

SEX, SEXUALITY, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

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When such concepts as *sex*, *sexuality*, and *homosexual orientation* are used, it is likely that most people think only of the biological aspects of human sexuality or of specific sexual behaviors. Although such an understanding may be appropriate for the word *sex*, it is not at all appropriate for *sexuality* and *sexual orientation*, whether *homosexual* or *heterosexual*. Human sexuality is much more than *sex*, and sexual orientation is much more than *sex*.

During my career as a sociologist, I specialized in teaching courses in marriage and family relations (now an academic discipline known as *family science*). A core course in the family science major is a course in human sexuality. I began this course each semester (I am now retired) by discussing "The Nature and Meaning of Human Sexuality." As a Christian, I have always regarded our sexuality as a wonderful gift from God. Thus I always stressed in my classes that our sexuality is something good and beautiful within us rather than something to be ashamed of or afraid of. Unfortunately, the latter point of view, with its primary focus upon *sex*--the physical aspects of our sexuality, has been the more prevalent one for several centuries.

This has led to our society being referred to by some scholars as an "anti-sex" society. The negativism of society's traditional approach has hindered our search for a deeper understanding of the nature and meaning of our sexuality, including knowledge about sexual orientation. The more accepting we become of our sexuality as something good and beautiful within us, the more free we are to seek to understand its nature and meaning in our lives, regardless of our sexual orientation.

My own approach to the nature and meaning of human sexuality has been to view it as a dynamic part of our total personhood. I like to think of four different dimensions of human nature: the physical/biological, the emotional, the intellectual, and the spiritual. Our sexuality is a part of our physical being, and it functions according to basic biological principles. It is a perfectly normal, natural part of our being that has been with us from the very beginning of our existence. There is nothing about the anatomical nature of our sexuality or its physiological functioning for us to be ashamed of or afraid of.

Human beings, however, are also emotional beings. We have the capacity to experience a variety of feelings such as joy, fear, anger, love, shame, guilt, compassion, happiness, sadness, frustration, confusion, and even depression. Even thoughts about sexuality may result in one or more such feelings, and fantasies about sexual behavior are almost certain to engender some feelings. It is very unlikely that one can engage in any form of sexual expression without experiencing some emotions about it. Whether such feelings are negative or positive depends upon our own background of experiences and upon our own attitudes, values, and beliefs about sexuality. Our sexuality, then, is very much a part of the emotional nature of our being. Although sexual expression may be at times and for some persons little if any more than a physical act for physical pleasure, it cannot in reality be separated from one's emotional nature.

As human beings, we also have the intellectual capacity to think, to reason, to learn, and to make decisions for ourselves. We are creatures of learning and habit, not creatures of instinct. Thus we learn about sexuality during the socialization process that begins at birth and continues throughout our lives. In this process, we acquire the feelings, attitudes, values, and beliefs about sexuality and sexual behavior passed down from one generation to another. Although much that we learn is beneficial, we also learn things that are untrue and harmful. Fortunately, as intellectual beings, we can examine carefully the things we have been taught in light of the additional knowledge we have today and formulate our own thinking about sexuality. The more knowledge we have, the more capable we become of formulating our own attitudes,

values, and beliefs and of making responsible decisions about our sexual behavior. Human sexuality is very much a part of the intellectual dimension of human nature.

A fourth aspect of human nature is what I believe to be a spiritual dimension--something inherent within us that calls us into relationship with a supreme intelligence that we call God. If we think of our sexuality as having been created within us by God and of God having made possible the intense degree of love that two people can share with each other, then, in a very real sense, a sexual relationship with that person as an expression of genuine love and affection becomes a spiritual act. It can also be said that when a man and a woman engage in sexual intercourse that results in bringing new life into being, they are becoming partners with God in the continuing process of creation. This is not to say that reproduction is the only purpose or even the primary purpose of human sexuality. Our sexuality is also for the purpose of giving and receiving sexual pleasure in a loving, caring, committed, relationship. This can be meaningful and fulfilling spiritually as well as physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

Human sexuality, then, is a part of every dimension of human nature; it is a part of our total personality, our total being. This is just as true for persons with a homosexual orientation as it is for persons with a heterosexual orientation. The nature and meaning of human sexuality is essentially the same for all persons regardless of their sexual orientation.

As a part of our total personhood, our sexuality plays a significant role in one of the strongest motivating forces in human nature: the will to relate to another human being in a deeply meaningful and abiding relationship. Although this strong desire for such a relationship usually includes the desire for sexual fulfillment, it also calls for a deep degree of intimacy for every dimension of human nature. For such relationships to endure, there needs to be a deeply satisfying emotional, intellectual, and spiritual relationship as well as a fulfilling *sexual* relationship at the biological dimension. In reality, sexual fulfillment, though very important, becomes a relatively small part of the total relationship.

For most people (those with a heterosexual orientation), the desire to relate to another person in this way calls for a person of the other sex. For those of a homosexual orientation, however, the desire to relate to another person in a deeply meaningful and abiding way calls for a person of the same sex. In neither case is this desire simply to find someone who is physically attractive and with whom one can experience a satisfying sexual relationship. In each case, the desire is to find someone with whom one can relate as a total person and with whom one can experience a deeply intimate and satisfying relationship in all dimensions of one's personhood. The will to relate to another person in this way is just as strong and just as natural for a person with a homosexual orientation as for a person with a heterosexual orientation. In neither situation is the direction of one's desire a matter of choice for the individual. The more I learn about sexual orientation, the more convinced I become that genetics has far more to do with the development of a person's orientation than does the environment in which one is reared. And to the best of our knowledge, a person's sexual orientation is not subject to change.

If we could recognize that the nature and meaning of human sexuality is essentially the same for all persons, whatever their sexual orientation, and that a homosexual orientation involves the desire for a complete union with a person of the same sex rather than simply a desire for sexual fulfillment, perhaps the fear, prejudice, and discrimination toward persons with a homosexual orientation could be eliminated.

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