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**What Makes  
Sex So Special?**



Hope for Europe

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He who troubles  
his own house will  
inherit the wind.  
Proverbs 11,29



# What Makes Sex So Special?!

Thomas K. Johnson

## The Question: What's So Different about Sex?

*"Thou shalt not commit adultery."*  
Exodus 20:14

"Why *shouldn't* sex be treated like any other activity? Why should we consider it moral to play tennis with somebody we don't love but immoral to have sex with somebody we don't love? Why should we consider it moral to eat lunch with somebody of the same sex but immoral to have sex with that same person? Why should we be permitted to go to a movie purely for pleasure but not have sex purely for pleasure? What's so different about sex that it requires such special rules?"<sup>2</sup>

To be fair to Olen and Barry, editors of the book in which this declaration occurs, we must notice that they are attempting to articulate the ideas embodied in the so-called Sexual Revolution of the late twentieth century. They may not fully agree with these ideas, but they have nicely summarized some very common opinions and questions of our time. People are asking, "Why should we think traditional sexual ethics are anything but arbitrary, irrational taboos?" Someone else will

add, "Didn't modern contraception set us free from all this crazy nonsense about keeping sex within marriage?" A third voice might say, "If you think your God wants to keep sex inside marriage, it shows that your God is not very nice or has a bad sense of humor. Does your God just want to take all the fun out of life?"

Questions of this type are extremely important to many people, and important questions deserve honest, thoughtful answers. As a Christian I believe that our truly BIG questions are answered by the Bible. This means that in regard to understanding our sexuality, we should look for answers that are informed by the Bible. However, before jumping to answers, it may be wise to ask a counter-question – really a question about the questions. This counter-question should be as follows:

Observers of modern secularism point out that, because of secularization, people are often left with a reductively naturalistic interpretation and experience of life. The "naturalistic" part of this refers to thinking and talking as if all that really exists is that

which is natural, material, or physical. The “reductive” part of this phrase refers to the way in which a naturalistic worldview tends to be “reductive” or to reduce our understanding of our own life experience. If all that exists is what is natural or physical, the only experiences one expects to have will be physical experiences. The Sexual Revolution was closely tied to the development of secularism.<sup>3</sup> The Sexual Revolution proclaimed sexual freedom; however, wasn’t the real result quite different – a reduction of sex to an empty, shallow physical experience? The best support for this counter-question or critique of the Sexual Revolution comes from reading the writers and philosophers who were supporters of secularism and the Sexual Revolution.

One of the most articulate philosophical supporters of the Sexual Revolution was Alan H. Goldman, especially his article “Plain Sex.”<sup>4</sup> Goldman pointedly rejects any “means-end” analysis of sex; that is, he rejects any understanding of sex that connects sexual activity to another purpose, whether “reproduction, the expression of love, simple communication or interpersonal awareness.” To understand sex properly, he claims, it must be “plain sex” – without other associations. Sexual desire is nothing more than desire for contact with another person’s body. Goldman thinks false views of sexual morality arise from the silly idea that sex is properly something more than physical contact, whether love, communication, or whatever.

I am not the only person who thinks Goldman put the wrong title on his essay. If sex is what he thought it is, a better title might be “Empty Sex” or “Sub-Human Sex.” Because Goldman is a naturalist, his understanding and experience of life are dramatically reduced. He has a reductive understanding of sexuality, meaning his understanding and experience of sex is reduced to much less than sex was meant to be. His philosophy would support what many call sexual freedom, but the cost of this freedom is astonishingly high: the loss of everything human about sex. I find this price far too high. Might there really be something so different about sex that it requires special rules?

The secularist loss of an understanding of sexuality is also evident in the writings of Jean Paul Sartre.<sup>5</sup> He wrestled with how to create meaning in a meaningless world. According to Sartre, if God does not exist, there can be no “essence” of human life that comes before the “existence” of particular people. This means there is no proper pattern or scheme of life that people should follow or that gives meaning to life; we are forced to choose freely how we want to live. In the realm of sexuality, this means it is impossible to say that monogamy is better than polygamy, polyandry, or constantly changing relationships. We are condemned to freedom. However, this does not close the topic. In his novel *Nausea*, he shows that people use love and sex as a way of searching for meaning in life, though

this effort is not always successful. For Sartre knows that love and sex can easily become meaningless, manipulative, or boring if meaning is not brought into the relationship.

The terminology of Sartre is entirely different from that of Goldman, reflecting different philosophical traditions. However, their overall perspectives are remarkably similar regarding sexuality. They agree that sexuality has no necessary meaning or distinctive content that would lead to particular moral rules governing sexual relationships. They also agree that there is no fixed pattern for responsible sexual activity, whether heterosexual monogamy, homosexuality, polygamy, or continuous fluctuation. In this way, they would both support the Sexual Revolution and reject any traditional Christian perspective on sexuality. I am left wondering if the quest for sexual freedom has cost us a large part of our humanness.

Recently I was moved to tears by a “reality show” on a German television station. Young unmarried couples with children were offered paternity tests to see if the mother’s current partner was the biological father of the woman’s child or children. A young mother was “sure” her current partner was the father, though she acknowledged it could possibly be either of two men, given the week of conception. On live television, the couple received the report from a genetics laboratory that her current partner was *not* the biological father.

The tears they shed were not just the result of the foolish choices of imma-

ture people. Their foolishness and immaturity were supported by a culture that says sex should be treated like any other activity, not much different from having lunch with someone. Their lives embodied a message we hear all around, in schools, in books, and in the media. Might we be ready to receive some wisdom from the past and from on high? Is there no better way?

## The Answer: What Is So Different about Sex!

The Bible gives profound answers to the question of what is so different about sex that it requires special moral rules. I would explain those answers in these terms: Sex can best be described as an “interpersonal sacrament” which should properly occur within marriage, a “creation order”, because there is a close correspondence between the meaning of the interpersonal sacrament and the creation order. The biblical commandments about sexuality are not arbitrary rules from a fun-hating deity; they are designed to protect our humanness. This perspective leads to a much richer understanding and experience of the closest human relationships. This is a very substantial alternative to the reductive naturalism that says that sex is only about physical contact. This alternative says that there is a created pattern or “essence” of human life, and following this pattern is one of the steps that gives us meaning in everyday life.

How is having sex with someone different from having lunch with that person? Briefly stated in other words, sex requires special rules because God created us in such a way that marriage and sex fit together in a particular way. This is what we see in the pages of the Bible and in everyday experience. A crucial biblical text is Genesis 2:15–25.

*“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’*

*“The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’*

*“Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field.*

*“But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.*

*“The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called “woman,” For she was taken out of man.’*

*“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*

*“The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”<sup>6</sup>*

We are told in this text describing the origins of the human race that a man will “be united to his wife,” or as our older translations read, “a man will cleave to his wife.” The Hebrew word translated “cleave,” “dabaq,” is a very interesting way of describing the sexual embrace, for it brings together two meanings of the same word. On the one hand, this word means to cling physically to something. This word is used when a person’s tongue clings to the roof of his or her mouth (Psalm 137:6) or when a man’s hand clings to his sword in battle (2 Samuel 23:10). On the other hand, this word is used to describe tight bonds of loyalty and affection. During a time of intense uncertainty and fear, King David’s army was described as clinging to him (2 Samuel 20:2). Clearly, this word is describing deep, heartfelt commitments of loyalty and affection that endured through good and bad times.

In Genesis 2, it is not immediately obvious if this word refers to Adam and Eve physically clinging to each other or emotionally bonding to each other. Nevertheless, this is not a question

that needs a simple either/or answer, especially if, as I think, we are reading sacramental language. In relation to God, we should understand a sacrament to be a symbolic action instituted by God that serves as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace between God and His people. A sacrament confirms both His grace to us and our faithful loyalty to Him. Sacramental language has a distinctive feature; because of the close association between the symbolic action and the meaning of the symbol, the *names* of the action and the *meaning* of the action are freely mixed and transferred. In the Old Testament, the term “circumcision” could refer either to the symbolic action or to the covenant relation symbolized by this action. Something similar happens in the New Testament regarding Holy Communion and Baptism. (Standard biblical examples are Genesis 17:10; Matthew 26:28; and Titus 3:5.)<sup>7</sup>

When Adam and Eve were clinging to each other, this was *not* a sign and seal of their relationship with God. However, on a human, interpersonal level, it was a sacramental action signing and sealing a covenantal bond. Their “clinging” to each other was both the sexual embrace and the bonded relationship symbolized and confirmed by the sexual embrace. In this sense, Protestants have historically called sexual intercourse a “holy sacrament” of the covenant of marriage.<sup>8</sup> Stated differently, more psychologically, sexual intercourse communicates much of the marriage covenant and vow in a nonverbal and sym-

bolic manner. Because of the way we were created, sex is one of our strongest forms of nonverbal communication; sex is a promise of affection and loyalty, not only to each other but also to the children who may result from the relationship. The physical union is a sign of a more comprehensive union, including spiritual, emotional, and social aspects of life. This is what makes sex so different from casually having lunch or coffee with someone. Sex communicates promises of a very significant nature, whether or not the couple is aware of it. It is foolish to try to separate sex from the process of bonding inside a marriage or from the children who may be conceived through that bonding.

If sex is a sacrament of marriage, obviously one must ask, “What is marriage?” Is it merely a worthless document from a useless government office? Our answer to this question today can easily be prejudiced by our tendency to think that only physical objects can truly be real. Since marriage is not a physical object that one can touch, some tend to think it is not real or a real thing. Without thinking, a person may be comparing marriage to something like a coffee cup, a window, or a streetlight. This is a serious mistake that influences how we act. Moreover, unfortunately, our English translation of the commandment “you shall not commit adultery” does not immediately correct this mistake. However, the Dutch (*niet echtbreken*) and German (*nicht ehebrechen*) translations are a little better, since both of these

Bible translations refer to not breaking a marriage. This way of talking has a significant advantage, since it says more clearly that a marriage is something real that can be broken, though obviously the way in which a marriage can be broken is quite different from how one breaks a cup or a window.

So what is marriage, this thing we must be careful not to break? One of the best descriptions is a “creation order.” This means it is a relational structure given by God in creating us that serves our good as well as God’s various purposes. This way of describing marriage invites a comparison with other God-given structures we call creation orders, such important realities as work, government, and worship, through which God organizes our lives. It also means that marriage is not exactly something that we create; it is something that already exists, with some defined rules and boundaries, before we ever enter into it. By our foolishness and sin we can break a particular marriage, but marriage will continue to be a common part of human societies because it is a normal and normative part of God’s creation order.

The term “creation order” tends to lead us to view marriage somewhat from the outside, as a social structure. We should also emphasize that marriage is a lifetime covenant between a man and a woman, and this covenant is publicly declared so everyone can know that a particular man and a particular woman stand in this lifetime covenant.<sup>9</sup> This is the internal content of marriage:

a man and a woman solemnly covenant to become life partners. Those who think marriage is just a piece of paper have confused one part of the public declaration of the marriage (the legal part) with the covenantal reality that is being publicly declared. In the original creation, the only thing that was not good was that Adam was alone. God corrected this deficiency by creating Eve and by creating marriage. Marriage is a creation order with a lifetime covenant as its internal content; sex is an interpersonal sacrament that confirms and communicates this covenant in a nonverbal way.

Though it may be hard for us to think this way, marriage truly is something real, even though it is not a physical object. In addition, it has some enduring characteristics that we cannot change; it is monogamous, heterosexual, exclusive, and it lasts a lifetime. These characteristics are given by creation, with the result that many people and cultures find these enduring characteristics to be “natural;” the biblical descriptions of marriage and sexuality confirm and clarify these characteristics given in creation. Marriage can be compared to the law of gravity, which is also very real, though we cannot see it directly. However, the likelihood of people getting hurt by ignoring the reality of marriage is greater than the likelihood of getting hurt by trying to ignore the law of gravity. Most of us just accept the law of gravity, whereas some try to ignore the reality of marriage.



Once we grasp something of the close connection between sex and marriage, it makes sense to ask about the purposes of sex and marriage together. This really should be one question, rather than separating the purpose of sex from the purpose of marriage. Of course, many people think of the purpose of sex as being pleasure, emotional release, or bonding, while they see the purpose of marriage as primarily in the realm of financial/legal questions. This separates matters that more properly belong together.

One of the first purposes of marriage is companionship. Adam, Eve, and most of the rest of us find it is simply not good to spend our lives alone. Most of us need a life partner. Our work, our toys, and our pets are simply not enough. Companionship is the primary thing we should both seek and seek to preserve in marriage.<sup>10</sup> Closely tied to this is one of the purposes of sex, that of total-person bonding. We read that Adam and Eve were naked but not ashamed. Their comfortable physical intimacy contributed to a very wide-ranging unity of their lives.

People today are quite aware that sex can be very pleasurable. What needs to be added to that is an understanding that the pleasure of sex is different from other types of pleasure. Some pleasures can be enjoyed almost as much alone as with other people. This is obviously very different from normal sex. Other pleasurable activities, whether a sporting event, a concert, or a movie, are

normally shared with other people. Nevertheless, in most of these pleasures, the people with whom we share the pleasure are all together relating to something else, the sport, music, or film, which gives them the shared experience. Our attention, emotionally and mentally, is focused on the sport, music, or whatever brings us together. However, sex is different in the important sense that it is the other person who gives pleasure, not some other entity or event. Our attention is totally focused on the other person. Sex is much more clearly an interpersonal event or experience than are our other normal forms of pleasure. The pleasure, sometimes intense, could be seen as a gift of God specially added to the companionship, a distinct type of pleasure that helps confirm and strengthen the covenantal ties between a husband and wife.

In the wisdom of God, the context in which children should normally come into the world is this context of bonded, loyal companionship and love. The companionship that men and women need forms the right situation for children to get a start in life. We should not hesitate to say that child-bearing/child raising is one of the purposes of marriage and sex. This is not to say that a childless marriage is not a proper marriage. And this is also not to say that sex always has to be intended to lead to pregnancy or even to be open to pregnancy. Nevertheless, it is very unwise for us to separate sex, marriage, and childbearing. There are natural

connections among marriage, sex, and childbearing in the biblical descriptions of people and in our lives today.

As I write these words, I am riding on a train from Berlin, Germany, to Prague, Czech Republic. Three or four rows behind me is a group of young German men who have been into their beer since mid-morning. If I understand their drunken songs and slurred speech correctly, they are headed to Prague to enjoy the strip show discos and “sex professionals.” While listening to them, I have been reminded of the wry comment in Proverbs 6:26, “The prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread.” Very likely, these men will have some interesting sexual experiences this weekend. But they probably have not thought much about what they are missing or how they are being treated (or the probability that the prostitutes are being held as slaves by highly organized criminals). They are missing the

experiences that help bond a man and woman into lifetime partners, and the habits they are developing will make it more difficult for them to experience such satisfying bonding in the future. Very likely, they do not appreciate the way the prostitutes reduce them to something as exchangeable and disposable as a piece of bread; nor that hiring a prostitute is dehumanizing in a way that it is not dehumanizing to hire a taxi driver or a dentist.

The ancient words written in stone, “You shall not commit adultery,” do not call us to a joyless, boring existence. By giving us a firm “No” and some unchanging rules, God calls us to a richer, higher, more human type of life. Why can’t we acknowledge that sex is different from other activities – different in a way that requires special rules?

## Annotation Anmerkungen

<sup>1</sup> Much of the content of this essay was originally published in a series of articles on the Ten Commandments written for the World Reformed Fellowship ([www.WRFnet.org](http://www.WRFnet.org)) under the title “Written in Stone” in 2002 and 2003. This content is reused with gratitude.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Olen and Vincent Barry, *Applying Ethics: A Text with Readings*, fourth edition, (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of secularism is dependent on Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America & Russia* (InterVarsity Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Contained in Olen and Barry, pp. 86–97.

<sup>5</sup> This interpretation of Jean Paul Sartre is dependent on C. Stephen Evans, *Existentialism: The Philosophy of Despair & the Quest for Hope* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1984.)

<sup>6</sup>Quotation from the New International Version.

<sup>7</sup>See also Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 27, for the way this theme was taught in historic Reformation theology.

<sup>8</sup>Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909; Baker Book House, 1979), p. 276.

<sup>9</sup>A covenant is both similar to and different from a contract. A contract is usually very specific, well-defined, and limited in scope, such as a contract to rent an apartment or do a particular job. In contrast, a covenant may not be so well-defined, since we simply cannot know what may come our way in a lifetime. On the other hand, a covenant is also unlimited, since it involves one's total life, not something as limited as committing to a job or apartment.

<sup>10</sup>We must be careful not to think that marriage (or sex) will provide total meaning or salvation, thereby solving all our problems. As an atheist, Sartre recognized that sex and marriage do not provide meaning; meaning must be consciously brought to the relationship. Christians should say even more clearly than did Sartre that sex and marriage do not provide meaning; they have meaning if received as a way in which we can glorify and enjoy God in gratitude.

## The Author

### Über den Autor



Thomas K. Johnson received his Ph.D. in ethics from the University of Iowa (1987) after being a research scholar at Eberhard Karls Universität (Tübingen). He has an ACPE from Missouri Baptist Hospital (St. Louis, 1981), a Master of Divinity (*Magna Cum Laude*) from Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, 1981), and a BA (*Cum Laude*) from Hope College (Michigan, 1977). He is a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in America and planted Hope Evangelical Church (PCA) in Iowa. Johnson was adjunct professor of philosophy at Kirkwood College 1991–1994; visiting professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, 1994–1996. (UHU is a dissident, anti-Communist university, forced into exile by the Belarusian dictator in 2004.) Since 1996 he and his wife have lived in Prague, Czech Republic, where he taught philosophy at Anglo-American University (4 years) and at Charles University (8½ years). He is MBS Professor of Apologetics and Ethics (2003) and Vice President for Research (2007). His wife, Leslie P. Johnson, is director of the Christian International School of Prague.

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