

Gay Sexual Ethics, Part II
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In a previous article I wrote about a shocker: Christians have a problem with sexual desire. I know that caught you off guard, but it was meant to surprise “traditional” Christians even more. There is the persistent and false assumption that the historical Christian ideal praises sexual desire within marriage. Not true for the early church. Not even true for Martin Luther, father of six children and passionate defender of marriage. Luther wrote, “Intercourse is never without Sin; but God excuses it by his grace because the estate of marriage is his work.” Sexual desire is bad. That view has its roots in 1st century Judaism, even though many Jews of Jesus’s day lauded sexual desire. Greek Stoic and Neo-Platonic philosophy only reinforced this negativity towards sexual desire. The question is, given that Protestant Christians today of all stripes do not uphold historical Christian views on sexual desire, what should we do about sex?

The most common conservative Protestant response is to cherry pick biblical texts that support their views on marriage. Celibacy gets no attention. Then, ignoring the evidence from the early church, they cite the command in Genesis 1 to “be fruitful and multiply” as evidence for the blessing of sexual desire. Conservative Christians then have the gall to proclaim that their views are the only authentically Christian position. Gay Christians could just as easily do the same thing, and many do. Queer readings of the Bible proliferate. The *Queer Bible Commentary* and *Take Back the Word* are two excellent collections that do just that. The problem with queer readings of scripture is that most straight Christians I know find them deeply unsatisfying. For those not used to such methods of literary criticism, these post-structuralist readings seem out of place and inauthentic. While I would argue that they are just as authentic as any other reading, I am deeply sympathetic to the fact that queer interpretations often do not sell to straight audiences. Thankfully, there is another approach.

In 2005, I decided to come out of the closet in my final sermon as an intern at Wapping Community Church in South Windsor, CT. Looking through the Bible, the best text I could find that spoke to my experience was a lament of Jeremiah. I wanted to convey the level of self-loathing that is so characteristic when someone comes out. Jeremiah nailed it:

Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, ‘A child is born to you, a son,’ making him very glad. Let that man be like the cities that the LORD overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, because he did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great. Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?

When I shared the passage and the accompanying sermon with one of my colleagues, she replied, "You're not seriously going to preach this, are you? There has to be more good news in your sermon." My colleague was right, of course. It did not make a very good sermon. But it did convey a key point too often lost in debates over scripture. How you characterize desire, and gay sexual desire in particular, has major implications beyond sex. When gays and lesbians disproportionately kill themselves for the discrimination against who they are, the stakes are changed. Sex and sexual desire are about justice as much as sex.

Once you acknowledge that the biblical ethic of sexual desire is not relevant to our current context, it opens up the possibility of using other ethical guidelines to talk about sex. We do not share first century assumptions about the body, desire, marriage, procreation, or sex itself. I know of no Christian who honestly advocates that we return to a sex ethic of the first century. Unlike in those times, relationships today are based on love, mutuality, and are in a context where intimacy can happen without the risk of pregnancy. We are in desperate need of new ways of thinking through a faithful approach to sex. The most convincing contemporary Christian treatment of sexual ethics that I have read is Margaret Farley's *Just Love*. Farley argues that justice should be the key concept in healthy, Christian relationships. That means not harming the other person physically or emotionally. It means free consent of both parties and mutuality. Honesty, commitment, equality, and finally social justice round out Farley's criteria for Christian sexual ethics.

Farley's approach has big implications for gay sexual ethics. As my coming out sermon showed, gays suffer tremendously for our sexual desire. We are told our sexual desire is bad, sinful, and we hate ourselves for it. The most just and loving thing to do is to jettison the first century conception of sexual desire and focus on justice and love instead. Once we say that gay sexual desire is good, we can begin to focus on being better in relationships with others. What if we took Farley seriously? What if the focus in gay sex was on honesty, mutuality, and seeking fruitful relationships, of any duration? Gay men, and young gay men in particular, can be shockingly cruel to one another. Gay sexual ethics matter and Christianity, properly interpreted, can have a lot of important things to say.