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The Church's Concern About Sex Attitudes

By HARRY G. COINER

ED. NOTE: A historical, sociological, and theological study of sex attitudes is currently being prepared by the Family Life Committee of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Scheduled for publication early in 1960, it will be the second volume in a six-volume research project. The first, *Engagement and Marriage*, appeared in April of this year.

In this article Prof. Harry G. Coiner, one of the contributors, presents the preface to the second volume. It introduces the reader to the need as well as the nature and purpose of this research study.

IT is safe to say, and almost trite, that no word in the English language which describes something that is good and beautiful in itself has come to be associated with as much evil and impurity as has the word "sex."

The word "sex" is used with broad and varied meanings. It can identify a portion of the human race, e.g., the male sex. It can mean anything connected with sexual gratification or reproduction or the urge for these, especially the attraction of individuals of one sex for those of the other. It can mean legitimate expression of the qualities of femininity or masculinity, or it can mean all that is evil and lustful. It can mean sexual love or lusting sexuality.

Sex is a good word. However, it has been used and abused in such fashion that the Christian context of the word has been largely lost, even among Christian people. William E. Hulme says, "This is the Christian definition of sex: that God created people as men and women for the purpose of the marriage companionship and the creation and development of new life."¹

The word comes from the Latin *sexus* meaning "gender" (maleness or femaleness), probably from the root form *secare*, to cut, meaning thereby a division or segment of mankind.²

¹ William E. Hulme, *God, Sex and Youth* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1959), p. 19.

² *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd Edition Unabridged (Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1954); *A New Latin Dictionary*, ed. E. A. Andrews (New York: American Book Co., 1907).

SEX IN GOD'S DESIGN

The Bible establishes the unitive and procreative function of sex and makes it an integral part of the created nature of man. "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them. And God blessed them and said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:27,28). "And God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). "And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made He a woman and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. . . . Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed." (Gen. 2:22-25)

David R. Mace's comment on this Scriptural account of man's creation is concise: "The Bible has no hesitation in declaring that the sexual nature of man was deliberately created as part of the divine purpose. The hand of the Creator did not falter or slip at this point. The Hebrews accepted this view of sex wholeheartedly. For them the sexual union of husband and wife was a blessing bestowed by God for man's enjoyment and use."³

When, at a certain stage of the creative process, God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him" (Gen. 2:18), this was more than a ringside comment. Adam was alone, and with him in such a state, there would have been no possibility of the subsequent covenant relationship between God and His people. God created man as male and female to fulfill the divinely given nature of man. Not only is it "not good" for man to be alone, but it is also "not good" for a man and wife to do anything but cleave together and be one flesh. The Bible begins by telling us that God chose to make the human race in the form of individuals of two different kinds, that they might meet and love and marry and complete each other. And on all this God looked with satisfaction and blessed it.⁴

³ David R. Mace, *Whom God Hath Joined* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 38.

⁴ Mace, p. 18.

Thus by faith we embrace our sexual life as a divinely given part of our natural creation. There is no reason why as human beings we should be ashamed of this "power of fruitfulness" or should treat sexual attraction as something that could hardly be more than tolerated.

Martin H. Scharlemann observes that "according to the Scriptural account of God's work in making the world and us, sex is part of that creation which God saw and 'behold, it was very good' (Gen. 1:31). The very fact that the divine image and the creation of man and woman are mentioned in the same breath, so to speak, suggests that man was endowed with sex to permit him to share in God's creative activity. Sex is an integral part of God's plan of creating and preserving life among those beings which He intended to be the very crown of visible creation. . . . From this we must conclude that sex is a divine blessing of immeasurable worth and consequence, which, like other gifts from God, and possibly to a higher degree, should be 'received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth' (1 Tim. 4:3)."⁵

David R. Mace further comments: "Only in recent years have we been able to see a gradual but welcome change in the generally accepted Christian attitude toward sex. . . . Many of us were brought up under the still lingering influence of the old tradition. Somewhere in our deepest thoughts and feelings there may still lurk doubts about the wholesomeness of the sexual side of marriage. There may still seem to us to be something just a little unclean or shameful or discreditable about the fact that we have sexual intercourse from time to time with our wives or husbands. It cannot be strongly enough asserted that there is no authoritative Christian truth that gives any support to such feelings or attitudes."⁶

The attitude of the Christian church has not always been without its lights and shadows when facing the fact of sex. Sometimes a distorted fear of sex, sometimes unclear and false doctrines, and sometimes unhealthy influences contributed more toward confusion than clarity in the marital relationship. Throughout its

⁵ "The Biblical View of Sex," *Lutheran Scholar*, Vol. XIV, No. 4 (October 1957), p. 579.

⁶ Mace, pp. 38, 39.

history Christianity has wavered between the wholesome attitude of the Hebrew family and the dualism of the Hellenistic age, which set aside the whole matter of sex, because it belonged to the body, as being of an inferior order for a reasonable creature like man.

MODERN FOCUS ON SEX

Our human and cultural situation today raises searching questions as to the meaning and purpose of sex. Thoughts on the subject during the last half century have shifted back and forth between attitudes of repression and permissiveness. As one studies the resulting confusion of ideas, attitudes, and practices with regard to sex, it becomes clear that to some degree all men sense the mystery, exploit the pleasures, evade the responsibilities, and miss the fulfillment that are a part of the sex relationship. "In the long history of mankind, some have sought for the meaning of sex in sexual expression; some have confined the meaning of sex to its propagative function; others have put their faith in romance as the guide for sexual fulfillment; still others accept it as a biological necessity only; and countless others have become victims of its dynamic power for demonic ends."⁷

There are those who claim that sex has become a mess because it was hushed up. Sex has not been hushed up but chattered about for centuries, and it is still in a mess. The facts warrant the general conclusion that a rather large-scale deterioration has taken place in the attitude of contemporary society toward sex. Pitirim Sorokin's analysis of the sex mores of America gives abundant evidence for the preponderant practice of premarital relationships and the increasing number of extramarital relations, which often result in divorce, desertion, abortion, illegitimate children, and the orphanaging of children. It is Professor Sorokin's firm belief that sexual promiscuity leads to addiction and that such addiction is abetted directly by our pulp magazines, bathing beauty contests, realistic and/or sophisticated novels, lewd entertainment on the stage, and by suggestive movies as well as television programs. He asserts that all this is taking its toll in terms of physical and mental debility and aberrance. For the debase-

⁷ Simon Doniger, ed., *Sex and Religion Today* (New York: Association Press, 1953), pp. 97, 98.

ment of sex and failure to put it to its proper use produces mental tensions and results in the reduction of the creative activity of the individual as well as the destruction of his integrity and personal habits.⁸

Martin J. Heineken states that "there is a deep-seated malady, something gone wrong with the basic orientation toward sex, such that it is high time that the church cease lamenting and denouncing and give a theological diagnosis and suggest a theological cure, in positive, constructive terms. We are confronted with a desperate flight into sensuality and the frantic multiplication of piecemeal satisfactions because the quality of life has lost its eternity. We are confronted with an unprecedented phenomenon which makes us realize the tremendous, disintegrating power of sex gone astray, because it strikes at the very roots of man's being."⁹

Although causes which influence the level of sex morality are not easily identifiable, the widespread influence of Sigmund Freud warrants serious consideration. William G. Cole discusses Freud's teachings and summarizes: "Freud saw man as a totality, with sex as one part, perhaps the most important part of his nature. He proclaimed that sex was natural, that procreation was secondary to pleasure, and he cautioned society against too severe restrictions on sexual instincts."¹⁰

The causes for the low level of sex attitudes and morality today are hidden from us, no doubt, within the complex ferment of the culture of our time. We are living in an age of tremendous social, political, and intellectual change. The foundations of religion, morality, political institutions, social theory, the very notion of the nature of man—all have been shaken with a great violence. The most general cause for a low level of sex attitudes and morality is the low level of the moral and spiritual sanctions which support high ideals of love and sexual expression. Religious sanctions of obedience and loyalty to God mean very little, if anything, in a secular society. Social pressure bears little restraint when a new technology of sex, prophylaxis, and contraception removes

⁸ *The American Sex Revolution* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1956).

⁹ "A Theology of Marriage" (unpublished paper, 1957).

¹⁰ William G. Cole, *Sex in Christianity and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 235.

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the triple terrors of conception, infection, and detection. Added to this, there is additional freedom and protection in the anonymous stranger-patterns created by the automobile, the motel, and the apartment house. Public opinion is less hostile to illicit unions and even to perversion than it has been for a long time. The Christian churches are not free from blame in all of this, largely because of their failure to do much in a positive way to remove the confusion, ignorance, and unhealthy guilt associations which surround sex like a fog not only in our Western culture but in many areas of the world.

While America was curiously obsessed with the matter of sex, treating it as if it didn't exist and yet exploiting it in numerous ways, Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey and his associates were discovering some facts about sexual behavior. Though many doubts have been expressed, both in the press and elsewhere as to the validity of the Kinsey findings, it is probably fair to say that, so far as statistical studies can give us accurate information, the Kinsey books are reliable for the type of study made. In any event, for good or ill, the lid is off. According to Kinsey's data, Americans are not chaste, and their sexual behavior is not nice.

Though Kinsey's findings do not invalidate in any basic way the nature of the Christian view of sex, it is not possible for Christians to return to a pre-Kinsey sexual era and ostrichlike declare that there is no problem about which they should be concerned.

In an appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the Kinsey reports Seward Hiltner asks, "Is there anything in Kinsey's findings that suggests we put the Christian view of sex on the shelf as irrelevant to modern life?" Hiltner answers with an unqualified no. "Is there anything in these findings that brings judgment on what Christians are thinking as well as doing, not thinking or not doing, about sex today?" he asks again. His answer is an unqualified yes.¹¹

Speaking to the same point, W. Norman Pittinger says: "For the Christian, the Kinsey reports have a particular significance.

¹¹ Seward Hiltner, *Sex Ethics and the Kinsey Reports* (New York: Association Press, 1952), p. 206.

Not only do they show the plain truth that the moral standards of our fellow-Americans and even of our fellow-Christians, as of ourselves, are less than the most humanistically-minded Christian ethic will allow. . . . They also make it clear that a genuine Christian understanding of the meaning of human sexuality is almost entirely absent from most nominal Christians."¹²

The exploitation and perversion of sex is of concern to Christians because of the spiritual and moral implications. The beauty and rightness of a God-given aspect of life may be perverted and is being perverted. There is a fine line between that which is holy and sublime and that which is sinful and ugly. With the easy explanation that sex is nothing to be ashamed of, some people justify lust and license as the right way of living. They assume that every gratification of sex is good merely because man is physically endowed to satisfy this hunger, and thus they condone adultery and fornication as normal and desirable. It may therefore be as false to say that sex in itself is good as to say that sex is always bad. What we are concerned about is the right expression or use of sex. While the Christian will identify himself with God's saving plan and thus see his own life of sex in its light, the person who lacks faith will be tempted to appreciate sex on account of its intrinsic value, viz., the pleasure which it carries with it, or the biological importance it has for the propagation of the human race. Both of these latter views are fragmentary. The Bible is explicitly clear on the privileges and blessings of sex, confirming the desire which one person has to have union with a person of the opposite sex and states that this divinely assigned function is to bring about the "oneness of the flesh" of the two persons. At the same time the Bible is just as explicitly clear on the judgment which inevitably attends willful and sinful exploitation of sex. Chastity of life is to be a badge of the Christian and serve to set him apart from the world so that his witness to the saving and keeping power of Christ will be effective. His life is to demonstrate the "bringing into captivity of every thought to the obedience of Christ." (2 Cor. 10:5)

¹² W. Norman Pittinger, *The Christian View of Sexual Behavior* (Greenwich, Conn.: The Seabury Press, 1954), p. 17.

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The consideration of a Christian view of sex begins for Lutherans on a solid confessional base. "Gen. 1:28 teaches that men were created to be fruitful and that one sex in a proper way should desire the other (et sexus recta ratione sexum appetat). For we are speaking not of concupiscence, which is sin, but of that appetite which was to have been in nature in its integrity, which they call physical love (στοργήν φυσικήν). And this love of one sex for the other is truly a divine ordinance . . . because the natural desire of sex for sex is an ordinance of God in nature, and for this reason is a right (et propterea ius est); otherwise, why would both sexes have been created?" (Apology 23, 7 ff.). This affirms that there is nothing to be ashamed of either in the fact that the human race reproduces itself in a certain way or in the fact that sexual activity gives pleasure. In the Biblical view the body is to be used, not abused, to be enjoyed, not punished. Christianity teaches redemption of the whole person, which in every activity is to glorify God. (Rom. 12:1, 2; 1 Cor. 10:31; 6:19, 20)

Roland H. Bainton is careful to affirm that Christianity like Judaism has never condemned sex. Because the creation is good, life is good, the continuance of life is wholesome, and the means which God has instituted for its ongoing cannot be evil. Sex in Christian treatment has never been considered by itself, apart from the context of marriage, procreation, family, and the common life of men and women. Though sex is not to be repudiated as defiling, yet it dare not be indulged in promiscuously or for private gratification apart from social responsibility, and above all, not as a device for exciting emotional upheaval in the interests of religion. Sex is good but capable of abuse, and like every good it is to be disciplined and subordinated to an entire way of life.¹³

WHY A STUDY OF SEX ATTITUDES?

The study being developed is based upon these premises:

First, we believe that sex is an important aspect, area, dimension, or relationship of life which — no less than other important things

¹³ Roland H. Bainton, *What Christianity Says About Sex, Love and Marriage* (New York: Association Press, 1957), pp. 9, 10.

—requires careful and critical consideration in the light of Christian truth.

Second, we believe that there is a kind of thought and concern emerging about sex in relation to the total person under God which unites what modern knowledge and insight have given us with the traditional concern and intent of Christian doctrine. This structure of thinking and teaching has not yet been described forcefully and adequately enough so that the thinking of our church might be deepened and expanded.

Third, we believe that several factors in our modern society are causing a deterioration of personal relationships, including the physiological and psychological aspects of such relationships, and that these factors ought to be as clearly envisaged (in their sexual aspect as in any other) and made an item of concern and action.

Fourth, we believe that Christian pastors will appreciate a sound Biblical basis for effective Christian sex education, knowledgeable marital counseling and pastoral care. Before the fact of the power and mystery of sex the pastor should not be speechless or helpless but rather articulate and able to hold before his people a Christian view of sex and marriage.

In general, we believe that there are some old facts and new facts about which there should be an expanded openness of discussion, some deepened understanding of Christian points of view, and in this sense something new to be said.

It certainly must be our concern that the sexual life of man be interpreted from the Christian perspective. To discuss sex fully and frankly on a secular level and outside the Christian context would mean that we lose Christian contact with a vital area of man's experience and by so much pervert Christianity itself. It would certainly seem that the challenge to the church is to sound a clear and certain note on the sexual nature and life of man, as it stands in the midst of a world that is teetering between a complete moral breakdown like that of ancient Rome and what could be the most universally wholesome sex attitudes the world has ever known. Christians will not "give up" and permit Satan to have a field day, but will continue to work for a deeper understanding of the life of man under God, that "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10:31)

SEX ATTITUDES AMONG SELECTED LUTHERANS

A sociological survey, which employed a questionnaire on the basis of a sampling procedure,¹⁴ attempted to determine by a few specific questions what was the general status and trend of sex attitudes among the members of the Augustana Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The researchers wanted to know: Do Lutherans accept the attitudes which are common in present-day social culture, or has the influence of church membership made a significant difference in their thinking? If there is a difference, is what Lutherans think a wholesome and workable philosophy of sex and marriage? Or have Lutherans been confused by the teachings of the past and consequently manifest no stable attitudinal pattern?

Here follows a sampling of the significant items revealed by the survey:

1. Over 90 per cent of those questioned favored a thorough sex education before marriage, yet only about 33 per cent stated that they had received such education.

2. More than 90 per cent of those questioned agreed that discussions of sex between parents and children were proper. Only 20 per cent, however, indicated that they had had such discussions.

3. The right or wrong of sex relations in marriage when children are not the object was probed. The question on the survey read: "Do you believe that it is right to have sex relations for the enjoyment of husband and wife without the intention of conceiving children?" This question was asked of married people only.

The response of the lay people in the various synodical groups revealed a significant difference. The Augustana Lutheran Church, for example, had the highest percentage in favor of sexual relations for pleasure only, the ELC took the middle ground, and the Missouri Synod had the smallest percentage in favor of such practice. The average was 68 per cent in favor, which figure may be construed to indicate a rather strong opinion among Lutherans that sex relations cannot be justified for any other purpose than procreation.

When it came to the actual practices involved, 84 per cent of

¹⁴ Paul G. Hansen, et al, *Engagement and Marriage* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), pp. vii—ix.

couples on the average reported enjoying sexual relations without the purpose of having children. This indicates a marked difference between belief and practice.

More pastors than lay people were uncertain on the subject of sexual relations for pleasure only. 19 per cent of the pastors questioned were uncertain and 10 per cent of lay people. The largest percentage (among pastors) of those uncertain were found in the ELC (29 per cent), with the Augustana Lutheran Church having less (19 per cent), and the Missouri Synod still less (15 per cent).

4. In the matter of sex education the survey revealed that books took first place by a wide margin, mothers, second, and friends and playmates third as sources. Fathers, physicians, pastors, teachers, brothers, and sisters were given a low rating generally.

5. Only 15 per cent of the lay people believed that sex education would lead to immorality, and only 4 per cent of the pastors expressed the same opinion.

A summary of the survey of sex attitudes among Lutherans discloses more positive and wholesome attitudes toward sex and sex education than the opposite. The need for greater conformity between attitudes and practices is indicated. Either attitudes need to be adjusted so that what is common practice does not create guilt feelings; or else there should be a frank discussion of practices with a determined effort to correct them if they are actually wrong and harmful.

The percentage of persons who revealed negative and unwholesome attitudes should constitute a concern of the church. These, and the persons who indicated "they were not sure," present an educational challenge. The Christian church has all too often remained silent where it should have spoken on matters of sex, or it has spoken with an uncertain sound which could be followed with difficulty if at all.

As one studies the data, one wonders how much prevailing attitudes are due to mere conformity with the social ethic of environment and how much they are due to Christian motivation.

It is time, we believe, for the church to give guidance at the hand of Holy Scripture on a number of specific issues. To list these issues is to run the risk of oversimplification on the one hand and overcomplication on the other. The following are subjects on

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which a great many Christian people and particularly professional church workers have expressed doubt and uncertainty and desire for clarification. These are the issues which the study will endeavor to clarify:

1. What is the place of sex in God's design?
2. What is the proper place of sex in marriage?
3. What is the proper place of sex outside marriage?
4. When is sexual desire sinful (lust)?
5. What is the relation of love to sex?
6. What should the church teach regarding aberrations in sex practice?
7. What is the place of modesty and chastity in matters of sex?
8. What should be the Christian attitude toward the modern emphasis on sex?
9. What is the Christian interpretation of sex?
10. What should be the church's responsibility and role in sex education?

THE CHURCH FACES THESE ISSUES

In modern times, with its relaxing of sex morals and the new freedoms between men and women, the influence of Freudian psychology, social studies, and scientific advances, the contrast between the Puritanic and/or Pietistic taboos and the modern freedom (call it naturalism, utilitarianism, or secularism) has been accentuated. We are living in a highly sensual society, we must admit. Christian people are confused by the streams of thought which converge on the problem of sex. Social scientists tell us that abnormal sexual behavior is symptomatic of underlying feelings, attitudes, and emotional needs. We are living in a period in which sex is warped beyond all sensible proportions. It is to help meet these problems and issues that this study was undertaken. The light it hopes to bring to bear is from the Holy Scriptures, from Christian history, and from relevant modern studies.

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