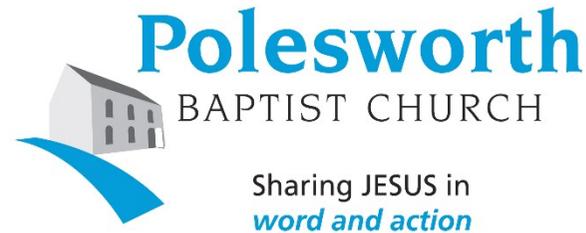


living in marriage they are missionaries of God's blessing to the world.

Reflecting on Christian sexual morality for today invites the risk of disagreement, and being a causing distress. Yet it is something we should reflect on for over and over the scripture makes it clear that the sexually immoral will not enter eternal life. That fact alone merits our engaging in an honest reflection on what is beneficial sexual morality.

Nick



July 26th 2020
Reflection Two
on Acts 15:1-35:
Living God's Mission
and sexual morality.

In Acts we see the early Church is emerging from a chrysalis of Judaism that had a clear picture of Godly sexual morality and thus of immorality. But as the Church spread into the Roman Empire and was joined by Gentile believers the Church met new attitudes to sexual morality. We get a big glimpse into what this meant in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and also his letter to Rome. The Corinthians for example, who rather misunderstood resurrection also misunderstood Christian freedom under grace. The idea that Christians are free from the Law of Moses was interpreted to mean that they could do as they like, especially with their bodies. So the Corinthians suggest to Paul that what was acceptable is permissible. The body, they were suggesting, is made for its appetites, as for eating food, so for sexual activity - let the drives of the body have their way.

Paul rejected that idea, saying that while everything is permissible not everything is beneficial. The body is of eternal significance, the whole person is made for union with Christ, in this world and in the new creation. Sexual activity unites two people in one flesh [Gen 2:24] so, as in their example of prostitution, a body which belongs to Christ has been dishonourably linked with another. The body, he writes, is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord and the Lord for the body. Do you not know, he asks - for they should - that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body. [c6:12 onwards]

Paul's thinking comes from an entirely different viewpoint than the Corinthians. Though you are free to do anything, Christian freedom is not for permission to sin but for the prevention of sin. Barclay in his commentary makes the point well. When people say I shall do what I like what they mean is that they will indulge in a habit of or passion which holds them in its grip - the passion is in control of the person, not the person in control of the passion. He sees these things from God's view-point, they see them from a worldly perspective.

Sadly the Corinthians perspective is now closer to the views of the world. A world which promotes sexual activity as almost the central expression of what it is to be human. All that counts is love, which has itself become a god inviting our

worship, personal safety and mutual consent. Within that frame-work anything goes. This view has crept into the church, with the effect that churches have become reluctant to speak on what it is to be sexually moral as a Christian. But Paul proposes that Christians can never do what they like but what Christ likes – a scriptural view that runs throughout the New Testament – because Christ bought us at the cost of his life. So what then might be said to day?

Firstly the Council in Jerusalem and Paul in Corinthians are living under an urgent expectation of Christ's coming soon. So their views on sexual morality are something of a crisis ethic. We live as a people still waiting for the second coming. Further the Lord in His earthly ministry did not teach on every circumstance of human relationship. Like Paul our sense of what is pleasing to God must flow from understanding of Godly principles from scripture as a whole, under the guiding wisdom of the Holy Spirit. And in general terms Paul advocates marriage, saying it is better to marry than to sin, as it's not wise to live in ways which expose people to temptation. Within these caveats let's consider three key relationships where may need to re-refresh our sense of beneficial sexual morality [in all this we are speaking of heterosexual relationships]

Firstly, because it is the position we all start from and where most of us by reason of being widowed, deserted, or divorced or needing special care are likely to end up, being single. Paul stresses the value of singleness, and I think given today's society the church should do the same, for Christian marriage has been deeply undermined.

Being married may be God's preferred life style, and is certainly God's preferred context for sexual activity – hence Paul advises the unmarried and widows that 'if they cannot control themselves, they should marry for it is better to marry than to burn with passion' and preferably a Christian [1 Corinthians 7:9 and 39, but at the same time he values a celibate singleness [v8] Let's remember that our Lord Jesus was single. He sanctified singleness as a way wholly honourable to God, provided it is lived in celibacy, for sex is meant for marriage and marriage for sex. So then let us do all we can support and affirm those who for whatever reason are single.

A second consideration is of married couples who were non-believers, but then one of the couple becomes a Christian. This can still happen today. And Paul advises [1 Corinthians 7:12 and following] that the Christian spouse should not break the marriage but recognise that they sanctify their unbelieving partner and their children and indeed as Peter also recognises [1 Peter 3:1] may be the means by which the unbelieving partner is brought to faith. The believer's mission field is their home.

But today we are just as likely if not even more likely to meet couples living

together who are neither married nor Christians. Here I go with Paul, what business is it of ours to judge those outside the church? .. God will judge those outside.' But what if one of them becomes a Christian, what might we then say? You may think I am wrong but I suggest that Paul's advice, from 1 Corinthians 7 regarding married couples where one is an unbeliever and one is a believer applies. Hopefully the believing partner would not only seek in God's grace to bring their partner to faith but also to marriage [with or without coming to faith] always remembering that marriage however desirable is not to be forced. This is an adjustment for our cultural times, but I hope one that the Lord would support.

Let us come finally to the situation of two people who are each Christian, who decide they want to live together in an intimacy of love, even parenting children but without becoming married. I think here that the matter is simple but challenging. When Christian couples choose not to marry they are saying to themselves, to the church, to the watching nations around us and to God that marriage doesn't matter! I think that is a step beyond the boundary of beneficial sexual morality.

In Ephesians 5:22 plus Paul further reflects on Christian marriage, all in the context of living a life worthy of the calling Christians have received [4:1] Here, Paul sees marriage as a human symbol of the relationship between Christ and His church, which he grounds in the Genesis declaration that a man should leave his father and mother to be united with a wife, the two becoming one flesh. This is the basis of all Christian marriage. Paul describes all this as a mystery. In scripture a mystery is something which has been hidden in the past but which has now been brought to light in the coming of Christ and His gospel. Mystery, as has been said, is therefore not a secret to keep but a truth to tell.

What was once hidden with regard to human marriage, that it refers to Christ and the church, is now publicly revealed: human marriage points to the God-man and his girl. Marriage is a covenant of love between a man and woman modelled on the covenant of love between Christ and His Church. And so marriage, again as has been said elsewhere forms, establishes and protects the most fundamental human relationship. More fundamental than father and mother. More fundamental than the resulting children, precious as they are. More fundamental than a best friend. God made humans, in this sense, "to be joined" to one other, as a sign of His covenantal joining together with us – already known to us in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

When two Christians enter living together through the gateway of a wedding they honour God. In committing to the pilgrimage of marriage they set their relationship on a strong Godly basis. Together as one flesh they make a Godly witness to family, friends and the watching world around them. In becoming and