IN A RECENT, HIGHLY CONTROVERSIAL STUDY, author William Countryman concluded that “sex is not a primary concern in the New Testament writings nor is physical purity an accepted principle there.”

Really? If that is true, then Christians today are justified in denying that the New Testament prescribes any preferred conduct for sexual behavior. On the other hand, if the Bible does provide “accepted principles” for sexual behavior and links that behavior with the personal purity of the believer, then every Christian is obligated to apply those norms in the New Testament to their lives.

From its opening chapter, the Bible makes clear that being male and female, and the sexuality that goes with it, is a God-created gift and is affirmed as good (Gen. 1:27-28). But, as with all aspects of human nature, sexuality was corrupted with the fall. Though God’s ideal for sexuality has remained intact, people tend toward a corrupted form of that ideal. Throughout the Bible this tendency toward perversion is considered a serious threat to a person’s fellowship with God. So the Bible frequently speaks of the obligation of believers to adhere to proper norms of sexual behavior, calling us to a lifestyle of personal purity so our relationship with God will not be inhibited by sexual immorality. The New Testament teachings on sexual purity support this perspective and represent both a development beyond the Jewish views on ritual purity and a departure from the sexual views of the surrounding pagan Gentile culture.

Sexual Purity in Judaism

The predominant view of ancient cultures was that the world was divided between the pure and the impure. Whatever was religious and met the approval of a god or goddess was considered clean or pure, and everything else was impure. This view influenced the development of religious rituals that were designed to purify worshipers before they had contact with their deity. The Jews learned from the Mosaic covenant law that Yahweh was holy and only that which was holy and pure could have contact with Him. Fulfilling the ritual guidelines resulted in purification, making a person “holy” and therefore acceptable to God.

Within that framework the Old Testament law included prescriptions to guard against the impurity that resulted from deviant sexual behavior (Lev. 18—20). Further, sexual activity of any kind was perceived to require cleansing for religious purity, including regular sexual relations between husband and wife, masturbation, or other conditions associated with sexual impurity, such as menstruation (Lev. 15).
Sexual Purity in the New Testament

In the first century A.D. the Jews still adhered staunchly to ritual cleansing as a way to achieve spiritual purity. In fact, as they practiced their religion within the licentious atmosphere of the Roman Empire, they stressed purity laws with renewed vigor. Their Gentile neighbors gravitated toward one of two extremes in their efforts to relate sexuality to religion: they either openly practiced sexually deviant behavior and often equated that behavior with religious activity, or they withdrew from society altogether in the fear that all sexual behavior was wicked.  

Ironically, however, the Jews differed little from their Gentile neighbors in their basic understanding of consecration and purity. Both equated external ritual with purity, but in the Greek mind-set consecration to a god or goddess might include a sexual act with a prostitute as a type of ritual cleansing. To describe such ritual or cultic purity, the Greeks employed the term hagnos (lit., “pure”), which in the most general sense referred to the holiness or purity associated with a deity. Another word, katharos (from which we get the English word catharsis), was used by both Greeks and Jews as a second way to describe ritual purity. Often both terms were extended to include moral purity as it might be derived from ritual cleansing.

On the other hand, the Jews warned against committing zanah or, in the Greek, porneia, which is sexual immorality. (Porneia is the source for the English word pornography.) For the Greeks, porneia was not necessarily a negative term. It applied primarily to prostitution of various kinds, including temple prostitution and extramarital sex. For the Jews, however, the term applied to prostitution, adultery, fornication—in short, to a variety of sexual activities that made the person ritually unclean before God. Nevertheless, they remained more concerned that the individual achieve ritual purity than that the person’s heart be morally pure.

Jesus’ Teaching

Because Jesus clashed with the Pharisees over the purification rites of the law, some scholars claim that He ignored the issue of sexual purity or even denounced it as an unrealistic aspiration that God would not expect from fallible people. On the contrary, however, Jesus did not jettison the obligation of believers to purity. Instead He advanced the notion beyond the confines of the ritual purity prescribed by the Pharisees toward a more complete understanding of a person’s holiness before God.

For instance, Jesus taught that the “pure (katharoi) in heart” would see God (Matt. 5:8); that is, not those who are externally and ritually pure, but those whose hearts have experienced true cleansing would also experience a true relationship with God. Further, He taught that the sin of immorality (porneia) was not so much a sin against ritual impurity as it was a sin against the marriage relationship and God’s ideal for that relationship (Matt. 5:32). For Jesus, a faith relationship with God should show in the believers conduct, setting them apart from their neighbors, especially the Gentiles (Matt. 5:46-47; 6:32).

Therefore, with Jesus’ teachings as the foundation, the early Christians advanced in their understanding of the meaning and importance of sexual purity in the life of the believer, moving beyond the strict Jewish law and distinguishing themselves from the licentiousness of the Greek culture. Rather than cultic or ritual purity being the goal, moral and inward purity became the goal because Christ Himself was hagnos or pure. This was especially true in the regions outside Jerusalem, where the Jews’ ritualistic religion did not have a grip on the young believers. As such, Paul’s teachings, which combined his knowledge of the Jewish purity laws with his desire to evangelize the Gentiles, most fully expressed the importance of sexual purity in the spiritual life of Jesus’ followers.

Paul’s Teachings

Paul is frequently charged with opposing sexual activity of any kind. In reality, however, as a former rabbi he honored sexuality as a gift of God for which purity was the only appropriate treatment.

Writing to the Gentile believers of Thessalonica, Paul clearly taught that true hagnos (purity) did not result from a mere outward religious ritual (1 Thess. 4:3-7).
impurity could be expected from people who are ignorant of God’s laws and lack the standards to which God has called the believer (for example, Gal. 5:19-25).9

But, like Jesus, Paul argued that the believers’ conduct should distinguish them from their neighbors. They not only know better but are able to live better. As their character is becoming holy, their conduct should show it. Believers are not only to abstain from sexual immorality but also to live morally pure lives, exhibited foremost by fidelity in the marriage relationship. Paul taught believers to live by the admonition that the spiritual relationship with God is a call, not to a life of sexual impurity, but to a holy life in a spiritual community with higher values than those of their unbelieving neighbors (see Eph. 5:3).10

According to Paul, true holiness begins in the inner life. Holiness and sexual purity are not an accident but a result of Christlike character being intentionally cultivated in the life of the believer. Foremost in this process of cultivation is the believer’s attention to the mind, where sexual immorality begins when impure thoughts are entertained. Paul regarded the protection of the mind to be such a serious matter that in 2 Corinthians 10:5 he likened its defense to a military onslaught. For the Corinthians Paul pictured the protection of the imagination as a military campaign in which every thought must be captured as a prisoner of war and brought under subjection to the Master, Jesus Christ.11 Similarly, in Philippians 4:8, rather than let the heart and mind wander, and therefore go unprotected, Paul taught that the believer must intentionally focus the mind on those thoughts that promote right conduct, including thoughts that were pure (hagnos).

So, does the Bible provide “accepted principles” for sexual behavior? Yes! In fact, the Bible calls the believer to a life of moral and sexual purity based on his or her desire to be sanctified or conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29). This begins with the life of faith that distinguishes the believer from strict legalists and from unlawful immoralists. Sexual purity in the Christian’s life demonstrates that his or her character is growing into Christ’s image.

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