

Kenōsis in sexuality

Author:
David T. Williams¹
Affiliation:
¹Centre for Theology and Religion, University of Fort Hare, South Africa
Correspondence to:

David Williams

Email:

dwilliams@ufh.ac.za

Postal address:

PO Box X1314, Alice 5700, South Africa

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Recent decades have witnessed both a shift in sexual standards, and the loss of the Biblical authority which has traditionally motivated them. This has been the case even with Christians. It is therefore necessary to suggest a new motive for morality, especially in this area. A possibility is the idea of the imitation of Christ, adopting the principles on which he acted, which can be summed up as *kenōsis*, or self-limitation. Jesus was fundamentally limited through being incarnate; human beings are likewise limited, also with regard to their sexuality. Jesus adopted the practice of self-limitation, seen in his humility; Christians, in imitation of him, likewise should practise self-limitation. Indeed, the manifestation and practice of sexuality is fundamentally limited in any case by its very nature. If the principle of *kenōsis* is applied in the areas of marriage and divorce, and in related issues such as homosexuality or chastity, it serves to underpin what is a traditional set of practices in a way consistent with a Christian world-view.

Introduction: The need for Christian guidelines in sexuality

Over the last half-century or so there has been a fundamental shift in ethical standards, especially in the western world. Such a change must be painful to those who seek to uphold traditional Christian values. The shift has been particularly dramatic in the area of sexuality, where practices condemned for centuries are openly participated in. Society is paying the price in the escalation of sexually transmitted infections, and particularly of the Human immunodeficiency virus or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV / AIDS).

It is even more painful when the shift has taken place within the ranks of the Church, amongst those who profess to be followers of Jesus. The question has become urgent as to how a Christian sexual ethic may be advocated effectively. Traditional answers are bankrupt. If the core of Christian ethic is love, as Jesus himself said, it is readily answered that it can in fact often be more loving to act in a freer way than previously; this is the stand of 'situational ethics', which denies the validity of a set of absolute commandments. If it is urged that a looser moral is contrary to the Bible, the rejoinder follows that Christians are not subject to the law, but are led by the Spirit; and there is no shortage of those who claim to justify their actions by claiming a special revelation of God.

Perhaps a clearer, and more Christian, approach is that of White (1979:109), who writes that 'the imitation of Christ is the nearest principle in Christianity to a moral absolute'. This finds common Biblical examples; White notes that it is basic to the appeals of both Peter and John (1979:192,202), but examples in other writers can be readily adduced.

But it is necessary to go even beyond the idea of the imitation of Christ for ethical guidance. Cochrane (1984:41) notes that the first temptation was to become more like God; it seemed very plausible! If ethics is just the imitation of Christ, we will find ourselves trying to live as a first century Jew, adopting unnecessary aspects of culture as well as his ethical example; perhaps a classic example is the wearing of hats by women in obedience to Paul's directive, where surely this was done not as right in itself, but as the cultural manifestation of a deeper principle. Luther makes this point when he insists that Christ is not so much the example, but the exemplar (Thielicke 1966:186); we do not so much follow his actions, for that would be a different form of legalism (Thielicke 1966:185), but follow the pattern of his life. This is particularly the case in the area of sexuality, for Jesus never married, and there is no record even of sexual activity, or even of attraction. Rather it is necessary to deduce an ethic from the overall principles which Jesus conformed to.

Kenōsis as a Christian pattern for sexuality

This pattern is presented in Philippians 2:5–11, where Paul appeals for the adoption of the 'mind which was in Christ Jesus' (Phlp 2:5). It is highly significant that he outlines this as a mind which

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followed the principle of *kenōsis* (Phlp 2:7). This naturally applies to Christian marriage, where Ephesians 5:25 urges husbands to love their wives. What is significant is the motive of imitation, 'as Christ loved the Church', and that the passage continues, 'and gave himself up for her'. The same principle can be extended to other questions of sexuality. Therefore, although it may not be a popular idea, I suggest that, in imitation of Christ, sexual expression involves self-limitation, or *kenōsis*.

Some immediate justification for the connection of ideas lies in the fact that sexuality is at the root of what is the major relationality of human nature. If indeed the nature of the person primarily lies in the relationships experienced by that person, sexuality is a major component of a person's nature. Blenkinsopp (1970:14) adds that salvation, which was achieved through Jesus' *kenōsis*, includes the body and therefore its sexuality. This must be expected, for at the very heart of the Christian understanding of God is that he is Trinity, that is relational. Then sexuality has an obvious link with the body; Paul sees sex as an act of the body, not the flesh, which means that it involves the whole being of a person (Piper 1942:34). Because Jesus was totally incarnate, having a full human body, a Christian ethic of sexuality must be based on incarnation (Williams 1996:297 following Nelson). This also suggests that it is kenotic, as that was the nature of the incarnation. By being a limitation, sexuality, just as the incarnation, gives opportunity to establish relationship.

Despite the negative perception of any limitation, especially in the modern West, it can be seen as good; this is of course especially seen in the *kenōsis* of Jesus, which must be viewed as good. This can also be applied to sexuality. Thielicke (1964:4) observes that whereas creation was uniformly described as good, the oneness of the original man was not; 'It is not good for the man to be alone' (Gn 2:18). In that case the sexual differentiation that followed must be seen as better. This is because it gives the possibility of deep interpersonal relationship, and thus is a better reflection of the Trinity. But this also means limitation; the Persons of the Trinity are inherently limited simply due to their individual nature; for example, the Father is limited simply because he is not the Son or the Spirit. Sexual differentiation, as a reflection of the differentiation in the Trinity, also involves limitation; a woman is not able to experience in the same way as a man, or *vice versa*. Thus, although this must be subject to qualification, every person is limited to one of the two sexes. In this case, as it cannot be questioned that the nature of the Trinity is good, even perfect, the limitation implied in sexuality is also good.

The limitation in sexuality is reflected in 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul outlines the nature of the Church as illustrated by the human body. His choice of the body, particularly as limited, is relevant for sexuality, for a person's sex is probably the first characteristic noted when a person sees somebody new; what, after all, is the first question asked about a newborn baby? His basic point is that each person in the Church is limited and needs to be complemented by others. This point is immediately relevant to his succeeding discussion on the

use of the *charismata*, for these too are limited; both in that no person ever receives all the gifts, but also that a person is still limited even with the enabling that the gifts provide. Just as the gifts are given for the benefit of the Church as a whole, he urges that a charismatic must also limit the use of the gifts for the sake of the entire body. Rolston (2001:55) points out that sexuality bonds individuals to others and thus enhances the community; indeed, relationship is exactly what is enhanced by acts of *kenōsis*.

Human sexual differentiation is intimately linked with procreation. It is through the limitation of every human being to one sex, that is through *kenōsis*, that normal reproduction is possible. This of course means that there is some parallel between the *kenōsis* in the act of creation and the human action of procreation. Rolston (2001:56) comments that most species reproduce sexually, an indication that nature is essentially kenotic. At the very basic level, sexual intercourse is an act of self-giving of each partner to the other; sexual reproduction is essentially altruistic (Rolston 2001:54). Also, just as the Father limited himself and gave the actual creation to the Son, so the actual procreation is by the female, as a result of the gift of the male. Christian theology has understood the act of creation as performed by the second Person, by the Word. This is perhaps an indication that the nature of the second Person is more to be seen in terms of the female than of the male; without pressing the vagaries of language, much early tradition referred to the second Person as *sophia* rather than as *logos*. Genesis describes the process of creation as that of separation, of limitation of each from the other; the essential feature of wisdom and of words is likewise that of delimitation. Complementing this, the Spirit is the agent of life-giving, the initiator of the inter-relationships that are the essence of life. These must also reflect limitation in exclusivity, for if relationships are too wide, the life is diseased and cancerous.

The experience of sexuality as limitation

Biologically, every human being, as other animals, actually has the characteristics of both sexes. From birth until about six weeks there is no anatomical or physiological difference; only after that do sexual characteristics develop as determined in the chromosomes (Mahoney 1983:72). Thereafter, there is difference in that each gender has developed one set of organs only and not the other – in other words, it is limited. (This is of course a generalisation.) Genesis 2 describes the introduction of sexual differentiation, that is the limitation of each. Cochrane (1984:37) comments that the man was in a deep sleep; even this process, as any creation, was kenotic! Here Blenkinsopp (1970:23) feels that the common ancient view was that the sexual act was a means of return to primordial unity. Thus Thielicke (1964:5) rejects Brunner's statement that there are two types of human beings, rather seeing a polarity within humanity. An individual is fully complete, but there is *kenōsis* of one sex; it is still there, but limited in function. This parallels the attributes of God, which in *kenōsis*

are not absent, but limited in that they are not used as they could be. In this case it is natural that every individual is a mix of homosexual and heterosexual inclination; it depends on the degree of *kenōsis*. This also implies that a person is not incomplete whilst in the single state, even if he or she may feel unfulfilled.

The limitation is not emptying. *Kenōsis*, despite the common translation, means restriction, but not complete abandonment. God did not limit himself in creation to the extent of deism, and Jesus never lost all to the extent of non-existence! This means that any person will still have the characteristics of the other sex, and a well-rounded personality probably demands this; excessive maleness or femaleness is destructive of relationship. It is this balance of difference and similarity that enables relationship, and it is therefore significant that Jesus became incarnate in the 'likeness' of human flesh. Sexual activity parallels the incarnation in rejecting domination and identity, whilst embracing cooperation.

Incidentally, there is absolutely no substance to the objection sometimes raised by feminists that Jesus, as a male, could die only for males. In his dying, his sexuality became irrelevant, and he died as a human being for human beings. Even if he was crucified naked as a further twist to the horror, sexual matters must have been far from his mind and from the minds of those who witnessed the events that enabled atonement. On the basis of salvation enabled by the *kenōsis* of Christ, there is therefore a practical equality between the sexes (Gl 3:28). Here Tribble (1992:10) correctly observes that there is no inherent inferiority in women being taken from the male; men came from the ground, yet dominate it! She also points out that the dominion of Genesis 1:28 does not include women.

The implication of the limitation of each person to one sex is extremely significant. Because of this, the deepest of all interpersonal relationships, that which is expressed sexually, has been made possible. If people were sexless, that depth of relationship would not be possible. Limitation therefore enables relationship. This is a parallel to the *kenōsis* of Jesus in his assumption of humanity. That limitation was an essential precursor to the act of atonement which enabled the relationship between God and those who would accept his salvation. Here Johnson (1997:281) suggests that a fundamental reason for gender is that it enables the portrayal in this age of the greatest relation of all, between Christ and his Church. He notes that this implies that Christians relate to God as female, which would be appropriate because they are recipients of his grace and are obedient to him.

The limitation to one sex carries a further implication in that it usually involves a further limitation to the roles accepted in specific cultures. Martinson (1996:111) comments that although the biological differences between the sexes are actually very small, the situation is quite different culturally, where men and women are more different than alike. This has often been galling to women, who have found themselves

restricted and even oppressed simply due to their gender, especially when they are aware of being as competent as, if not more so than, the men who are doing what they would love to be engaged in. Coakley (2001:207) comments that feminists tend to reject *kenōsis* as they see it as restrictive. It is interesting that the modern world has witnessed an explosion in working women. This may be understood not only from a desire to earn money, but as a search for status and for a measure of economic independence, in other words from a desire to overcome limitation. Ironically, of course, such a step results in other limitations, now effectively self-imposed. A comment on this point is that Paul is often accused of misogyny, even forbidding women to speak in public (1 Cor 14:34). Thielicke (1964:149) remarks that this is a contemporary social ordinance with no kerygmatic authority; Paul would have accepted the essential equality of the sexes (cf. Gl 3:28), but respected social mores. Any hint of misogyny is rather negated in the observation that several of his friends were women (Blenkinsopp 1970:73). The ideal, which will be eschatologically realised, is the availability of all roles to all (Martinson 1996:114). Paul is effectively requesting self-limitation for the sake of others, which is indeed its fundamental motive, as in the case of Jesus. Perhaps a parallel is evident in his attitude to eating meat offered to idols and to the observance of special days (Rm 14).

The practice of sexuality as *kenōsis*

As sexuality is such a significant aspect of being human, issues relating to it are always important. My particular concern is to draw attention to a criterion for evaluation which perhaps should be taken more notice of. The essence of the experience of Jesus, from the start of incarnation to his death on the cross, was the acceptance of self-limitation, which, as described in Philippians 2, progressively deepened. Here it may be suggested that the essence of Christian sexual relationships is likewise an acceptance of limitation. Not only did Jesus limit himself in order to be incarnate, so that limitation was inherent to him, but he continued to choose self-limitation in his humility. Blenkinsopp (1970:86) observes that Jesus deliberately limited himself in the area of sexuality; he was 'tempted in all respects' (Heb 4:15). Conversely, sexual sin, from a Christian perspective, is a denial of such limitation. It must be noted that according to the Genesis stories, the heart of sin was the desire to transcend limitation. Whilst it is legitimate to seek to overcome the limitations of a person, such as inherent in sexual identity, there is a time simply to accept them. Thus Jesus, in accepting humanity, did not use the possibility of overcoming its limitations, as the incident of the Temptations demonstrates. The same is true for his Passion. Whereas on another occasion he would appear to have avoided a problem by passing through the mob that was trying to kill him, in the Passion he refused to do anything except take all that was flung at him.

The goodness of self-limitation lies in what it enables, primarily relationship. It may be suggested that *eros*, the sexual drive, is an aspect of a desire for union (Blenkinsopp 1970:7); this parallels Jesus' *kenōsis*, which

came from a desire for union with humanity, that is a desire for their salvation. This would mean that the sex act is primarily motivated by the desire to relate fully to one's spouse, and not by procreation (Piper 1942:47). Piper (1942:49) points out that even if one motive for sex is to overcome mortality, this does not arouse sexual passion. Of course, wanting immortality is an aspect of a desire for salvation.

Complementing this, the Christian ethic of self-limitation manifests as exclusivity. As Tracy (2006:58) points out, the consensus of historical Christian teaching as well as that of many modern Christians, notably evangelicals, is that sexual relations are only appropriate within marriage. This follows from the parallels with worship of one God only, especially in the polytheistic world of the Biblical environment, and from the New Testament extension to Christ and the Church (Eph 5:23). It also follows from Christ's *kenōsis*, insofar as he became a slave, and a slave is normally obedient to one master only, as Jesus himself pointed out (Mt 6:24). This means abstinence from sexual relationships before a full commitment to one person, usually in a marriage, and from those with other persons after such a commitment. Tracy (2006:61f) suggests that sexual abstinence actually has positive benefits for the one following that practice, despite the common belief that it is harmful and unnatural. This would tie in with the point that the *kenōsis* of Jesus was ultimately beneficial. He remarks (Tracy 2006:66) that self-restriction is generally accepted as a beneficial discipline in almost every walk of life, except the sexual.

Christian practice has traditionally restricted the practice of sexuality to marriage, and rejected any intercourse either before the formal commitment in a wedding or outside the formal marriage bond. Indeed, more than this, the attitude of several early Christians, such as Aquinas and Augustine, was that the sexual act should be limited to procreation; most today feel, however, that it is a part of the union between partners. Nevertheless, the physical side may need limitation, as Paul enjoins (1 Cor 7:5). A marriage relationship does not demand sex to be good (Piper 1942:30); in fact, even procreation is possible without sex, although very unnaturally. This comment is of course also applicable to a homosexual relationship, which does not require physical sex.

Getting married is effectively accepting the practice of limitation. This manifests in two ways. Firstly, a married person is not able to relate to members of the other sex in a way that would have been possible before marriage. This does not mean sexual intimacy, which would be forbidden in any case, but the very existence of the partner must restrict any real openness. Nothing should be said or done that would affect the relationship in the marriage. A person concerned for his or her reputation and so Christian witness will even be hesitant about visiting members of the opposite sex in a way that can be misconstrued. An example of this is that a minister making a pastoral visit to a member of the opposite sex may well feel that it is advisable to be accompanied by

his or her spouse. In fact, the sexual climate is changing so rapidly that this precaution is also becoming applicable to visits to people of the same sex!

Secondly, the very existence of a marriage relationship is limiting. Paul discusses this point in 1 Corinthians 7 and goes so far as to advise Christian workers not to marry, simply because the very existence of the partner and the desire to act in such a way as to please them is inevitably restrictive and may even affect the practice of Christian faith. Examples abound of Christians who are married, even to people who are not directly antagonistic to the faith, who complain that they are not able to do what they want to. Even the existence of a committed Christian partner can be restrictive, even though there may be complete sympathy for the faith.

Christian marriage has moreover been monogamous, so that polygamous unions are not permitted. Yet another limitation! Thielicke (1964:178) comments that Christianity has always resulted in a tendency to monogamy, as this elevates the woman as a person. This is exactly what God does in *kenōsis*, self-limiting in order to give free choice to people, thus elevating them. However, Thielicke (1964:180) comments that monogamy is not a condition for Christianity. Christian practice has caused a great deal of stress when, in cultures which accept polygamy, the man has accepted Christianity and has been told to put away all wives after the first. The practice of polygamy in any case leads to tremendous hardship and suffering.

Thus limitation is an inevitable part of marriage. Indeed, the relationship in Christian marriage must be kenotic if it is to reflect the action of the creator. Ephesians 5:21 enjoins each partner to be subject to the other; this is clear in respect of the wife, who is commanded to submit 'as to the Lord, for the man is head of the woman' (Eph 5:23). Perhaps less immediately obvious is the attitude of the husband, but love [*agapē*] always means self-giving. This is made very clear by the reason for that love, in that Christ 'gave himself up [for the church]' (Eph 5:25), which was of course by the act of *kenōsis*. Indeed, the nature of love, expressed to its human height in marriage, is kenotic, and so the *kenōsis* of Christ provides a pattern for it. Obviously the partners cannot stand on status, they will self-limit to serve each other in humility, even obey each other; and the commitment is to last until death.

However, the belief is common amongst Christians that a wife has to be totally submissive to the husband, believing that this is commanded in Ephesians 5:22. Obviously a wife in such a situation experiences definite limitation. It is not surprising that in many societies, women express an unwillingness to take the step of marriage, as they fear oppression by a husband. This results in either uncommitted cohabitation or a succession of partners. It is common that at the same time as there is a refusal to accept the implications of marriage, the natural desire for children results in a plethora of single-parent children, with very often the father not wanting to take the responsibility for children that the commitment of marriage would normally entail. Of course,

without the help of a father, the mother finds that situation even more restrictive. Surely Christian practice, however, is that both partners should limit themselves so that decisions are mutually made. It may be suggested that the dominion that the male has over the female both due to physical strength and from creation (1 Cor 11:3) must also be subject to *kenōsis*, again for the sake of the harmony within marriage. Thielićke (1964:155) says that when there is still disagreement, it is for the husband to decide; this is a solution prompted only due to the social context (1964:158).

Again, it is important to note that this limitation is really an essential accompaniment to the magnificent relationship that is marriage. Again, limitation enables relationship. Indeed, most people gladly accept the restrictions that marriage involves simply for the joy of the relationship. And once again, there is a parallel to the *kenōsis* of Jesus, in that the depths of self-limitation which he had experienced – and it must never be forgotten that it was voluntary – were experienced in order to enact atonement, in other words to produce the relationship between God and those who accept it. Perhaps it might be added that in a healthy marriage, each party is well aware of the sacrifice that the other is making, and in a real sense participates in it. When it comes to the atonement, it would be a caricature to stress the idea of penal substitution and the ‘amazing exchange’ to perceive that Jesus did all of the suffering and Christians none.

Even the practice of sexuality within marriage is subject to the principle of *kenōsis*. Paul writes that husbands and wives should not refuse each other (1 Cor 7:5). In other words, each may have to limit themselves when not wanting the other sexually. More than this, every spouse is aware of times when out of love for the other, it is necessary to exercise self-restraint. In both of these cases, self-limitation is done for the sake of the relationship. This is in line with the *kenōsis* of Christ, which was done for the sake of salvation, that is for the enabling and indeed for the strengthening of relationship with God. The reason that Paul gives is in fact not directly for the sake of the relationship within the couple, but for prayer, the relationship with God. But then, of course, if this is strengthened, the relationship between the couple would also improve as well.

Clearly much more could be said in this regard. Perhaps one vital point is that a successful marriage is very much a matter of a Christian mind, which is the purpose of Philippians 2; but resulting in a will that issues in action. It may be observed that a marriage is better when each partner is aware of the situation and feelings of the other, and each gives freedom to the other, not dominating. In his incarnation, which must be a parallel to marriage, Jesus gained awareness of what it is like to be human. Moreover, just as Christ’s *kenōsis* was an act of will, so marriage is likewise; despite the common delusion, it does not depend on continual attraction, but on commitment. Such love is not an emptying of essence; neither party loses, but rather gains, just as *kenōsis* in God is not an absolute loss, but a restriction for the sake of benefit.

Part of this gain was the salvation of people into a relationship with God, a ‘new creation’ (2 Cor 5:17). Similarly, one

purpose of marriage, even if not the only one, is procreation. This may be affirmed as good; there is no Gnostic refusal to bring children into a wicked world (cf. Martin 1995:205). However, family size should be limited; *kenōsis* is for the sake of relationship, and a family is too big if its size precludes adequate relationships and mutual care, not least economic provision. This should not be seen as a refusal to obey the ‘dominion mandate’ to multiply and fill the earth (Gn 1:28). It would be deviating from the purpose of this article to defend *kenōsis* in detail in the context of this, but a few comments should be in order. Firstly, the dominion mandate has been criticised extensively as the root of capitalism, and specifically exploitation and oppression. At the very least it must be qualified in its application. It must, for example, be understood in the context of a primitive earth with no population problem and little prospect of ecological damage. Unbridled dominion and population expansion in the modern context can only result in the loss of harmony, both between people and with the environment. Secondly, the command was given in an unfallen state; it must be clear that the punishment for sin as outlined in Genesis 3:16–9 directly affected both aspects of the mandate. This would indicate that the command of Genesis 1:28 must be understood in a clearly qualified sense, and in particular that both dominion and multiplication must be limited for the sake of harmony. They are dependent on specific circumstance, even something as basic as income (Thielićke 1964:203).

Of course dominion does require numbers. Here it may be observed that dominion is in the context of sexuality (‘let them have dominion’), but probably no more than plurality is intended. It is in this plurality that Barth (1958:181f) finds the meaning of the image; he notes that the first occurrence of the term in Genesis 1:26 is immediately followed by ‘male and female’. God may be affirmed as plural, but not sexual; there is no idea of divine marriage in Christianity (Monti 1995:198). Incidentally, Tribble (1992:18) points out that it is equality and harmony that enables real dominion.

More than just the relationship between husband and wife, the relationship with the results of that union will also exhibit *kenōsis* if they are to be successful. Of course, parenting is restrictive in itself. When a child is still a baby, the control over it by the parents is almost absolute, but as the child grows, the parents should gradually lessen their control by limiting their own action, giving increasing freedom. Thielićke (1964:206) comments that refusing to have children reduces the purpose of marriage; he cites Bertrand Russell’s view that a childless marriage is no marriage (*ibid*:209).

With the oneness of the flesh also comes the command to be faithful (Thielićke 1964:251). Multiple relationships, whether consecutive or concurrent, most definitely are excluded by the traditional ethic. This goes against much modern belief and practice. Tracy (2006:60) notes the common modern rejection of the Biblical ethic, hardly surprising in a postmodern world. Divorce has become almost an accepted feature of modern western society. This should be qualified, as the practice of co-habitation has become more common,

allowing 'divorce' without all the associated messiness and expense that it would entail otherwise. It may be suggested that whilst the Christian ethic is of permanent monogamy, the issue of a formalised marriage may well be secondary to this. The commitment of traditional marriage is a mockery in many if not most cases, and is incidental to the key issue of a single exclusive lifetime relationship. In some societies it even has unwanted implications, such as financial ones, which can be avoided by living together.

Over the last few decades, homosexuality has replaced divorce as the deviation from traditional Christian values most in the public eye. It can be seen as a refusal to limit sexual expression to the opposite sex, that is a rejection of *kenōsis*. Homosexuality has become particularly contentious in an African context, with many political and Church leaders being very hostile to any homosexual practice; the issue is even threatening to split the Anglican communion. It is perhaps significant that opposition to homosexuality has been characteristic to Africa in light of the stress on community there; Monti (1995:252) notes that some opposition to homosexual marriage is based on the view that it is detrimental to society. *Kenōsis* is, of course, beneficial to society.

A common view is that for some, homosexuality is not learned, but innate; in this case, it is not a matter of will, which is the case for adopting *kenōsis*. This is a defence from the perspective of creation, insofar as appeal is made to the suggestion that God made a person as he or she is, so it must be good. Of course the same argument can be applied to other differences from the norm, such as blindness or the disposition to over-eat; the latter is perhaps increasingly significant in the light of increasing obesity and its results, often again simply due to a lack of self-limitation. As regards sexuality, a contrary suggestion is that the Genesis account specifies the creation of humanity in two sexes, so that the exclusion of the relation between opposite sexes is wrong (Tate 2003:78,80). Here Thielicke (1964:269f) accepts the existence of homosexuality as a genetic condition, seeing it, like disease, as a result of the fall, and therefore not culpable as a predisposition (Thielicke 1964:282), and, he believes, incurable (Thielicke 1964:284). This opinion is not uniform. Davis (1993:99) asserts that homosexuality is learned, not genetic, and that changing sexual preference is not particularly difficult with modern techniques, whilst Nelson (1994:382) insists that therapies to change orientation are discredited. Walker (1997:157) observes that most who advocate a liberal view accept the latter, but he feels that evidence suggests that this is only the case for a very small minority. Wrigley and Stalley (1997:173) are even more explicit, saying that there is no evidence for genetic origin (cf. also Tate 2003:79). Citing Masters and Johnson's *Human sexuality*, they assert that there is 'considerable evidence to show that homosexuality is not a fixed all-life condition'. In this regard Tate (2003:79) remarks that although some homosexual experience is fairly common, it is usually temporary.

Even if a person is genetically disposed to homosexuality, they are not forced to practise it. The same is true for other

deviations from a Christian sexual ethic; they are never forced. Temptation is not sin, as seen in the experience of Christ, who was far from exempt from the former, but did not yield (Heb 4:15). In this regard it is often pointed out that the *kenōsis* of Christ was voluntary, an act of his will, and prompted by love. Here Martin (1995:212) comments that Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 was more concerned about desire than actual intercourse; the same was true of Jesus, and several later Christian writers, such as Clement of Alexandria, who saw evil in the desire (Martin 1995:215). Schreiner (2006:73) would not be alone in claiming that homosexual temptation can be overcome in the grace of God. Likewise Wimber and Springer (1987:28) claim that Christian healing is effective not just for physical disease, but also for 'problems like homosexuality'. These views would support the assertion that a Christian response to the homosexual urges that do come to many at some stage (Wrigley & Stalley 1997:170) is not to accede to them, but to limit oneself.

This would also apply to issues of much longer standing. Abnormal sexual practices such as bestiality or incest are also a refusal to be limited to the more widely accepted norms. This, with qualification, also applies to masturbation. Birth control seems almost totally acceptable in modern society; even if this may well be practised to avoid the limitation of the calendar, it may well be done, as the *kenōsis* of Christ, for the sake of enhancing relationship. Abortion can also be seen as the refusal to accept limitation by imposing it upon another, that is a refusal of grace, rejecting the sanctity of life (Thielicke 1964:226f).

It is almost certainly true to say that the incidence of homosexuality and of divorce, both official and unofficial, has increased over recent decades. The same is also true of promiscuity, although it has always been a feature of society, and often even not particularly hidden. A person is even thought to be strange or abnormal if he or she does not practise, could it be said, as much sex as possible? May it also be observed that the sexual practices closely mimic the religious ones? Certainly modern society practises hopping from church to church at whim, refusing commitment to any, whilst many practise polytheism, whether in westernised Hinduism or in the idolatry of materialism.

The practices of homosexuality, divorce and promiscuity all result from a desire for pleasure, which goes against the sacrifice and responsibility, limitation in other words, demanded in marriage (Thielicke 1964:201). Christ's experience of *kenōsis* must largely have excluded pleasure. All three practices may also be viewed as a refusal to accept limitation in a more fundamental way. Both promiscuity and divorce stem from a refusal to limit sexual relationships to one person, and thus denying the exclusivity that is fundamental both to the nature of God and to his worship. It is really no accident that the polytheism of ancient Canaan was associated with polysexuality, in contrast to the uncompromising limitation of worship expressed in the first commandment. Likewise, the battle against religious syncretism has constantly been reflected in the battle of the Church for sexual purity.

Self-limitation may well be correct, but it should not be overdone – *kenōsis* is not total emptying. It is a feature of life that reaction to something is often overdone, and it therefore is hardly surprising that Christian practice often adopted the ultimate, as in early asceticism. When applied to sexuality, excessive self-limitation manifests in celibacy; the Catholics even make it a requirement (at least officially) for the priesthood. Perhaps the irreverent thought of the last parenthesis can be followed by another, that if monogamy is motivated by monotheism, then an over-reaction of celibacy is a parallel to spiritual atheism? Nevertheless, there is perhaps a desire here to imitate God more closely, who is himself celibate (Blenkinsopp 1970:24), so also a reflection of his *kenōsis*. However, even bishops are enjoined to be the husbands of one wife, not of none (1 Tm 3:2). The image of God may to some extent be seen in creativity, but does not lie in procreation (Blenkinsopp 1970:27). Interestingly, a rejection of the traditional Christian view of marriage has sometimes gone along with advocacy of celibacy. Of course, without sexual practice, a person may as well be homosexual!

Celibacy does of course find Biblical support in Paul, especially his statement that ‘it is good for a man not to touch a woman’ (1 Cor 7:1). Martin (1995:205f) rejects a gnostic influence here, which may well underpin celibacy; of course this is also contrary to Christ’s *kenōsis*, which is an affirmation of a material humanity. He thinks that Paul has generally been seen as advocating marriage only for the weak, although Protestants have generally seen him in favour of marriage. The latter is perhaps more likely, in view of the Old Testament metaphor of God’s marriage with Israel (Piper 1942:12), and the parallel picture of Christ and the Church in Ephesians 5. Paul’s injunction was motivated rather by the situation (1 Cor 7:28) but also by a desire for single-mindedness in service, a benefit of this form of self-limitation. Marriage is not an absolute; Christian devotion may include leaving one’s spouse (Lk 18:29) (Blenkinsopp 1970:92). Wholeness does not depend on sexual relationships, but on Christ (Tate 2003:85). Johnson (1997:273) comments that the Christian conception of calling liberates from any illegitimate shame at not fulfilling traditional stereotypes.

The transcending of *kenōsis*

After the horror of the dereliction of the cross came the glory of the resurrection; after the depths of *kenōsis* came the exaltation and glorification. Limitation will be removed. This is seen in Christ, to whom every knee will bow (Phlp 2:10), and in creation itself, for in the re-creation there will be no night and no sea (Rv 21:1, 25).

The same is true of relationships, for in the final state there will be no marriage. I have suggested elsewhere (Williams 2004:236) that this is because the exclusivity that

is fundamental to marriage is no longer relevant, that it will be possible to relate fully to all. The limitation of sexuality will probably be transcended completely and the original androgyny of Adam restored (cf. Martin 1995:205); the suggestion of Johnson (1997:285) that we will be effectively female neglects the transcending of marriage. Sexual relationships will be necessary no longer, as the limitation of death will be no longer, and therefore there will be no more need for procreation. In fact, neither multiplication nor dominion is necessary any longer and comes to an end with the reversal of *kenōsis*.

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