

RAW MATERIAL

STUDIES IN BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

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Chapter 21

CONCLUSION

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The Bible would present an interesting collection of texts for the study of sexuality even if it was not Scripture for so many people. But because the Bible is Canon for the church (and synagogue) the study of these texts takes on a special intensity. It is difficult to keep a clear head when reading texts which could impact your own life and the lives of those close to you in profound ways. These studies are offered as an attempt to clarify some texts and themes which may disturb many modern readers of the Bible. Repeatedly these studies show that no topic can be understood by itself, but rather each interacts with other topics, sometimes in surprising ways.

The studies in this book do not cover all aspects of Biblical sexuality, though most topics are given some points of contact in these studies, and a few broad themes have emerged. The broadest theme is the heavy emphasis on sexual reproduction in the Hebrew Scriptures and the strong movement away from this value and goal in the New Testament. In the New Testament sexuality is about obedience, purity and the sexual bond between husband and wife . . . or even between a prostitute and her client. Sexuality is not about reproduction. Though sexual activity may result in a pregnancy, that is not its goal, and is not really necessary in the New Testament statements on sexuality. The genealogies have run their course and lost their value. Genesis 1:27 retains its value to declare the image of God and the value of monogamy, but Genesis 1:28 is neglected and ignored in the New Testament.

As with reproduction, issues of gender change dramatically between the testaments. In the law of Moses the greatest differences between laws specific to males and laws specific to females are in the sexual laws. The New Testament reduces this disparity, refusing polygamy, divorce and remarriage to men with almost the same law as to women. Men may retain the sole right of initiating divorce in Matthew and Luke (but not Mark), but their remarriage is equally forbidden. In non-sexual roles likewise the disparity between the genders almost disappears. Galatians 3:28 has a broader application in the New Testament than allowed by most churches to this day. At the very least we cannot assume that gendered language used for church offices therefore restricts such offices by gender. Phoebe the deacon (not deaconess) shattered the “husband of one wife” barrier before the Pastoral Epistles had ever been written.

Celibacy, marginally treated in the Hebrew Scriptures, comes to have a positive value in the

New Testament. It may not be good for a man to be alone (Gen 2:18), but some men, and some women, seem called to this life. Reproduction is no longer a goal, for there is much work to be done in evangelism. But the few texts which speak of celibacy also make clear that such a lifestyle is for only a few members of the church. The New Testament never recommends or permits the church to impose a life of celibacy on its members.

The Old Testament purity laws seem to provide the context for much of Old Testament legal texts on sexual issues, and the church's application of purity laws specific to sexual issues need not be treated differently than the application of purity laws without sexual content. Christian communities could (should?) treat all purity laws with a common hermeneutic to decide their application, but I doubt that will happen any time soon.

Most important, if a church claims to recognize the Scriptures as Canon, then the community and its members are well served if they openly examine the ways in which they use, and do not use that authority. Any daring church member can find important inconsistencies in how a church applies the Canon. What happens next cannot be decided by a work of exegesis such as this. Final decisions must be lived out, and therefore be livable, in the world of flesh and blood.

May the Lord have mercy on us all.