

The 4 theological meanings of sexuality

A theological ethical approach of sexuality

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Introduction : a brief history of Christian thinking about sexuality

In the second half of the 2^d century **Tatian the Syrian**ⁱ who is considered as a church father was the first to proclaim that any sexual acts of any kind should be characterized by the word “**sin**” → That was only a beginning.

The idea of perpetual single life or virginity, got more and more popular among christians and was even reinforced by a new fashion :

eremitism (hermits) that would soon after lead to
monasticism (monks) in the 3^d and 4th century.

One and a half century after Tatian, **Gregory of Nyssa**, in the 4th century wrote that sexuality was tolerated by God after the fall, because it could **soften** the hardness of becoming mortal.

But it is in the 5th century that we meet one of the most influential theologian ever, someone who wrote more than 135 books and many letters (218 preserved), a philosopher, theologian and bishop, someone who still have influence on the way **you** think today as believers :

I mean **Augustine** of Hipo.

One of its book called “*On marriage and concupiscence*” talks about sexuality.

He describes Adam and Eve sexuality before the fall as being

without desire ; without any fire ; without any sexual appetence.

If “**we**” feel desire, it is because of original sin transmitted to all humans.

So, for Augustine, what is bad is not sexuality itself → but the desire that goes with it.

This desire he calls it **concupiscence**ⁱⁱ.

Most of the theologians of the centuries after Augustine will follow and even go further, developing logically his view of the consequences of the original sin.

During the middle-age, monks were very influential for the medieval society

Intellectually and **financially**

In the 11th century, pope **Gregory VII**, a former monk, imposed celibacy to all church men.

In the same century **Peter Damian** (declared as a Doctor of the Church in 1828) said that if all mankind would come to monasticism, then humanity would disappear allowing the second coming of Jesus.

In the 13th century **Thomas Aquinas**

who is may be after Augustine one of the most influential catholic theologian, said something that had already been said but that he popularized : substantially :

“if Jesus came through the holly spirit,

it is to avoid that Jesus could be corrupted by original sin through a sexual act”ⁱⁱⁱ.

In the 16th century came the reformation.

Very soon, the reformers rejected celibacy as a prerequisite for leadership in the church.

But still, they all admired Augustine (Luther was a former augustinian monk)

and **they kept** his **vision** of **concupiscence**.

For example Luther or Zwingly urged christians to marry as teens

to avoid sexual immorality (1Corinthians 7,9).

Despite the reformation, sex remained suspicious in the church ... until now :

→ **Masters of sex** (1'40") – Bill Masters (Gynecologist) and Virginia Johnson (Psychologist)
pioneers in sexology → “*Human Sexual Response*” 1966
→ refuted lots of Freudian theories by observation

Even if we do not reach such a level of taboo, unfortunately sexuality is still misunderstood,
because church consciousness about it is wearing a heavy past.

And even if *we* are a young movement,
we do not come from nowhere,
and are still influenced by our predecessors.

Modern theologians try to change things. But some of them fall in the reversed trap :
because they want christians to be more at ease with sexuality,
they go very far in the opposite direction.

Two tendencies can be detected :

1st - Some think that **gender** should be **differentiated from sexual appearance**^{iv}
→ By this way, they legitimate same sex relationships
in which love can be shown as well as in heterosexuality.

2^d - Some (sometime the same) think that we should **separate sexuality from love**^v
→ By this way, they legitimate sex outside of marriage
which do not mean you do not love your spouse.

I think this is a **pendulum** movement after centuries when sex was to be considered as :
“an external and wicked enemy” (Paul Ricoeur^{vi}).

So “How are we to consider this important part of human nature ?”
As christian the question is the same as
“Why does God created us with sexual desires ?”

Let's get into God's plan about sex. Try to make a **reset** on what you think.

It is possible to see *four* purposes of sex from God's perspective in the scriptures :

The first one is : **Procreation**

It has always been identified as a purpose of sexuality, as we have seen through history.

Genesis 1,28 *God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and **increase in number**; fill the earth and subdue it.”*

Procreation is God's plan *through* sexual difference.

Every theologian agree about that whatever the time.

At least *nearly every* theologian (remember Peter Damian !)

But there is an other purpose that God intended for sex
which has not always been recognized :

Sex is designed for pleasure and joy

Why is sexuality so **attractive** ? → Because it is a source of **pleasure**

Is it because of **hormones** ? **Yes, but** there is more than that :

In chapter 4 of **Songs of songs**,

the lover is describing the body of his beloved one as a secret garden full of plants and fruits.

And at the end, she answers :

Songs of Songs 4,16 *Awake, north wind, and come, south wind! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread everywhere. **Let my beloved come into his garden and taste its choice fruits** (NIV)*

I don't know about you, but reading this make me feel that
the pleasure of sex is not 100% sexual

I feel in this text that there is tenderness, desire (concupiscence?), affection, poetry,
much more than just having fun one night.

I have read a philosopher who wrote : “**animals are reproducing, humans make love**”

I like this sentence showing that human sex is not an animal activity.

Deuteronomy 24,5 *If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and **bring happiness [Joy]**¹ to the wife he has married. (NIV)*

Joy is more than pleasure.

That is one of the reason why you cannot do what you want with sex.

Because Joy is about bringing pleasure to the other, it is about giving

Acts 20,35 ... *'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*

So there are limits imposed by the fact that **sex is not an end but a means.**

That bring us to the third purpose of sexuality as created by God :

Sexuality is a love language

[sexuality as a love language]

That sexuality is a language of love seems obvious (cf “The 5 love languages” G. Chapman)

What is less obvious is how to speak this language.

In **Genesis 3,16** God says to the woman :

”Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” (NIV)

It is not a license for husbands to rule over their wives in sexual relationships.

This verse is describing the consequence of sin.

Ephesians 5,28 says the contrary

*In this same way, husbands ought to **love** their wives as their own **bodies**. (NIV)*

When we have sex, there is a message that is spoken with our body

When we make love, there is a message going with it.

When we make love we are **promising love with our body !**

In God's law, the union of bodies is the gift of oneself, not for a few moments, but for life :

Deuteronomy 22,28-29 *If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay her father fifty shekels of silver. **He must marry the young woman, for he has violated her. He can never divorce her as long as he lives.***

Why² is there this law in the OT ?

Because in having sex, there is already a *commitment*.

Sometimes in the OT it is even the 1st sexual intercourse that seals marriage :

Genesis 38,1-2³ ; Exodus 22,15⁴

1 **שׂוּחַ** Piel Perfect 3rd Mas. Sing. Root: שׂוּחַ to rejoice, be glad

2 When studying laws of the OT, it is necessary to understand the intention behind the rule.

3 **Genesis 38,1-2** *At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah. There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. He married her and made love to her;*

4 **Exodus 22,16** *“If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride-price, and she shall be his wife.*

[The three components of the couple love]

Psychologists are not very at ease with the concept of “Love”. They don't really know how to talk about it even if it greatly influence human behavior.

In the 1980's Robert Sternberg (Yale university) came up with a theory to describe Love His theory is still the most used to describe love from a psychological point of view.

He describes Love with **three** components :

Passion : it can be either physical arousal or emotional stimulation⁵.

Intimacy : it is the feelings of closeness and attachment to one another. It's the feeling of being at ease with the other one, which can also be confidence and complicity

Commitment : Unlike the other two blocks, it involves a conscious decision⁶. It shows up first by the desire to « be a couple » and then become a desire to make it lasting.

Those three components can be drawn as a triangle.

When the three components are strong, Sternberg calls it « consummate Love ».



But when one or two components are not strong enough you can have other kind of love

Infatuated Love	Friendship	Empty Love
Fatuous Love	Romantic Love	Companionate Love

The goal is to find the **balance**, the **consummate love**

In this model, sex is part of passion.

It shows that passion or sex alone, without commitment or intimacy, cannot be fulfilling because the language, the message, going with it, is confused.

Sexuality out of love [commitment and inimity] is like a lie, a false speech

Making **love** is a way of **communication**

Making love also needs communication.

This is a virtuous **circle**

5 It can be : 1) A strong feeling of enthusiasm or excitement for something or about doing something ; 2) A strong feeling (such as anger) that causes people to act in a dangerous way ; 3) A strong sexual or romantic feeling for someone

6 It can be : 1) A promise to do or give something ; 2) A promise to be loyal to someone or something; 3) the attitude of someone who works very hard to do or support something

But how can we get into this circle ? Where is the entrance door ?

It is the same as becoming a disciple :

to deny self (Luke 9,23)

to be crucified with Christ (Galatians 2,20)

to love as he loved us (John 13,34)

All those verses gives us the general principle of love and can apply to sexuality.

As disciples we have the great advantage to know what is love through Jesus-Christ.

Sexuality that pleases God must be guided by a “like Jesus” love.

Because sex is not only a gift from God to spice up marriages

But it is also a sign

Sex is a sign

What is a sign ?

This is something that can be seen with human eyes but reveals an invisible reality^{vii}.

The rainbow was the sign of the covenant with Noah

The ten plagues were signs that God wanted his people to be freed

Miracles are signs of God

when Jesus heal someone, it is a sign of spiritual healing (cf. Mt 9,2-6)

So how can we say that sexuality is a sign ?

In **Genesis 1,27** we can read :

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female (וַיִּבְרָא וַיְנַקְבֵהוּ)⁷ he created them. (NIV)

So God created humanity with two sides : male and female,

And the two sides *together* are composing an **image (= a sign)** of God.

It is in **Genesis 2,22-23** that we find for the first time the words *man and woman* :

Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.²³ The man said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” (NIV)⁸.

So inside human nature, we can see that :

femininity comes from masculinity

and masculinity is defined in contrast to femininity

And both *together* are the image/sign of God.

Within a consummate love, a perfect love, with commitment and intimacy, sexuality is showing something of the nature of God^{viii}.

1Corinthians 6,17 *But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality.*

What is the link between “being united with the Lord” and “sexual immorality” ?

7 Prononcer *zâchâr ounqévâh*

8 Genèse 2,22-23

וַיִּבְרָא יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַצֶּלֶע אֲשֶׁר-לָקַח מִן-הָאָדָם, לְאִשָּׁה; וַיִּבְרָאָהּ, אֶל-הָאָדָם.

Il transforma le Seigneur Dieu la côte qu'il a prise hors de l'humain [il ne faut pas traduire l'homme car on pourrait se tromper avec le masculin, ni le prénom Adam ici car il y a un article qui indique que ce n'est pas un prénom], en une femme, et il l'apporta à l'humain

וַיֹּאמֶר, הָאָדָם, זֹאת הִפְעַם עֵצָם מֵעֵצָי, וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי; לְזֹאת יִקְרָא אִשָּׁה, כִּי מֵאִישׁ לָקַחָהּ-זֹאת.

Il dit l'humain « Cette fois c'est l'os de mes os, la chair de ma chair.

Celle-ci, on l'appellera femme, car c'est de l'homme [masculin] qu'elle a été prise.

All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. ¹⁹ Do you not know that **your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit**, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. (NIV)

So **sexuality is**, in the flesh, the visible sign of **the union of the father and the son through the Holy Spirit**

Sexuality is the sign of the **trinity** in the couple.

Conclusion : why the christian sexuality is fully satisfying

God's purpose ↓	Sexuality in Homosexual love	Sexuality in Heterosexual love		Sexuality in Christian love	Sexuality in Single life
		Not committed	Committed		
Procreation	0	(+)	+	+	0
Pleasure	+	+	+	+	(+)
Language	+/-	-	+	+	0
Sign	- ⁹	-	0	+	0
Result	Sin	Sin	Normal	Glory	Other

Christian sexuality is fully satisfying, from a physical **AND** spiritual point of view.

But you see that in the table, I said “**other**” in the result of “single life”,

Because it is **obvious** that **being single can not** fulfill any of the purposes that *sexuality* is meant to achieve **in the married couple !**

So why has it been so emphasized by christians through centuries ?

Just think : in the Catholic Church how many canonized saints have been married ?

Just remember what the monks thought about sex in the middle age ?

Obviously they drew their views on Paul's words in 1Corinthians 6 and 7.

And notably **1 Corinthians 7,38**¹⁰

But truly, in those chapters, it is not easy to follow his thoughts

as he seems to oscillate between different *opinions*¹¹

The only thing that is **compulsory** is that **married christians should not divorce**¹²

The key verse to understand the whole passage is this one :

1Corinthians 7,7 *I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.*

So the question is : **what is my gift ?**

If it is being single, I should better stay single,
otherwise I could build a destructive relationship (v28)

If it is marriage, I should better marry, to avoid burning (v9 - *with passion* [NIV] is not in greek).

Singleness is an other tool of God to achieve other purposes.

⁹ **Romans 1,23** [People] *exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images (...)* They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator (...) ²⁷ *In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, etc...*

¹⁰ **1Cor 7,38** *So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.*

¹¹ Even if Paul prefers single life because it is the situation in which he finds himself (v6b) and therefore he thinks single life is better than marriage (v38) **all what he says on marriage is not a requirement from the Lord (v6a.12.25).**

¹² **1Cor 7,10-11** *To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. 11 But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.*

It is not a **shame** It is neither a **glory** (as Middle Age monks thought and taught)
It can also be only temporary.

And here, just before I conclude,

I just would like to say a very very little word about a taboo : I mean **masturbation**
As you have seen in my table, there was a + between **brackets** in single life column.

Masturbation is part of human sexuality,

but how to consider it from a theological point of view ?

→ Is it the proof of an incapacity to lift our soul up to God ?

→ Is it the expression of selfishness ?

→ Is it a sin ?

To answer “yes” to those questions is the same as saying “yes” to Augustine's theory of original sin and consequently it is also saying “yes” to greek philosophers like Plato who taught that those who are spiritual should lift *themselves* up to heaven (out of the cavern).

But **this is not what Jesus teaches** :

He *became flesh* because it is impossible for humans to reach God.

That is why God decided to come to reach out to humans by becoming flesh.

→ This is the contrary of Plato's philosophy.

So if God created us with sexual desires, it is not to be focused on repressing it.

Masturbation is **not against love** : It does not hurt anyone.

Unless associated with **pornography** or if it becomes **addiction**.

So (in my opinion) it is not a sin : (cf survey)

No scripture is against it (Even Gn 38 sin of **Onân** → *onanism* ; doesn't talk about it)

There is no psychological side effect to it, if it is not addictive and compulsory

It does not weaken the character as we often taught it

unless addiction (1Corinthians 6,12)

but addiction weakens whatever it is (food, TV, video games...)

It is not destroying what God created or wants to create.

Considering it a sin comes from the middle age and reformation admiration of Augustine's theology which comes from plato's philosophy.

Considering it a sin is considering that God made a mistake in creation.

Or that mankind was spoiled by original sin but then, if we want to remain logical,
in every sexual desire, even in married couple, there is concupiscence.

There is no middle way between both views.

Having said it is important to warn people against addiction which can come with onanism.

Because when addictive, the brain gets used to pleasure (endorphins) and claims more
which lead to porn and more.

So I am not encouraging disciples to “practice” it

but I encourage not to be overwhelmed by guilt when doing it.

Lets conclude

So as Paul says : **1Corinthians 7,17** *each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them.* (NIV = accurate translation)

The truth is that **we should live as disciples wether singles or married**. And if married :

1Corinthians 7,5 *Do not deprive each other...*

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Michelle ASHFORD, *Masters of Sex* (Saison 1, épisode 5, 2013-2015), d'après le roman de Thomas Maier, avec Michael Sheen et Lizzy Caplan.

- i Il est considéré comme Père de l'Eglise bien que condamné pour hérésie à la fin du 2ème siècle par Irénée de Lyon.
- ii Le terme de *concupiscence* restera un pivot de la pensée théologique ultérieure en matière de sexualité et de mariage. C'est aussi en s'appuyant sur ce concept qu'il prouve la déchéance de tout être humain : « **nul n'est pur de péché en votre présence, pas même le petit enfant dont la vie n'est que d'un jour sur la terre** » ; « En quoi ai-je donc péché alors ? Etait-ce un péché de convoiter le sein en pleurant ? Si je convoitais maintenant avec une pareille ardeur, non pas le sein nourricier mais l'aliment convenable à mon âge, on me raillerait et on me reprendrait à bon droit. Ce que je faisais était répréhensible [...] Oui, c'était une avidité mauvaise ». (Les Confessions Livre 1, chapitre VIII).
- Mais c'est aussi la faiblesse du raisonnement d'Augustin dont on voit qu'il est gêné par la nécessité de la sexualité pour perpétuer l'humanité. On le voit par exemple lorsqu'il écrit : « *Comme le mariage est resté légitime, malgré cette intervention du mal, des imprudents pensent que ces mouvements désordonnés de la concupiscence sont parties intégrantes du bien même du mariage. Or, sans être doué d'une grande subtilité, il suffit du bon sens le plus vulgaire pour comprendre que le mariage, dans sa nature, est aujourd'hui ce qu'il était dans nos premiers parents. En tant qu'il est le moyen établi par Dieu pour continuer et propager la société, le mariage est bon en lui-même; ce qui est mal dans le mariage, c'est uniquement ce qui vient de la concupiscence, ce qui cherche à se soustraire aux regards et à rester dans le secret le plus profond. Toutefois, ce mal lui-même, le mariage le tourne en bien, et c'est là sa gloire, quoiqu'il rougisse de ne pouvoir exister sans ce mal. Quand un boiteux se met en marche pour parvenir à un but légitime, cette marche, quoique défectueuse en elle-même, ne rend pas mauvaise la fin obtenue, comme aussi la bonté de cette fin n'a pas la vertu de rendre belle une marche par elle-même défectueuse. Appliquant cet exemple au mariage, nous disons que la concupiscence qui en est inséparable ne saurait le rendre intrinsèquement mauvais, comme aussi la bonté intrinsèque du mariage ne justifie pas à nos yeux la concupiscence* ».
- iii « Dans une nature déjà corrompue par l'acte conjugal, la chair n'aurait pu naître sans être imprégnée du péché originel » THOMAS D'AQUIN, *Somme Théologique*, IIIa, q.28, a.1 puis IIIa, q.29, a.2
→ disponible en ligne : <http://docteurangelique.free.fr/bibliotheque/sommes/4sommethologique3a.htm>
- iv Je donne ici cet exemple d'un article accessible en ligne (en anglais) afin que chacun puisse se faire une idée. Eugene F. ROGERS Jr, *An Argument for Gay Marriage*, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3069>
- v Voir par exemple l'article de George HUNSINGER « There is a Third Way: Theses for the Crisis in Our Church », *The presbyterian outlook*, November 25, 2001
→ disponible en ligne : <https://pres-outlook.org/2001/11/there-is-a-third-way-theses-for-the-crisis-in-our-church/>
- vi Paul RICŒUR, « La sexualité, la merveille, l'errance, l'énigme », *Revue Esprit*, N°289, Novembre 1960
- vii Il ne faut donc pas confondre un signe avec un symbole. Le Symbole est un signe mais il est plus qu'un signe car il participe à la réalité qu'il désigne alors que le signe ne fait que renvoyer vers autre chose. Le corps est un signe de la réalité spirituelle. Si j'utilise mal mon corps, c'est le signe que ma spiritualité n'est pas profonde.
- viii « Le corps, et lui seul, est capable de rendre visible l'invisible : le spirituel et le divin. Il a été créé pour amener dans la réalité visible du monde le mystère caché de toute éternité en Dieu, et ainsi en être le signe » JEAN-PAUL II, *Audience du 20 février 1980*