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Third Draft of an Unofficial Document**

**Celebrations and Blessings for Covenants, Associations and Other  
Relationships  
Introduction**

**Part 1 of a 6 piece document set**

# 1

Celebrations and Blessings  
for  
Covenants, Associations and Other Relationships

## INTRODUCTION

Early in 1983, the Rt. Rev. William B. Swing, Bishop of California, authorized the Diocesan Commission on Liturgical Renewal to consider what liturgical response might be appropriate to same-sex couples seeking the blessing of the Church on their commitment to each other.

During March of that year, news of a proposed "gay wedding", to be held at an Episcopal church in San Francisco, reached the attention of the Bishop and the public. The issue became more intensive after the Bishop had forbidden use of the church for the purpose of either a "wedding" or a blessing of the Union. The priest of the parish involved suggested that the Bishop set up a special commission to consider the general issues. In response, Bishop Swing enlarged the scope of the work already assigned to the Commission on Liturgical Renewal.

In earlier discussions, the Commission explored the judicious adaptation and use of the form suggested for "The Blessing of a Home" in the Book of Occasional Services. There was a clear implication of blessing a relationship which had achieved sufficient stability to create a home and seek a blessing upon that place.

It should be noted that there is no canonical objection to blessing gay couples. One of our number reminded us of the old rule for the guidance of visiting clergy (especially bishops): "If they hold up anything before you, bless it."

As the work of the Commission proceeded, it became evident that such a liturgical celebration begged the question of whether the relationship itself could be blessed. Without in any way belittling the usefulness of the Blessing of the Home, it became increasingly apparent that there was a yearning for something which went further.

Was this a "gay marriage"? It was not difficult for members of the Commission to agree that many sincere single-sex couples wanted a relationship and a commitment as strong as a heterosexual marriage. However, it is clear that "marriage" is defined in law, canons and the prayer book as a form of union between a male and a female.

It also became clear that any recommendation was likely to be offensive to committed partisans of either stripe. Opponents of any affirmation of a same-sex relationship would oppose any form suggested. Strong advocates of the propriety of gay men and lesbian women marrying would be disappointed if anything less than a "marriage service" were proposed.

The Episcopal Church is not alone in attempting to grapple with this problem. We hope that some of our work may be of use to the wider church. In our research, we particularly noted the work of the Unitarian Church in such blessings and work done (covertly) by Roman Catholic liturgists.

To people in other parts of the United States, our response may seem somewhat avant garde. The West Coast has become in recent years the cutting edge of change in many areas, and it is precisely because we live in California that we have chosen a

complex response to what is a very complex and rapidly changing social context. We live in a culture where a large number of relationships that were not feasible in earlier times are now so.

As people interested in good liturgy, we take the point of view that, since liturgical forms are going to be put into use, they might as well be well-drafted forms. We believe that the forms which follow commend themselves as appropriate liturgy for blessing a relationship which is not marriage.

Clearly, these forms are "unofficial," and likely to remain so. They are suggested for use only in dioceses where the bishop or other ecclesiastical authority takes no exception, or actively encourages their use. They will be used only by clergy in sympathy with the pastoral needs of those to whom they apply.

#### The Celebration of a Relationship

It will be seen that the first group of rites covers a number of growing relationships, by no means all of which are likely to be of a sexual nature. In addition, some of the relationships we have considered are limited, with little potential for growth.

An interesting result of the Commission's work has been to suggest that there is room for blessing a non-marital relationship other than one between same-sex couples. Among those with pastoral needs already identified are the following:

1. Relationships which, for economic reasons, are not leading to civil marriage. Typical of such a relationship would be a couple, otherwise free to marry, whose marriage would terminate a pension or social security

payment. It could be stated that such persons are free to marry, but simply do not choose to do so.

2. Growing and important relationships which are not ready for a permanent commitment. In our society today, as in many other social groupings, there are couples who choose to live together with a commitment which is not yet permanent, although it may later be so. There are other relationships, short of cohabitation, running the gamut between "going steady" to long-term friendships between mature adults who, for whatever reason, choose or are forced to live apart.

There is a difficulty in drawing the dividing line. We do not believe that a couple in their early teens should decide to "go steady", and rush to a church to bless this arrangement. Having developed a form for the Preparation for a Permanent Relationship, we trust to pastoral discretion in its use.

3. Other important relationships, such as a spiritual friendship; a relationship between teacher and student; a communal relationship based upon shared prayer and religious observance; ongoing spiritual direction; and a business partnership. These rites do not contemplate any sexual relationships between the parties.

We recognize that there are others in permanent heterosexual relationships where at least one person is not legally free to marry. Although the circumstances may arouse considerable sympathy, and call for pastoral understanding, we did not feel that such situations fell within the scope of our project.

### The Celebration and Blessing of a Covenant in Love

The Commission reviewed many different liturgical forms in more or less clandestine use throughout the Church. Regardless of what canon law states, and whatever attitude the bishops take, many Episcopal clergy are participating in, and officiating at, liturgical blessings of same-sex couples seeking to make vows of mutual fidelity, whether or not they were described as "gay weddings." A survey of printed rites disclosed that these liturgical events are principally based on the model of the "Blessing of a Marriage."

One interesting result of our research was to find that there is a strong division of opinion among gay couples as to desiring a blessing of a long-term commitment or an adaptation of the marriage service.

As our work progressed, it became apparent that a consensus was building to develop a rite that, while it clearly parallels much of the marriage rite, is in many ways quite distinct. "The Celebration and Blessing of a Covenant in Love" is the result of our work. We hope that we have been able to meet the needs of varying styles through the use of rubrics, additional directions, and other notes.

We recognize that our recommendations, which are to offer liturgical forms to bless various relationships, some of which has been contrary to the Church's teaching for centuries, will be controversial. In preparing these liturgical forms, we have followed these principles:

1. The rites should be used to bless important and continuing relationships. They are not intended for brief or trivial relationships, however desirable. The emphasis is, as appropriate, placed on permanence and life-long commitment.
2. Before officiating, a cleric should enter into a program of counseling appropriate to the rite and the relationship it upholds.
3. These rites presuppose that the principal parties are within the community of faith, and that their use of the pertinent rite is an expression of their faith.
4. The choices involved in the establishment and maintenance of the relationship being blessed should have been made in pursuit of a Christian ethic of life. The relationship partakes of such marks as:
  - a. The parties have come together because they are attracted by a sense that each is to the other an evidence of God's grace, rather than because they are trying to evade, avoid or escape some other relationship or situation.
  - b. The parties choose to make a public affirmation--in faith--of their relationship.
  - c. The relationship is intended for, and functions as, a creative influence in Church and community. There is no intent to harm or denigrate any other relationship.
  - d. The parties are faithful to each other.

Our Commission comprises lay persons, priests and deacons of widely varying age and background. At the outset of our work we viewed the project with emotions varying from enthusiasm to loyal resignation. In common we had a concern for good liturgy and open minds. It has been apparent that each member has made significant contributions to the development of the liturgical forms, and decisions have usually been made by unanimous agreement. We earnestly hope that those who deplore our project will at least respect our sincerity in undertaking it. We believe that those Christian men and women whose needs are fulfilled by these rites will consider our efforts worthy of them.



**Part 2 of a 6 piece document set**

# 2.

①

Concerning the Service

A Christian covenant in love is a solemn and public covenant between two persons in the presence of God. It is required that one, at least, of them must be a baptized Christian; that the ceremony be attested by at least two witnesses; and that the persons be free by law and custom to commit themselves to this exclusive relationship.

This service is designed for persons intending a life-long commitment, and for whom a civil marriage is not, or cannot, be chosen. As a result, this rite hallows a relationship in the vision of the Church without creating a relationship or status under civil law.

The persons shall be counselled as to the nature, meaning, and purpose of this covenant. Counsel should aid in clarifying the suitability of a covenant, identify problems in the relationship, identify legal issues, and suggest opportunities for continued growth.

The persons may have sponsors, normally from the parish community, to provide support and assistance and share their spiritual pilgrimage in making the covenant; normally the sponsors are the witnesses at the celebration.

A priest or a bishop normally presides at the Celebration and Blessing of a Covenant in Love, because such ministers alone have the function of pronouncing the solemn blessing, and of celebrating the Holy Eucharist.

In the opening exhortation (at the symbol of N.N.), the full names of the persons are declared. Subsequently, only their Christian names are used.

THE CELEBRATION AND  
BLESSING OF A COVENANT IN LOVE

- \* At the time appointed, the persons desiring to make a life-long commitment of love to each other, with their witnesses, assemble in the church or some other appropriate place.
- \* A hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung, or instrumental music may be played.
- \* Then the Celebrant, facing the People and the two persons, addresses the congregation and says:

Dear Friends in Christ: We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the covenant of these persons in a life-long commitment of love. The calling to live in a bond and covenant of love is a gift from God in whose image we are created and by whom we are called to love, to reason, to work and play, and to live in harmony with God and one another. In celebrating this covenant, we are reminded of our highest vocation: to love God and to love our neighbor.

N.N. and N.N. are here to bear witness to their love for each other, and their intention to embody Christ's love in their relationship. Each has found the other to be a gift of God in the midst of a broken and sinful world. We are now called to share in their happiness, and to witness this exchange of vows because we believe God, who is love and truth, sees into their hearts and accepts the offering they are making.

The union of two persons in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy, for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity, and for the greater manifestation of love in the lives of all whom they encounter. Therefore this commitment is to be undertaken and affirmed seriously, reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with God's intention for us.

The Declaration of Consent

\* The Celebrant addresses the two persons, saying

N. and N.: You have come here so that God may confirm and strengthen your love in the presence of this company. Therefore I ask you to declare the firm intention of your covenant. Do you believe God has called you to live together in love?

> We do.

Will you remain faithful to each other, never allowing any other relationship to come before the one you are now to affirm?

> We will.

Will you nurture each other's ability to grow in maturity and wisdom within this relationship?

> We will.

Will you do all in your power to make your life together a witness to the love of God in the world?

> We will.

\* The Celebrant then addresses each person separately, saying

N, will you take N. to live together in a covenant in love as long as you both shall live?

\* Each answers

> I will.

\* The Celebrant then addresses the congregation, saying

Will all of you witnessing these promises do all in your power to uphold these two persons in their commitment?

\* The People answer

> We will.

\*

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

\* The Celebrant then says to the People

The Lord be with you.

> And also with you.

Let us pray.

O gracious and everloving God, you have created us in your image: Hear our prayers for N. and N., who now celebrate before you their covenant in love; increase their faith in you and in each other; give them grace to keep the promises they make that their life together be a witness to your love; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

\* Then one or more of the following passages from Holy Scripture is read. If there is to be a Communion, a passage from the Gospel always concludes the Readings.

\* At the conclusion of each Reading, the Reader says

The Word of the Lord.

> Thanks be to God.

\* Between the Readings, a Psalm, hymn, or anthem may be sung or said.

\* When a passage from the Gospel is to be read, all stand, and the Deacon or Minister appointed says

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to \_\_\_\_\_.

> Glory to you, Lord Christ.

\* After the Gospel, the Reader says

The Gospel of the Lord.

> Praise to you, Lord Christ.

\* A homily or other response to the Readings follows.

THE SOLEMN VOWS

- \* The two persons face each other, and in turn each takes the right hand of the other and says a solemn vow.

Form One

In the Name of God and before this community, I, N., take you, N., to be my beloved companion in life, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

Form Two

In the name of God, I, N., take you, N., to be my companion; and I solemnly promise, here with our witnesses and God: to stand beside and with you always; in times of celebration and times of sadness; in times of pleasure and times of anger; in times of pain and times of health; I will live with you and love you; as long as we both shall live.

Form Three

- \* After suitable counseling and in agreement with the celebrant, the two persons may recite vows composed by themselves or by others, which embody the intention to live without reservations in a life-long relationship.
- \* They loose their hands.

- \* The Celebrant may ask God's blessing on the tangible symbol(s) (such as ring(s)) of the covenant and relationship. The following is a suitable blessing.

Bless, O Lord, these \_\_\_\_\_ to be signs of the vows by which these persons have bound themselves to each other in love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

- \* The giver then delivers the symbol to the other in an appropriate manner and says

N., I give you this \_\_\_\_\_ as a symbol of my vow: receive and treasure it as a pledge of my love for you. With all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (or in the Name of God).

(6)

\* Then the Celebrant joins the right hands of the two persons and says

Now that N. and N. have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands (and the giving and receiving of \_\_\_\_\_), I declare that they are united to one another in a solemn covenant in love, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Let us all uphold them in this Covenant.

\* The People respond

> Amen.

### The Prayers

\* All standing, the Celebrant says

Let us pray together in the words our Savior taught us.

\* People and Celebrant together

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy Name.  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those  
who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power, and the glory,  
for ever and ever. Amen.

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your Name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those  
who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial,  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours,  
now and forever. Amen.

\* If Communion is to follow, the Lord's Prayer may be omitted here.

\* The Deacon or other person appointed reads the following prayers, to which the People respond. After suitable counseling, and with the consent of the Celebrant, other appropriate words may be used.

Let us pray.

Eternal God, creator and preserver of all life, author of salvation, and giver of all grace: Look with favor upon the world you have made, and for which your Son gave his life, and especially upon these persons whom you have united in love. Amen.

Give them wisdom and devotion in the ordering of their common life, that each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy. Amen.

Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will, and their spirits in your Spirit, that they may grow in love and peace with you and one another all the days of their life. Amen.

Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours. Amen.

Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair. Amen.

Give them calm strength and patient wisdom in bringing up the children you give them, that they may know you, love you, and serve you. Amen.

Enhance their relationship with joy and beauty, that their family and friends may rejoice with them. Amen.

Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others. Amen.

Grant that all those who have witnessed these vows may find their own lives strengthened and their loyalties confirmed. Amen.

Grant that the bonds of our common humanity, by which all your children are united one to another, and the living to the dead, may be so transformed by your grace, that your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven; where, O Father, with your Son and the Holy Spirit, you live and reign in perfect unity and love, now and forever. Amen.



THE SOLEMN BLESSING OF THE COVENANT

- \* The People remain standing. The two persons kneel, and the Priest says one of the following prayers

Most gracious God, we give you thanks for your tender love in sending Jesus Christ to come among us, to be born of a human mother, and to make the way of the cross to be the way of life. By the power of your Holy Spirit, pour out the abundance of your blessing upon these persons, now joined together in a solemn covenant in love. Defend them from every enemy. Lead them into all peace. Let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts, a mantle about their shoulders, and a crown upon their foreheads. Bless them in their work and in their companionship; in their sleeping and in their waking; in their joys and in their sorrows; in their life and in their death. Finally, in your mercy, bring them to that table where your saints feast for ever in your heavenly home; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

- \* The couple still kneeling, the Priest adds this blessing

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, bless, preserve, and keep you; the Lord mercifully with his favor look upon you, and fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace; that you may faithfully live together in this life, and in the age to come have life everlasting. Amen.

The Peace

- \* The Celebrant may say to the People

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

> And also with you.

- \* The two persons then greet each other, after which greetings may be exchanged throughout the congregation.
- \* When Communion is not to follow, the couple leaves, followed by their witnesses and the People. A hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung, or instrumental music may be played.

At the Eucharist

- \* The liturgy continues with the Offertory, at which the couple may present the offerings of bread and wine.
- \* For the Proper Preface, the following may be used, or another one suited to the day.

You created us to share in your divine life, and forming us in your image you called us to live in harmony with you and all creation in your Kingdom; through the unity of persons one with another, you teach us that love is our origin, our constant calling, and our fulfillment in heaven.

- \* At the Communion, it is appropriate that the couple receive Communion first, after the Ministers.
- \* In place of the usual postcommunion prayer, the following is said

O God, the giver of all that is true and lovely and gracious: We give you thanks for binding us together in these holy mysteries of the Body and Blood of your Son Jesus Christ. Grant that by your Holy Spirit, N. and N., now joined in a solemn covenant, may become one in heart and soul, live in fidelity and peace, and obtain those eternal joys prepared for all who love you; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

- \* As the party departs, a hymn, Psalm, or anthem may be sung; or instrumental music may be played.

Additional Directions

When both a bishop and a priest are present and officiating, the bishop should pronounce the blessing and preside at the Eucharist.

A deacon, or assisting priest, may deliver the charge, ask for the Declaration of Consent, read the Gospel, and perform other assisting functions at the Eucharist.

On occasion, and as appropriate, instrumental music may be substituted for a hymn or anthem.

Silence may follow any reading.

It is desirable that the Lessons from the Old Testament and the Epistles be read by lay persons.

If there is to be a presentation of either or both persons by family members, or others, it takes place immediately following the declaration of consent. A hymn, psalm, or anthem may follow.

**Part 3 of a 6 piece document set**

# 3

CELEBRATION OF A RELATIONSHIP  
OR ASSOCIATION

This form may be used when two or more persons wish to celebrate, affirm, or renew a commitment or special relationship to one another in the presence of the Christian community. Prayers and readings suitable for a number of such relationships are provided in this rite. The service is especially appropriate to initiate a period of preparation for marriage or some other form of more permanent commitment.

It is essential that the rite and statement of commitment be prepared in advance, in consultation with the Officiant.

This rite takes place normally during a celebration of the Holy Eucharist immediately following the Homily (and Creed) or during the Daily Office at the time of the hymn or anthem which follows the Collects.

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The Officiant, facing the people and the persons celebrating a relationship or association [with their sponsors] addresses them briefly in words such as:

Dear Christian friends: we have come together in the presence of God to celebrate the \_\_\_\_\_ of N. and N. They are undertaking \_\_\_\_\_ and intend \_\_\_\_\_ in the forthcoming time [state aims or purpose in two or three brief sentences].

Do you who witness their affirmation uphold N. and N. in their endeavors?

People: We will. Thanks be to God.

#### THE COMMITMENT

The form of Commitment, worked out in advance, is oral. It includes:

1. Statement of intention and shared responsibility of the persons directly involved;
2. Responsibilities of the immediate families, as appropriate;
3. Ways in which the community will support the relationship; and, when appropriate,
4. The means by which the relationship may be dissolved.

The Officiant adds a prayer, either from the following Propers, or one especially written for the occasion, celebrating and blessing the relationship.

When used with the Eucharist, the service continues with the Prayers of the People and the exchange of the Peace.

When used with the Daily Office, the Peace is then exchanged, and the concluding devotions of Morning or Evening Prayer follow.

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## THE PROPERS

When possible, it is highly desirable that this rite occur during a regular parish liturgy. A suitable Sunday or Feast of the church year may be chosen, on which occasion the Propers of the Day are used, with the appropriate Prayer after the Commitment from below, or one especially written for the occasion. At other times, selections from the following propers may be substituted for those of the day, or other suitable readings may be chosen.

## COLLECT

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with your most gracious favor, and further us with your continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy Name, and finally, by your mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

## PSALMS

1, 8, 19, 34, 78:1-6, 84, 92, 122, 125, 138,  
139:1-17

## READINGS AND PRAYERS

### Business Partnership

Lessons: I Corinthians 3:10-14  
Matthew 6:19-24

Almighty God, you declare your glory and show forth your handiwork in the heavens and on the earth; deliver these your servants from the service of self alone; may they sustain each other in good times and bad; may their dealings with [their employees and] the public be conducted with integrity; give them pride in what they do, and a just return for their efforts; through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

### Communal Fellowship

Lessons: Acts 2:42-47, or Acts 4:32-35  
John 15:1-8

Be present, O Lord, with these your servants, and fill them with your grace. Grant that they may manifest your love to all whose lives they touch. May they grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of you. Strengthen the bonds between them. Guide, comfort, and preserve them in your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### Gay or Lesbian Friendship

Lessons: Ruth 1:8-19a, or I Samuel 17:57-18:5a,  
or Ecclesiasticus 6:5-6, 14-17  
Matthew 5:1-12

Most gracious and loving God, you have created us in your image and made us the temples of your presence: knit together in constant affection N. and N. who come seeking your blessing upon their life of friendship and mutual ministry. Give them courage and devotion, patience and wisdom. Empower them by your spirit to be steadfast in their love for each other and faithful in their witness and service to your world. We ask this in the name of your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

### Preparation for a Permanent Relationship

Lessons: Hosea 2:20-22  
John 15:9-12

Almighty Creator, look with favor upon your servants who have pledged their love to one another. May they always perceive the fullness of your love for them. Help them to walk the way of life together. May they so live and work during this time of preparation, that they may grow in faith and trust of each other, and in the responsibilities which they share; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### Spiritual Direction

Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20-25  
Luke 10:21-24

Almighty Lord God, who called Abraham and Sarah to leave home and journey to an unknown destination: Shepherd these your servants in their pilgrimage of faith; help them to pray as they ought; strengthen them in purity of trust, in holiness of life, and in perfection of joy, and bind them ever more closely to yourself as they grow in the Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### Spiritual Friendship

Lessons: Romans 8:3-12, or Ruth 1:8-19a, or  
Ecclesiasticus 6:5-6, 14-17  
John 15:12-17

O God, from whom all true friendship comes: Grant that these your servants may grow and rejoice in your love through their friendship for each other; fill them with a spirit of generosity and constancy in affection, with patience in correction and frankness; may all whose lives they touch reflect the joy of your heavenly kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### Teacher/Student

Lessons: II Corinthians 3:14-4:5  
Matthew 11:25-30

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom: Enlighten by your Holy Spirit both teacher and learner; help them to grow together in the knowledge of your truth; foster their pursuit of new discovery and sound learning, and grant that they may worship and serve you all the days of their life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### PREFACE

Of the Day, or of the Season

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### ADDITIONAL DIRECTIONS

Support before and after the celebration is important. It is well to identify specific kinds of support within the parish family. Sponsors may be appointed by the priest or community to aid in the formation of the relationship and to represent the community as witnesses and to share in the pilgrimage with those making the commitment.

Counselling or professional advice may be appropriate to clarify the nature and suitability of the particular relationship by identifying concerns and problems in the relationship and the means of continued growth, and, where appropriate, identifying and resolving legal matters.

The time-frame of the celebration needs attention. Here can be identified at what point in the relationship or partnership a celebration or affirmation is appropriate, how long it is to last, and whether or not a final, or lifelong, celebration (such as Marriage) will be appropriate.

The rite is a public affirmation. While not all matters in a particular circumstance are suitable for mention in public rites, counselling should give attention to the text of the service and its setting, to the parish life in which the relationship or partnership occurs, the family life of those concerned, and possible implications for society in general.

In addition to the prayer within the rite, suitable petitions may be added to the Prayers of the People.

It may be appropriate to sign a legal document, or other agreement, either privately or during the public celebration.

At the Offertory, the persons celebrating a relationship may present the bread and wine for the Eucharist, at which they may appropriately receive Communion first, after the ministers.

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**Part 4 of a 6 piece document set**

# 4

CONCERNING THE SERVICE

This service is intended for use with persons

1. Who are fully competent and eligible to be married under the laws of the State, but who, for compelling personal reasons, have elected not to seek married status;
2. Who are not satisfied by the informal and private nature of a common-law relationship;
3. Who desire to bear public witness before the Christian community concerning their intention to establish an enduring and Christian union, and who seek the Church's blessing upon the enterprise;
4. But for whom, absent a valid license from the State, the Prayer Book rite for the Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage is neither appropriate nor canonically available.

The Celebrant of this rite, whether Bishop or Presbyter, acts in a purely pastoral capacity, and not as an officer of the State effecting a legal contract.

BLESSING OF THE UNION OF A WOMAN AND A MAN UNDER SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

=At the time appointed the persons to be joined, with their witnesses, assemble in the church or some appropriate place.

=During their entrance, a hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung, or instrumental music may be played, during which they take their places where they may conveniently hear the reading of Scripture in the Ministry of the Word.

=All standing, the Celebrant says

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

People And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever. Amen.

=In place of the above, from Easter Day through the Day of Pentecost

Celebrant Alleluia. Christ is risen.

People The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

=In Lent and on other penitential occasions

Celebrant Bless the Lord who forgives all our sins.

People His mercy endures for ever.

=The Celebrant may say

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

=As appointed, the hymn "Glory to God in the highest" or some other hymn of praise, or the Kyrie eleison, or the Trisagion may be sung or said.

=The Celebrant says to the people

The Lord be with you.

People And also with you.

Celebrant Let us pray.

=The Celebrant

O gracious and everliving God, you have created us male and female in your image: Look mercifully upon this man and this woman who come seeking your blessing, and assist them with your grace, that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may honor and keep the promises they make to each

other; through Jesus Christ our Savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

=Then one or more of the following passages from Holy Scriptures is read. If there is to be a Communion, a passage from the Gosepl always concludes the Readings.

Genesis 1:26-28 (Male and female he created them)

Song of Solomon 2:10-13; 8:6-7 (Many waters cannot quench love)

Tobit (NEB version) 8:5b-8 (That she and I may grow old together)

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (Love is patient and kind)

Ephesians 3:14-19 (The Father from whom every family is named)

Colossians 3:12-17 (Love binds everything together in harmony)

=Between the Readings, a psalm, hymn, or anthem may be sung or said. An appropriate psalm is Psalm 67.

=When a passage from the Gospel is to be read, all stand, and the Deacon or Minister appointed says

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to\_\_\_\_\_.

People Glory to you, Lord Christ.

Matthew 5:1-10 (The Beatitudes)

Matthew 5:13-16 (You are the light...Let your light so shine)

Matthew 7:21,24-29 (Like a wise man who built his house upon the rock)

Mark 10:6-9,13-16 (They are no longer two but one)

John 15:9-12 (Love one another as I have loved you)

=After the Gospel, the Reader says

The Gospel of the Lord.

People Praise to you, Lord Christ.

=A homily or other response to the Readings may follow.

=After the Gospel (and homily), the woman and the man stand before the Celebrant, who addresses them in these or similar words

N. and N., you have come here today to seek the blessing of God and the Church upon a loving relationship into which you propose to enter. I require, therefore, that you promise, with the help of God, to fulfill the obligations such a relationship involves.

=The Celebrant then addresses the woman, saying

N., do you promise to love N., to comfort him, honor, and keep him, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, to be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?

=The Woman answers I promise, God being my helper.

=The Celebrant now addresses the man, saying

N., do you promise to love N., to comfort her, honor, and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, to be faithful to her so long as you both shall live?

The Man answers I promise, God being my helper.

=The Celebrant then addresses the congregation, saying,

Will you who have witnessed these promises do all in your power to uphold these two persons in their relationship?

People We will.

=The Celebrant causes each of the persons, one after the other, to take the other by the right hand, and to say

In the Name of God, I, N., commit myself to you, N., as a loving companion, through good times and bad, in weakness and in strength, sharing joys and sorrows, while my life shall last.

=The Celebrant may ask God's blessing on a ring or rings, or on some other suitable symbol, as follows

Bless, O Lord, this ring to be a sign of the promises by which N. and N. have committed themselves each to the other; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

=The Giver places the ring on the ring-finger of the other's hand, or presents the token, and says

N., I give you this \_\_\_\_\_ as a symbol of my love and commitment, and with all that I am, and with all that I have, I honor you; in the Name of the Father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit (or, in the Name of God).

=The Celebrant joins the right hands of the man and the woman, and says

Now that N. and N. have pledged themselves each to the other, and have signified this engagement by the joining of hands and the giving and receiving of a ring, I pronounce that they are no longer two, but one flesh, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder.

People Amen.

THE PRAYERS

=All standing, the Celebrant says

Let us pray together in the words our Savior taught us.

People and Celebrant

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy Name,  
thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those  
who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power, and the glory  
for ever and ever. Amen.

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your Name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those  
who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial,  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours,  
now and for ever. Amen.

=The Deacon or other person appointed reads the following prayers, to each of which the People respond, saying, Amen.

Let us pray.

Eternal God, creator and preserver of all life, author of salvation, and giver of all grace: Look with favor upon the world you have made, and for which your Son gave his life, and especially upon this man and this woman whom you make one flesh. Amen.

Give them wisdom and devotion in the ordering of their common life, that each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity,

a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy. Amen.

Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will, and their spirits in your Spirit, that they may grow in love and peace with you and with each other all the days of their life. Amen.

Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours. Amen.

Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair. Amen.

Bestow on them, if it is your will, the gift and heritage of children, and the grace to bring them up to know you, to love you, and to serve you. Amen.

Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others. Amen.

Grant that all persons who have witnessed these promises may find their lives strengthened and their loyalties confirmed. Amen.

Grant that the bonds of our common humanity, by which all your children are united one to another, and the living to the dead, may be so transformed by your grace, that your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven; where, O Father, with your Son and the Holy Spirit, you live and reign in perfect unity, now and for ever. Amen.

#### THE BLESSING OF THE UNION

=The people remain standing. The woman and the man kneel, and the Priest says one of the following prayers

Most gracious God, we give you thanks for your tender love in sending Jesus Christ to come among us, to be born of a human mother, and to make the way of the cross to be the way of life. We thank you, also, for consecrating the union of man and woman in his Name. By the power of your Holy Spirit, pour out the abundance of your blessing upon this man and this woman. Defend them from every enemy. Lead them into all peace. Let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts, a mantle about their shoulders, and a crown upon their foreheads. Bless them in their work and in their companionship; in their sleeping and in their waking; in their joys and in their sorrows; in their life and in their death. Finally, in your mercy, bring them to that table where your saints feast



for ever in your heavenly home; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.  
Amen.

or this

O God, you have so consecrated the union of a woman and a man that in it is represented the spiritual unity between Christ and his Church: Send therefore your blessing upon these your servants, that they may so love, honor, and cherish each other in faithfulness and patience, in wisdom and true godliness, that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

=The man and the woman still kneeling, the Priest adds this blessing

God the Father, God the Son, God	Almighty God keep you strong
the Holy Spirit, bless, preserve,	in love for one another,
and keep you;	that Christ's peace may be
	always with you;

The Lord mercifully with his	God's Spirit strengthen you with
favor look upon you, and	perseverance, patience, and
fill you with all spritual	courage in fulfilling all you
benediction and grace;	have undertaken;

That you may faithfully live	God the Holy and Blessed Trinity
together in this life,	fill you with every blessing,
and in the age to come	and bring you at the last
have life everlasting.	to the heavenly Jerusalem.

Amen.

Amen.

The Peace

=The Celebrant may say to the people

The peace of the Lord be always with you.

People And also with you.

=The woman and the man then greet other, after which greetings may be exchanged throughout the congregation.

=When Communion is not to follow, the couple, with their witnesses and attendants, leave the church.

=A hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung, or instrumental music may be played.

At the Eucharist

=The liturgy continues with the Offertory, at which the newly joined couple may present the offerings of bread and wine.

PREFACE OF TRINITY SUNDAY

=At the Communion, it is appropriate that the newly joined couple receive the Sacrament first, after the ministers.

=In place of the usual postcommunion prayer, the following is said

O God, the giver of all that is true and lovely and gracious: We give you thanks for binding us together in these holy mysteries of the Body and Blood of your Son Jesus Christ. Grant that by your Holy Spirit, N. and N., now joined in a holy union, may become one in heart and soul, live in fidelity and peace, and obtain those eternal joys prepared for all who love you; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

=During the retiring procession a hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung; or instrumental music may be played.

**Part 5 of a 6 piece document set**

#5

The Bible, Change, and Christian Sexual Ethics

by Irene Lawrence, M.Div., Ph.D.

Commission on Liturgical Renewal

Diocese of California

1984

## The Bible, Change, and Christian Sexual Ethics

by Irene Lawrence

This paper is written to suggest some lines of thought for Christians who are wrestling with the issue of a Christian response to the various forms of sexual expression now asking for recognition within the household of faith. The immediate context of this work is the response of the Commission on Liturgical Renewal (Episcopal Diocese of California) to the Bishop's request that it propose some appropriate liturgies for serious Christian relationships other than traditional heterosexual marriage, and thus the issues I address revolve around this concern. This paper looks at some of the ways we can address the issues of Christian sexual behavior.

### The Bible and Christian Practices

Many discussions of Christian sexual ethics assume that there is a more or less agreed upon set of principles (often called "traditional Christian ethics"), based upon Biblical precepts. Both traditionalists and non-traditionalists share this assumption as they either support "traditional" ethics or argue that, for one reason or another, such ethics need to be modified to fit today's world. In this paper, I will examine and reject this assumption; I will argue that there is no single set of principles that can reasonably be called "Christian ethics" on either historical or Biblical grounds, at least in any simplistic sense. Christian ethics has changed over the centuries, and the Bible has been used to support very different versions of Christian ethics.

The sort of sexual ethics that has most claim to the title "traditional Christian ethics" is not exactly what is usually meant by that title now; rather, it is the glorification of celibacy that dominated Christian (and indeed non-Christian Western) thought from roughly the second century after Christ through the Reformation. This attitude is not particularly strong in the Bible and it is not a characteristic of Judaism. It seems to have arisen in the ancient world from various sources and to have struck some sort of responsive note in many sections of serious and thoughtful pagan society. Augustine is often credited with establishing it firmly into Christianity as part of his Neo-Platonic way of analyzing Christianity; that may be partly true, but he could not have succeeded if others had not prepared the ground and if there had not already been a receptive audience for the move--an audience for whom the primacy of celibacy seemed so obvious that it did not need to be argued for. So to that earlier

age, Christian sexual ethics were worked out within the framework of celibacy being best, because celibacy was obviously (to them) the most supernatural type of sexual life, and other carefully defined practices were allowed largely as a concession to the natural part of human beings.

Even traditionalists today, at least in Protestant Christianity, do not usually share that world view. Marriage is the normative type of Christian sexual expression. While celibacy is allowed, and even required in some circumstances (in the absence of marriage, for example), it is not usually considered intrinsically preferable to appropriate sexual expression within marriage. This change also has various sources, and it was established into at least Protestant Christianity with the Reformation. Again, it became so much a part of the general world view--so obvious to everyone--that it did not need to be argued. But now in contemporary society, Christian and non-Christian, traditional marriage is no longer assumed to be the norm by large numbers of people, but no other consensus has yet replaced it.

I have pointed out two rather different systems of Christian sexual ethics--celibacy first and marriage first-- each of which, in its time, was considered simply "Christian ethics." But even within one time period and overall society, different and conflicting systems may exist, each with a claim to be called "Christian ethics." Generally, the system promulgated by those in power is the system we take as normative. Often alternative systems are simply not remembered by history. We can see how this works by looking at nineteenth-century American society, which is close enough to us for some of the alternatives to be visible. The popular view of the nineteenth century, passed on to us by the powerful middle class, includes a rather rigid and puritanical sexual ethics--what is often called "middle class morality," a term as much descriptive as pejorative. Yet there were other groups who practiced, usually out of necessity, other versions of sexual ethics and yet called themselves Christians. For example, the middle class considered marriage virtually impossible to dissolve; once in a great while a husband might divorce a wife for adultery, but that was not particularly approved of.

However, for black slaves in the United States marriage was a luxury not always allowed, and spouses, married or not, might be split up and sold separately and new "marriages" then entered upon. Black women were frequently used by their masters for personal pleasure and both men and women were used for breeding purposes. Even after Emancipation, the ups and downs of many blacks' lives--and indeed of many poor whites' lives--prevented the sort of tidiness and constancy that the more fortunate considered intrinsic to Christian morality. A literary example of this is Mr. Doolittle, Eliza's father, in Pygmalion, but Shaw was

not presenting this as a case of Christian morality. Many slaves, however, as well as many other groups over the years, did consider themselves Christian even if they did not live by the standards of the standard-makers.

The point is that there have been many systems of sexual ethics over the years claiming to be Christian. I will give two more quick examples, from this century: at the turn of the century both contraception and divorce were virtually forbidden to Christians as unthinkable. Among Protestants (and Roman Catholics in practice, although not in theory) contraception was allowed and even encouraged by mid-century, and divorce has almost completed the same process. The significant issue is that the changes are not seen as the abandonment of Christian principles, but as the truer expression of Christianity under our circumstances.

Thus the mere fact that a particular practice is "new" or formerly disapproved of (such as contraception) does not automatically make it unacceptable to Christians. On the other hand, it ought not to be automatically acceptable, either, so we need to consider what criteria a Christian should use in making such a decision. The obvious answer, of course, is the teachings of the Bible. It is a correct answer, too, but it is not as helpful an answer as we might hope, because followers of all the systems sketched above have used the Bible to justify their choices. It is a disconcerting fact of human nature and Christian history that almost every reader of the Bible finds in it just what they expect to find--what they "know" is "right."

The celibates' Bible recommends making oneself "a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12) and notes that "it is well for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor 7:1). The Bible of advocates of marriage points out that God arranged matters so that "a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). The slave owners' Bible tells slaves to obey their masters (Eph 6:5, Col 3:22). The slaves' Bible talked of the Exodus and the Jubilee Year (Lev 25:10). The anti-contraceptionists' Bible says, "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 8:17). There are clear statements against any divorce (Mark 10:9), statements allowing divorce "on the ground of unchastity" (Mt 5:27), and statements allowing unbelievers to separate from believers (1 Cor 7:15). Those opposed to homosexual practices quote Rom 1:27 that such people receive "in their own persons the due penalty for their error"; those who would allow homosexual practices quote the love of David and Jonathan, "passing the love of women" (2 Samuel 1:26). Those who advocate very distinct roles in marriage for women and men quote Eph 5:22-28, that wives should be subject to their husbands, their heads, and husbands should love their wives; feminists quote that to

those who have put on Christ, there is neither male nor female (Gal 3:28). And so on.

Of course I have not gone into these Biblical statements in any depth, and it can be argued that there are extenuating circumstances in some of them. For example, Paul's views on marriage are colored by the fact that he expects the almost immediate end of the age, and it does not seem to him the best time to get involved in the attention to another person that marriage requires. Similarly, his remarks about "shameless" homosexual acts may be primarily aimed at pagan religious practices involving homosexuality; thus his condemnation may be of idolatry rather than homosexuality. But even after all allowances are made, it is clear that there are differences in ethical expectations within the Bible itself. There is also approval of, or at least no repudiation of, practices that we as Christians today find abhorrent. Besides the practice of slavery that I have already mentioned, there was the custom of a man marrying his brother's widow if his brother died childless. Jesus did not speak against the practice when a trick question involving it was thrown at him (Lk 20:27-40). Further, there are practices clearly condemned that we find acceptable. I have mentioned divorce; there is also the practice of lending money to one's "brother" (i.e., compatriot) at interest (Ex 22:25, Lev 25:36--although one may so lend to a foreigner: Dt 23:20.) Thus it does not seem possible to use the Bible in a simple way as a guide to conduct.

One other problem in using the Bible as the source of rules for conduct needs to be mentioned. Even in those cases in which most if not all Christians have agreed that a particular rule is applicable to Christian conduct--for example, "You shall not kill"--the rule has been interpreted very differently by different groups. No Christian group that I know of has taken the command not to kill completely literally; exceptions have always been made. Different groups have made different exceptions: for example, for enemies in war, for enemies in a "just" war only, for persons threatening one's life, for persons threatening one's property, for fetuses, for pre-viable fetuses, for embryos, for potential embryos, for animals, for animals needed for food only, for animals used in research of benefit to humans, for insects, for vegetables. (Even vegetarians must kill plants to eat, unless they eat only windfalls!) And even if "kill" is interpreted more restrictively, as, for example, to "kill violently," the same problems remain.

Thus, even if it were clear just which Biblical rules ought to be followed, it is not clear just how they should be followed. It is true that persons in a limited group such as a profession--say, nursing--can agree on a set of rules for the profession and can even agree to some extent about what those rules mean (although



both rules and interpretation have to be revised every so often as circumstances change). But even for such groups, professional rules of ethics apply successfully to only a limited part of their lives; all general rules such as "do not ever act in such a way as to bring discredit upon the profession" run into the same interpretation problems that I have described for "You shall not kill." And, for better or for worse, most Christians do not consider themselves "professional" Christians in this limited sense; they feel that their Christian ethics should cover all of their lives, not just some special Christian part of it.

Since, therefore, we cannot depend on "what Christians have always done" or on the Bible as a rule book, we need to find another way to deal with Christian ethics, preferably on different Biblical bases. But to do that, we will have to abandon the attempt to build Christian sexual ethics on the basis of "who did what and with which and to whom."

### The Gospel and Christian Practice

I will now make some suggestions about how, in the light of all the Biblical and historical differences I have mentioned, we can still use the Bible as our guide to living. Although I will suggest some rules Christians should follow, I am not going to present them as direct quotes from the Bible or as God's unchanging laws. Although I will, in effect, dispense with some of the Bible's contents, I will do so knowingly and according to a principle: I suggest we take Paul as our model.

The problem is that much of the Bible, including some of the New Testament, does advocate a rule-based system of behavior on believers. Unfortunately the advocated rules differ from author to author and from book to book. However, in examining the New Testament we discover that the strongly rule-oriented sections tend to be written later in the New Testament period, when the church was in the process of becoming an institution, while the earliest New Testament documents that have been preserved, the early writings of Paul, are very critical of living by the Law. Rule-oriented Christians certainly existed from the very beginning of Christianity; the very first Christians were law-abiding Jews. Paul himself originally persecuted gentile-influenced Christianity because he saw it as a law-breaking sect of Judaism. But after his conversion, he came to a different understanding of the place of Law in human life. When he came to make rules for his churches--and he did, frequently and with vehemence--they are ad hoc rules, formed for a particular situation.

Paul's discussion of Law and Gospel is found primarily in the first few chapters of his letter to the Romans and in his letter

to the Galatians; it is stated in the contemporary terms of Jews (Law keepers) and gentiles (not Law keepers), but the dynamics of his argument apply to any rule-oriented group. Briefly summarized, his argument is that everyone is a sinner, but that people sin in two distinct ways: either they do bad things, in which case everyone recognizes them as sinners, or they keep the Law and become guilty of the worse sin of self-righteousness, which Paul calls "boasting." The point is that both those who trust in the Law and those who do not come up empty-handed before God--and that is the Good News. Paul does not object to anyone keeping the Law if they want to, but such people must not think that they are earning any credits for their trouble. Instead, Paul says, people are accepted by God just because God freely accepts them, since no one can possibly deserve it, no matter how many or rigorous the laws they keep. Paul is not saying that it does not matter what one does; on the contrary, he has some rather strong opinions about what constitutes proper Christian behavior in this or that case. But he would argue that proper Christian behavior comes as response to God's acceptance, not as a means of earning it. That is, if one consistently does bad things, it raises serious questions about one's response to God's acceptance.

Thus Paul considers Christian ethics to be the Christian's response to what God is doing in one's life. This is, unfortunately, far less clear cut than following rules, even difficult rules. We have to trust that God will show us where we go wrong as we interpret the things that happen in our lives, and in so doing, we must balance between scrupulosity and carelessness. Further, the one thing that is certain is that we will every so often be wrong and be shown to be wrong, and we will not like this. We prefer to think that other people are the real sinners, and that we are merely human. This is self-righteousness, and since our need to be self-righteous may be another name for original sin, in many ways keeping even difficult rules is easier--and much more satisfying to the unregenerate part of all of us--than is Paul's program.

But we should note that Paul did not think he invented this understanding of things; it seems to be congruent with Jesus's practice of associating with "sinners" and telling parables such as the Workers in the Vineyard (Mt 20:1-16) or the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14). And it is especially congruent with the Summary of the Law, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"--a "rule" only in form, as it is contentless. Traditionally, the "love" in this statement is known as agape, not romantic love; it does not concern itself with feelings about the loved one, but with seeking what is good for the loved one. The whole effort of Christian ethics, sexual and otherwise, is working out the implications of that kind of love (agape) in our lives.

In any case, this is a difficult and ambiguous way of living, and works best with small groups of very dedicated people. The opportunities for rationalization and self-delusion are obvious. And it is hard to give up trying for what is certainly "right" according to the rules, and to settle for the much fuzzier lesser of two evils. Paul's churches may have been composed of such dedicated people, but as time went on, the churches became more established and institutional--and one almost universal characteristic of human institutions is that they have rules for their members. The Christian church is no exception, and thus we have in the later Pauline documents such as Colossians and Ephesians and even more so in the still later Pastoral Letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) a growing understanding of the Christian life as both institutional and rule-oriented in a more rigid way.

Certainly from that time to this the church has emphasized rules as guidelines for Christian living and will undoubtedly continue to do so. This is probably not harmful if we understand that the rules are not in and of themselves God's laws, nor are the rules even the laws of the Medes and Persians which may not be altered (Esther), and as long as we recognize that from time to time they must be altered. We do not wish to return to the time when it was one's Christian duty to return a runaway slave.

### Some Specific Suggestions

I am not going to offer a complete system of Christian sexual ethics in the late twentieth century, but I have some suggestions about areas that should be of concern to Christians that I think are often neglected in ethical discussions, especially those that concern themselves with who may do what to whom. These concerns are interrelated, of course, but for convenience I have separated them into the three categories of respect for persons, honesty, and care in the use of power. These are all areas that need examining as we try to put content into the Summary of the Law in our lives. These issues apply to all relationships, no matter what sex the participants.

Respect for persons is really another way of talking about love (agape) in action, but I think it is helpful to distinguish it from the other forms of love in action (honesty and care in the use of power) that I am concerned with here. Respect for persons emphasizes the need to be sensitive to the other person; its practice prevents the Christian, for example, from using honesty as a cloak of self-righteousness ("I said I wasn't ready for a commitment from the beginning; why are you upset?"). Its practice eliminates seduction from a Christian's repertory, where seduction means the use of psychological force or over-persuasion, the attempt to remove the partner's autonomy. (Courtship, on the

other hand, is the attempt to establish a relationship between two persons who retain their autonomy throughout.) And practicing respect for persons it eliminates anything that hurts one's partner, either physically or mentally.

People, even lovers, are going to hurt and be hurt by each other at times; remember that we are all sinners. But the frequency could be cut down a little if Christians thought about the other person. For example, serious diseases that resist treatment (herpes and AIDS, for example) call for restraint on the part of the sufferer to avoid hurting another by passing on a serious disease. (Lesser illnesses, however we may define lesser, call primarily for honesty.) For another example, contraceptive responsibility (if applicable) should be mutually assumed and mutually agreed upon. And respecting persons means respecting their speech; a "no" always means "no"; speakers who really mean "yes" must say so.

Some people have the problem of being able to function sexually only in a destructive or violent context. Others tend to fall into other sorts of destructive relationships where sex may not be the major factor, as when two people are inappropriately dependent on each other. In the past, the church has been a little too quick to try to maintain even a destructive relationship if it is heterosexual marriage and to try to break it up if it is something else. I am not here specifying what behaviors are harmful, only saying that both physically and psychologically destructive behaviors, whatever they may be, cannot be expressions of Christian love. It seems clear that Christians have a responsibility to prevent someone from harming another person, but it is not as clear whether a Christian may harm herself or himself. We probably have a parallel here with alcoholism or other forms of substance abuse; there is no completely satisfactory model for understanding the problem. Although certainly a Christian ought not to be self-destructive, in the present state of our knowledge we will probably often have to leave open the question of how much, in any given case, is under the destructive person's control and encourage such persons to deal with the issue one step at a time, while at the same time protecting others as much as possible.

Honesty, the second criterion, is one of the most difficult virtues for every one, given our tendency to rationalization and self-righteousness. However, no discussion of Christian behavior can ignore it. And not all cases of honesty vs. dishonesty are difficult; in many of them we know we are lying, but, we convince ourselves, it is justified in this particular case. I do not say that one should never lie, even in sexual matters; I am not out to impose any absolute laws, for the reasons given above. But I do think that when one does choose to lie, it should be in the

realization that one is treading on very thin ice indeed. There is a simple logical reason for not lying in a relationship: a relationship built on lies, whether deliberate ones or self-delusions, cannot be not a real relationship but is a fictional one to whatever extent the lies replace reality.

Often people want to cling to their illusions, which presents a difficult pastoral problem, but at least in theory no Christian can ethically lead another into falsehood. And lovers are always making promises--sometimes even formal ones, as in marriage vows. Quaint as it may seem, a Christian is obligated to keep such promises--or at the very least to make clear to one's partner that one can no longer keep the original rules of the game. It has been said that half the love songs in the world are promises of eternal love and the other half are laments over broken promises of eternal fidelity. And the worst of the laments are from people who thought they understood their relationship, only to discover, say when it breaks up, that they were in love with a fantasy while the real person was off doing something else.

If we apply only the criterion of honesty, even a "one-night stand" is not necessarily un-Christian in and of itself, if the people involved know what they are doing and if the normal accompanying lies ("of course I love you and certainly I'll respect you in the morning") are absent. However, honesty is only one suggested criterion, and I doubt that many extremely casual relationships meet the other criteria.

Care in the use of power applies to all persons in relationships of unbalanced power, that is, when one of the persons involved has some sort of socially recognized power or authority over the other. One example is adults (particularly parents and other close relatives) and children. Christian adults are not justified in entering upon a sexual relationship with a child, no matter how much the child may "want it." If it is "true love," it will wait for the child to grow up. If it is incest or pedophilia, it cannot be acted upon because of the harm it will do the child. I am not here legislating what ages define "child" or "adult," but certainly any young person who is a dependent in the technical sense is off limits.

The point is that Christians cannot allow the exploitation of the vulnerable, who may not have the strength or freedom to refuse advances, or even to recognize them at the time. Children are not the only victims; people in professional relationships are also especially vulnerable. Strictly speaking, a profession is distinguished from other sorts of work by requiring its members to live up to a certain ethical standards established by the profession. These standards usually include regulating the relationships between the professionals and their clients. A

professional relationship is by its very nature one of unbalanced power; the professional is an expert in some way and the client comes for some sort of help. This is true whether the relationship is physician/patient, psychiatrist/patient, counselor/counselee, teacher/student, clergy/parishioner, banker/client, or whatever. The potential for destructive sexual involvement in any of these relationships is enormous, largely because of the vulnerability of the client. Under these circumstances, no Christian should engage in a sexual relationship that is also a professional relationship.

Of course there are people who deliberately use their profession to prey upon others sexually; the notorious Hollywood "casting couch" is an example. But the problem is more subtle than that, especially in male-female relationships; males in current society are generally trained to express romantic love by protectiveness of the loved one, and females are generally trained to express it in admiration of the loved one. Thus, especially when the professional relationship is male professional and female client, it is easy for one or both to think that they are in love. Christians in such a case should end the professional relationship--the patient, for example, should find another physician--and then see if they still want to enter upon the sexual love relationship. No one wants to impede the course of true love, but the difference between true love and exploitation is obscured by one-sided power.

### Marriage and Other Unions

It may seem odd, in a discussion of Christian sexual ethics, to mention marriage only in a couple of paragraphs at the end. It is an important topic, but not, as many used to consider it, the yardstick for Christian sexual morality. In other words, marriage does not "make it right" (nor, for that matter does lack of marriage). The only yardstick for Christian sexual morality is love, but as that is not, by itself, a very useful one (as I have already said), I have tried to work out some of its implications for contemporary Christians.

Nevertheless, marriage has been, and is, an important Christian institution and should be looked at at least briefly. Historically, of course, it has always been between a woman and a man, and has had all sorts of social and legal implications, such as status in the community, provision for various family members, and the transfer of property rights. In modern countries these things, insofar as they are still important to society, are usually covered by civil law; in fact in most countries, even those with a larger proportion of outwardly observant Christians than the United States, couples must undergo a civil marriage to

establish the applicability of the civil laws of their country (for example, so that their children will be considered legitimate and allowed to inherit) as well as a religious marriage ceremony if they are so inclined. The United States is unusual in that a religious ceremony establishes a civil marriage in accord with civil law. As a matter of fact, the United States is getting far less interested in regulating the marriages of its citizens than it used to be; the law now allows sexual contracts outside of marriage (establishing the basis for "palimony," among other effects), has pretty much removed the category of "unlawful" (illegitimate) children, and has largely removed the laws restricting consenting adults' sexual expression. Thus it seems clearer than it might have been in an age which considered itself uniformly Christian, that Christian marriage cannot be defined by civil law.

Amid all this change there is at least one thing, I would suggest, that is unique to Christian marriages, and that may be applied to other marriage-like relationships. I have already stated that the basis of Christian ethics is the working out of the Summary of the Law, in particular the injunction to "Love your neighbor." The immediate question, of course, is "Who is my neighbor?" When Jesus was asked that, he answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37), saying in effect that one should be neighbor to whomever one may meet who needs one's help. Christian marriage is a matter of love/agape as well as (in current practice) a matter of romantic love; however, the partners publicly and seriously promise to be responsible for loving each other with agape as well as continuing to love everyone God will send them to love in the ordinary course of events. Thus they are making a promise to love even more than other Christians; they are committing themselves to consistently love a particular person in addition to all the other loving they must do routinely as Christians.

This understanding of committed love can be applied to other sorts of relationships than the one between a man and a woman that we have traditionally called marriage. But such relationships will be serious and long term, probably life long, in nature; such a commitment is not undertaken lightly. Whether we want to call all such commitments "marriages" or reserve the word for the heterosexual relationship that meets the current civil law qualifications is not an important Christian issue, but by whatever word or words we call them, such commitments are intrinsically Christian relationships and should be encouraged. One way to do so is by providing appropriate liturgical services for such commitments to be made and blessed publicly. Christian love deserves all the help and recognition other Christians can give it.

One final issue: it is unlikely that all, or even most, Christians will come to a consensus on issues as sensitive as these in any short period of time. And the approach I am taking here is quite different from that usually used to measure Christian morality, and may make some people uneasy. Admittedly, it leaves many uncertainties and many opportunities for self-deception. Actually, I think all common ethical systems leave about the same amount of room for self-deception, and about the same amount of room for error, but they do this in different places, and all of us prefer the devil we know to the one we do not know. In any case, it is not unhealthy for Christians to differ on these matters, and allowing room for ambiguity is not necessarily the first step to the abandonment of all standards. I am not suggesting that "If it feels good, do it" is the sum of Christian sexual ethics. It is probably the case here, as with so much of Christian life, that we need different views to get a truer picture of the whole. We need the avant garde, even perhaps the lunatic fringe, to remind us of Christian freedom; and we need those who hold to the past to remind us of our Christian responsibility. In all cases, we need to love one another.



**Part 6 of a 6 piece document set**

#6

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