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FOREWORD

Essays in the previous issue of the Faculty Bulletin focused on the Christian moral vision and the identity of the early church as a moral community. It was argued that faithful lives commended Christianity to many in the ancient world.

In T. R. Glover's phrase, however, the early Christians not only "out-lived and out-died" their pagan opponents; they also "out-thought" them. From the outset the church was involved in teaching and interpreting the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. Thus the church was not only a moral community; it was also a teaching community--and its teaching anchored its morality.

In the emerging "therapeutic society" it is vital that the church resist the temptation to become "relevant" and "practical" to the neglect of the task of instructing believers in basic Christian beliefs. The following essays reflect upon various aspects of the church as a teaching community.

Once again, appreciation is owed to Mrs. Nancy Tindel, Faculty Secretary, for her work in preparing the manuscripts.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

MYSTERY, MARRIAGE, AND MORALITY

By Michael R. Weed

As the early Christian movement made its way into the Hellenistic world, it moved into an environment where an erosion of traditional values was long underway. It also moved into a climate where popular religion had little real interest in morality. Unlike the pagan gods, however, Yahweh of Israel and the Father of Jesus Christ was essentially personal and moral. Consequently, from the very onset, Christians were engaged in teaching the moral implications of Christian faith in an environment marked by moral uncertainty and confusion. Thus, for example, we find in the apostle Paul's earliest extant letter, First Thessalonians, Christians are exhorted to remember the moral instruction which they had earlier received from Paul and other Christian preachers (4:1 ff.). To the extent the early church was successful, much of its success was due to its ability to offer a clear and coherent vision of the meaning of human life--a vision with practical implications for everyday living.

Few would contest that we are presently living in a somewhat similar and perhaps even more dangerous situation, one marked by moral dissolution and personal

disillusionment. Certainly the past century has witnessed considerable erosion of traditional Western values--many of which are basically Christian. Unfortunately, many in the emerging "post-Christian" society consider Christianity as having been tried and found wanting. In this setting, it is not surprising to see in our "therapeutic age" a proliferation of therapies, each with its own vision of the human and of human flourishing. These, however, more nearly represent the problem than present any clear way to a cure.¹

It is both ironic and tragic that there is an all too evident tendency for Christians to abandon their own vision of the human and, in misguided attempts to "get practical," to annex uncritically the various techniques and therapies of the age.² In this fashion the Christian message too often becomes garbled and its vision of the human becomes blurred.³ This, in turn, results in a confusion in both the faith and the practice of an alarmingly large number of Christians.

A guiding thesis of these comments is the conviction that Christian moral exhortation must be accompanied by and grounded in basic instruction. For example, "play your position" would be meaningless advice to youngsters who do not know the basic rules, much less the goal, of the game. Similarly, taken out of their proper context within a biblical view of reality, particular Christian moral exhortations become distorted or even meaningless.

The following is an attempt to sketch how the Christian vision of the nature of

God as trinitarian underwrites the Christian view of human personhood (i.e., what it means to be human) and how that, in turn, grounds particular Christian moral exhortations, specifically those regarding marriage.

God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Early Christians maintained that Christ not only discloses God's purpose in the creation but he also reveals the very nature of God in a previously unparalleled way. It was inevitable that early attempts to explore and clarify the Christian understanding of God's nature were undertaken by those heavily influenced by Hellenistic philosophical categories. Unfortunately, Hellenistic thought tended to conceive of God largely in terms of Absolute Being--self-sufficient, unchangeable, impassible, and totally independent of all other existing reality.

Clearly such an approach ran counter to biblical views at a number of points. Absolute Being, for example, could only be involved with finite reality in a removed sense and only indirectly responsible for-the creation through a lesser being or demiurge.⁴ Further, it is difficult to reconcile basic categories of the personal to such a Being. Love, for instance, both as an emotion and as a need, appears to represent a deficiency for a self-sufficient Absolute Being and remains an embarrassment for Christian thinkers attempting to describe God on the basis of Hellenistic categories.

By contrast, implicit in the Hebrew understanding of Yahweh as Creator and explicit in the Christ event, the heart of the Christian revelation is the disclosure of God as personally involved with his creation. Unfortunately, Christian thinking about the trinitarian nature of God was pursued through the use of Hellenistic categories and remains to many Christians today an antiquated numerical puzzle. Still, however unsatisfactory they may have been, early attempts to grasp the meaning of the Trinity did endeavor to draw out nuances of the biblical picture of God.

Essentially, Christian reflection on the trinitarian nature of God attempts to grasp the innermost nature of God: the very character of God as disclosed in Jesus Christ. That is, the Trinity is not an aspect of God that is separable from or incidental to his “divinity”; it designates the essential and permanent aspect of God’s nature as he is within himself.⁵

As Father, God is the one who, out of his own richness, is giving life to the Son. He is not the self-contained Absolute one of Hellenistic thought but one who “goes outside of himself” and extends his own life to the Son. The Father holds nothing back; he gives all that he has to the Son.

The Son receives his life from the Father in an attitude of trust and dependence. He does not seek equality with the Father, much less independence. The Son does not seek his own will but totally aligns his own will with that of the Father. As the Father gives all to the Son, so also the Son holds nothing in reserve but offers all back to the

Father.

Further, the relationship of the Father and Son describes an ongoing and dynamic movement at the very center of God. The mutual self-giving of the Father and Son does not diminish or compromise the “divinity” of either. Rather, it is precisely self-expending love, not undifferentiated self-contained Being, that comprises the nature of God. Father and Son embody mutual and total self-giving. Moreover, this love constitutes a unity in which the identities of the Father and Son are not swallowed up and annihilated but are established and maintained. The Father cannot be who he is apart from the Son, nor can the Son exist apart from the Father.⁶

The mutual self-giving of the Father and Son, constitutive of the essence of God, is generative. The Holy Spirit is the means whereby the dynamic relationship of self-expending love between the Father and Son proceeds from the Father and Son and creates a world occupied by a vast and richly diverse array of finite and dependent beings. That is, creation itself is an expression of the love of God who, out of his own nature, wills a cosmos to exist separate and apart from himself. Through the creation the Creator risks himself in creating beings who are uniquely endowed with the ability of entering covenant relationships with him--relationships of trust and loyalty. But these beings are also permitted to stand over and against the Creator--to ignore, forget, and even to reject him. Such is the shape of the nonreciprocal, self-expending love of God.

It is this understanding of the nature of God as self-expending love that grounds the Christian view of human personhood. Quite simply, the Christian view is that human personhood is derivative of the Creator and images the divine nature and purpose. In the following comments I shall outline three basic ways in which the Christian view of God provides a framework for viewing human personhood and, in particular, the meaning of marriage. This theological framework, in turn, underlies and renders meaningful particular Christian moral exhortations.

The Human as Image of God

As the Creator is not a remote, self-contained Absolute Being, but one who from within himself wills to exist in relation, so he pronounces that it is not good for the human person to be alone. The image of God, borne by his creature, is, in the first instance, a reference to neither “spirituality” nor “rationality.” Rather, the imago designates the unique capability of humans to communicate with and to enter into covenant relationships both with the Creator and with fellow humans. To be a person is to form and live in relationships of trust, loyalty, and self-expending love.

“Male and female he created them”

Genesis indicates that the fundamental and prototypical form of human existence as co-existence is the relationship between man and woman. The primal unit of the

human is man and woman. Consequently, there is no neutral or androgynous “humanity” behind male and female. Neither is there any ground for denying or attempting to transcend human sexuality in the name of a “higher way.” It is essentially in the relationship between man and woman--not as man or woman--that human persons image the self-expending love of God. It is in this relationship that the two become “one flesh,” indissolubly bound in a new psychological and spiritual reality.

As hereto, the spouse remains fundamentally and irreducibly other. She speaks to me from beyond my own world and questions my mastery of the world.⁷ She also discloses the richness of her own person from beyond the range of my own grasp or gaze. She exists over and against me and in her presence offers countless occasions for painful but necessary disclosures of my own expansive ego, exposing my faults and self-deceptions. Yet it is also this other who accepts and cares for me who opens me to the richness of the world outside myself and my narrow self-serving intentions.

As one whose existence is fundamentally co-existence, the other stands before me as one who both offers and needs a word. It is through both her words of commitment and care and her own need for such words that I am enabled to offer similar words of loyalty and care. It is only together as man-for-woman and as woman-for-man that we complement one another, truly complete and fulfill one another’s potential as human.

Finally, it should be noted that it is only in this overall view of the personal that human sexuality must be viewed. Truly human sexuality cannot be grasped simply on

the biological level. To be human, sexuality must serve broader spiritual and personal goals than mere satisfaction of instinct. In the biblical view, human sexuality is the means of intimate communication--knowledge of the other and of the self. In Karl Barth's phrase, "coitus without co-existence is demonic."⁸

"Be fruitful and multiply"

As the Creator's love is generative and brings into existence others with whom he wills to co-exist, so also human love between the primal pair is generative and issues in the existence of the child. Unfortunately, many Christians fail to recognize the full theological and moral significance of parenting.⁹ Within the biblical perspective, however, to bear and to raise children is not merely an external, fortuitous and non-essential aspect of being human.¹⁰ Nor is it merely an act of compliance with the divine command. Rather, parenting is a fundamental expression and realization of that self-expending love in and through which man and woman image, however obliquely and imperfectly, the Creator.

Becoming parents marks an irrevocable turning point in the history of the couple, a point from which their characters are indelibly altered in a number of substantial ways. No longer are they merely husband and wife; now they are also and forevermore mother and father. Herein is the relationship of the two both intensified and transcended. The child's very existence forever points to the union of the two parents. It also, however,

intrudes upon and alters their world. The child limits their time and challenges their self-mastery and independence. He requires considerable self-discipline and demands self-sacrifice on the part of the parents.

Further, the child evokes care and responsibility from the parents. As one who has distinct uniqueness, the child resists and challenges the parents. Eventually, the child is not only one for whom the parent is responsible; the child is also one to whom the parent must give account. This questioning serves as a constant reminder that parental authority is neither absolute nor arbitrary; it is derived from--and ideally is reflective of--a higher authority.

The child also unsettles and disturbs isolationist tendencies of the parents by drawing them even further beyond the family, opening their world to broader dimensions of human co-existence both spatially and temporally. To be a parent inescapably involves one in a broader network of social relationships. To be a parent also, however, heightens sensitivity to and awareness of human frailty and transience. The child occasions in the parents a deeper awareness of both the past and the future. He opens the parents to the reality of the child's future--a future which the parents cannot finally guarantee and into which they cannot fully accompany the child. Herein the parents awaken to their own limitations and dependence upon others. They also become aware of those beliefs, values, and traditions which were received from their own parents and forebears. These, in turn, are bequeathed to the child for the child's own

journey into the unknown future.

In summary, the bearing and raising of children are primal dimensions of experience which indelibly mark human personhood. It is the Christian view that the experiences of marriage and parenting both anticipate and find their ultimate meaning and significance within the context of Christian faith.

‘This is a great mystery’

In the foregoing we have said that human existence is co-existence; the basic form of the personal is the interpersonal. It has also been argued that two primal dimensions of human existence wherein growth into the fully human occurs are those of marriage and parenting. The point now must be made that these primal experiences also provide circumstances in which one may be open to the transcendent. That is, there is a “sacramental quality” to these experiences; given within the ebb and flow of the common are glimpses of the uncommon, fleeting encounters with the depth, richness and the mystery of reality.¹¹

Christian faith relates to such moments in the course of ordinary affairs, however fleeting, wherein are experienced hints of extraordinary meaning. For there are, however much moderns, “bombarded with banality,” have become dulled to them, those incredibly rich moments--times with a husband or wife, with a parent or with a child--

moments which evoke awe and wonder. Such moments are “rumors of angels” (Berger), or signals of transcendence, which point beyond the lived world and reveal it to be but an enclave in a larger and yet eminently personal world. More precisely, these occasions point beyond themselves to the presence of a deeper dimension of the personal, the presence of the Creator and Sustainer. Such hints of transcendence not only point beyond my immediate world, however; they also reinvest or even hallow the everyday with a sacramental quality. They contain impulses for trust and hope and evoke an “inductive faith.” It is this faith that is completed, clarified, and corroborated by the full disclosure of God in Christ.

In summary, it has been argued that, according to the Christian view, marriage and parenting are requisite for the fullest realization of human personhood and the personal nature of the universe. It is necessary, however, to offer two brief words of clarification to this thesis. First, it has not been argued that one cannot become fully human without the primal experience of marriage and parenting. To do so, however, entails some analogous relationship with rigorous demands for sacrificial care, long-term commitment, and self-discipline.¹² Second, it has not been argued that marriage and parenting are easy; more nearly, the opposite is the case. Rather, I am maintaining that we receive our identities in struggling with these difficult roles--heroic roles--and that in them it is offered to us to become fully human, i.e., imago dei.¹³

Conclusion

It is one of the present tasks of the church not merely to give moral exhortations but to anchor those firmly within the Christian vision of the God who manifests his character in the self-expending love of the cross. Thus the church cannot neglect the teaching of scripture and basic beliefs and must promote serious reflection on the meaning of Christian faith precisely in order that its attempts to be practical will also be faithful--and fruitful. For it is only within the framework of biblical faith and the Christian vision of reality that we can understand why anyone would forgive an unfaithful partner, keep a costly promise, bear and protect a retarded child, or even stay with an unpleasant spouse.

Contrary to much contemporary ideology, the Christian vision reveals that self-expending compassion, and not independence or self-sufficiency, relates the human to the divine. We are defined as persons more by our roles as husbands and wives, parents, brothers and sisters and friends than by our individual achievements.

Notes

- 1 Christopher Lasch writes: “The trouble with the consciousness movement is not that it addresses trivial or unreal issues but that it provides self-defeating solutions. Arising out of a pervasive dissatisfaction with the quality of personal relations, it advises people not to make too large an investment in love and friendship, to avoid excessive dependence on others, and to live for the moment--the very conditions that created the crisis of personal relations in the first place.” The Culture of Narcissism (New York: W. H. Norton, 1978) 27.

- 2 Certainly the intent to be “practical” is commendable. It is misguided, however, if it entails neglect or abandonment of serious attention to scripture or basic Christian beliefs. For example, much recent attention to human sexuality among Christians reflects a mechanistic and theologically naive view of human sexuality.

- 3 Again, Christopher Lasch points out that much therapeutic language is deceiving: “Even when therapists speak of the need for ‘meaning’ and ‘love,’ they define love and meaning simply as the fulfillment of the patient’s emotional requirements. It hardly occurs to them . . . to encourage the subject to subordinate his needs and interests to those of others, to someone or some cause or tradition outside himself. ‘Love’ as self-sacrifice or self-abasement, ‘meaning’ as submission to a higher loyalty--these sublimations strike the therapeutic sensibility as intolerably oppressive, offensive to common sense and injurious to personal health and well-being.” The Culture of Narcissism, 13.

- 4 In Plato’s Symposium, for example, the divine has nothing to do with the human (203a).

- 5 The following comments are indebted to Arthur C. McGill’s rich reflections in his provocative little book, Suffering: A Test of Theological Method (Philadelphia: Geneva 1968).

- 6 John Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology (New York: Scribner’s, 1966) 178.

- ⁷ The homosexual relationship, I would argue, is as psychologically barren as it is biologically infertile. It is true that many--perhaps most--heterosexual relationships are less than ideal. Nonetheless, as hetero, the other can shatter my world of illusions and open me to that which is truly other.
- ⁸ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics III/4 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961) 133.
- ⁹ Stanley Hauerwas has even maintained that “the most morally substantive thing that any of us ever has the opportunity to do is have children.” See his A Community of Character (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981) 165.
- ¹⁰ Walter Kasper, Theology of Christian Marriage (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 18.
- ¹¹ I leave it to biblical scholars to decide the full meaning of Ephesians 5:32. It is my understanding, however, that it is the “miraculous and mysterious” nature of the one flesh relationship between man and woman which allows it to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church. See Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology, Vol. I (New York: Harpers, 1962) 150.
- ¹² I would argue that just as it is a perversion of language when two promise to lie to one another, it is a perversion of the human when a person or persons deliberately avoid marriage and parenting for reasons of cowardice or selfishness.
- ¹³ Two excellent articles which explore this theme are Michael Novak’s “The Family Out of Favor,” Harpers Magazine (April, 1976) 37-46, and Rosemary Haughton’s “Marriage: An Old, New Fairy Tale,” Marriage Among Christians (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1977) 129-150.

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