

IN THE FLESH

Part one: Sex and the Bible

In the first of a three-part series to promote discussion on questions about sex and God, **Carla Grosch-Miller** invites us to take a fresh look at what the Bible really says

My third year in ministerial training, biblical ethics class. The lecturer asks: What are biblical sexual ethics? A clean-cut, earnest chap raises his hand: Christian family values. Sex is for marriage. Having read the Bible cover to cover and in depth during my first year of training, I shot my hand into the air: What about levirate marriage, polygamy, concubinage, and Paul's promotion of celibacy?

In Reformed churches, the Bible discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is the primary authority for faith and conduct. The biblical witness on sexual matters is complex. We believe that the 66 books of the Bible are "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), not God-dictated. They came to us through particular human beings whose understanding and perceptions were shaped by their culture. Understanding as much as we can about those cultures helps us to make sense of what we read.

What does the Bible have to say about sex? And what are the cultural assumptions that shaped the texts?

Here is a list of the scriptures that relate to sex, grouped by category. The only thing missing is the prophets' use of marriage as a metaphor for the relationship between God and God's people.

- Creation and family stories: Genesis 1-4; Genesis 16; Genesis 18; Genesis 38
- The rules: Exodus 20:1-17; Exodus 22:16-18; in the Holiness Codes – Leviticus chapters 12, 15, 18-20; Deuteronomy 20:13-18; 21:10-21; 22:5,13-30; 23:1-2,10-11, 17-18; 24: 1-5; 25:11
- The horrors: Judges 19-21; Genesis 34; Genesis 19 (see also Ezekiel 16:49-50 and Jude 1:5-7); 2 Samuel 13
- The blessings: Deuteronomy 24:5; Ecclesiastes 9:7-9; Song of Songs; Psalm 127; Proverbs 31:10-31
- The apostolic writings: Matthew 1:1-18; Matthew 5:27-32; Matthew 19:1-12; Luke 16:18; John 8: 2-11; Acts 15;

Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 5- 7; Galatians 3:27-29; Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:1-4:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; 1 Timothy 1:8-11; 2:8-15; Titus 2:1-15; Hebrews 13:1-6; 1 Peter 3:1-9.

Choose a category and give them a read. Ask yourself: What are the writer's assumptions about gender and about sex (the two topics are inextricably intertwined)? What might life have been like back then?

Here is some information that might help: In the ancient Near East, fertile women needed to have five live births in order for the tribe to survive. The majority of infants born did not survive first birthday. Women were sexual and domestic property, not individuals with the power to say yay or nay to marriage or sex. In these patriarchal cultures, men owned the women, the children, the animals and the fields; they needed to be able to sow their seed and sire offspring to survive in the face of challenges from other tribes. Polygamy, levirate marriage, concubinage and rules that protected their child-bearing property are part and parcel of biblical sexual ethics. Men could readily divorce women for being barren; women could not procure a divorce for any reason.

Old Testament sexual ethics were driven by the pressing need for procreation, the protection of property, and maintaining social order and national identity via "purity" rules, eg the Leviticus Holiness Codes, in a land populated with competing tribes with their own gods. We read the prohibition of adultery in the 10 Commandments and apply our contemporary understanding: What is wrong is the betrayal of trust and the breaking of covenant. In the Bible the prohibition against adultery is instead about protecting the male's property rights and parentage. This does not diminish the importance of the prohibition, for which Christian tradition has developed a different rationale; it does however alert us to the fact that biblical writers had a different set of assumptions and concerns than we do.

Turning to the New Testament, did Jesus overturn earlier biblical sexual ethics? How did the early Christian community understand the old rules? There



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Illustration: Chris Andrews

‘Women were sexual and domestic property’

isn't much sex in the New Testament. Jesus saves an adulterous woman from stoning, elevates women by taking them out of the category of disposable property by making divorce impermissible, and equates lust with adultery. Professor Countryman concludes that the four Gospels have different ways of presenting the subject of “purity” that the Holiness Codes address but there is one point on which they all agree: For Christians, physical “purity” no longer determined their relationship with God. What made a person a Christian was love of God and neighbour, not eating kosher food or following the Levitical Code.

Paul, convinced the end time was at hand, counselled celibacy. The great circumcision debate in Acts was resolved in favour of dropping the legal requirements but for a prohibition against contact with blood, strangled food, food offered to idols, and pornicea: A word

variously interpreted to mean idolatry or fornication. It is impossible to ascertain exactly what was meant.

Serious study of biblical sexual ethics may leave us scratching our heads. We would not dream of making our daughter marry her rapist or requiring a widow to marry her dead husband's brother, nor do we condone rape as a fruit of warfare. Procreation is no longer the pressing need. We don't think of women as sexual property and honour their right of consent. How do we discern what we read? What Godly values guide our thinking? ●

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Next month: How did sexual ethics evolve in the Christian tradition in the generations after Jesus?