (Third Canonical Epistle), and Canon 100 of the Council in Trullo.

¹³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Galatians and Ephesians* 20, In vol. 13 of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889).

human person. Those who remain celibate help the Church to reject the view that sex is a biological need that cannot or should not be resisted. Celibacy reminds us that *all* Christians are called to limit and discipline their desires. The desert fathers and mothers constantly remind us that our deepest human longings can only find satisfaction in God, not through another human being.¹⁰

The Marital Mystery: “The Two Shall Become One Flesh”

God designed human sexual conduct to occur within the context of marriage between one man and one woman. Gen. 1:27 is elaborated in 2:18, where God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” Genesis then applies the example of Adam and Eve to all marriages: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). The “one flesh” establishes the pattern for sexual union in marriage. It is not another man but a woman who is the sexual complement of the male. In Matt. 19:4–6 (and Mark 10:6–8), Jesus reinforces Gen. 1:27 and 2.24 as the normative pattern that God desires all marriages to follow:

“He answered, ‘Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.’” The implied sexual intercourse in Matthew and Genesis is clearly between a man and a woman.

A same-sex union is unholy in terms of its basic structure. A holy sexual bond requires two, and only two, different sexual halves (“a man” and “his wife”), brought together into one sexual whole (“one flesh”).¹¹ This complementarity is a reflection of God himself, since male and female together are made in God’s image. Gender differentiation and sexuality are essential components of human nature. Masculinity and femininity are adjectival, an aspect of our humanity. Thus, there are only two ways to be fully human: either as male or as female. Any other form is a symptom of the corruption of human nature that has come as a result of the fall. These forms include adultery (Exod. 20:14; Matt. 19:18), fornication (1 Cor. 6:15–18), homosexuality (Lev. 18:22; Rom. 1:26–27), incest (Lev. 20:11–21), bestiality (Lev. 18:23; 20:15–16), and lust (Matt. 5:28).¹²

Positively speaking, in briefest terms, the sacrament of Christian marriage is to be heterosexual, monogamous, non-incestuous, socially visible, socially affirmed, physical, permanent, sanctifying, and eschatological.

Accordingly, Orthodox Christianity views the “one flesh” union as a profound mystery that images the love between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:31–32). Saint Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians uses the marital analogy as a public picture of the intimate union between Christ and the Church. Saint John Chrysostom observes how this union takes on an ecclesial character that makes the Christian home “a little church.”¹³ Heterosexual, monogamous marriage functions as a redemptive analogy of the exclusive relationship between Christ and his bride, the Church. The female imagery of the Church’s bridal relation to Christ, the male bridegroom, is used in

Ephesians 5 to manifest the mystery of salvation when Paul quotes the Genesis text, “the two shall become one flesh.” “This mystery is a profound one,” says Paul, “and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:29–32). There is thus a soteriological, iconic dimension to marriage and human sexuality that are to be understood in light of God’s self-revelation in Christ (the male bridegroom) and the Church (his female bride). As noted earlier, the ultimate goal of sexual expression, whether in marriage or celibacy, is to grow in Christification (theosis) by worshipping God and honoring the humanity of others through self-giving *ascesis*.

Conclusion

In this article I hope to have provided a faithful account of the norms of Orthodox sexual ethics, and to have explained a number of fundamental aspects in the Church’s vision of human sexuality. These points constitute the Church’s fence which surrounds that vision. The fence’s purpose is not to shame or disgrace those who disregard or seek to remove it; it is to delineate clearly where the boundaries lie that lead to health and wholeness. It provides the context in which the holy purpose of sexuality can be affirmed and fulfilled by the Christian community, and all others who may wish to enter the gates of its healing graces. ✱

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