

HOLINESS AND SEX FROM BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

DR. Olatunji Samuel AKINWUMI

Department of Arts Education, School of Multi-disciplinary Studies, Bamidele Olumilua
University of Education, Science and Technology Ikere –Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

Email Address: tunji.samakin@gmail.com

Abstract

The experience of holiness is pivotal to the Christian faith. It is clearly taught on the pages of scripture. Since man is born with moral pollution and he soon grows to possess sin, within and without there is therefore need for him to be cleansed. Having understood this, the priests in the Old Testament cleansed the Temple using water after they had been sanctified with the blood of innocent animal. Christian teaching about sex has been contaminated and confused by negative and wholesome unscriptural concept. It is therefore not surprising that there is a great deal of bewilderment abroad especially among Christians, concerning the radical changes that are taking place in sexual attitudes, and in sexual behavior, in our contemporary world. This write-up, which will therefore bring home plainly the urgent need for a biblical reinterpretation of holiness and sex, might serve a useful purpose of making life meaningful at this present time.

Keywords: *Holiness, politics, Christian faith, sex, scripture, moral pollution, attitudes*

Introduction

The persistent liberation and emancipation of youths from parental authority, the breakdown of community, consciousness, the introduction of the western type of education and employment opportunities in cities, all these factors and many more have bastardized the ever-present Biblical concept of sex.

The extent to which Christian teaching about sex has been contaminated and confused by negative, wholesome and unscriptural concepts, is worrisome and calls for an urgent attention. It is therefore not surprising that there is a great confusion, especially among Christians concerning the sudden changes that are taking place in sexual attitudes, and in sexual behavior, in our contemporary world.

Premarital sexual intercourse is almost universal. It is described as “extremely common” “the common thing”. It has become the custom, the “common practice” in our contemporary world. Nowadays, in Africa for instance, premarital sexual relations have been described as non-existent or infrequent.

The young ones do not see pre-marital sexual intercourse as fornication, but as a necessary way to get to know each other. To most of them, it is the natural way of preparing for marriage. They therefore often ask the question: How can you marry without first trying it out? They make their choice, and to have a boyfriend or girlfriend means sleeping together. The purpose is also to see whether the girl can become pregnant, in which case it is more difficult for the parents to refuse marriage.

Many people however refuse to admit that sex before marriage is bad, evil or sinful, in general, they regard it as a preliminary preparation for marriage and the people are strengthened in their opinion by its common occurrence: “Everybody does it”, they say, “it is the usual way”.

Extra-marital sex is also prevalent in our society. Men and women engage in illicit sexual intercourse in the name of love; this is no doubt conjugal infidelity. This unhealthy libertine attitudes toward sex needs to be controlled and this can only be possible when holiness is inculcated in sex. Even though, it is theologically wrong to separate sex from human existence, it must be seen in its true theological light. Its claims must not be denied but must be done and practiced in holiness. Anyone who will study carefully what the Bible really has to say about sex is in for some surprises. It is therefore necessary, of course, to shed our preconceived ideas and go to the scripture with an open and receptive mind.

Holiness: what is it?

The primary picture in the Old Testament understanding of holiness is one of separation; since it is a profoundly religious concept, holiness implies separation from defilement and clinging unto God. It signifies “a state of being and moral actions” (Tyson : 1986). In the New Testament, holiness expresses primarily the idea of separation. It is used in different ways; it is employed occasionally in a ritual sense, that is, in the sense of separation from ordinary, for secret purposes (Berkhol: 1953).

According to Wesley (1990), it is the same thing as “Christian perfection” which entails “loving God totally with ones hearts, mind and soul” Christian perfection implies that no wrong remains in the soul; and that all the thought, words and actions are governed by pure love”. In his view, Asbury (1944) states that “Holiness in God is inherent; in Christians. Holiness is infinite and unchangeable,”

In Charles Finney’s description, holiness is seen as “a disposition to do universally right in opposition to wrong. It is a disposition to do what is upon the whole best to be done” (Charles : 1976). It is therefore conformity of heart and life to the perceived nature and relation of things. It is the opposite of all sinfulness.

Tozer (1976) asserts that “whatever is holy is healthy; evil is a moral sickness that must end, ultimately in death” since God’s first concern for this universe is its moral health, that is, its holiness. Whatever is contrary to this is necessarily under His eternal displeasure. He differentiates between absolute holiness and contingent holiness. Absolute holiness according to him is for God. It knows no degree and this He cannot impact to His creatures. The relative or contingent holiness on the other hand is the one that God shares with Angels and Seraphim in heaven and with redeemed men on earth. This is the holiness that God does impact to His children.

As it has been pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, the original meaning of the Hebrew word for “Holiness” is separation” it was quite a natural development then that everything outside God’s holiness was described as “common” the opposite of “holy” or “sacred”. Things and persons could only become “holy” or be “sanctified” as God called them out from the “common” to be set aside for His service (Baxter : 1976).

The term “holy” is applied to such places as the camp of Israel, the hill of Zion, the ground near the burning bush, the city of Jerusalem, the tabernacles, the temple and inner compartment, the alter and its gifts, and heaven itself. It is applied to persons such as the prophets and most fundamentally to God: God declares in Exodus 29:43 that he would maintain his holiness by those who were near to him and maintain his honour before all the people. Holiness should be maintained in sex. Any sexual intercourse that desecrates or profanes God’s name should be jettisoned.

Holiness is the essence of God’s character, man is therefore called to be holy. To say that you are holy according to Paul (2018), is to be set apart by God’s grace for God’s purpose. Paul explained further that man’s allegiance is to the kingdom of his success and happiness, but to the progress of his kingdom, glory and grace.

Sex is good as long as it is rightly used; that is when it is closely linked with its procreative purpose. Veneration of the male semen is another central factor in designing the right use of sex. Any waste of the precious seed of life by planting it where it does not belong is a violation of the divine purpose.

The Old Testament provides plenty of illustration of the misuse of sex. Sex remains unholy when it is abused or misused, the Bible thunders against this with, righteous indignation. But this implies no suggestion that there is any inherent evil in sex itself. Like every other area of human life, it can be abused and become an occasion of sin.

Biblical view of sex

Right at the very beginning, the Bible informs us clearly that God heartily approved of sex. "Male and female" says the Genesis story, "created he them". In other words, when God made man, he chose deliberately to make him a sexual being. Being God, he could presumably have made us in any way he wished. It was his deliberate considered choice to make us complete with sex organs which equipped us for sexual intercourse (Patricia C. 1871).

Although the Bible speaks plainly about sex, it is not easy to sum up its teaching on the subject in terms that would be relevant to our life today.

The sixty-six books of the Bible cover a wide historical period. During those periods, many changes took place and these changes were often reflected in Hebrews' sexual attitudes. In the early part of the Old Testament, for instance, polygamy seems to have been accepted without question, whereas by New Testament times, monogamy had become the established rule. The strange custom of the levirate, which required a man to have intercourse with his dead brother's wife, seems to have declined and died out.

Second, some parts of the Bible at least were written in what we call an "eschatological" framework. This means that the men who wrote were not anticipating an extended human future on this earth. They expected the existing world order to come to an early and dramatic end, and to be replaced by what they called the kingdom of Heaven. So, since human life as it had been lived was not going to be continued, they did not want to waste time on such worldly details as the regulations of sexual behavior or family life?

Third, several patterns of sexual behavior which are problems for us today are not referred to at all, in the Bible. There is no reference, for example, to masturbation. Nothing is said about petting; presumably, Hebrew youth had little opportunity to indulge in it. The Bible makes no reference to contraception, and none to abortion. The Bible writers shed no direct light on modern problems like sterilization and artificial insemination.

Nevertheless, Christians must seek as much light as they can from the pages of the Bible if they are to present their points and views intelligently.

Sex in Hebrew thought

In Hebrew religious setting as the Old Testament describes, sex played a central role. To the Hebrews it was the means by which a man became a father, and becoming a father was without exception the most important event in his entire life. It was an event of profound spiritual significance.

The Hebrews had a strong sense of destiny. They believed they were God's chosen people, from their stock would arise, one day, the seed of Abraham; and every Hebrew carried that seed in his loins. It was his duty to propagate it, to beget sons.

For the Hebrews, sex was the means of procreation. It was a process by which man continued the work of creation on behalf of God. No wonder, therefore, that family life was the central focus of Hebrew society.

A Hebrew man was always identified as the son of his father. Through him, the family line continued. The greatest tragedy that could befall him was for his line to die out, for his name to be forgotten.

Every Hebrew man carried on his body the mark of his identity as a member of God's chosen race. And it was no accident that he carried this mark on his sex organ. Far from being disreputable this was the most sacred part of his whole body; therefore it was appropriate that it should be specially dedicated to God as the symbol that his whole body, his whole person, was dedicated to God. For it was with this organ that he became, in a special sense, a co-worker with God.

To become a father, he must plant his seed in a woman's body. The Hebrews, like all ancient people did not understand the process of reproduction as we do today.

The view of Jesus about sex

Jesus having grown in Jewish communities accepted without question most of the ideas and customs, which were His cultural heritage. All he was concerned to do was to make a few necessary corrections and adjustments. The statement "You have heard from those of the Old times...but I say unto you" introduced many of his utterances".

Jesus reaffirmed the sanctity of marriage as an institution ordained by God. Indeed, he sharply criticized those who treated the obligation of marriage lightly. Jesus based his argument on the binding nature of the sexual union in which husband and wife become "One flesh". This lays upon both husband and wife a deep obligation to each other.

In Jesus opinion, a man or woman might justifiably renounce sex for the fulfillment of a legitimate spiritual goal. In other words, the call to marriage and call to celibacy might be considered alternative paths, men and women might take in the service of God and their fellowmen, a view which was in conflict with traditional Hebrew thought.

A basic stress in the teaching of Jesus was on the root of sin, which he consistently declared lay in the attitudes and intentions of mind and heart. He therefore rejected the legalistic approach to sexual misdemeanors in the Old Testament times. In his teachings, all sexual sin, and indeed all sins, had its source in wayward impulses and desires that are first nourished in mind. He therefore spoke of the "lustful look" as adultery committed in imagination, and of purity of mind and heart as the only true guarantee of integrity in behaviour (David R.M. 1971).

The attitude of Jesus towards sexual sins is one of understandings and comparison, in contrast with the punitive attitude common among religious people.

Paul was a Jew, and like Jesus, he accepted the traditions of his people. He reasserted the moral and spiritual implication of the "one flesh union". He went further and declared that these implications applied even when a man entered into a casual sex relationship with a prostitute. Paul recognized too, the need for married couples to enjoy a healthy sex, life and warned them against cheating one another by too long abstinence from intercourse.

Sex and holiness in the early Church

The period represented by what we call the Early Church spans roughly the first five hundred years of Christianity. It was an eventful and turbulent time. It actually started with the struggle of the young churches for recognition amid widespread persecution and misunderstanding. The period witnessed the widespread acceptance of faith and its adoption by a series of Roman emperors.

St. Augustine, one of the great thinkers who shaped Christian doctrine during this momentous period gave special attention to the theme of sex, as a result of his personal experience, Augustine recommended celibacy as the best way to live a truly Christian life,

but to those unable to attain such heights, because they could not rise to the necessary level of self-control, he shared some view with Paul by recommending marriage as the best remedy.

Sex in marriage, according to Augustine is regarded as sinful unless it is undertaken exclusively for procreation. In his own opinion, every expression of sexual desire is unavoidably sinful in marriage than it would be in other setting, so he declared that those who turned to marriage as an outlet for their uncontrolled sex impulse were guilty only of venial sin, which could be pardoned because they were using marriage to avoid becoming involved in more serious transgression outside marriage.

This view of sex was widely accepted throughout the Early Church. Influential thinkers, such as Ambrose, Jerome, Tertullian and others expressed similar ideas.

The general view on the early church was that sex could be justified in marriage only for procreation and only when it was undertaken in a calm unemotional frame of mind. All other expressions of sex were sinful. Consequently, it was obvious that celibacy represented the Christian ideal. It was categorically declared that the state of celibacy was spiritually superior to the married state.

In the Medieval Church, there was however, some attempt to soften the harsh teaching on sex. It was explained, for instance that “Concupiscence is not sin but an incentive to sin”, and the married couples were reassured by the statement that their sex life is not quite so wicked as long as they “resist manfully” which presumably means that they had to go down rightly against their impulses (David Mace: 1970)

However, married couples were instructed to abstain from intercourse for three days before coming to Holy Communion, in order that they might be in a proper spiritual condition to receive the sacrament. More extensive abstinence was therefore called for during lent.

Conclusion

If one of life's major preoccupations a suggested by many people is to root out all sexual feeling, since the stimulant of sexual feeling seems to be the female of the species, it therefore follows that women must be scrupulously avoided.

Cognizance must be given to the fact that sex has both the unitive and procreative functions. The unitive function as emphasized by Paul the Apostle in his epistle would be unfulfilled if female counterparts are completely avoided. The procreative function of sex established by God would be unrealized if sex is totally condemned.

Holiness should be inculcated in sex. The gross exploitation of one person by another for sexual purposes should therefore be jettisoned. The sexual behavior that offends the community's sense of propriety should be completely condemned.

If holiness is included in sex, sex life of married people can be for them a source of spiritual enrichment, instead of defilement by sin.

If Christian begins to discover the sacramental quality of sexual intercourse practiced without guilt or shame, the whole elaborate structure that has associated sex with fear and repression will collapse like a house of cards.

In conclusion, God frowns at sin in its totality; holiness should therefore be inculcated in sex. Premarital sexual intercourse and extramarital sexual affairs are not scriptural. Nevertheless, it would be shortsighted indeed on the part of Christians to dismiss the sexual ferment of our time as wickedness and decadence; we need to go back to the Bible with open minds.

Eventually, it is theologically wrong to separate sex from human existence, it must be seen in its true theological light, and it must therefore be practiced in holiness. Holiness would be impossible if the will which is the real capital of the soul is not cleansed. It would be hindered when the affection is not cleansed. It is when the affection is cleansed that one can enjoy freedom from self-love which mars so many lives.

However, the society would no doubt be in perfect peace when holiness and sex are practiced as stipulated in the scriptures it would coordinate, unify and simplify the believers. It would no doubt create the consciousness of God in our society.

References

- Baxter, J.S. (1976). *New Call to Holiness*, Grand Rapids, Zonder Van Publishing House, page 130
- Benezeri, K.L. (1977). *African Christian Marriages*, New York, Macmillan Publishing Co, Inc., page 96.
- David, R.M. (1971). *The Christian Response to Sexual Revolution*, London, Lutter Worth Press, page 18.
- Finney, C.C. (1983) *Sanctification and Fifty-four Relations of Christ to Christian*; Benin, Rhema Publication.
- Paul Trip Ministry (2018). *The Doctrine of Holiness* in www.paultrip.com
- Patricia, C. (1971). *Man Alive in Christ*, London, Gill and Macmillan, page 47.
- Tozer, A.W. (1976). *Charles Wesley on Sanctification A Biographical and Theological Study*, Grand Rapids, Zonderum Publishing House, page 172.
- Wesley, J.A. (1990). *Plain Account of Christian Perfections*, Benin Rhema Publication Ministry, page 13.