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SEX IN CHURCH:
THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION OF SEXUALITY WITHIN THE ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematics
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
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March 2023

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To my Momma

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe thanks to so many wonderful brothers and sisters in Christ for their support and love through this writing process. First, I want to thank my parents, Stacy and Charlotte, for their life-long dedication to my academic success and my spiritual formation. I would not be where I am without your leadership and wise counsel.

Many thanks to my advisor Dr. Joel Biermann for your assistance refining my topic and for always pointing me back to the central argument. Thanks to my readers Dr. Kent Burreson and Dr. Richard Marrs for your valued feedback and insight. Special thanks to Dr. Beth Hoeltke for your steadfast encouragement and guidance throughout the writing process.

I'm endlessly grateful to my fellow deaconess students: Christina, Zoë, Janie, Alicia, and Erin. Thanks for your insight, friendship, and collaboration regarding this project and throughout our diaconal formation. I am so blessed to have you all as colleagues in ministry.

Last but not least, thanks to my husband Jonathon for listening to countless rants through my writing process and for leading me through our evolving one-flesh union. I thank God every day for bringing me such a wonderful partner in life and ministry.

Soli Deo Gloria!

ABSTRACT

Rusche, Sarah Talena. "Sex in Church: The Christian Vocation of Sexuality Within the Ecclesial Community." Master's thesis, Concordia Seminary, 2023. 71 pp.

Sex is characterized as an individualistic endeavor by both Christian and non-Christian thinkers. The culture of the world gives license to every individual to choose what kind of sexual experiences they would like to give and receive, while the culture of Christianity isolates individuals navigating the complexities of sexuality. In response to this individualism, this thesis argues that a faithful sexual ethic orders itself according to God's will for His creation by considering the needs of the ecclesial community. This thesis analyzes the current sexual ethics of Roman Catholicism, confessional Lutheranism, and liberal Protestantism to glean benefits and drawbacks from each ethic. The benefits of each sexual ethic are then combined with Stanley Hauerwas' writings in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* to develop ecclesial-focused perspectives within each existing ethic. The thesis concludes with a working faithful sexual ethic which uses the doctrine of vocation to guide each Christian through life and discover how their sexuality fits within each life stage.

CHAPTER ONE

THE NECESSITY OF AN ECCLESIAL-FOCUSED SEXUAL ETHIC

Introduction

In Christian culture today, sex can be seen as something taboo, only discussed in the negative context of adolescent and young adult restraint from sexual activity. The worldly cultural alternative gives license to every individual to choose for themselves what kind of sexual experiences they would like to give and receive, with the use of the law as a curb to perpetrators of sexual assault. Both models assume an individualistic path to the desired achievement; the road to remain abstinent can isolate the individual from others to prevent temptation to sexual activity and protect their purity. The culture of the world allows the individual to choose what path to travel without regard for the other person in the relationship. Our sinful nature, manifested in western and American culture broadly, reinforces the individualistic mindset of these two opposing sexual ethics, which are both antithetical to the Christian worldview and perspective on these issues.

I experienced this tension myself both prior to and after getting married to my husband. My church facilitated a Worth the Wait program over a weekend in 2012, which was a valiant attempt at promoting abstinence to a group of high schoolers. I remember crying one night because I had sexual thoughts and feared that made me a bad person, but I did not feel safe enough to speak to the adults facilitating the program or my parents about those thoughts at the time. The guilt-centered nature of the conversations made me feel embarrassed for having those thoughts, even if I wasn't acting on them. While there were opportunities for conversation with adults one-on-one about the content of the program, they were not conversations that fostered dialogue about the pressures and complexities of being a Christian teenager in a non-Christian

culture. Most importantly, they did not use Gospel-centered rhetoric when speaking about our relationship with our sexuality.

I spent the rest of my high school and college years grappling with an understanding that sex before marriage was bad but seeing a different understanding espoused by most of my friends. When I finally did get married, I struggled throughout most of our pre-marriage relationship and about a year into our marriage with the realization that I was entering into a stage of life which meant having sex was now a fundamental part of my relationship. I did not regret waiting until marriage to have sex, but I found it difficult to suddenly change my mindset to sex abruptly being something I could partake in when it had such a negative perception before marriage. Thankfully, most of that trepidation was solved by having conversations with my husband at all stages of our relationship about the transition we were going through. These conversations took into consideration our Gospel-centered calling as Christians to stay abstinent before marriage, but also acknowledged the difficulty of staying abstinent in a loving relationship before marriage. I now understand that these conversations were what I was craving throughout all those years when I was struggling with sexuality and abstinence.

Many Christian scholars throughout the ages and today argue that sex within marriage should not be entered into with an individualistic perspective; man and woman come together as two separate entities that are transformed by their union into one flesh. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God” (1 Cor. 11:11–12).¹ The one-flesh union respects the differences of the two people involved, and

¹ Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

they retain their individuality as persons made in the image of God. However, the marriage of a man and a woman no longer allows for the individuals to think only about themselves and their safety, happiness, and fulfillment, but instead calls them to focus on serving their spouse and their neighbors around them. This is especially difficult to understand in a culture which values the insight of the individual and sees no need for a common relatability between people in community.

The Thesis

This thesis will study an ecclesial-focused approach to sex and sexual ethics as opposed to a sexual ethic focused on the individual. This approach is developed in conversation with and guided by Stanley Hauerwas' argument in *A Community of Character*. An ecclesial-based sexual ethic emphasizes faithfulness to Christ and His church and focuses on benefits to the church at large as opposed to personal benefits or what is pleasurable in the moment. In this sexual ethic, sex is seen as a gift from God that reinforces a marriage commitment grounded in the ecclesial community. This thesis will consider existing Christian sexual ethics to understand what is beneficial about current ethics, why the omission of focus on the ecclesial community negatively impacts them, and what changes could be made to each ethic to create more ecclesial focus. The denominations highlighted include Roman Catholic, confessional Lutheran, and liberal Protestant.

Because our culture prizes the self, sex and marriage have been negatively affected in both Christian and non-Christian marriages. Not only is it important for the man and woman in a marriage to focus on their spouse as their neighbor to love, but the church at large also benefits from married people strongly united, focused on each other's needs, and "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21). The church's intentional desire to build strong

marriage relationships with a communal focus helps create a more faithful and beneficial church in a culture which values self more than neighbor.

What Is a Sexual Ethic?

Sexual ethics is a branch of philosophy that outlines moralities and principles regarding sexual behavior. When scholars examine sexual ethics, they discuss the interpersonal relationships between sexual partners and the impact of those relationships on society, culture, and philosophy. Instead of a checklist of rules related to sexuality, the ethic gives a framework for understanding how sex is related to our lives and gives parameters for choices made related to sex.² Examples of these ethics are normally numbered or bulleted lists of statements that individuals can use to create a structure in which to discuss issues of sexuality that might arise in one's life.

However, as a person is functioning in everyday life, a sexual ethic related to one's belief system may not be easily found. Unless a group or ideology deliberately creates a list of ethical statements for those who claim allegiance to learn and subscribe to, it can be difficult to be aware of an explicit ethic that is framing sexual behavior. This is especially difficult for Christian groups because there are so many different Christian denominations with different sexual ethics, and most are only implicitly outlined and, as a result, are difficult to follow. When they are explicitly outlined and taught, the framework is difficult to teach in an effective and supportive manner or may promote concepts that are unfaithful to a faithful reading of Scripture.

A both implicit and explicitly outlined sexual ethic that I experienced growing up was the ethic persistent within purity and abstinence culture. Because sex and sexuality play a prominent

² Brian G. Murphy, "The Nuts and Bolts of Creating a Sexual Ethic," *Queer Theology* (January 25, 2022), <https://www.queertheology.com/create-sexual-ethic/>.

role in the human experience, the church is obliged to create systems and structures to address that role in the lives of youth. There are a lot of explicit rules and regulations that can be compounded to create the purity culture ethic depending on its context, including wearing purity rings, attending purity balls, and signing purity pledges.³ There is also a lot of subliminal messaging surrounding the impact of the ethic on those who participate. The ethic may help one stay abstinent until marriage, but there are legalistic measures that make sex only seem wrong and negative, as well as creating an implicit understanding of one's righteousness before God being tied to one's pure behavior. Unfortunately, a lot of purity culture tends towards this mindset, even in Lutheran circles. As a result, I felt guilt and shame for sinful behavior that caused me to question my right relationship with God. This perspective was an inaccurate depiction of God's love for me despite my sins, and this ethic was not faithful to the positive depictions of sex and sexuality within marriage in Scripture.

While the purity culture sexual ethic misses the mark, the argument against the evangelical position falls prey to similar shortcomings. Nadia Bolz-Weber creates an explicitly outlined sexual ethic in her book *Shameless: A Case for not Feeling Bad about Feeling Good (about Sex)*. Unfortunately, in her support of those who struggle with different sexual sins, Bolz-Weber is unfaithful in her exegesis of Scripture. Her ethic runs totally counter to traditional Christian sexual ethics, arguing for an antinomian view of Scripture that allows for all different forms of sexuality to be right in God's eyes.⁴ Similar to the purity culture ethic, Bolz-Weber's ethic is difficult to teach in a supportive or effective manner, especially amongst other Christians. Bolz-

³ Joe Carter, "The FAQs: What You Should Know About Purity Culture," *The Gospel Coalition*, (July 24, 2019), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/faqs-know-purity-culture/>.

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Shameless: A Case for Not Feeling Bad About Feeling Good (About Sex)* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 179–80, Kindle.

Weber sacrifices cordial relationship with orthodox Christian bodies in favor of supporting world views that are totally counter to Scripture. These compromises do not lead to a faithful sexual ethic.

It is essential for the church to establish a faithful sexual ethic because of the emphasis that humans place on sexuality, as well as the many conflicting ways in which sex and marriage are presented in popular culture. Sex is an act that touches almost every aspect of our lives because we are created as distinctly sexual beings and sex is how we bring forth new life. It is an act that is charged with physical, mental, and emotional labor because of the vulnerability that is required. Sex is given much publicity by popular culture, and Christians react by discussing the many ways in which sex should be done, when it should happen, and what kind of weight it should have in someone's life. Having as many conflicting sexual ethics within Christendom as there are outside of Christendom is not helpful for teaching or witness. Because the body of Christ spends a lot of their time in the world where there are many conflicting ethics of sex, it is essential for Christians to have a uniform ethic that is faithful to God's will for His creation.

The Methodological Procedure

The framework this thesis will use for the development of the argument is the doctrine of the creation of man and woman, specifically referenced in Gen. 2:18–25. God understands from the beginning of creation that it is not good for man to be alone and that his partner comes from within him, not from another created animal on earth. Once the woman is presented to the man, there is also a pronouncement by Moses regarding the centrality of this partnership in future generations: “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). From this initial understanding of the unity of this man and this woman, there is a developing tradition in the post-fall world concerning marriage and

how it must be understood. Jesus also uses this verse in his teachings about divorce to the Pharisees, which underscores the seriousness of the commitment one makes when entering the marital covenant made in a one-flesh union. Paul then applies this verse to his conversation about sexual immorality and the right relationship between men and women in a marriage. In this context, Paul does not speak of man and woman as the same, but as two complementary beings that are made stronger as a unit. Whether that be in a marriage or in any other kind of community, man is not meant to live in isolation.

This doctrine is used throughout Scripture as a framework for understanding how marriages should function. Understanding the creation of man and woman as originating from one flesh helps us to understand marriage as a uniting of two distinct entities into one partnership. This Biblical foundation for the all-encompassing union found in marriage also assists in understanding a biblical theology of marriage that has an ecclesial focus. If one is intrinsically connected to their spouse, the spouse's issues cannot be ignored or pushed aside in favor of one's own. The burdens and joys of life are shared equally between each spouse when they become one flesh, which is a good model for how we are also connected as the body of Christ and the broader human race.

This understanding is not only relevant to the framework of a successful marriage but can also be extended to the body of Christ, the church. While we are called to live fully into a one-flesh union once married, we are also called to live in community with other Christians and bring other sheep into the fold to follow the Good Shepherd. Man is also not supposed to be alone in his or her life of faith in Christ, and worshipping and serving within a church community is essential to preventing isolation. This understanding of the one-flesh union is the underlying assumption of the thesis when considering how to create the most faithful ecclesial-focused

sexual ethic.

Sexual Ethics in the Bible

There are many different arguments about Christian sexual ethics in scholarship. It is necessary to start with what the Bible says explicitly or implicitly about marriage and sex, in both the Old and New Testament. A proper interpretation of these texts is essential to the Christian understanding of an ecclesial-focused sexual ethic. In discussion of Christian sexual ethics, religious scholars usually begin with the creation of man and woman, as this is regarded in church tradition as the first marriage and first occurrence of sex. Thus, within the church, conversations about sexuality and marriage rightly seek to understand the issues of human sexuality today by addressing how God created humanity to live in the relationship of marriage before the fall.

In the beginning, God created man and woman as complementary beings; they both possess a human nature first and foremost, and then are characterized by their gender secondarily.⁵ Human nature is the determining factor for those who inherit the kingdom of God, not gender. As male and female, humans are creatures made to be in community with one another.⁶ Marriage was ordained by God as a manifestation of that community in our temporal realm.⁷ The union of two as one flesh created by marriage is significant because this union is not merely spiritual. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod speaks of humans as “embodied creatures,”⁸ which expresses the need for a wholistic

⁵ Gifford A. Grobrien, ed., *Ethics of Sex: From Taboo to Delight* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017), 254, Kindle.

⁶ Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Human Sexuality: A Theological Perspective*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1981), 7.

⁷ CTCR, *Human Sexuality*, 9.

⁸ CTCR, *Human Sexuality*, 7.

union, both physical and spiritual. Sex then becomes the most tangible expression of the physical unity of husband and wife as one flesh, as well as a physical manifestation of the lifelong commitment between two people in marriage.

The coming together of husband and wife is a uniting of the complementary persons.⁹ In marriage, male and female as two distinct persons become united as a fellowship or community both physically and spiritually.¹⁰ This kind of communion is fully realized in the uniting of one man and one woman even before the fall, and this intimate form of unity is reserved for the institution of marriage. From the Scriptures and ancient thinkers, we understand sex and sexual desire to be sinful only in contexts in which it is not meant to be exercised.¹¹ Sexual ethics are necessary not because sex itself is bad, but because some ways it can be exercised are against God's will for His creation. God created sex for a specific purpose, to be participated in by a man and woman committed to mutual giving and receiving for the duration of their lives in the context of marriage.

In Paul's letters, marriage is a beautiful institution ordained by God from the beginning of creation as a model or type for Christ and His bride, the church. However, it is not a necessary manifestation for all humanity as an essential form of human obedience to God. Paul also speaks explicitly about singleness as the ideal for those living the Christian life. While he rejects the notion that sex in and of itself is immoral, especially within marriage, Paul does not see marriage or sex as essential to human life, especially the Christian life.¹² He presents his thought process

⁹ Grobien, *Ethics of Sex*, 254.

¹⁰ CTCR, *Human Sexuality*, 7.

¹¹ Edward J. Ellis, "Ancient Views of Sexual Desire and the Light They Can Shed on Paul's Sexual Ethics in 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 7, and Romans 1" (PhD diss., Baylor University, Waco, TX, 2005), i, Proquest Dissertations and Thesis Global.

¹² David Wenham, "Marriage and Singleness in Paul and Today," *Themelios* 13, no. 2 (January 1988): 39.

succinctly in 1 Corinthians:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.... So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better. (1 Cor. 7:32–35, 38)

However, Paul is not anti-marriage or anti-sex. Instead, he gives the followers of Christ the understanding that there is not one ideal way to live, but different callings for every person in the church. “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.... Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him” (1 Cor. 7:7, 17). These teachings about marriage, sex, and singleness are essential to an understanding of the role of sex in the life of the Christian. For both the married and the unmarried, sex should not be embellished with lofty romantic notions or considered fundamental to one’s existence. According to Paul, marriage and sex are only to be aspired to if singleness cannot be attained, because these are only copies and shadows of the life to come in the new creation.¹³ While this thesis will argue about the significance of sexual ethics and marriage in the church and broader culture, it should be noted that I do not consider marriage to be the highest calling, but rather a common calling for those who “burn with passion” (1 Cor. 7:9).

While Paul spoke about the positive aspects of singleness and marriage for the witness of the church, he also had strong condemnation for sexual immorality within the church and its impact on the body. He writes:

¹³ Wenham, “Marriage and Singleness in Paul,” 40.

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. . . . I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you.' (1 Cor. 5:1, 9–13)

This condemnation is quite strong, but it speaks simultaneously to the calling of the individual disciples of Christ and the church at large. Each individual Christian should understand their calling to flee sexual immorality, but the church is also called to keep individual Christians accountable when they commit sins of sexual immorality and idolatry. We are not called to judge those outside of the church, but those within our own midst. This perspective is essential when discussing the church's stance on sexual immorality in the world. The church is quick to rebuke those who commit ostensibly more egregious sexual sins (homosexuality, pornography, promiscuity, prostitution, etc.) and is quick to forgive sexual sins within the church that seem more harmless (pre-marital sex, cohabitation before marriage, sexual abuse within marriage, divorce, etc.). There are many possible reasons for this inconsistency. Perhaps the church is more forgiving of other Christians because they understand repentance and forgiveness, or because of a fear of losing members. Perhaps the church sees sexual sins within heterosexual couples as less harmful than the sins of people who do not identify as heterosexual. Whatever the reason, such distinctions are not supported by the apostle.

Paul does not justify the Christian who commits sexual sin in any way, and in fact gives license to the Christians in Corinth to judge this person for his sexual immorality. Paul goes on to entreat the Corinthians to solve their conflicts among themselves instead of bringing lawsuits against each other in civil courts outside the church (1 Cor. 6:1–8). Paul is not just calling for

sexually immoral Christians to be cast out without any chance for repentance, but he wishes their sins to be addressed before fellow believers. If they refuse to repent or do not believe their behavior is sinful, then that person would be to the church “as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17). Jesus’ stance on conflict because of sinful behavior gives several opportunities for repentance and restoration; and, like conversion, it is the person who is held responsible for declining the invitation to be back in a right relationship with God after all those opportunities. However, it is the responsibility of the body of Christ to do its very best to bring that person back into the sheepfold. Creating a clear and accessible sexual ethic will make it easier for the church to communicate how children of God should be behaving when it comes to their sexuality.

Sexual Ethics and Culture

A natural next step, then, is to understand how scholars interpret the Biblical texts regarding sex and marriage and their impact on the church and the broader culture. The man and woman involved in the marriage should be fully involved and invested in their own marriage with mutual love and respect for one another. Their sexual life should reflect this mutual love and respect for one other person, further solidifying the one-flesh union between the married couple. However, the marriage should not be entirely focused inward on the one-flesh union. Martin Luther speaks of humanity’s sinfulness as being turned in on oneself, which manifests in selfishness with no regard for God and neighbor.¹⁴ This same self-serving attitude can also be applied to the marriage relationship when the couple is more concerned with serving themselves and their relationship than their neighbors or their church community. While partners in marriage should always support one another, the gaze of the marriage should continue to shift away from

¹⁴ Martin Luther, “Chapter Eight,” in *Lectures on Romans: Glosses and Scholia*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, vol. 25, *Luther’s Works: American Edition* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 345.

the individual towards the spouse and beyond to other neighbors. Not only is marriage itself a community of two that should be nurtured and cherished, but community in the church is also shaped by the smaller units of community that are exhibited in healthy, Christ-centered marriages.

Eric Fuchs talks about this concept and its antithesis in the increasingly individualistic culture in which Westerners find themselves. Fuchs sees the culture shifting to an efficiency and productivity-based value system instead of valuing creative and authentic love. Whether that is exhibited in creating a new life with one's spouse or discovering the reality of a spouse and other members of the church as valued members of God's creation, this requires socializing instead of isolation. Fuchs argues this social aspect of marriage as an ethical responsibility, as opposed to the private nature of marriages in Western culture:

The current discrediting of marriage seems rather to me to be an indication of the interiorization of standards of the dominant economic and technocratic ideology. It also manifests elsewhere that a whole generation is unable to think of itself in terms of historical project or of inscribing itself in the temporality for which it affirmed it was responsible.... For commitment to the priority of the man/woman relationship, recognized [by Christians] as the fundamental structure of all social relationships, has immediate consequences: it leads to the rejection of a society given over to the fate imposed by economic productivity in the name of which, for example, an environment is imposed on families which makes emotional and social life impossible, and which forces man and woman to work-schedules and displacements that destroy all creativity, including conjugal creativity, and which reduces man and woman, and even their desire, to the rank of consumer products.¹⁵

For Fuchs, the focus on the economic model¹⁶ is a heartless undertaking. The increasing individuality and emphasis on productivity of those within our culture even since Fuchs was writing contributes negatively to the expressions of community in our midst; the relationship to

¹⁵ Eric Fuchs, *Sexual Desire and Love: Origins and History of the Christian Ethic of Sexuality and Marriage*, trans. Marsha Daigle (New York: Seabury, 1983), 208.

¹⁶ Fuchs, *Sexual Desire and Love*, 208.

family, spouses, friends, and communities around us are all compromised. Fuchs instead argues for the conjugal model, which emphasizes the marriage relationship as the priority with a focus on emotional and social relationships. This thesis is specifically addressing the effect of the idolatry of individualism on marriages, which leads to further isolation and destroys the creativity that can be found within marriage. The idolatry is manifested in a cultural understanding of the institution of marriage as a means to economic success as well as the purpose of marriage being conflated with other more individualistic goals for achievement in this earthly life.

The expansion of the institution of marriage beyond one man and woman, continuing infidelity and divorce, and acceptance of premarital sex and pregnancies outside of marriage are all examples of the loss of the Biblical foundations of marriage in the broader culture. This non-Christ centered understanding of the institution of marriage then leads to a non-Christ centered purpose for marriage: happiness, unconditional love with no conflict, tax benefits, cohabitation with benefits for me. All these purposes reinforce the self-centered perspective that is natural to humanity post-fall. Christians are just as guilty as non-Christians of loading these expectations into their respective marriages as fellow sinners, whether that be alongside or in place of Biblical expectations for marriage.

While desiring happiness, unconditional love, lack of conflict, and benefits to self in marriage are not evil desires on their own, if the purpose of marriage stops here, the mutual and self-sacrificing natures of marriage are wholly neglected. In Christian marriage, the focus must remain outward in service of your spouse as God's creation, as well as beyond the immediate marriage relationship to the rest of His creation. The fulfillment, benefit, and happiness come because of the self-sacrificial love and care for the neighbor, instead of from something one is

being provided by their partner. Of course, there will not always be positive results from this outward focus, but it is the call of Christians to love one's neighbor as self, and one's spouse is one's closest neighbor.

The CTCR gives another example of an ecclesial focus in marriage: the raising of children. Although not every couple is blessed with children, the report argues that taking care of children is one way to prioritize another person outside the marriage.¹⁷ With children involved, it is difficult to prioritize oneself over the needs of someone totally dependent upon others for survival. It is obviously still possible, as we live in a sinful world, to raise children in a selfish way, but as Christians we are called to serve those within our care and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31). Raising children also occasionally contributes to a curving in of the family, which is why Jesus does not limit the neighbor to just the family. Not only does this outward gaze affect the quality of the marriage itself, but it also contributes positively to the family and the community. When all people, but especially married couples, are aware of their neighbors and serve them in whatever capacity is useful, the church, the immediate community, and the broader culture benefit. The couple is also modeling for their children how Christians should function as good neighbors in the world.

Stanley Hauerwas writes at length in *A Community of Character* about the reorienting of perspective when educating people in the church about sex. His concern is not on what kind of sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong, but about how one should act as a person affiliated with the Christian community.¹⁸ The foundation of Hauerwas' argument is the truth of Christian

¹⁷ CTCR, *Human Sexuality*, 18.

¹⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 194, Kindle.

convictions and participation in the church community because of these truths.¹⁹ For Hauerwas, being a Christian means understanding the truth of God's Word and being part of the community of believers united around that Word all exercising their diverse gifts in service to neighbor.²⁰ This also applies to his sexual ethic because a Christian sexual ethic must be based on the public understanding of marriage and how all people in the Christian community understand their relationships to one another through their respective marriages.

Hauerwas' ethic of sex is connected to the understanding of marriage as a public undertaking as much as it is something that two people undertake together. The assumption in Christian culture that sex is a private matter between two people is incorrect for Christians to believe. Hauerwas argues that this privacy is itself an ethic co-opted by Christianity from a secular ethos.²¹ Hauerwas puts forward the two existing cultural positions on sex: realism and romanticism.²² A realist understands the unfortunate position that sex has in our culture, but intends to provide information to make the experience healthy and safe for those participating.²³ A romantic will allow for sexual relations to take place within a context in which real, quality love is found, or in a way in which this love can be fostered more fully.

Hauerwas also speaks to the role of sex in the church's mission, namely that both single people and married people are acceptable in the church simultaneously. In looking at Paul's writings, Hauerwas argues that singleness is legitimated by the early church because it was helpful in order for the growing church to be well served.²⁴ He makes the insight that those who

¹⁹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 1.

²⁰ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 3.

²¹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 177.

²² Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 177.

²³ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 177–78.

²⁴ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 190.

stayed single were not giving up sex, but giving up heirs, which was a symbolic expression of one's primary loyalty and hope for future descendants being controlled by the church, not the family.²⁵ However, singleness is not the ideal for Christians, because marriage also symbolizes an important Christian witness: "If singleness is a symbol of the church's confidence in God's power to effect lives for the growth of the church, marriage and procreation is the symbol of the church's understanding that the struggle will be long and arduous."²⁶ Although singleness and marriage seem to be at odds, they both contribute to the faithfulness of the church. Procreation becomes another sign of hope, because the church's confidence in God gives confidence to bring life into the world when there are no guarantees that children will also follow Christ.²⁷ This confidence then results in the raising of children to follow the Christian community in service to neighbor and community.

Instead of trying to cobble together a Christian sexual ethic from secular realism or romantic notions, Hauerwas argues for an ethic that understands marriage and having children as the church's political task.²⁸ He also emphasizes that this ethic should be clearly explained to adolescents learning how to understand and manage their sexual behaviors. However, it is often difficult to talk to adolescents about sex using ethical language, as most ethical conversations about sex tend towards abstraction. Hauerwas gives an example of the abstract nature of sexual ethics in his writing:

For example, it is often claimed that it is a mistake to begin reflection about sexual ethics by trying to determine if certain kinds of genital sex are right or wrong. ... Instead, ethicists prefer to call attention to the importance of the presence of love for wholesome sex. Rather than answering 'yes' or 'no,' we say things like, 'the physical

²⁵ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 190.

²⁶ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 191.

²⁷ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 191.

²⁸ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 176.

expression of one's sexuality with another person ought to be appropriate to the level of loving commitment present in that relationship,' or that any one act of 'genital expression should be evaluated in regard to motivations, intentions, the nature of the act itself, and the consequences of the act, each of these informed and shaped by love.' All of which may be true, but is a lot for teenagers in the back seat of a car to remember.²⁹

Hauerwas recognizes that the Christian sexual ethic needs to be understandable to those who will be applying it to their lives.³⁰ Hauerwas references Rosemary Haughton to illustrate his redevelopment of the Christian sexual ethic. Haughton replaces the romantic notion of marriage with the heroic notion: "the point is that the qualities that make people stick out a hard life together, not stopping too much to wonder if they are fulfilled, are the qualities people need if they are to develop the hero in marriage, which is what being married 'in the Lord' is about."³¹ For Haughton and Hauerwas, fidelity is the central characteristic of the hero. The endurance and commitment to a spouse while society romanticizes detachment to commitments that no longer fulfill is characteristic of a hero, as well as the follower of Christ.³² This commitment is a shadow of the covenant God has with His children, and marriage is a sign of the hope we have in that promise He gives to us.

In his concluding remarks, Hauerwas finalizes his thoughts on the most faithful Christian sexual ethic. Returning to his initial goal to address the adolescent trying to understand sexuality, the importance lies not in the rules or ethic itself but in the community which subordinates interest in sex to something greater.³³ Hauerwas is unable to define succinctly an ethic which

²⁹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 182.

³⁰ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 176.

³¹ Rosemary Haughton, "Marriage: An Old, New Fairy Tale," in *Marriage Among Christians: A Curious Tradition*, ed. James Burtchaell (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1977), 143.

³² Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 192.

³³ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 195.

manifests this value; he instead points the reader to an account of life in a Christian community with “the lure of an adventure that captures the imagination sufficiently that conquest means more than the sexual possession of another.”³⁴ For Hauerwas, this can be singleness or marriage, but no number of rules are satisfactory for those who are unable to be part of such a community.

While Fuchs and Hauerwas wrote at the beginning of the post-modern period and provided insights that we agree with today, their perspective was more pessimistic than other Christians during the time they were writing. In the 1980s, the Moral Majority was attempting domination over United States politics, and Christians at the time hoped that the new political power gained would reverse the trend of continuing secularization and reestablish American Christian nationalist values at the federal level.³⁵ As time went on, it became clear that the Moral Majority and the New Christian Right were not effective means of recreating these values. Christianity’s pride of place in Western culture slowly diminished. All along, Fuchs and Hauerwas were maintaining their stance about the importance of the church maintaining faithfulness in teaching and expression of faith within itself and in the world around it, even if those ideas were not favored by the church, American government, or in the popular culture.

The sinful world in which we live is opposed to God’s will by nature and transforming the world into a place where valuing God’s Word is difficult, if not impossible. Hauerwas speaks of his perspective on sex as uniquely Christian because of the claims the church makes about sex and marriage.³⁶ Because his perspective is geared toward the Christian community, it is explicitly serving members of the body of Christ. However, while this argument is serving Christians,

³⁴ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 195.

³⁵ *Britannica*, s.v. “Moral Majority,” accessed February 20, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Moral-Majority>.

³⁶ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 176.

Christians are also members of the broader secular culture which prizes individuality and productivity. A Christian ethic of sex is thus inextricably connected to society and the public affairs in which members of the church are involved and must react to their expectations of sex appropriately.

The Importance of an Ecclesial-Focused Sexual Ethic

While Hauerwas orients the discussion of sexual ethics within a conversation about the importance of Christian community, he is unable or unwilling to provide the ethic itself. This thesis will propose the sexual ethic with which one can operate in the context of Hauerwas' construction of the Christian community. Creating an ecclesial-focused sexual ethic will improve understanding of sexual activity for Christians in all stages of life, from adolescents and young adults to those getting married or struggling with their sexuality as they age. This ethic will emphasize an understanding of marriage as the giving of oneself to the other, which involves an outward gaze and focus on one's neighbor.

This reorientation of perspective has much significance for the church's efforts to educate her young people. Because sex is an act surrounded with much anticipation, excitement, and mystery, it can too easily be considered a topic that is taboo or something private and not to be discussed in a public setting like Bible studies or youth group. Although talking about sex may be uncomfortable or difficult especially in Christian circles, sex education is most beneficial when it communicates a more wholistic and constructive understanding of sex as a gift and a means for building the unity and communion within marriage. This understanding is not only beneficial for those entering marriage, but also those in the broader community who interact with those who are married. Those with an understanding of the unity developed in sex will understand the implications of loving one's neighbor as themselves, as their partner becomes one

with them. The knowledge of this oneness can also be applied to other neighbors, and this wholistic understanding of relationships between people will bring about more positive relationships with others in our neighborhoods, communities, and the broader culture.

This constructive understanding found in an ecclesial-focused sexual ethic is not only important for educating young people but will also contribute to all Christians' understanding of the body of Christ as a connected whole. Not only are marriages meant to flourish with two people, but the church is also served well by having healthy marriages in its midst. Even if not everyone in the church gets married, those who are married have the experience of being in total communion with one person learning and practicing the kind of outward focus essential in Christian marriage. This focus is then extended beyond the marriage into the church at large. Jesus and Paul do not speak just about sexual immorality as bad for marriage in which it occurs; they are clear on the negative impact it also has on the faithfulness and witness of the church.³⁷

Conclusion

In pursuit of faithful sexual ethics written in our post-Christian era, there are some helpful resources, but they tend to focus on the marriage relationship itself. While this has value, this thesis will also explore how a faithful, ecclesial-focused sexual ethic could be implemented in the church amid the current cultural climate. Hauerwas addresses the focus on Christian community, and this perspective is essential to our understanding of a Christian sexual ethic. For us today, it is also essential to continue to maintain this faithfulness even despite the lack of dominance of Christianity in Western culture in the post-Christian period. While I pursue the most faithful sexual ethic that integrates community, it is important to clarify that I am not

³⁷ See Matt. 5:27–28 and Mark 7:20–23 for Jesus' words on sexual immorality. Paul addresses sexual immorality in Rom. 13:13–14, Gal. 5:19–21, Eph. 5:3–5, and Col. 3:1–6.

intending to create a new sexual ethic or defend an alternative ethic to the ones discussed. I intend to shed light on the current conversation regarding sexual ethics in different denominational circles in tandem with Hauerwas' perspective on the importance of the ecclesial community in sexual ethics. My goal is to explore the benefits and limitations of each ethic on its own and then integrate Hauerwas' ideas into the aggregated beneficial aspects in an effort to address my critiques of the sexual ethic used in my upbringing. I also plan to integrate the doctrine of vocation into the formation of a faithful sexual ethic that will be able to guide and shape Christians in rightly understanding and practicing their sexuality.

As Christianity is minimized and even maligned in popular culture, it is even more necessary to understand how Christians should operate when it comes to something as important to popular culture as sex and sexuality. Centering the faithful Christian sexual ethic with an ecclesial focus is countercultural in a post-Christian context that values individuality. But, as Hauerwas argued in his chapter, the dominance of Christianity in the world does not serve as an excuse for the Christian community to change how it functions. Subordinating the benefit of the individual in favor of the benefit of the community brings questions from the world in which we live, but we see in Scripture and in its interpretation that this is most faithful to God's Word and His plan for His people.

CHAPTER TWO

SEXUAL ETHICS IN POST-CHRISTIANITY: ROMAN CATHOLIC, CONFESSIONAL PROTESTANT, AND LIBERAL PROTESTANT

As church history develops, the fracturing and splintering of Christian perspectives on Scripture and theology continues to cultivate new and widely varying opinions on sexual ethics and sexuality. Depending on the church body in which one resides, the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions will be valued in varying degrees, and church history may or may not inform practices of the present-day church body. In this chapter, three streams of current Christian sexual ethics will be discussed to better understand the approaches offered to the church. To appreciate a few perspectives on Christian sexual ethics available today, three representative perspectives will both be discussed, with a focus on the sexual ethics found in the Roman Catholic church, in confessional Lutheranism, and liberal Protestantism.

For the Roman perspective, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, *Theology of the Body* by Pope John Paul II, and *Humanae Vitae* by Pope Paul VI will be used to ascertain the normative position of the Catholic church. The Catholic perspective on sexuality is essential due to the historic and long-standing nature of the church body, as well as the wealth of resources explaining the Scriptural and theological justifications for their perspective. For the conservative Lutheran perspective, John Kleinig's *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* will be highlighted as an exposition of the confessional Lutheran emphasis compared to the Catholic theology of the body. *Shameless* by Nadia Bolz-Weber is the representative liberal Protestant sexual ethic, spotlighted because of its contrasting position compared to the other two ethics, and because it more accurately reflects the prevailing perspective of the culture about sexuality. Bolz-Weber argues against both the Catholic and confessional Protestant perspectives and seeks to create a more inclusive sexual ethic that understands all forms of sexuality to be pure in God's

eyes.

Roman Catholic Sexual Ethic

Roman Catholicism has a compelling post-Christian sexual ethic to highlight because of their conservative view of sex and its place within marriage. For example, sex is spoken of as the “marriage act”¹ or “conjugal act”² in the catechism because it is an act totally reserved for this stage of life. This ethic is firmly rooted in Scripture and tradition, but also accommodates the changing cultural landscape.

The Roman Catholic sexual ethic is highly valued by Catholics because they consider marriage to be a sacrament of the church. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks in depth about marriage when discussing the sacrament of Matrimony, as well as the Fourth and the Sixth Commandments. There is also lengthy discussion about marriage, sexuality, and parenthood in *Humanae Vitae* by Paul VI and *Theology of the Body* by John Paul II. The Catholic church has frequently addressed issues of sexuality and marriage in reaction to the shifts in the culture over time. The *Catechism* argues that “the beautiful vocation of man and woman to be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth was burdened by the pain of childbirth and the toil of work.”³

However, God’s mercy did not allow the relationship between man and woman to be entirely destroyed. Marriage is still practiced in a post-fall world as a tool to overcome selfishness and open people to mutual aid and the giving of self for others.⁴ Matrimony as a post-fall practice speaks to the relationship between Christ and His church. For Catholics, the nuptials

¹ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011), 628, Kindle.

² Catholic Church, *Catechism*, 629.

³ Catholic Church, *Catechism*, 446.

⁴ Catholic Church, *Catechism*, 449.

between Christ and His church exist for everyone through Baptism and the Eucharist, and marriage also becomes a sign of this communion.⁵ The witness of those present to the consecration of the marriage by the priest extends the communion not only to the couple but also to the ecclesial reality of the church. The couple are accountable to the church at large to uphold their covenant and be strengthened in that covenant by the church.⁶

Like the covenant created in marriage, sex also becomes a sign of the total spiritual communion formed between husband and wife.⁷ Sex is not only biological, but it also impacts the inner being of the person and is as a manifestation of the love between husband and wife who are fully committed for life.⁸ For Roman Catholics, sex is procreative and unitive; it is first and foremost for creating new life, but also cements the relationship between husband and wife in the definitive giving of oneself to the other.⁹ They become one flesh in the covenant and the marriage act, and their conjugal chastity is a witness to the world of Christ's total fidelity to His church.¹⁰

John Paul II spoke of sex in *A Theology of the Body* as a conjugal union of man and woman which represents the unity of creation. In his commentary on Gen. 2:24, John Paul II contended that the "one flesh" union between a man and a woman allows the couple to fully discover the mystery of the unity of humanity in creation, when Adam called Eve "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."¹¹ John Paul II also analyzes the use of the verb "knew" in Gen. 4:1 when

⁵ Catholic Church, *Catechism*, 451.

⁶ Catholic Church, *Catechism*, 454.

⁷ Catholic Church, *Catechism*, 626.

⁸ Catholic Church, *Catechism*, 626.

⁹ Catholic Church, *Catechism*, 623.

¹⁰ Catholic Church, *Catechism*, 627.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline, 2006), 222, Kindle.

discussing the conjugal union and discusses the implications of the conjugal union being defined as knowledge in Scripture.¹² He understands the knowledge found in the one-flesh union in Genesis 4 as revelation of the unity between Christ and the church.¹³

John Paul II demonstrates a profound relationship between the mystery of husband-wife and Christ-church through his analysis of Eph. 5:22–33 by outlining the reciprocal nature of the love between husband and wife. This love allows the husband and wife to understand their unity, as well as the unity between Christ and the Church.¹⁴ John Paul II argues that this Christ-like and Church-like love is what helps us understand the relationship between Christ and the Church, and helps spouses live more fully into the essence of Christian marriage.¹⁵ In his analysis of the husband-wife and Christ-church type, John Paul II points out that in Eph. 5:25–27 the Church is presented in splendor, “without spot or wrinkle,” which highlights the importance of the presentation of the chaste body in marriage.¹⁶ The husband is Christ, who is inherently without sin, and the wife is presented by Christ to Himself without sin, having been cleansed by the waters of baptism.¹⁷

Towards the end of the *Theology of the Body* addresses, John Paul II brings the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* by Pope Paul VI into the discussion. This encyclical overlaps with the addresses being given, and John Paul II contends that it contains the moral norm for marriage and parenthood.¹⁸ In the extended discussion of various themes of *Humanae Vitae*, John Paul II

¹² John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 269.

¹³ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 588.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 578–79.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 580–81.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 586.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 586.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 734.

discusses the church's position of the transmission of life, which includes discussion of the body and its attributes. He states that because "man is person precisely because he possesses himself and has dominion over himself,"¹⁹ man is free to give himself as a gift to another person. In the conjugal union, husband and wife express this freedom. The freedom expressed in the conjugal act brings love as well as fecundity, and the two should not be separated and hampered by any means of controlling them.²⁰ This argument reinforces the Roman Catholic position equating marital chastity with the rejection of artificial means of contraception. Conjugal chastity within marriage is frequently emphasized to "resist the concupiscence of the flesh,"²¹ guard the significance and dignity of the conjugal act and its procreative purpose,²² and enrich and purify the marriage.

In *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI reinforces the duties and responsibilities of marriage and parenthood that are essential to the development of the family. Paul VI explains that married people collaborate with God the Creator in the transmission of human life, which makes parenthood a very serious role that can bring joy and hardship simultaneously.²³ Marriage is not an act of compulsion; the couple must willingly concede to total commitment to one another, in joy and sorrow, loving their partner for their partner's own sake instead of for what they receive from their partner.²⁴ Paul VI also reinforces that married love is not meant to be contained within

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 748.

²⁰ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 748.

²¹ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 766.

²² John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 767.

²³ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* [On Human Life], The Holy See, July 25, 1968, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html, sec. 1.

²⁴ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, sec. 9.

the couple, but rather must be channeled into the creation and rearing of children.²⁵ He argues that responsible parenthood means “that [parents] are not free to act as they choose in the service of transmitting life, as if it were wholly up to them to decide what is the right course to follow. On the contrary, they are bound to ensure what they do corresponds to the will of God the Creator.”²⁶

Paul VI also discusses responsible parenthood, especially regarding natural regulation of pregnancy. Paul VI argues that natural regulation of pregnancy can be responsible in certain situations, but that artificially regulating pregnancy through birth control medications, sterilization, etc. does not align with God’s will for a married couple. For him, the self-denial and self-control that take place when ordering the births of children allows husband and wife to recognize the blessings of family and acquire mastery over themselves.²⁷ Developed over time, this discipline is a witness to chastity which transforms the marriage into one of a more truly human character. Paul VI does take into consideration the difficulties families face in the world, which is “the result of misguided governmental policies, of an insufficient sense of social justice, of a selfish accumulation of material goods, and finally of a culpable failure to undertake those initiatives and responsibilities which would raise the standard of living of peoples and their children.”²⁸ However, these external factors should not hinder the Christian witness of continuing to procreate. Paul VI calls for the continuation of programs of mutual aid to combat these challenges.²⁹

²⁵ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, sec. 9.

²⁶ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, sec. 10.

²⁷ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, sec. 21.

²⁸ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, sec. 23.

²⁹ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, sec. 23.

The Roman Catholic sexual ethic seeks to align itself with Scripture and church tradition while undertaking a thorough explanation and application of their ethic in an ever-shifting cultural landscape. They maintain the importance of the husband-wife relationship as a reflection of Christ and His church and how that connection impacts behavior within the marriage. Sex within marriage then serves to solidify that union and bring new life into the world and the marriage community.

Wonderfully Made

The opening chapter of John Kleinig's *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* focuses on the perception of the body in our world today versus how the Scriptures discuss the body. Kleinig argues that the world has reached no consensus about the body: "People disagree on what it is, what it is meant to do, and how it is to be regarded."³⁰ Our bodies can be worshipped and the care of our bodies can be idolized if our happiness and wellbeing is dependent on how we look and feel.³¹ Our bodies can also be abused in trying to reach an unattainable standard if we perceive the temporal life to have no meaning or fulfillment. As a result, we detach from reality to live inside the mind or a higher consciousness.³²

Neither of these two extremes regard the human body correctly. Kleinig explains that our bodies have great value because we exist in them and they were given to us by God.³³ As humans, our bodies locate us in a precise time and place with people in a family and society. Our bodies grow, change, and carry us from birth to death through various life stages, as well as the

³⁰ John W. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021), 11, Kindle.

³¹ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 11.

³² Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 12.

³³ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 17.

mundane tasks of everyday life. God also uses our bodies to bring about his gifts of salvation and sanctification. Our bodies are washed with water in baptism and are sustained with the body and blood of Jesus Christ in bread and wine. We hear God's Word from other bodies with our ears and speak His Word into the lives of others with our mouths. As Christians, we are then called to serve others with our bodies as part of the body of Christ.³⁴ As opposed to trying to reach a spiritual life outside the body, God expects us to be sustained by the Holy Spirit in our bodies. Thus, we live as embodied creatures with body, mind, and soul all distinguished from one another but connected to create the person.³⁵

Considering the right teaching about the significance of the human body to God and to creation, Kleinig closes his opening chapter with a caution for fellow Christians wishing to communicate this theology of the body to others. Kleinig promotes a positive attitude and vision in Christian evangelism and outreach when discussing the theology of creation, marriage, and sex. He cited a prominent Christian journalist who noticed that

Christians often reinforced [non-Christian] contempt for Christianity by attacking public immorality and lobbying politicians to impose Christian morality on the whole of society... that ... has led to counter-legislation to sanction these measures, as well as the use of popular media to cast [non-Christians] in a positive light and depict Christians as angry, self-righteous killjoys.³⁶

Instead of highlighting what Christians are against, Kleinig proposes that Christians construct a positive, attractive vision for what is true and right for humanity.³⁷ Christians should showcase the beauty and goodness that comes from living rightly as God's creatures through example, instead of through conflict with those of differing beliefs.

³⁴ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 9–10.

³⁵ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 13.

³⁶ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 18.

³⁷ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 18.

Kleinig's commentary on the sexual body later in the book attempts to construct this positive, attractive vision by balancing the beauty and goodness of sex according to God's purposes with the sadness and corruption of sexual sin. The world, including the church, is constantly navigating portraying sexuality in public discourse, especially in different forms of media. In the recent past, Kleinig notices that there are attempts to be more explicit in sexual conversation and activity by using crude or anatomical language and graphic imagery.³⁸ The intentions for the blunter language and imagery could be construed as both positive and negative; communicating clearly and honestly about sex could seemingly strip away the power it seems to hold on people, but these more candid approaches cannot truly encapsulate the fullness of sex. Considering this, Kleinig contends that sexual chastity in all people and sexual fidelity in holy matrimony are gifts from God that far outweigh sexual sins that go against His will for us.³⁹

Kleinig's definition of sexual chastity incorporates time before and within marriage and involves sexual integrity as well as spiritual purity of heart governed by self-giving love.⁴⁰ When one reserves themselves sexually for marriage, this self-giving love is totally preserved, which creates trust within marriage and is a type of Christ's perfectly self-giving unity with the communion of saints.⁴¹ Kleinig references several examples of St. Paul's condemnation of sexual impurity,⁴² which Paul cites as idolatry and denial of our status as God's creatures, and his affirmation of chastity,⁴³ which point to our hope in and reverence for the resurrected body in the

³⁸ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 92.

³⁹ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 92.

⁴⁰ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 94–95.

⁴¹ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 95.

⁴² Some examples include Rom. 1:24–25, Eph. 5:6, Col. 3:5, and 1 Thess. 4:3–7.

⁴³ Some examples include 1 Cor. 6:12–20, Titus 2:5, and Phil. 4:8.

new creation.⁴⁴ For Kleinig, chastity is beautiful and necessary because in it Christians live fully into our humanity and into the purity that we receive from God in Christ, which will be fully realized in the new creation.⁴⁵

Kleinig then outlines the biblical teaching about sexual holiness and its application in the church. God's call to humanity for holiness does not exclude the sexual body—our sexuality is also called to be holy.⁴⁶ Kleinig uses the term “sexual sanctification” to describe the process of living into God's will for the sexual body.⁴⁷ On the Christian's journey of sexual sanctification, we are often plagued with a bad conscience about sex due to actual sexual sin or the devil's temptations to guilt and shame. Kleinig argues that there is no all-inclusive sexual ethic within Scripture. Instead, God's Word seeks to create a good conscience by teaching the positive aspects of holy marriage and holy singleness and the forgiveness that exists for those Christians who break the commandments and are burdened by their transgressions.⁴⁸

While sexual sins are no worse than any other sin, Kleinig argues that these sins affect the body, soul, mind, and spirit in a more comprehensive way than other sins (as St. Paul argues in 1 Cor. 6:12–20).⁴⁹ However, instead of proposing sexual repression as a corrective, as is common amongst Christians, Kleinig suggests that we instead order our sexuality so that it pleases God and our spouse.⁵⁰ Kleinig says, “Self-discipline cannot perform the required surgery on the heart and mind. Only Christ can do that. He alone can create a new heart and renew a right spirit in

⁴⁴ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 95–96.

⁴⁵ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 96.

⁴⁶ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 101.

⁴⁷ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 101.

⁴⁸ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 99.

⁴⁹ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 91.

⁵⁰ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 106.

us.”⁵¹ Because we are sinful human beings we will continue to sin, especially if these sins are firmly engrained in our bodies. But Kleinig repeatedly asserts that participation in public worship, a daily devotional and prayer life as a couple, and private confession and absolution can help order our steps to focus on God’s desire for the sexual body.⁵²

In the end, Kleinig’s main aim concerning sexuality in *Wonderfully Made: A Protestant Theology of the Body* is cultivating a healthy perspective on sex, sexual desire, and sexual enjoyment. God created all of these and established them as gifts to facilitate healthy and enjoyable marriages. As Christians, we are given the proper use of sexuality in Scripture, and we are also given means of grace and forgiveness of sins when we stray from God’s will for us.⁵³ God unites a man and a woman in marriage, this union is sanctified with Jesus’ presence within the marriage, and the Holy Spirit transforms the couple into faithful, self-sacrificing spouses that reflect Christ to each other.⁵⁴

Shameless

The central focus of Nadia Bolz-Weber’s *Shameless* is reacting to the traditional church doctrines which teach a very specific notion of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality which, in her view, eliminate any of the nuances of God-given personality and diminish the power of the Gospel. She tells personal stories and stories of her parishioners disenchanted by Christianity because of the stringent, mostly man-made rules attached to the Scriptures.⁵⁵ These rules were either broken in attempts to be freed from their constraints or seemed to be followed perfectly

⁵¹ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 103.

⁵² Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 104, 106.

⁵³ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 108.

⁵⁴ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 108.

⁵⁵ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 62–71.

but did not generate the unmitigated fulfillment promised.⁵⁶ *Shameless* is a particularly compelling sexual ethic to showcase because Bolz-Weber is writing directly against the prior two sexual ethics. She is attempting to create a Christian sexual ethic with much more intermingling of modern cultural notions about sexuality than the Roman Catholic sexual ethic.

Bolz-Weber argues that the Biblical sexual ethic in which “a heterosexual cis-gender Christian who never has sex with anyone until they marry their one true love and make babies”⁵⁷ eliminates a huge swath of people who do not identify within those parameters. Even those who do wait until marriage to have sex find it difficult to transition from associating sex as a sinful activity outside God’s will to something joyful and God-given in marriage. As a result, Bolz-Weber argues, “we should not be more loyal to an idea, a doctrine, or an interpretation of a Bible verse than we are to people. If the teachings of the church are harming the bodies and spirits of people, we should rethink those teachings.”⁵⁸ The focus on one’s purity and abstinence attempts to create holiness within the church, but Bolz-Weber argues that these practices can breed both self-righteousness and self-shame.⁵⁹ The self-righteousness comes from purity we use to make ourselves holy; the self-shame comes when we are unable to keep ourselves pure because of our sinful nature.

As a counter to the evangelical purity movement, Bolz-Weber offers an attitude she calls sexual flourishing, when Christians not only undertake to do no harm to others but also are concerned with the neighbor’s needs.⁶⁰ In terms of sexuality, this means being concerned with

⁵⁶ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 52–59.

⁵⁷ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 2.

⁵⁸ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 4.

⁵⁹ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 25.

⁶⁰ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 11.

how sexual behavior affects us and each other. Bolz-Weber proposes a sexual reformation that shows concern for those neighbors in our world who struggle with “antiquated and harmful ideas about sex and bodies and gender.”⁶¹ *Shameless* develops several discussion points regarding this concern for neighbor, as well as whether the church has made God’s laws and boundaries more important than His sacred creatures. Frequently, these points redefine terms that mainstream Christianity used to justify their position concerning sex.

Bolz-Weber redefines purity and holiness. She argues mainstream Christianity equates these terms, but that holiness is our union with God and with one another,⁶² which is averse to purity because purity is characterized by separation and isolation from others.⁶³ She also substitutes the traditional roles of male dominance and female submission with dignity for all image-bearers of God.⁶⁴ For her, bearing God’s image grants self-determination for all bodies to be authentic in themselves. Instead of women’s worthiness coming from their appearance or quiet demeanor and men’s worthiness coming from being a strong and confident leader, humanity’s worth and dignity comes from our origins as God’s creatures.⁶⁵

Bolz-Weber is also critical of the fear and shame that Christians are made to feel about sex, which mischaracterizes God’s view of sex as evil outside of the correct circumstances.⁶⁶ Because everyone is unique, she contends, there is no one-size-fits-all framework or paradigm for sexual flourishing.⁶⁷ Bolz-Weber argues that sexual flourishing is something that is stewarded in our

⁶¹ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 12.

⁶² Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 19.

⁶³ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 25.

⁶⁴ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 45.

⁶⁵ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 45.

⁶⁶ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 52–54.

⁶⁷ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 56–57.

bodies for our good pleasure, however that looks to any person or couple. She also makes connections between sexuality and spirituality in her discussion about sex education for youth. In her own experience and the experience of many other parents, sex before marriage is communicated to youth as dangerous and sexuality must be suppressed because of these perceived dangers.⁶⁸ Instead, Bolz-Weber argues that one must be integrated physically, emotionally, sexually, and spiritually, and that those who are exposed to messaging about controlling their sexual desires are less likely to be totally integrated within themselves.⁶⁹

She references Debra Hirsch's *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality*,⁷⁰ which describes spirituality as longing to know and be known by God and sexuality as longing to know and be known by other people.⁷¹ These definitions underscore the connection between the two, and Bolz-Weber argues that this closeness creates an opportunity to further connect them with less negative language surrounding sexuality and less suppression of one's desires. Bolz-Weber also references the Song of Songs as a positive example of this holistic integration. While Bolz-Weber notes that other Biblical scholars argue the book is an allegory for Christ's love for the church, she prefers to exegete the text as an encouragement for Christians to understand the holiness surrounding sexuality and sexual desire. Her argument about Song of Songs is applied quite broadly, well beyond the confines of marriage between one man and one woman.⁷²

In her concluding chapters, Bolz-Weber shifts to application of the redefinitions of

⁶⁸ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 126.

⁶⁹ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 139.

⁷⁰ Debra Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015).

⁷¹ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 174.

⁷² Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 170–71.

traditional Christian sexual ethics. For her, Jesus' resurrection from the dead and Peter's vision in Acts indicates that God now believes all people to be clean, regardless of how they identify, how they look, or how they present themselves.⁷³ Christian community then becomes an opportunity to silence the accusing voices that want to fit everyone into a specific mold, even those voices within the church. Instead, the community celebrates the grace of a God that loves people as their real, authentic selves.⁷⁴ Tracing the outline of a worship service with a baptism, Bolz-Weber defines sexual flourishing as "incarnation, *carne*, flesh ... accompaniment ... gratitude and generosity; abundance ... everyone, without exception ... forgiveness ... connection ... holiness ... poetry ... shamelessness."⁷⁵ Bolz-Weber contends that these concepts redefine the existing "stale and oppressive" Christian sexual ethic and create a new, more open environment to be good stewards of our own bodies and the bodies of others.⁷⁶

While she has been quite critical of the traditional Christian sexual ethic, Bolz-Weber includes words of reconciliation in her concluding chapter, "Benediction." Through the retelling of the account of the anointing of Jesus by an unnamed woman, Bolz-Weber places herself as the woman and as Simon the Pharisee:

I, too, have knelt to Jesus, the one who knows me, and cried tears of relief, regret, and the balm of just being seen. The Jesus whom God sent to claim and save us is what keeps me in Christianity, despite a hundred reasons to pack up and leave. But this Jesus thing is a double-edged sword. Because as much as I treasure the comfort of being seen by God-made-flesh, forgiven and freed from harmful designations, I also resent having to extend the same to those I dislike. Simon, not unlike myself, sees what he wants to see, what's easy to see: an unclean person kneeling at Jesus' feet. A sinner. I think of Augustine, and Tertullian, and the women who taught the Christian Charm classes, and Cindy's church, and Trent's and Sam's skinny-jeaned youth pastors, and the man who exposed himself to me and my friends that summer, and the

⁷³ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 179–80.

⁷⁴ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 183.

⁷⁵ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 190–97.

⁷⁶ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 198.

man at the retreat center who charged women with murdering their fetuses, and all those who drafted the Nashville Statement. If I pay attention closely enough, I can see Jesus look at them, those he also claims and loves, and say to me, “Nadia, do you see this man? Do you see this woman?” Are they complex, hurting, wonderfully made children of God with whom I deeply disagree, or are they only as I want to see them—sinners? If the Gospel is where we find healing from the harm done to us by the messages of the church, then it must also be where we find freedom. Meaning that even if it is the last thing I want to do, I absolutely have to believe the Gospel is powerful enough, transgressive enough, beautiful enough to heal not only the ones who have been hurt but also those who have done the hurting.⁷⁷

Bolz-Weber is very honest about her feelings about those in Christendom who do not identify with her sexual reformation. She also addresses the positive aspects of her mostly harmful religious upbringing, which includes lives continually reflecting their faith and a community that connected the human to the divine and humans to each other.⁷⁸ Although a lot of Christendom is unsatisfactory to her, especially regarding their treatment of sexuality, there is still hope in the pursuit of the real and authentic relationships with God and with one another.

Strengths and Limitations of Existing Sexual Ethics

In this presentation of three representative contemporary sexual ethics, each creates a message regarding sex, sexuality, and marriage that attempts to speak to the contemporary cultural perspective. Each ethic communicates what sex and the body should represent, as well as the desire for a secure and constructive relationship between the two parties in the sexual relationship. However, there are key aspects missing from each that could create a more faithful sexual ethic for all of Christendom, and especially those youth and young adults who are struggling with the competing voices of the church and the world.

⁷⁷ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 187.

⁷⁸ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 189.

Roman Catholic

The Roman Catholic sexual ethic is strong in its foundations in church tradition while also considering the difficulties of maintaining such a counter-cultural ethic. They remain clear that sex should always be open to the possibility of procreation, and that sex manifests the physical unity of husband and wife in marriage. John Paul II and Paul VI specifically focus on the contemporary cultural use of birth control and the underlying issues that make birth control appealing to many couples. Paul VI specifically calls on the government and the church to create more opportunities for the natural regulation of pregnancy to feel more attainable to couples, especially those without certain economic and social privilege.⁷⁹

While *The Catholic Catechism*, John Paul II, and Paul VI discuss in depth the necessary parameters for a couple to engage faithfully in the conjugal act, there are very few references to the impact of following the moral norm on any kind of community. The main focus of communion of persons in *Theology of the Body* is between the man and woman in marriage.⁸⁰ There is brief discussion in *Theology of the Body* and *Humanae Vitae* about the family as a community of persons being impacted by the ordering of the births of children.⁸¹ There is great emphasis on the sacramental nature of matrimony as well as the need for witnesses of a marriage union to testify to the union before God and confirmed by the Church.⁸² When it comes to the conjugal union itself, the Roman Catholic position considers the command of Scripture right and lawful. That command creates a deeper connection between the husband and wife, and by

⁷⁹ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, sec. 23.

⁸⁰ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 774.

⁸¹ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 750. See also Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, sec. 17.

⁸² John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 643.

extension the children they care for.⁸³ In all three documents, this connection does not extend beyond the nuclear family besides in the witness of the marriage itself. This lack of ecclesial emphasis leads to the problem of the law weighing down the individual seeking to live faithfully in her sexuality and marriage. Without an ecclesial community to assist with bearing the burden of these laws, the individual becomes isolated, and this isolation can lead to despair regarding one's sinfulness and inevitable inability to follow these laws perfectly. Even considering the nuclear family as one's community can lead to isolation from other families within the church and beyond as married couples work towards a chaste relationship.

Confessional Lutheran

John Kleinig's treatment of the sexual body was clear about sex within marriage being most faithful to God's will for His creation. Kleinig reminds us of the importance of God's creation of embodied persons and underscores the importance of treating the body well, especially when it comes to its sexuality. Both Paul VI and Kleinig discuss chastity and fidelity within and outside marriage as integral pillars of the Christian sexual life. Kleinig's most important contribution in *Wonderfully Made* is the concept of ordering one's sexuality toward the purposes of God, as opposed to repressing our sexual desires that were given by God as a gift.

Kleinig predominantly speaks about the relationship between husband and wife in his treatment of the sexual body, except when he discusses the process of sexual sanctification. Kleinig acknowledges the church's responsibility to prevent sexual abuse within its walls.⁸⁴ He also argues that sexual sanctification is received within the church community from participation

⁸³ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 761.

⁸⁴ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 101.

in public worship, daily devotional and prayer life between spouses, and private confession and absolution with one's pastor.⁸⁵ The church community is used as a tool to curb and order a Christian's sexual formation and sanctification. However, there are unaddressed implications of ordering one's sexuality to God's will beyond those addressed in *Wonderfully Made*. Kleinig's perspective is analogous to the Roman Catholic sexual ethic because he does not address the influences of sexual sanctification on the church or the broader culture. While he recognizes the church's impact on an individual or a couple's sexual sanctification, he does not consider the reciprocal application. Further, as the process of sexual sanctification directly impacts the ecclesial community, it also influences the communities outside of Christendom in its witness and perception by the culture. These ideas do not appear in Kleinig's writing but need to be considered as an integral aspect of the effects of a faithful, ecclesial-focused sexual ethic.

Liberal Protestant

Nadia Bolz-Weber embraces a different perspective from the other two sexual ethics, but she conveys a helpful understanding of the difficulties faced by those who attempt to follow God's will. She is sensitive to how our sinful world engages with the truth of God's Word and how it can easily have negative impacts on His children when applied by our sinful nature. Her discussion of the sexual reformation and sexual flourishing she wishes to see focuses very explicitly on the community's needs while remaining an individualistic perspective. The freedom given in the Gospel is not to be used at humanity's discretion for harm but should benefit the neighbor. Bolz-Weber's understanding of the gift of sexuality and attempting to move away from sexual suppression and towards understanding the nature of the gift can be beneficial to

⁸⁵ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 102.

Christendom when applied to sex within the marital relationship.

However, the limitations of the ethic lie in the application. Bolz-Weber works with an antinomian viewpoint, introducing all expressions of sexuality in virtually any context as God's will for His creation after Christ's resurrection. While she is correct that those whose sexual ethics do not align with God's law are still loved by Him, Christians are called by God to follow and be disciplined by Him according to His will revealed through Scripture and taught in the church. This openness and neighborly focus are only helpful insofar as they reinforce God's will for human sexuality that we obey as disciples of Christ.

Conclusion

These three sexual ethics each have constructive benefits to offer Christendom in their approaches. However, they each center on the self or the married couple at the expense of the ecclesial community or the broader culture. The Roman Catholic sexual ethic focuses on chastity of self and the married couple without examination of the implications for the church in response to cultural changes. Kleinig focuses on the self and the married couple with mentions of the ecclesial community in a supportive role but overlooks discussion of the impact of the couple on the ecclesial community and the broader culture. Finally, Bolz-Weber emphasizes the benefit of the neighbor but elevates the sexual desires of the individual at the expense of God's Word and law. In the next chapter, I will use Stanley Hauerwas' *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* as I seek to highlight the importance of considering the ecclesial community more prominently in Christian sexual ethics and understanding the implications of this ecclesial-focused ethic on the broader culture.

CHAPTER THREE

THE VALUE OF A FAITHFUL, ECCLESIAL-FOCUSED SEXUAL ETHIC

The goal of this chapter is to combine the beneficial aspects of the sexual ethics discussed in the previous chapter with an awareness of the role of the ecclesial community in this sexual ethic. A healthy and vibrant Christian community is essential for Christendom to continue to fulfill the Great Commission as well as care for those within the church. I will outline the importance of the ecclesial community to God and the significance of an ecclesial-based sexual ethic using Stanley Hauerwas' *A Community of Character* and other sources. I will then discuss the limitations of each ethic considered in chapter two and provide recommendations for further research and development of each ethic. In the end, I will argue that the Christian's many different vocations need to be emphasized and appreciated to create the most faithful sexual ethic within the ecclesial community. Understanding what vocations are most important for a particular person at a particular time allows the Christian to adequately ascertain the role of sex in one's life at every stage.

Why is the Ecclesial Community Important?

Community was essential to God's kingdom on earth throughout the Scriptures. In the creation account, God made clear that it was not good for man to be alone, so He created a helper for him. Later, God started his chosen nation with the family of Abraham and promised him innumerable descendants. Those descendants became the nation of Israel, with whom God established a covenant including guidance on how they were to live their lives, ceremonial laws for sacrifice to Him, and instructions to build a temple to worship Him. There are many psalms which describe the Israelites' worship life and desire to worship God, as well as the importance of dwelling in concord with one another. Peter Dibley references Psalm 133 in his analysis of the

importance of Christian community:

The psalmist writes, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity” (Ps. 133:1 NRSV)! ... If we understand this first line to be about the collective worshipping community, then it emphasizes the importance and benefits of unified cooperate worship. ... [Verses two and three] convey the idea that the unity of worship offers goodness and pleasantness in abundance. ... Mt. Hermon is located 125 miles north of Jerusalem. Mt. Hermon is in a wetter climate than Mt. Zion. Thus, the analogy could be conjuring up the idea that unity in worship is meant to be shared far and wide and that it refreshes the worshippers like dew in a dry and arid land.¹

The ecclesial community is also emphasized in the New Testament when Jesus called twelve apostles to assist His mission, along with many more disciples who were present in establishing the Christian church at Pentecost and beyond. The book of Acts describes the early Christian church as a tight-knit community:

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44–47)

Paul compared the Christian churches to a human body with Christ at the head,² which underscored the importance of connection between every part of the church for its survival and flourishing. Throughout its continuing history, the church has met and worshipped together in unity to encourage and care for one another in response to God’s saving love for them in Jesus Christ.

While the ecclesial community was designed for those already part of the church, the community is also tasked with bringing new members into the community. Jesus makes it clear that the mission of the church community is not just to encourage and support existing Jewish

¹ Peter Dibley, “Do Not Forsake the Assembly: The Importance of Christian Community,” *Review and Expositor* 115, no. 3 (2018): 408–9.

² See Paul’s discussions of the body of Christ in 1 Cor. 12:12–31 and Col. 1:18.

people, but also to be witnesses of the Savior's death and resurrection to "all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Followers of Jesus are charged with seeking out new followers from all nations, baptizing them and instructing them how to follow Christ. Jesus was specific about how He understood the role of His followers in the world He created in the Sermon on the Mount: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ...Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:14, 16). Jesus also gives no room for His followers to harbor any hatred toward those who do not follow Him:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matt. 5:43–45)

These commands broaden the mission of the Christian church to consider not only their own needs and the needs of fellow Christians, but the needs of those outside of the ecclesial community. Because God the Father provides for all those in His creation, regardless of their love for Him, we ought also to provide for their needs, be a witness of Christ to them, and allow the Holy Spirit to work faith through that provision and witness.

In our modern age, Robert Kolb and Theodore J. Hopkins define the ecclesial community as they begin a conversation about tangible issues facing congregations in *Inviting Community*. They explain that they use the term "community" theologically, not empirically.³ They define the church as "a community of the baptized who confess the same Lord and drink the same cup."⁴ This reality is not defined by empirical definitions of community like language, practice, or

³ Robert Kolb and Theodore J. Hopkins, "Inviting Community: Ecclesiology from the Foundations Up," in *Inviting Community*, ed. Robert Kolb and Theodore J. Hopkins (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2013), 14.

⁴ Kolb and Hopkins, "Inviting Community," 15.

behavior. This theological reality is seen when Christians gather around God's means of grace in baptism, the Lord's supper, and the preaching of His Word. In this definition Kolb and Hopkins continue to broaden the vision of the Christian community discussed in Scripture and resist the temptation to define the ecclesial community by its external appearance. The church is instead defined by its head, Jesus Christ. His life, death, and resurrection give the gift of forgiveness and eternal life to all who believe. His Great Commission guides Christian eyes towards our neighbor in need.⁵

Dietrich Bonhoeffer discusses the importance of the ecclesial community in *Life Together*. This community is an incredible gift of God and a privilege that is easily forgotten in contexts where the community is commonplace.⁶ This community brings joy and strength to the believer, especially those who are isolated, lonely, and in distress. As humans we long for community, and Bonhoeffer argues that the human desire to be in fellowship with others is not something that should be transcended but lived into.⁷ We are called to be in community with other Christians through and in Jesus Christ in response to His life, death, and resurrection for all creation.

Christian community through Christ creates a divine and spiritual reality, not an ideal or emotional reality.⁸ Unfortunately, the mischaracterizing of Christian community often comes from within, from Christians with an unrealistic image of the ecclesial community consisting of aspirational images of a perfect group of people or therapeutic experiences and emotions. For Bonhoeffer, the divine reality of ecclesial community is established by God for Christian

⁵ Kolb and Hopkins, "Inviting Community," 15.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works—Reader's Edition, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 2.

⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 3.

⁸ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 9.

participation.⁹ This community is held together not by humanity with all its limitations and inability, but by God's steadfastness toward humanity. Considering this, we receive His gift of community with thankfulness, whether its manifestations of practice are according to our preferences or not.

This community is not tailored according to humanity's desires. Rather, Bonhoeffer describes how a faithful Christian community should operate. The spiritual love humans show to one another is the mark of Christian community. He explains:

Spiritual love, however, comes from Jesus Christ; it serves him alone. It knows that it has no direct access to other persons. Christ stands between me and others. I do not know in advance what love of others means on the basis of the general idea of love that grows out of my emotional desires. All this may instead be hatred and the worst kind of selfishness in the eyes of Christ. Only Christ in his Word tells me what love is.¹⁰

This spiritual love could initially be met with abject horror when we consider our sinful nature and the way it corrupts love. Basing the love we give on our own desires seems intuitive, but such a love may be totally counter to what Christ and His Word expresses. Spiritual, Christ-centered love uses God's Word in service to others and allows the Word to work instead of any human influence.¹¹ All acts of spiritual love are mediated through Christ to the other person. This spiritual love then creates the united, holy, universal, church that acts as Christ's body moving within the world.

While our human expectations regarding Christian community are sometimes realized in wonderful, uniting, and impactful experiences, such experiences are not always the reality. Instead, in the church, it can be all too easy to descend into conflict, chaos, and division and

⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 13.

¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 17.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 18.

blame segments or the entire community for not meeting our expectations. Bonhoeffer reminds us that any division “not necessitated quite objectively by common work, local conditions, or family connections” is dangerous to the flourishing of a Christian community.¹² Still, Bonhoeffer concludes that although such divisions are unwelcome, even a positive experience in Christian community is not what brings us together. Rather, it is faith in God’s gift of His Son that holds the church in unity.¹³

Kolb and Hopkins explain that Martin Luther’s understanding of church community included both the Word of God and Christian discipleship.¹⁴ Luther’s emphasis on Christian discipleship develops after his observation of the disregard of God’s Word and basic virtues among the Christians of his time. In response, Luther encourages pastors and their parishioners to read and meditate upon God’s Word found in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer, and put that Word into practice in their daily life.¹⁵ Not only is this practice valuable for one’s own sanctification, but it also allows the whole church to be built up in knowledge of the truth. When all members of the community regularly receive the means of grace and participate in the marks of the church, everyone is equipped to encourage and admonish one another in the faith.

One clear test of the importance of community in the church was the coronavirus pandemic. Beginning in 2020, churches were compelled to gather only virtually to receive God’s gifts. Myles Werntz argued that the transition from in-person worship to virtual isolation was

¹² Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 19.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 21.

¹⁴ Kolb and Hopkins, “Inviting Community,” 12.

¹⁵ Kolb and Hopkins, “Inviting Community,” 13.

relatively simple because churchgoers had already been living in isolation for years prior.¹⁶ Werntz differentiates isolation from loneliness; loneliness is a feeling that changes depending on who one is around, but isolation is a continual state regardless of one's presence around others.¹⁷ Werntz argues that just as humanity is isolated from God in our sinfulness, so humanity is perpetually isolated from one another and constantly seeks to overcome that condition.¹⁸ The solutions to loneliness such as "lessening our distractedness, being good neighbors, paying attention to the world, or speaking justly" are helpful for surface-level issues but exacerbate the underlying issues of isolation brought on by our sinful nature and reinforced by popular culture.¹⁹ Because this isolation is most comfortable for us by nature, we must be reoriented to God's will for us as Christians to look outside ourselves and love and serve our neighbor.

While humanity's sinful nature tends to prefer isolation, God has designed humanity to live with and depend on one another since the beginning. The ecclesial community was designed by God as the manifestation of this dependence for humanity to live in love and service to Him and to love and support one another. A faithful sexual ethic must be understood as a vital aspect of the faithful ecclesial community so that God's people are able to consider each other in the church as well as the broader community instead of just considering themselves.²⁰ An ecclesial-focused sexual ethic can also help to increase the love and support provided by the community.

¹⁶ Myles Werntz, *From Isolation to Community: A Renewed Vision for Christian Life Together*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 9.

¹⁷ Werntz, *From Isolation to Community*, 2.

¹⁸ Werntz, *From Isolation to Community*, 3.

¹⁹ Werntz, *From Isolation to Community*, 8.

²⁰ Luther's explanation of the sixth commandment reinforces this notion. Confessing the commandments with the ecclesial community in worship and teaching emphasizes the ecclesial community's involvement in the following of the commandments, which includes the right relationship between man and woman in leading "sexually pure and decent life" (Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, St. Louis: Concordia, 2017, 93).

A Community of Character

While considering the benefits and drawbacks of the sexual ethics described in the previous chapter, I was mindful of the arguments of Stanley Hauerwas in *A Community of Character*. His assertions impact the way that sexuality is understood and taught in the Christian community as well as in the broader culture. In this influential book, Hauerwas combines theology and ethics in a series of essays discussing a Christian polity that promotes the forming of virtuous people shaped by the truths of the Christian faith.²¹ In his introduction, Hauerwas makes it clear that his interest in writing about Christian social ethics is “to challenge the church to regain a sense of the significance of the polity that derives from convictions peculiar to Christians.”²² This polity, for Hauerwas, requires a narrative found in the witness of Scripture that provides a foundation for how Christians operate within the world.²³

While most of the essays outline Hauerwas’ explanation and encouragement for communities of character, the last third of the essays are devoted to the practical issues of family, sex, and abortion.²⁴ Hauerwas chose these issues because they are clear manifestations of the established Christian way of life, and because they are significant issues in the world at the time of his writing.²⁵ For Hauerwas, the Christian family specifically is the most telling mark of the church’s social significance as an intergenerational institution that serves the community of the church as opposed to the popular cultural notion of the family as an interpersonal association between individuals that serves the individual.²⁶ The Scriptural narrative and virtues of patience

²¹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 11.

²² Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 10.

²³ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 14.

²⁴ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 15.

²⁵ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 16.

²⁶ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 15–16.

and hope applied to the family are essential for preserving and growing this intergenerational institution. It is in the context of these Christian convictions about the family, that we can begin to understand the faithful ethic of sex and vice versa, as both ideas inform one another in profound ways.

The Family

Before speaking about the ethic of sex, Hauerwas finds it valuable to track the significance of the family in Christian community as well as in the culture at large. Christopher Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World*²⁷ and a 1977 report by the Carnegie Council²⁸ are featured to highlight the changes families had undergone in the prior years. Lasch highlights the changing of family dynamics in the twentieth century, especially in immigrant families, by policymakers to create a more uniform American culture.²⁹ The nuclear family was made to be more dependent on schools and state institutions to deter families from retaining unique religious traditions, languages and dialects, and other cultural traditions.³⁰ The most significant finding in the Carnegie Council study considered the response to these external changes by families. Kenneth Keniston argues that the nuclear family in the nineteenth century relied on self-sufficiency.³¹ Children were beneficial to have in an agricultural family unit for maintenance of land, and schooling and healthcare were also housed within the family unit to accommodate their work.³² As legislatures created more homogeneity, families continued to desire and seek self-sufficiency,

²⁷ Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

²⁸ Kenneth Keniston, *All Our Children: The American Family Under Pressure* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

²⁹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 253.

³⁰ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 253–54.

³¹ Keniston, *All Our Children*, 11.

³² Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 254.

but it became increasingly impossible to maintain. Work, schooling, and health care outside the home became more common, and children became more of a financial liability.³³ Considering these changes in social responsibilities in tandem with the desire for self-sufficiency, Keniston concludes that the nuclear family's primary function should be the fulfillment of the emotional needs of parents and children.³⁴ Because the parents must choose other institutions to raise their children, the only thing left to them is what society cannot provide: meaningful relationships.

While the historical data provided by Keniston is helpful in understanding the evolution of the nuclear family over time, Keniston's conclusion further isolates the nuclear family from their neighbors and destabilizes the moral status of the family.³⁵ Hauerwas points out that the family used in Keniston's report "is the instant family, the family with no past or future, and thus with no moral stake in preserving our past or seeking a better future."³⁶ The family with no attachments to the history or mission of the church would have no desire for continuing its legacy. However, any attempts to create a cohesive ethic regarding family with this worldview would fail because of a lack of normative understanding of the purpose of family.

Alongside this rejection of the importance of community for the family, there is a profound misunderstanding about how one should go about raising a family. Hauerwas is sharply critical of parents who fail to instill their values and convictions in their children in favor of allowing them to "make up their own minds."³⁷ This hands-off approach not only deprives the child of knowing what may be true and good about human existence, but also gives the parent no reason

³³ Keniston, *All Our Children*, 22.

³⁴ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 255.

³⁵ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 256.

³⁶ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 257.

³⁷ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 259.

to courageously live out that truth and goodness for themselves, which may indicate they are not confident in those beliefs.³⁸ In response to the cultural approaches to family life, Hauerwas calls on the church to lead by example and stand as an institution that desires loyalty to Christ and to family.³⁹ He calls Christianity to account for contributing to the isolation of families and a lack of emphasis on the Christian community and its mission, as well as the place of the family within that mission.⁴⁰

Instead of continuing to isolate and only seeking emotional satisfaction from the nuclear family, the Christian family must instead understand themselves as historic beings with ties to the Christian community and heritage. Part of this heritage is the moral significance in being willing to have children despite the difficulties faced regarding changing family dynamics.⁴¹ Marriage, raising children, and even Christianity itself are not chiefly about attaining happiness or emotional fulfillment as the culture has established. Instead of hoping for happiness or emotional fulfillment from the family, Christians are meant to hope in something much greater.

Hauerwas concludes:

Therefore I am ending where I began since again it is clear that the family, in order to be a viable moral enterprise, requires community beyond itself. We see, however, that the special commitments of Christians concerning marriage require an even more substantive community. Yet it is our conviction that the church is formed by a story that gives it the convictions necessary to sustain those called to marry and have children in a world that has been bent by sin and evil. We have the courage to call children into such a world because our hope is not in this world but in a God who has called us to his Kingdom through the work of Christ.⁴²

³⁸ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 259.

³⁹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 262.

⁴⁰ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 272.

⁴¹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 257–58.

⁴² Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 273.

The hope we have in God through Christ is the touchstone by which the Christian community is established. The family is one means by which we are reminded of this hope, which connects us back to the ecclesial community where we continue to return and receive God's gifts of the Word, sacraments, and mutual conversation and consolation with other followers of Christ. This hope in Christ allows us to continue to create new life despite the difficulties that the world creates.⁴³ The Christian family is also able to understand that because sex is how the testament of our hope is created, sexual desire is subordinated to the interests of the community into which that new life comes. Considering each person's different vocations in the current stage of life, enables families better to understand how they are meant to serve their ecclesial community. The faithful sexual ethic then becomes a mechanism by which the Christian family can continue to grow and preserve the legacy of the witness of Jesus Christ.

The Ecclesial-focused Sexual Ethic

After discussing the importance of the family living into its role in the ecclesial community, Hauerwas highlights the importance of constructing a sexual ethic that considers the ecclesial community over the individual.⁴⁴ Hauerwas argues that the faithful understanding of sex within Christian marriage is intrinsically connected to how we understand marriages contributing to the community at large.⁴⁵ Specifically, it is essential to understand the political, or community-driven, function of marriage in the church, as opposed to basing a Christian sexual ethic on natural law. For Hauerwas, politics in the church is concerned with the development of virtuous people, not creating governmental structures or mechanisms for social change⁴⁶ Thus, the

⁴³ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 260.

⁴⁴ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 274.

⁴⁵ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 275.

⁴⁶ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 11.

political function of marriage focuses on how marriage and sex within marriage can help the church be faithful to the narrative and vision of Christianity.⁴⁷

In contrast, the sexual ethic based on natural law considers anthropological characterizations of sexuality, the nature of sex itself, and an abstract notion of what is right and wrong.⁴⁸ The natural law relies on human reason, which can easily be shaped by what is pleasurable or helpful according to our own perspective. Bringing in Hauerwas' political function of sex contextualizes the sexual ethic within God's Word and Law for His creation. Hauerwas argues that basing our view of sexuality on nature is too abstract to apply specifically to our Christian context and mission, because those who argue for more progressive sexual ethics also consider the natural law.⁴⁹ This means no longer understanding sex to be a private matter that is unregulated except for prevention of harm or offense, but a public matter that is regulated by God's law implemented by the church.⁵⁰ Instead of creating an ethic abstracted from a particular context, the faithful sexual ethic is derived from a contextual understanding of the church and its mission.

The most unfortunate irony of the church's teaching about sex is emphasized: while God created humans to be fundamentally sexual beings, which makes sex a gift from God, the church and her theologians tend to speak negatively about sex: "'No,' you should not have sexual intercourse before marriage. 'No,' you should not commit adultery. 'No,' you should not practice contraception. And so on."⁵¹ Christians are also ill-equipped to explain why we operate with

⁴⁷ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 11.

⁴⁸ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 276.

⁴⁹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 276.

⁵⁰ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 277.

⁵¹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 274.

certain guidelines around sex.⁵² To create a Christian ethic of sex, Christian ethicists often co-opt secular understandings instead of providing an ethic that is based on the ecclesial community's faithfulness to God's Word concerning how one's sexual life should be lived.⁵³ Hauerwas is critical of this co-opting, specifically regarding abortion. He writes:

Christians have failed their social order by accepting too easily the terms of argument concerning abortion offered by our society. If we are to serve our society well, and on our own terms, our first task must be to address ourselves by articulating for Christians why abortion can never be regarded as morally indifferent for us. Only by doing this can we witness to our society what kind of people and what kind of society is required if abortion is to be excluded.⁵⁴

While abortion is not the primary focus of this thesis, it is a side effect of a society where the church allows the individual to be the center of attention rather than the ecclesial community. Hauerwas offers very helpful insight into the importance of children for Christendom and understanding our role in the care and support of our neighbor. Not only is an openness to new life part of the vocation of marriage, but children are also a gift from God and a sign of His refusal to forsake His creation.⁵⁵ Keeping children central to the conversation about sexual ethics helps form a right understanding about sex among Christian people.

Christians are also called by Jesus to love and serve one another, including children. Our sinful nature can argue that new life creates a drain on resources and energy that could be used to create a better society. However, taking the time to care for children is a profound political act that shows that "God will not have this world 'bettered' by destroying life."⁵⁶ Hauerwas argues that the Christian community should be ready to receive and care for any child, but this kind of

⁵² Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 275.

⁵³ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 284.

⁵⁴ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 350.

⁵⁵ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 356–57.

⁵⁶ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 358.

care is currently beyond our comprehension because other institutions have taken over this endeavor.⁵⁷ Thus, our sexual ethics are impacted by our own sinfulness as well as the culture's prevailing sexual ethics. Instead, a faithful sexual ethic grounded in the community of the church will teach people how to be family and how to properly understand the role of sex in creating family.

Hauerwas' argument reminds us that there are implications in the sexual decisions we make beyond just the immediate consequences and the impacts on those involved. These decisions also reflect how we respond to the tasks we receive from the Christian community outside of sexuality, and how we support the church's mission in our response. For instance, one's decision to prioritize pursuing a relationship or marriage over other vocations in life, like child or congregation member, may limit the opportunities one has to faithfully serve others in the church with their gifts and talents. This substantiates the claim that a Christian's personal interest in sex should consider whatever is most beneficial to the ecclesial community, and thus positively impacts the faithfulness of the church in its expression and witness to the broader culture.⁵⁸ In order to do this, one must consider their various vocations in life to figure out where sexuality falls within those duties in service to others. The role of sex in life changes as one enters each life stage and understanding what vocations one has at any given point can help to understand exactly how that role takes shape.

Limitations of Current Sexual Ethics and Development of Faithful Ethic

The Roman Catholic, confessional Lutheran, and liberal Protestant approaches to sexual ethics were reviewed in the previous chapter. Each ethic attempts to explain how God's people

⁵⁷ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 359.

⁵⁸ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 305.

should interact in sexual relationships to varying degrees of success. However, they all lack emphasis on how these ethics relate to the ecclesial community. This demonstrates a misunderstanding of the context for which an ethic arises. Each of these ethics are unable to hold people accountable to the church at large for their sexual deeds and misdeeds in all stages of life, whether married or single. A faithful and successful sexual ethic should provide guidance for Christians to live and support one another in following God's will for His creation. However, each of the ethics previously discussed tend to consider the needs of those immediately impacted by the sexual relationship rather than the broader ecclesial community. To better explain this, I will explore how each ethic is limited by not addressing its implications for the wider ecclesial community and provide some thoughts on how further development of an ecclesial-focused ethic would benefit each of these Christian traditions.

Roman Catholic

In developing the parameters for sex within marriage without suitable consideration of the community, the burden of the Roman Catholic sexual ethic lies squarely on the shoulders of the individual. The Roman Catholic approach to family uncannily corresponds with Hauerwas' critical description of evolving family dynamics. Because of their distinct focus on the married couple and their children, the family becomes isolated from the church community while still functioning within the community's boundaries. *Theology of the Body* and *Humanae Vitae* both tend to focus on the family as a community of persons, which leads to more emphasis on the nuclear family than the ecclesial community. John Paul II addresses the ecclesial community as the group to whom one is accountable for personal chastity and fidelity within marriage.⁵⁹ This

⁵⁹ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, 268.

thinking confines the role of the ecclesial community to law enforcer over those involved in marriages and diminishes the idea of a group of married individuals who focus beyond individual marriages and instead seek to support and love all those in the community for the sake of Christ.

Another limitation to the Roman Catholic sexual ethic is the comprehensive rejection of artificial contraception. I believe the widespread and unconsidered use of contraception in the wider culture merits a response by the church, especially considering the contemporary cultural issues addressed by John Paul II and Paul VI. However, the Roman Catholic conversation about contraception reminds me of Hauerwas' continuing refrain throughout the "Sex in Public" chapter: a good sexual ethic needs to be able to respond to "a teenager who wants to know what is wrong with fooling around before marriage."⁶⁰ Hauerwas argues that although ethicists may not impact those teenagers as much as they would like, it is an expectation that they address practical questions of sexual conduct in an understandable way. Paul VI explains natural regulation of pregnancy as a way to practice self-denial and to help understand God's will for His creation in childbearing, but he seems to miss the impact of one's individual choice to use contraception on the ecclesial community as a whole. Paul VI solely focuses on solutions for the individual couple to plan pregnancies naturally, which continues to center the couple in the decision-making rather than the whole ecclesial community.⁶¹

If the couple considered the ecclesial community, they would try to understand how creating new life would impact their congregational community specifically, which would impact the role they have in fulfilling their current vocations. Considering their relationships with others within their family and their immediate community, it could become clear whether it

⁶⁰ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 285.

⁶¹ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, sec. 16.

would be in the best interest of the couple to conceive. For example, couples that are newly married and still learning the new vocation of spouse may feel inclined to take the time to learn the spousal vocation before also needing to learn the parent vocation. Couples that already have several children may feel the need to stop trying to conceive because they have reached the extent of their capabilities with their current children. Couples that cannot conceive naturally may instead choose to serve their neighbors with fostering or adoption. These different paths not only consider what the husband and wife wish to achieve within their marriage, but also those who are impacted by the health of their marital relationship.

The Roman Catholic church should define the role of the ecclesial community in sex as thoroughly as they defined the role of husband and wife. In fact, some of the parameters given to the marital sexual relationship could easily be expanded to apply to the entire ecclesial community. The *Catholic Catechism's* explanation of marriage as a tool to overcome selfishness and allow opportunities for mutual aid can easily be broadened beyond the marital relationship and into the ecclesial community.⁶² This broadening is especially relevant when one considers the “one flesh” union of husband and wife and the unity of the church in the body of Christ. Those unions are different in nature, but similarly tie people together with a common mission centered on Christ. Overcoming selfishness and allowing opportunities for mutual aid within the ecclesial community would allow individuals and couples to better follow Christ and look outside of themselves and their marriage to love and serve their neighbors within their community. Christians would then bring the love they have for their spouses to bear on their other relationships, which in turn follows the command of Christ and brings about a more faithful and loving church. Understanding these commands to love strictly within the context of a

⁶² Catholic Church, *Catechism*, 449.

marriage could focus the intention of one's good works in response to Christ on only one person, which is not the will of Christ for His people.

Confessional Lutheran

I find John Kleinig is very close to a faithful sexual ethic. He grounds the Christian understanding of the sexual body in a correct understanding of one's body. He also describes a positive vision of Christian sexual conduct that orders our sexuality to please God instead of repressing God's gift of sexuality.⁶³ He includes the ecclesial community in the process of sexual sanctification, which is essential to the process of ordering one's sexuality according to God's will for His creation. This inclusion is reminiscent of the Roman Catholic use of the ecclesial community as a form of accountability. However, Kleinig's version of ecclesial community is more of an ongoing effort compared to the Roman Catholics, who appear to expect little more than attendance of another couple's wedding ceremony.⁶⁴ It is also conveyed as more of a group effort towards sanctification by the entire ecclesial community, rather than an individual couple attempting to keep up with the ecclesial community's sanctified standards and practices.

Understanding and practicing the insights made by Kleinig is essential to a faithful sexual ethic. However, he neglects to address the impact of his faithful sexual ethic on the ecclesial community or on the broader culture outside the church. Not only is it important to understand the influence that an individual following the faithful sexual ethic has on the community, but it is helpful also to recognize the impact of a community that walks together towards a faithful sexual ethic on the individual's own walk. The faithful sexual ethic also impacts the ecclesial community and the individuals it encompasses by bringing them closer to God's will for all of

⁶³ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 18, 106.

⁶⁴ Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made*, 104, 106.

them.

An aspect of Hauerwas' writing that would be helpful to apply to Kleinig's ethic is his discourse about applying a faithful sexual ethic. The faithful sexual ethic is created for and applied to Christian contexts. Hauerwas argues that "a Christian ethic of sex cannot be an ethic for all people, but only for those who share the purposes of the community gathered by God and the subsequent understanding of marriage."⁶⁵ This is necessary because the ethic needs its context to be understood and practiced properly. However, Hauerwas also argues that while the Christian ethic is distinctive, he hopes that his ethical musings could be useful to those outside the Christian community.⁶⁶ While Kleinig discusses the impacts of sexual sanctification within the ecclesial community, it is also important to discuss how the faithful ethic is relevant in the broader culture as well. It is relevant not only as an influence on communities adjacent to Christianity, but also a witness to how we function within our ecclesial communities. Having a concrete understanding of the faithful sexual ethic within our own ecclesial community allows it to be more readily shared with and received by those outside, especially when considering Kleinig's constructive approach to depicting the faithful ethic.

Liberal Protestant

Though it is not without some significant problems, Nadia Bolz-Weber's sexual ethic does contain certain important aspects of a faithful sexual ethic. In her ethic, Christians must not only do no harm to others but must also remain concerned with their neighbor's sexual needs, especially those neighbors struggling with sexual sin.⁶⁷ This concern for neighbor is imperative

⁶⁵ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 276.

⁶⁶ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 10.

⁶⁷ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 11.

to Hauerwas' focus on the ecclesial community, as concern for neighbor over oneself is essential to living in community, whether in marriage or in ecclesial community. Bolz-Weber also understands sexuality to be a gift from God and rejects sexual suppression or seeing sexual activity as entirely sinful in favor of the Christian wholly integrating the gift of sexuality into his life.

In terms of limitations of the ethic, I see most explicitly Hauerwas' notion of the church uncritically adopting secular sexual ethics in Bolz-Weber's ethic. Not only is her ethic shaped by the evolution of the secular culture, but she also endorses the position of secular culture within a Christian context, creating a perspective rooted in the culture rather than in God's Word. Instead of the ecclesial community living according to God's will and moving differently within the world, Bolz-Weber attempts to synthesize the two into one. Unfortunately, these two ethics cannot exist simultaneously without one being greatly compromised. For the liberal Protestant sexual ethic, one must sacrifice understanding the authority of God's law as guide for the life of the Christian. Bolz-Weber's sexual ethic injects a generally moralistic understanding of religion into her cultural commentary, rather than using God's truths to guide her in approaching the culture. Her position and practice invert the right ordering of God's truth norming the culture.

There are plenty of key differences in the presuppositions used by Bolz-Weber in contrast to those used by Hauerwas to argue their respective positions on sexual ethics. There are also some key differences in the role of the ecclesial community prescribed in each case. For Bolz-Weber, the ecclesial community is meant to help celebrate the individual's sexual decisions:

Christians should help one another to silence the voice that accuses. To celebrate a repentance—a snapping out of it, a thinking of new thoughts—which leads to possibilities we never considered. To love one another as God loves us. To love *ourselves* as God loves us. To remind each other of the true voice of God. And there's

only one way to do this: by being unapologetically and humbly ourselves. By not pretending. By being genuine. Real. Our actual, non-ideal selves.⁶⁸

This explanation is primarily focused on the individual Christian, with the ecclesial community cast as the echo chamber in which one's "authentic self" is exalted. In contrast, Hauerwas would argue that the sexual ethic functions properly when the ecclesial community is forming everyone according to God's law.⁶⁹ While Bolz-Weber focuses more on understanding the neighbor's need in her ethic, when the needs and decisions of the neighbor are subjected only to each individual and that person's needs and desires, it works against the creation of a cohesive community.

The final assessment regarding Bolz-Weber's sexual ethic is much different than the other two ethics highlighted. The other two sexual ethics presented were missing important emphases regarding the ecclesial community and the broader secular culture. In contrast, Bolz-Weber inclusion of community in her sexual ethic is shaped by the world and individual desire rather than God's truth in His Word. There are too many different perspectives attempting to exist in harmony within her writing, and they run counter to God's will for His children. However, it is difficult to argue for God's will for His children when Bolz-Weber presupposes that God's law is not relevant to our lives today.⁷⁰ I appreciate her desire to reach people who are shunned by traditional churches with the Gospel, but she has abandoned a foundational assumption about God's law as a mirror and guide for Christianity to reach them. Bolz-Weber sheds light on the cultural interpretation of the sexual ethics of Christians, which can help Christians more critically evaluate their sexual ethics and the way they communicate them to the culture. But, her most important contribution is her emphasis on the importance of considering one's neighbor when

⁶⁸ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 183.

⁶⁹ Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 277.

⁷⁰ Bolz-Weber, *Shameless*, 179–80.

making decisions regarding sexuality.

Final Thoughts

I find John Kleinig's sexual ethic to be the most faithful sexual ethic highlighted in this thesis. The combination of Hauerwas' writings on the political function of sexuality within the church as well as the ethic put forth by Kleinig creates a faithful sexual ethic that encompasses the broader ecclesial community, not just the married couple.

The married couple is not the center of the church: Christ is. All who believe in Him, whether married or single, are called to a life of love and service to Him and to their neighbor. Kleinig brings a well-defined perspective on the practical nature of this sexual ethic in the ordering of one's sexuality to God's will for His creation and His law. One's sexuality being ordered to God's will allows for all members of the body of Christ to consider God's will over their own, which in turn allows all Christians to look outside themselves to love and serve their ecclesial community and witness to those outside the church community. The implications of this ethic most definitely impact Christian marriage, but also impact those unmarried of all ages within the church. Those who are unmarried also understand their own sexuality within the same bounds as the married couple. Because marriage and sex are subordinated to the interests of the ecclesial community, unmarried people follow in Paul's footsteps⁷¹ with prioritizing continuing the witness and mission of Christ over concerns for one's spouse or family. Married couples can become conscious of their own sexuality being a gift of God that creates new life and physically manifests the one-flesh union created by God in their marriage. Because a married couple's

⁷¹Paul advocates for singleness in 1 Cor. 7:7-8: "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am."

sexuality becomes subordinated to the needs and mission of the church, sex becomes less important than following Christ and loving neighbor.

An Ecclesial Sexual Ethic at Work

Considering all the different aspects of the sexual ethics spotlighted in this thesis, I would like to offer a few concluding remarks about how the church can capitalize on the beneficial aspects of current sexual ethics, while also integrating an outward focus on the ecclesial community. As noted above, my intent is not be the creation of a new sexual ethic, but rather an attempt to address the concerns mentioned in the Introduction. I perceive the next natural step forward in fostering an ecclesial-focused sexual ethic in the Christian church as a renewed emphasis on the doctrine of vocation. Christians are called by God in Christ to love their neighbor. Determining who our neighbors are and how we can serve them most fully is perhaps best done by considering one's vocations. When one considers the role of sex within the many and various vocations, one can begin to understand the role of sex within life at any given stage.

Looking back on my pre-marital life, I often struggled with feeling isolated in comprehending how I perceived my own sexuality. The sexual worldview espoused by many of my peers was different from my own, and even within the church it felt as though I was facing temptation and my own sinful nature all by myself. The prevailing messages I heard from the culture and the church focused either on liberating myself from the constraints of outside influences, specifically conservative Christian ones, or on avoiding people and situations that could potentially lead to inappropriate behavior. Ironically, both of these worldviews resulted in a me-versus-the-world mentality and the impression of working against others to discover my sexual self. There was no community walking with me towards the most authentic or faithful expression of sexuality. In either path, I was left alone to process my thoughts and emotions

about sexuality. This ultimately led to an understanding that whatever choices I made regarding sex and sexuality only impacted me and directly reflected my own sanctification and righteousness before God.

This thesis was part of my pursuit of a more faithful sexual ethic that can respond to and alleviate the pressure to make correct choices with very little support from others. In direct contrast to an individualistic emphasis, I wanted to explore the impact of looking outward in the search for sexual chastity and fidelity. Instead of focusing attention on internal thoughts and emotions about sex built on external pressures, the reality is that Christians are called to continually focus outside of ourselves on the forgiveness received through faith in Christ. Instead of ruminating on shortcomings and faults regarding sexuality, Christians are called to serve others as a response to that forgiveness received. God has given His children the gift of church community in which joys and struggles can be expressed, including sexual feelings and temptations. It's easy to turn inward and struggle alone or not be in conversation with others, especially because of the uncomfortable and taboo nature of conversations about sex within many Christian circles. However, bringing those thoughts and emotions into community creates space for objective thought without taking away the sacred, gifted nature of sexuality in humanity.

A natural step forward on the path towards a sexual ethic with ecclesial focus would be emphasizing the importance of Christian vocation. It is essential to consider how the procreative and unitive aspects of sex in the context of one's vocation in every life stage contribute to the health of a community. As a young single person, the law against pre-marital sex certainly applies, and the vocations of student, worker, family member, and friend, as well as church and community member are much greater in that time than the vocation of partner or spouse. While

many people can be unhappy or frustrated in their singleness, God is calling them to attend to different aspects of life in that present moment. Some may be called to marriage and parenthood in the future. Some may not ever be called to marriage, and Paul commends those people for their unique opportunity to serve God.⁷² Either way, the ecclesial community needs a single person's love and service to God and neighbor. Those who are dating or engaged may find themselves in a perceived in-between stage: no longer being single but still being unable to have sex. While this feels difficult in the moment, serving in current vocations and encouraging one another on the path towards marriage is a more beneficial use of time in that stage instead of focusing on one's own sexual frustrations.

For those who are newly married it can be difficult to discern the timing of when to start having children. If one considers vocation in their family planning, the discussion does not just involve the readiness or preparation of the couple but also whether the ecclesial community is better served by the couple becoming parents. Learning the new vocation of spouse is extremely important to one's future vocation of parent. This learning also contributes to the ecclesial community; many faithful spouses coming together in the church community is beneficial for the formation of a faithful ecclesial community. While there may be no "right" time to become a parent, allowing time spent learning the spousal vocation before adding the parent vocation is beneficial to the parents, the future children, and the ecclesial community at large.

Most people consider sexuality issues to be most prevalent in young people, but a faithful ecclesial sexual ethic even applies to older adults. Those who are empty-nesters and retirees are entering into new life stages. While they are continuing in parenthood, their attention can be refocused on the needs of the ecclesial community as the direct needs of their children lessen.

⁷² See 1 Cor. 7:7–8, 25–40 for Paul's thoughts on the benefits of singleness in the church.

This life stage is a wonderful opportunity to deepen connections with one's spouse in a different life stage, as well as deepen connections with potential grandchildren or other community members that could use a person's gifts and talents. Those who are widows or widowers come into yet another a new life stage. While one must take the time to grieve the loss of one's life partner, there may be potential to serve a fellow widowed neighbor with a second marriage or refocus on the needs of one's ecclesial community needs in various ministries.

Interestingly, there isn't a lot of sex involved in reflecting on the faithful, ecclesial-focused sexual ethic playing out in a congregational community. That is part of the intention of the ethic. While sex is a gift from God and extremely important to one's relationship with a spouse, it is but one manifestation of love and connection, and it is only shown to one other person in life. Thus, it is important for the sexual ethic to center the vocational relationships outside of marriage instead of solely focusing on the individuals within the marriage.

Conclusion

I hope that considering the ecclesial community in a sexual ethic will alleviate some of the burden that individuals face regarding sex and sexuality. A faithful sexual ethic allows the individual to relinquish the responsibility of navigating the complexities of sexuality alone in favor of the community working together to regulate how sexuality is manifested in life in a dynamic way that can address a rapidly changing world. Having such an ethic applied to my own life would have allowed me the opportunity to focus my attention away from myself and my perceived personal inadequacies, and instead focus on how my strengths could be used to serve others in the church and the world.

Not only is understanding the role of sexuality helpful to know for the individual, but the entire ecclesial community benefits from understanding their role in supporting one another in

learning the role of sexuality in each person's life. We must be constantly reminded through the means of grace, especially in mutual conversation and consolation, of our importance to God and to the ecclesial community regardless of life stage. This collaborative approach between individuals in community is preferable not only because of the lightened load but also because it is easier to remain faithful to the Law and Word of God when the entire body of Christ is working towards the same goal than when everyone is working towards their own self-interest.

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