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A Christian View of Sex in Art:

An Address by John Stuart Peck

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This address is an attempt to come to grips with some very urgent problems of our age on the subject of the portrayal of sex or sexual subjects in art. As I see it, this is a leading difficulty. Our culture confronts us with art products which have to do with sex and which are unacceptable to our moral sense as Christians, and we call these products "pornographic." We are also confronted with some art products which offend the social standards of the larger society to which we belong. These products, I would suggest, should be called "obscene." Obscenity, of course, is a larger question, but it obviously must come into this discussion. Now, if we want to talk about what obscenity is, and is not, in art, we might look for an example in the Bible. When we do, our minds must immediately go to one book: The Song of Solomon. If we look at that book, we have to admit that in the Scriptures themselves there is artwork about sex, and, furthermore, there is one point in chapter seven that is so potentially explicit that most translations actually muff it. Nevertheless, we would not call these passages pornographic or obscene. We could call them "erotic." So we've already suggested some differences in terms—"pornographic," "obscene," and "erotic"—terms which are mistakenly used as if they were interchangeable.

We must also establish at the onset that the question of sex in art not only involves pictorial art, it involves art in literature, dance, and music as well. (I'm going to leave out music because I think it is a special case.) This makes the issue more complicated, and it is still further complicated by two additional factors in our society. One is that the mass media (a phenomenon specific to our age) has raised the public availability of all types of art to new levels—worldwide levels. The other complication is that in the U.S. or even in so small a country as Britain, national culture has become so fragmented that the way in which people read a work of art is affected not so much by their nationality as by their particular subculture, which has its own style, its own images, and its own linguistic connotations. Consequently, the context in which we must approach the question of sex in art is analogous, really, to the Tower of Babel. Post-Babel, as it were, people who are in conversation or controversy on the subject of sex in art are often not talking *to* each other: they are talking, as it were, *past* each other. We no longer share a single meaning system. What may be acceptable to one group can be profoundly offensive to another. This is a very common problem today. In fact, problems of political correctness are now becoming so complex as to make communication in some cases almost impossible. No matter what you do as an artist, you're going to upset *somebody*. And something which might be pornographic to some may well be merely erotic to others.

Fundamentals for a Christian View of Sex in Art

Despite all these complications, I think that Christians should be able to develop some kind of consensus on the issue of sex in art, within a Christian worldview. We have got to work at that together. I say this because, you see, Christians nowadays often tend to react to pornography, for instance, with expressions of emotional disgust. This is understandable, of course, although it seems to me that they are reacting to the artwork's obscenity rather than its morality, and that the moral issue is often imposed on top of that. (There's a lot of inconsistency when it comes to sex in art, and we need to bear that in mind.) Other Christians want to show that they embrace the tolerance of our culture, so they will demonstrate a kind of codified toleration for the same artwork that disgusts others.

At the same time, inconsistent and emotional responses to art continue to cloud the issue. Reactions to nudity in art are an excellent example. I subtitled a recent book on the subject, "Goya Got over Andy Warhol," because both Goya and Warhol present

frontal nudes; yet Christians generally object to the latter artist and not the former. When you actually ask a lot of card-carrying evangelicals—and not just them but other folks who object to that kind of thing—they can't actually give you a reasoned answer as to why one artist's nudes are offensive and the other's are not. There's no rationale. It's some kind of instinct. And if all we've got as Christians is a critique based on a sort of inarticulate instinct, we're never going to convince people outside of the faith that our attitudes are anything more than irrational prejudice. What's more, we will never ourselves be able to produce worthwhile erotic art without having a guilty conscience—and that's a serious phenomenon. John Donne, a 17th century English poet, wrote an amazing erotic poem in which he likens his beloved to the newfound America; and he works through her charms in considerable detail in the poem and it's not pornographic. Erotic but not pornographic. You get overwhelmed by a different kind of experience. Donne was a devout believer; but I don't think contemporary Christians are capable any longer of producing that kind of literature. We would be frightened. Maybe I'm wrong, but certainly we will have problems about producing erotic literature which is really true to the biblical vision of sex for our generation--a generation that desperately needs that vision. Desperately needs it.

A Characterization of Art

So, as Christians, we've got to try and develop some consistency in our approach to the issue of sex in art. And, in order to do that, there are two things we've got to do first. We've got to talk about the nature of art, and we've also got to talk about the nature of sex, and see how these two are going to interact. To move ahead we need not a definition but a characterization of art. So, here we are. A work of art is the arrangement of raw materials in creation aimed at expressing some experience of insight into an aspect of life's meaning implicit in the subject. The subject can be immense or it can be trivial. Art achieves its effect in an oblique way by creating a part of an imaginary world and it aims at provoking and enabling the recipient to discover and to be initiated into an experience analogous to that of the artist. In so doing (and this is a vital part for our discussion), it leaves the recipient free to choose an appropriate response. I hope that certain implications of a characterization of art like that become fairly obviously relevant straightaway. One is that if we are to appreciate the way in which sex can be properly treated in Christian art, we've got to explore what is a typically Christian vision of what sex is about, which we will get to in a minute. A second implication is this: If art is an oblique communication, then it won't do to criticize the material as if it's simply giving information. This is a serious issue, especially for us evangelical Christians who tend to have a tradition of what I might call propositional faith, a faith which involves receiving the information and believing

it, rather than getting involved in personal relationships. For example, the plots of many operas involve love affairs which can only be described as adulterous, for instance *Tristan and Isolde*. Now, it might be objected that such a thing should not be portrayed in an opera by Christians. But the question to be asked about *Tristan and Isolde* is, "What does this work suggest?" Not, "What does it state?", but "What does it suggest?" Does it suggest that adultery is commendable, or fun, or desirable? In some cases one feels that it is suggested that it is a moral obligation. I think at worst in *Tristan and Isolde* the relationship is portrayed and suggested to be enormous unavoidable accident. By contrast, I think it could be said that some would suggest that adultery is fun—and I'm not only thinking of modern cases. I think some restoration drama is like that.

For art to be effective, it must be suggestive. It has to be illusory. Art works by two sort of basic principles, illusion and allusion. There's a kind of riddle quality about art. This is because it has to allow you to enter into it for yourself. It gives you clues and you have to work them out for yourself and then you enter in. Art therefore has to produce, in a sense, an illusion of reality. Essentially it offers us a kind of "let's pretend" situation. It creates a situation which we know isn't true but we pretend it is. It may be realistic; in fact, in a sense, it has to be realistic within the terms of the world that it's creating. But above all it must not be real—it must not be actual. The illusion must be maintained. I have problems with my oldest son who is a violinist and a perfectionist. When he was learning to play the violin, if he got a note slightly wrong he would stop. And I used to say, "Michael, this is unforgivable. Don't break the illusion. Anyway, 90% of your audience won't know it's the wrong note. Keep going." This is the essential thing. If you introduce the real world into your illusory world, you've messed it up. This is vital for our subject, I think. It's true in all sorts of ways. The stage, particularly, has conventions which preserve that illusion. In fact, I think a preoccupation with realism is a sign of artistic decadence. It's like it's a confession of failure. It puts the actual in place of the possible. Some material elements are very real but you can't use them on the stage. Imagine trying to stage a violent mugging and having the actor throw real nitric acid in the face of the victim, just like in real life. It wouldn't work. It would be very realistic, but you certainly wouldn't be able to find an actor who would or could play the part of the victim every night. Or suppose you were trying to portray warfare, so you sprayed the audience with real bullets from a machine gun. That would not be conducive to box office returns. Furthermore, that sort of realism is an admission of failure. You haven't been able to create a proper illusion. I am arguing that the portrayal of the sex act is of such an order. It needs to be implied rather than portrayed. Perhaps we can pursue that a little bit more in a minute when we return to discussing the nature of sex.

The important point is that there is a kind of art that intends to be sexually arousing; and when sexual arousal occurs, the art is introducing an involuntary response in its recipients. That's a serious issue, and it leads to a crucial question. If art works by provoking or stimulating the recipient into sharing the artist's experience, the question has to be raised, doesn't it, whether all experiences are of equal value, and indeed whether some are appropriate. For instance, in this age we're beginning to get wary of modern films which make us feel that violence is a natural, and therefore an acceptable, way to deal with situations that get on our nerves. Or we feel that because there's a lot of violence around, we must be prepared to use violence ourselves. In other words, we have to consider the values that are encouraged in our emotional response to the work. What kind of value then is attached to sex in a work of art?

A Christian View of Sex

It's this question of values that brings me back to the second major part of this subject, namely the distinctively biblical Christian meaning of sex—and there *is* a distinctive Christian meaning. (There are plenty of books written about this. I would recommend the work of Lewis Smietz on this subject, for some fundamentals of a Christian view.) There are several factors which are particularly significant for our discussion of the distinctively Christian meaning of sex. One is that in Scripture, sexuality is more significant than sexual experience. If you look at the founding narratives of Genesis, chapters 1–3, you see the stress there is on the significance of the difference between the sexes and their different functions, more than on the way that the differences are expressed physically. In particular, the chapters emphasize that sexuality is a function of our humanness as made in the image of God. The two are directly related: human beings are made in the image of God *and* they are made sexually differentiated. The two are intimately connected. This means that the founding documents of our faith suggest that sex is something more than simply a kind of physical conjunction like dogs copulating in the street. This leads us to the conclusion that sex—like everything else in human nature—is therefore symbolic. If a human being is made in the image of God and if that image is fundamental to his being, then human sexuality is part of the image of God. We may conclude from this that sexual behavior is symbolic in that it reflects something about God's nature. One might even say that sex, in this sense, is sacramental. In Scripture, sexual union is frequently used to illustrate the love of Yahweh for his people, especially to illustrate the exclusive, even jealous nature of His love. Indeed the very nature of the act of intercourse involves exclusivity. On the other hand it also involves a self-abandonment which is physically total. Sex is symbolic, therefore, of a mutual

commitment in which the two parties commit the control of their personal lives to each other, not simply commit their lives to each other but commit the *control* of their lives to each other. And it's this fact, as much as the biological drive, which makes the sex instinct so powerful.

It is interesting to note further that in the second chapter of Genesis, where the creation of the man and the woman is in closer focus, the dominant significance of human sexuality is more societal than personal. In this chapter, there isn't even a hint that the purpose of sex is reproduction. When you look at the history of Christian thinking about sex over the centuries, you will find that the morality of sexual behavior was often linked with whether it was going to produce babies or not. But if you look in the second chapter of Genesis, that isn't the predominant purpose at all. In fact, Eve's reproductive function isn't mentioned until after the Fall when, as Phyllis Tribble points out, Adam first calls her "havar" (the mother). If sex is connected with anything up until then, it is connected with being stewards of God's earth. This shifts the balance of interest quite profoundly, doesn't it? It becomes evident, looking at Genesis as a whole, that sex was not meant to dominate the life and the interest of human beings. It was not designed to take on the status of religious experience.

Therefore, when we look at the biblical vision of sex, we have to confess that something has gone profoundly wrong in our makeup. In the man-woman relationship generally in culture, women have become radically vulnerable. All the way through history, women have been dependent on the man's conscience for their status. So, as in Genesis 3, we find that to be a woman is to be in some way emotionally dependent: "to him will be your desire and he will dominate you." That's the problem. All this means the relationships—and we're not only talking marital relationships but also social relationships—have become distorted. And that fact makes it outstandingly difficult to judge the portrayal of sex in art. Clearly, sex is a creation of God, as Paul expressed it, and it is therefore to be received with thanksgiving. Also, as we have seen, there is the example of Scripture proclaiming that there is an erotic art which is acceptable to God. I mean, if He does talk about it, you can't argue, can you? With these issues in mind, then, we return to the question of the difference between the pornographic and the erotic in a Christian view.

Three Distinctives in a Christian View of Sex in Art

The Primacy of Relationship

It has to be accepted, of course, that human nature is capable of using *anything* pornographically, but that does not preclude there being a right place for the erotic. We must not let sin [hold] goodness ransom. Otherwise we wouldn't enjoy anything. To begin with, then, Christian erotic art will be more interested in the sexual *relationship* than in the act. I came across an outstanding example of this in the Tate Gallery in London some years ago and I've never forgotten it. It was a picture of a nude man and woman, a charcoal drawing, and it was life-size. The woman was lying on this couch completely naked. On the other side of the couch a man was . . . kneeling on the ground . . . facing the woman. The man was naked, and his penis was showing (not erect, incidentally, at that point, which I think was probably significant for the purpose of the picture). The point is that the expression on the man's face was brilliantly portrayed as one of sheer adoration, and I have never forgotten that. As we discussed, if you were going to look at that piece of art as information, you might well be thoroughly offended. You might say, "We mustn't have nude pictures." But if you looked at the relationship depicted in the artwork, the stress of the whole picture was on the way in which this man adored the woman. That was the thing. This special relationship was what absolutely illuminated itself in the picture. And this perfectly illustrates the point that I'm trying to make here. If you ignore that question of meaning and relationship, then what happens in practice (and we can see it happening in our culture) is that sex actually gets boring. And when sex gets boring, it has to be brought to life by the introduction of novelty—and that's a crucial problem in our society. That is what put us on this unending quest to bring sex back to life by finding new ways of doing it. In contrast, Christians should know that the secret of really enjoying sex—and I can say this after 40 years of marriage—is to have a living *relationship* with your partner. That's the point. Somehow we've got to relearn that, both for notions of sex in art and for sex in life.

Good Art Versus Pornography

Secondly, our art must aim at being good art. One of the chief complaints we can have about pornography, as you can infer from what I've said, is that pornography is bad art. It violates this principle. Pornography presents the recipient with erotic stimuli which arouse real-life response; so it introduces the very thing which breaks the illusion. And this intrudes a reality, then, into the "let's pretend" world. In a way, pornography is a kind of physical version of what propaganda is to the mind. It pre-empted the necessity for the recipient to work things out, and so make choices about a response. We may add here, also, that no artwork exists by itself. It has a context and the context in which we encounter the work has to be taken into account. I mean, if

you went into a home where there was one Goya nude on the wall—well, okay. If you found that there were Goya nudes all over the place and that the bathroom wall was covered with them, I think you would feel differently about a Goya nude. That's some of our problem today, because what we have is a culture that is saturated with erotic stimuli. On its own, any single stimuli might be quite innocent, but when they're all over the place we're up against something different. And what is happening in our culture is that people are being subjected to this kind of succession of erotic stimuli. I sometimes think a lot of the prevalent sexual disorders--pedophilia and the rest of the problems that shock us--are the product of a sexual instinct that has been prodded into over-activity to the extent that it's become explosive and expresses itself indiscriminately.

A Redemptive Character

Thirdly, sex in art from a Christian standpoint should be redemptive in character. By "redemptive," I mean that it will want to restore a vision of sex as God originally brought it into being. I think one important factor in this is privacy, by which I mean the business of implying or suggesting, rather than exposing, as it were. In some ways, art suggests that privacy is in human beings what holiness is in God. It's the determination to have an inner being which is totally the property of the person and is only made available to others by deliberate choice on particular, special occasions. If sex is private in this sense, then making images of it public and indiscriminately available violates its true nature and undermines its true value. I'm inclined to think that the enormous prevalence of impotence among men in the Western world has something to do with this, and I doubt whether Viagra is really the cure. The promulgation of explicit sexual imagery makes available to others what properly only belongs to two people in private. Hence, if there is ever to be a proper, Christian eroticism again, as in John Donne, it will always preserve some element of privacy and, hence, of mystery. Of course it will also imply a respect for womanhood as sharing in the divine image—not as something to be possessed but as someone to be adored, to be approached in an attitude of worship. (I love the old prayer book assertion, which I usually introduce into marriage services which I conduct, which goes, "with my body, I thee worship.") This means, of course, that the woman's body may be portrayed as a pleasurable subject, but never as an object of pleasure.

To summarize, then: The difference between erotic art and pornography, and the distinctive qualities of a Christian view of sex in art lie in the following: (1) in the extent to which the dominant effect is to induce sexual arousal; (2) in the focus on the relationship involved rather than sexual gratification; (3) the degree to which it is

redemptive and rescues our sexual life from improper exposure and from the idea that sex is an activity with no meaning beyond the physical experience. Finally, there is one further point to make about the redemptive in Christian art. Christian art—even a Christian approach to sex in art—can redeem the imagination. This is one element that often seems to be neglected in discussion of a Christian approach to art. Because Christians are under the inspiration of the cross and the resurrection and because of the fact that we worship a rescuing God, Christian art has to be something that sees itself as liberating people’s imagination so that things which otherwise would be unthinkable become possible. I would suggest that you read through the parable of the Good Samaritan again as an example of that. The story actually liberates the imagination of the questioner, so that at the end he can actually visualize the possibility that a Samaritan might actually be a neighbor. In that sense, the story liberates him. Of course whether he wants to be liberated is another matter, but we’re all up against that problem.

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