

Why are we Christians so guarded, even fearful, about sex(uality)?

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I've taught Human Sexuality for a long time. I've learned to be real and up front; be personal, but not a jerk. And, with this "Mosaic" generation, to be authentic even more than my doling out knowledge, or at times, advice.

When topics get really real, however, and people are confronted with questions and situations that call for more than being authentic, I've found the atmosphere changes. If I ask as Christians we consider ethical or moral questions, many become hesitant to engage; and even more hesitant to voice an opinion. Such has been the case since I can remember. So, why are Christians—even *young hip ones*—still so awkward and hesitant to explore the gritty elements of sexuality? Aren't we more *open* now to discussing just about *anything*? Even on Facebook?

I think behind the perennial hesitation is this fact: conservative Christians don't want to appear as liberals; and liberal Christians don't want to appear as if they've thrown the Bible in the dustbin. When it comes to sexuality, the very term "sex" seems to want to unravel normed theology.

I mean by that, the idea that if you examine some aspects of the topic, question some of the thinking that's gone on in Christian history, that somehow you'll start to pull on *that loose thread*—and it will tear apart all semblances of our theology, even our personal restraints.

We see sex, still, as the unruly child; unwilling to be reined in. Some even see it as "the Force" that—if we're not careful—will control us, and push us into its Dark Side.

It's probably because the Church has long made sexuality the über-symbol of sin, and along with that symbol, pictured sexuality as never on the right side of an OK equation. Instead of understanding it, we've reified it: a force we need to battle, and ready ourselves with "God's armor" to defend against. "If we're not careful, sexuality will drag you and me into its gutter."

I don't think this is God's view of our sexuality. In fact, I'm quite sure it isn't that at all!

Of course you *know* this, deep down. You *know* that our sexuality was a gift; a gift to procreate, and much more: "The gift that keeps on giving!"

Then let's be real here, and start to correct some of the misperceptions!

Our sex isn't just for procreation. Those that have taken this stance in the Church resist the *other* truth, that our sexuality is very much a part of our *animus*, our *being*; and without our sexuality we might as well be that dead doorknob! Sexual energy is part of the *animating principle*, the great *breath of life* given to us by our Creator.

And no, Eve didn't tempt Adam *sexually!* That's a pre-Augustinian and erroneous deduction, a tired old canard that even made its way into Renaissance art, blaming the woman in the process for all ills henceforth.¹ Just look at Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel interpretation of "*The Fall.*" It makes one wonder what Eve was doing besides reaching for the "apple" . . .



Truth is, we need to consider **Augustine** (354–430 AD) as the one setting into motion a version of sexuality that is *involuntary* in character; that is, *beyond human control* and *unwieldy*. Really? He writes in his *Confessions*,

. . . "the members [organs] which were expressly created for this purpose [procreation] will not obey the direction of the will, but lust has to be waited for to set these members in motion, as if with legal right over them."²

Let's quickly remember that Augustine is converting to catholic Christianity, attempting monasticism and chastity after a very sexually-driven life (a life he writes torturously and brazenly about in his opus *Confessions*.) He baptizes in 386 AD. But time and again he returns to the same questions in his writings: *Is this my body, or not? Why can't I tame [sexual] my desire? Why am I not able to rein in my own penis?* (He states, "*Sometimes it refuses to act when the mind wills, while often it acts against my will!*")³ Now, am sure that even though Augustine is using a male model here, by other of his evidence, he was certain that women were also having similar experiences with arousals and the body.

The point is, Augustine constructs a body typology which, fallen from grace and now marked by the proclivity to sin, begets a sexuality that is fraught with—the term he uses—*concupiscence*, to emphasize the sin seasoning it. It translates to *lustful sex*; and there's nothing pretty about that.

This idea of *lustful sex* molted into one of Christianity's orthodox creeds, disputed as it was early in the process.⁴ To Augustine, eventually the catholic Church and Christendom thereafter, we are "marked in the flesh with our fallen-ness." And *that* is interpreted as our sexual lust and indomitable sexuality. To many Christians, it all stems from Adam and Eve's primordial disobedience. Augustine's conclusion is thus that we were never born innocent; we were begotten with some deeply, essentially flawed elements in us. To him, we were a "*massa peccati*," or a *mass of sin*.

¹ Paul uses this argument to limit women's roles in the Church, their status, and rights. See 1 Tim 2:12–14.

² Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 10. The language is a translation from the Latin by Sarah Ruden, *Confessions. A New Translation* (2017).

³ *Confessions*, Book 10

⁴ Pelagius, a monk contemporary to Augustine and his followers ("Pelagians"), refuted these notions. These countered that humans were born innocent, but live in a world stained by Adam and Eve's primordial disobedience. Humans were not fraught with sinfulness from the beginning. Pelagians believed humans shaped their own lives. Much of their thoughts were resurrected with the Reformation, and included into Protestant theology.

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In our 21st Century, how do we respond to this erroneous, ancient sexual crucible? How do we get past the Augustinian idea that our sexuality is this *monster*; that behind sex there is *always* lustful sin; and behind *that*, a sexual *craving* that usurps *our will*?

First, we must rescue our sexuality from this idea that we inherit an *innately corrupt* sexuality.

God doesn't give bad gifts (Matt 7:1, Matt 5:45, 1 Chron 16:11–12; James 1:7). God's creations are all *good* (Gen 1:31). I presume to be right when underscoring this also means "literal Adam and literal Eve's" *human bodies*. Sexuality is fundamental to who we are, what we are. Sexuality is a good gift from God to bind us to each other; to procreate; and *more than that*—to hormonally help regulate our bodies and give us *pleasure*.

Second, anything can be turned from good into the not-good.

We have God-given will and decision-making capacity from the git-go. We aren't forced by the body, or the mind, in no way whatsoever to *do wrong*. We *slide* into wrongdoing when we aren't caring to *do good*. Yes, it is a human predicament; but for the Christian, there can be an abiding sense of companionship with God's spirit, the Comforter, who helps direct our actions if we allow it. No temptation is beyond our resolve (1 Cor 10:13).

Third—and this is where **science** helps us understand—our sexuality is crucial to our overall well-being and satisfaction.

Hormones do their work to move us into full procreational productivity! Beyond that, they help harmonize and regulate body functions, provide essentials for male and female body development, and hold up our health in amazing ways. Moreover, the *sexy* part is important: We *could* have wound up with *no orgasms*, yet God ingeniously made our *sexual response* overwhelmingly pleasurable. It's the icing on the cake, or the cherry on top (er, er, don't elucidate or imagine). And for what reason? We have a built-in signaling system that uses *pleasure* to create *wellbeing* and *mood happiness*. Orgasms release the wonderful "cuddle hormone" *oxytocin* and other chemicals, which together help us experience great pleasure. God wants us to be *pleasurably happy, satisfied*, of course in all the good ways.

Certainly, my hope is that the take-aways here are obvious: We need to regard our sexuality as a *good gift*, part of who we were made to be. And with that, and our *free will*, comes the need to understand it, to guide it well, *but not fear it*. We should de-escalate the war between it and our historical assumptions about its evil. In its stead, we must fashion a view of our sexuality as a malleable and hospitable part of our selves, not as an inward enemy. We do that by *understanding it, learning about it, not fearing it; directing its energy* as we ask God to guide us in its application, as much as we ask God to guide the rest of our lives.

If we do these things, we enter a peaceful accord with God's good gift, and we lift the veil of evil Augustine threw on it.

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