Selections from

Towards a Quaker View of Sex
An essay by a group of Friends

A Christian Attitude

There now comes the difficult matter of a Christian attitude to homosexual problems. On 16th September 1962, in his sermon in Canterbury Cathedral, the Bishop of Woolwich appealed for reform of “our utterly mediaeval treatment of homosexuals” and went on to say “as with capital punishment, one more determined push will see reform of something that is a peculiarly odious piece of English hypocrisy.”

It will be clear from all that has gone before that we do not regard the standards of judgment relevant here as being different from those that apply to other sexual problems. Surely it is the nature and quality of a relationship that matters: one must not judge it by its outward appearance but by its inner worth. Homosexual affection can be as selfless as heterosexual affection, and therefore we cannot see that it is in some way morally worse.

Homosexual affection may of course be an emotion which some find aesthetically disgusting, but one cannot base Christian morality on a capacity for disgust. Neither are we happy with the thought that all homosexual behaviour is sinful: motive and circumstances degrade or ennoble any act, and we feel that to list sexual acts as sins is to follow the letter rather than the spirit, to kill rather than to give life.

Further we see no reason why the physical nature of a sexual act should be the criterion by which the question whether or not it is moral should be decided. An act which expresses true affection between two individuals and gives pleasure to them both, does not seem to us to be sinful by reason alone of the fact that it is homosexual. The same criteria seem to us to apply whether a relationship is heterosexual or homosexual.

“I seek only to apply to my own life the rules which govern the lives of all good men: freedom to choose a partner and, when that partner is found, to live with him discreetly and faithfully.” (Wildeblood, 1957, p. 175.) Is the homosexual to have that freedom, or must he, in Housman’s words, “curse the God that made him for the colour of his hair”?

It is now necessary to emphasize that we are not saying that all homosexual acts or relationships are to be encouraged. It is difficult shortly to suggest circumstances which may give them a quality of sin. But first of all any element of force or coercion, or abuse of some superior position, must obviously put an act beyond the pale and leave it to be condemned. The authors of this essay have been depressed quite as much by the utter abandon of many homosexuals, especially those who live in homosexual circles as such, as by the absurdity of the condemnation rained down upon the well-behaved. One must disapprove of the promiscuity and selfishness, the lack of any real affection, which is the stamp of so many adult relationships, heterosexual as well as homosexual. We see
nothing in them often but thinly disguised lust, unredeemed by that real concern which has always been the essential Christian requirement in a human relationship.

But it is also obvious that the really promiscuous and degraded homosexual has not been helped by the total rejection he has had to face. Society has not said “if you do that, that is all right, but as to the other, we cannot approve of that”. It has said “whatever you do must be wrong: indeed you are wrong”.

Only if Society is prepared to revise this judgment and to accept even degraded homosexuals as human beings, can they be helped to face the moral implications of their selfish relationships.

**IV. A NEW MORALITY NEEDED**

**The Church and Sexuality**

It will be relevant at this point to refer to the history of the Church’s attitude to sexuality throughout the centuries, and to elements in that attitude that seem inconsistent with some of the deepest insights in the Bible.

Throughout nearly all its history and in some sections of the Church today, the myth of Adam and Eve (called without justification the Fall of Man—This was never suggested by Jesus, but seems to have come from Paul; see Romans 5, v. 12-14) is treated as though it were historical fact on which logical arguments can be built. In this way, sexuality came to be regarded as necessarily polluted with sin in that event. Even when rejected as historical fact, this myth still has its effect upon the attitude of some Christians to sexuality; it will therefore be wise to think more about it. First, this, like other myths, had an earlier Babylonian origin and was used for religious purposes by the Jewish teachers. Further, like all myths, it is a poetic and symbolic representation of the condition and predicament of man. It is not exclusively or even primarily concerned with sexuality. It is a myth representing the transition of man, either in his racial history (phylogenesis) or his development from babyhood (ontogenesis) from an unreflective obedience to instinct to a condition in which he is responsible for his actions, in which he can reflect on them and make judgments and moral choices, weighing up possible courses of action in the light of a concept of good and evil.

It is a story, not of man’s fall, but of man’s growing up, and of the pain that growing up involves. It is significant that God is recorded as saying (Gen. 3, v. 22): “Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.” To recognize and love what is good is to know also what is evil, to fear it and to be tempted by it. To know the good is to know joy, but it is also to experience pain, to be tempted to pride and presumption.

It is unfortunate that sexual intercourse takes place between Adam and Eve only after the expulsion from the Garden; this perhaps provides an excuse for thinking that sexual intimacy is associated with a sinful and disobedient state. But this is not given in the text nor is it a necessary implication. Indeed Eve claims the help of God in the matter. The shame associated with nakedness immediately after the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge need not imply that sex became tainted there and then with sin: it may imply a recognition that our sexuality more than anything else in us can lift us to the heights of self-realization or plunge us into degradation; it is the focus of our self-awareness. The
awareness of nakedness may further be a symbol of the awareness of vulnerability, of exposure to pain that must come with self-consciousness.

No doubt from the earliest days of Christianity there have been men and women for whom the sexual relationship was illumined and deepened by the Christian message of love, for whom it expressed a true equality, an equal-sided valuation and respect, for whom coitus was an expression of tenderness and unity, not merely the gratification of animal urges. But it is one of the great tragedies of history that not until recent times has this implication of Christianity found public expression.

Dr. Sherwin Bailey, a leading Anglican authority on this subject, can find no evidence of this expression in any theological writing before the appearance in the seventeenth century of Holy Living, by Jeremy Taylor, a married bishop of the English Church who owed much to the support and companionship of his wife. In that book coitus is for the first time referred to as an act that relates two people in togetherness. It was an experience “to lighten the cares and sadness of household affairs, and to endear each other.” Dr. Bailey writes, “Taylor maintains that marriage is the queen of friendships, and husband and wife the best of all friends, the love that binds them together is a ’union of all things excellent’: it contains in it proportion and satisfaction and rest and confidence.” (Bailey, 1959.)

In contrast to this, for the previous fifteen hundred years almost every writer and leader in the Church, both Catholic and Reformed, regarded sexuality as unavoidably tainted with sin, and the sex-relationship in marriage (apart from procreation) as a licensed outlet for the bestial impulses in man. This latter concept of marriage is overwhelmingly repulsive to many of us now, yet it is no exaggeration to say that it has lingered in the Church almost to the present day, and only recently has it become possible to be married in church without hearing an echo of it in the marriage service.

Dr. Sherwin Bailey, writing of earlier centuries, says: “…the general impression left by the Church’s teaching upon simple and unlearned people can only have been that the physical relationship of the sexes was regarded by religion as unworthy, if not as shameless and obscene. The effect of such teaching must necessarily have been grave; it caused a distortion of principles and values which has left an indelible mark upon Christian sexual thought and we can only guess at the psychological disturbances and conflicts which it has produced in the lives of individuals.”(Bailey, 1959.)

Only in the present century have Christians dared in any general way to follow in the steps of Jeremy Taylor and to accept that, irrespective of any other purpose, coitus can be justified and dignified as the expression of a deep relation between two persons. We do not blame Christianity and Christians of earlier centuries; we can seek the origin of misconceived attitudes in the compromise between pagan and Christian thought and in the social conditions of the Dark Ages.

We have then to reject the idea that there is anything necessarily sinful about sexual activity. A better understanding of the nature and value of myth, and a more scientific approach to problems of human behaviour, have delivered many Christians from this oppressive and destructive idea. Sexual activity is essentially neither good nor evil; it is a normal biological activity which, like most other human activities, can be indulged in destructively or creatively.
Further, if we take impulses and experiences that are potentially wholesome and in a large measure unavoidable and characterize those as sinful, we create a great volume of unnecessary guilt and an explosive tension within the personality. When, as so often happens, the impulse breaks through the restriction, it does so with a ruthlessness and destructive energy that might not otherwise have been there. A distorted Christianity must bear some of the blame for the sexual disorders of society.

A Way Forward

In trying to summarize the feelings and judgments that have come to us in the course of our several years’ deliberations, we must keep this historical survey in mind. It supports us in rejecting almost completely the traditional approach of the organized Christian church to morality, with its supposition that it knows precisely what is right and what is wrong, that this distinction can be made in terms of an external pattern of behaviour, and that the greatest good will come only through universal adherence to that pattern. Nothing that has come to light in the course of our studies has altered the conviction that came to us when we began to examine the actual experiences of people—the conviction that love cannot be confined to a pattern. The waywardness of love is part of its nature and this is both its glory and its tragedy. If love did not tend to leap every barrier, if it could be tamed, it would not be the tremendous creative power we know it to be and want it to be.

So we are concerned with the homosexuals who say to each other “I love you” in the hopeless and bitter awareness of a hostile criminal code and hypocritical public opinion, and also with the anguish of men and women who know they love one another when marriage is impossible and only suffering can be envisaged. We recognize that, while most examples of the “eternal triangle” are produced by boredom and primitive misconduct, others may arise from the fact that the very experience of loving one person with depth and perception may sensitize a man or woman to the lovable qualities in others.

We think it our duty, not to stand on a peak of perfectionism, asking for an impossible conformity while the tide of human life sweeps by us, but to recognize, in compassion, the complications and bewilderment that love creates and to ask how we can discover a constructive way in each of an immense variety of particular experiences. It is not by checking our impulse to love that we keep love sweet. The man who swallows the words “I love you” when he meets another woman, may in that moment and for that reason begin to resent his wife’s existence; but it is also true that love may be creative if honestly acknowledged though not openly confessed. We need to know much more about ourselves and what we do to our inner life when we follow codes or ideals that do not come from the heart.

Those who have read so far will recognize how difficult it has been for us to come to definite conclusions as to what people ought or ought not to do. But although we cannot produce a ready-made external morality to replace the conventional code, there are some things about which we can be definite. The first is that there must be a morality of some sort to govern sexual relationships. An experience so profound in its effect upon people and upon the community cannot be left wholly to private judgment. It will never be right for two people to say to each other “We’ll do what we want, and what happens between us is nobody else’s business.” However private an act, it is never without its impact on
society, and we must never behave as though society—which includes our other friends—did not exist. Secondly, the need to preserve marriage and family life has been in the forefront of our minds throughout our work. It is in marriage that sexual impulses have their greatest opportunity for joyful and creative expression, and where two people can enter into each other’s lives and hearts most intimately. Here the greatest freedom can be experienced—the freedom conferred by an unreserved commitment to each other, by loving and fearless friendship, and by openness to the world. In marriage, two people thus committed can bring children into the world, provide them with the security of love and home and in this way fulfil their sexual nature. Finally, we accept the definition of sin given by an Anglican broadcaster, as covering those actions that involve exploitation of the other person. This is a concept of wrong-doing that applies both to homosexual and heterosexual actions and to actions within marriage as well as outside it. It condemns as fundamentally immoral every sexual action that is not, as far as is humanly ascertainable, the result of a mutual decision. It condemns seduction and even persuasion, and every instance of coitus which, by reason of disparity of age or intelligence or emotional condition, cannot be a matter of mutual responsibility.

It is clear that we need a much deeper morality, one that will enable people to find a constructive way through even the most difficult and unpredictable situations—a way that is not simply one of withdrawal and abnegation. There are many who say that when people find themselves in a situation where it is difficult to be consistently moral, they must practise self-denial and “bear their cross”. This is often the right way; but it is a serious misconception of the Cross to suggest that it is related only to self-denial.

Morality should be creative. God is primarily Creator, not rule-maker. Quakerism from the beginning rejected the idea of particular observances, rituals or sacrament, and instead regarded the whole of life’s activities as potentially sacramental. The Quaker movement arose in a time of spiritual stirring. By rejecting all authority save that of the Holy Spirit and the headship of Christ, its vital witness was to an authority which begins in personal experience, in the encounter of man and God in the human spirit and mind. Quakerism begins with a search and its method is experimental.

Every true Christian, of whatever branch of the Church, accepts that the whole of his life must be brought before God. The Society of Friends places particular emphasis on our individual and personal responsibility. We cannot accept as true a statement that is given us merely because it is given with the authority of tradition or of a Church. We have to make that truth our own—if it is a truth—through diligent and prayerful search and a rigorous discipline of thought and feeling. Man is intended to be a moral being. That is not to say that he should accept a formal morality, an observance of mores, but that his actions should come under searching scrutiny in the light that comes from the Gospels and the working of God within us.

There have been periods in our Quaker history when the effort to achieve consistency and integrity toppled over into a humourless scrupulosity, leading to a restricted life in which a pattern of conduct was secured at the expense of warmth and joy and creativeness. Friends, if they keep in mind the need to avoid this error, could help to discover that kind of conduct and inner discipline through which the sexual energy of men and women can bring health of mind and spirit to a world where man’s energy always threatens to become destructive. We need a release of love, warmth and generosity into the world, in
the everyday contacts of life, a positive force that will weaken our fear of one another and our tendencies toward aggression and power-seeking. We need to recognize fearlessly and thankfully the sexual origin of this force.

This search is a move forward into the unknown; it implies a high standard of responsibility, thinking and awareness—something much harder than simple obedience to a moral code. Further, the responsibility that it implies cannot be accepted alone; it must be responsibility within a group whose members are equally committed to the search for God’s will.

Perhaps our last words should be to those, equally aware of the tragedy, who may be distressed and put off by our rejection of a morality that has seemed to them a product of Christianity. We do know, from the intimate experience of several of us, that it is possible to give substance to the traditional code, to live within its requirements, enriched by an experience of love at its most generous and tender, and conscious of our debt to Christ in showing us what love implies. We would ask those who cannot easily follow our thoughts to recognize what has driven us—Christians and Friends, trying to live up to the high standard of integrity that our religious society asks of us—to our insistent questioning.

It is the awareness that the traditional code, in itself, does not come from the heart; for the great majority of men and women it has no roots in feeling or true conviction. We have been seeking a morality that will indeed have its roots in the depths of our being and in our awareness of the true needs of our fellows.

We believe that there is indeed a place for discipline, but that it can only be fully healthy as well as fully Christian when it is found in application to the whole of life. The challenge to each of us is clear: accustom yourself to seeking God’s will and to the experience of his love and power, become used in your daily life to the simple but tremendous spiritual fact that what God asks he enables, provided only and always that we want to do his will.

Men and women thus accustomed will not be less exposed to sexual difficulties—heterosexual or homosexual—than others whose lives are not “under discipline” in this way. As we see it, the difference lies in their response to the claims of sexual urges. Whereas the emotional or “moral” response focusses attention on the control of the sexual urge in isolation, the way of life we have described makes it likely that the particular sexual problem will be seen in the full context of ordinary daily living, and thus be kept in perspective as something for which God has not only a solution but a positive purpose.

Such positive purpose may—and often does—involve the acceptance of suffering by the person concerned. We have no unity with those who regard all tension and all frustration as being by definition bad or unhealthy: such a view is utterly without psychological foundation. The mental and spiritual well-being of a person depends rather on his or her developed capacity to deal with tensions and frustrations as and when they arise. The Christian cannot escape the implications of the Cross. In the power of the Holy Spirit, there are no dangers from which strength cannot be gained, no apparent disaster which cannot be transformed into spiritual opportunities.
True chastity is a quality of the spirit: it entails the deepest respect and a profound value for human relationships. It involves the most generous giving, which may mean the restraint of withholding, but it is not solely measured in physical terms. Further, there are lives which are being lived unconventionally with more true chastity than some lived in obedience to conventional codes.

If chastity means respect for oneself and others, then promiscuity is the final denial of it. It denies the importance of personality, and those who seek relief in this way of life imprison their true selves—they are sexual deviants damaging both themselves and their transitory partner by divorcing the physical from the spiritual and keeping impersonal what should involve the whole personality. Yet wherever the most transient relationship has, as it may have, an element of true tenderness and mutual giving and receiving, it has in it something of good.

What then is chastity? It is the antithesis of what was recently described to one of us as “the hire purchase attitude of this age”—the attitude that implies: “I want it now and I must have it. I will pay later—perhaps—if I can”. It is not rigid restraint nor refusal to be involved; it is not arid self-discipline nor living according to a moral pattern. It is a wholeness of personality, courtesy and charity, sincerity and purity of heart. It is not necessarily measured in physical terms; it is a total absence of exploitation; it is as necessary a part of marriage as of a single life.