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052166263X - Agape, Eros, Gender: Towards a Pauline Sexual Ethic

Francis Watson

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AGAPE, EROS, GENDER

Issues of gender and sexuality have recently come to the fore in all humanities disciplines, and this book reflects this broad interdisciplinary situation, although its own standpoint is a theological one. In contrast to many contemporary feminist theologies, gender and sexuality (*eros*) are here understood within a distinctively Christian context characterized by the reality of *agape* – the New Testament's term for the comprehensive divine-human love that includes the relationship of man and woman within its scope. The central problem is addressed by way of key Pauline texts relating to gender and sexuality (1 Corinthians 11, Romans 7, Ephesians 5), texts whose influence on western theology and culture has been enduring and pervasive. They are read here in conjunction with later theological and non-theological texts that reflect that influence – ranging from Augustine and Barth to Virginia Woolf, Freud and Irigaray. As in the author's previous books, the intention is to practise a less restrictive approach to biblical interpretation which locates the texts within broad theological and intellectual horizons.

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Preface

Disciplinary boundaries within the theological curriculum are a necessary concession to the complexity of the subject matter and the inevitable limitations of the individual scholar. It makes good pragmatic sense that one person should be a New Testament scholar, another a systematic theologian, and another an ethicist – so long as the boundaries remain open, ensuring freedom of movement between the disciplines. But where boundaries are closed, they define a subject matter which is now held to be the exclusive preserve of a single group of scholars. Communication between the disciplines is subject to severe restrictions. Thus, the New Testament scholar becomes incapable of serious theological reflection on the New Testament texts. The systematic theologian makes only cursory forays into the fields of the biblical scholar or ethicist, and may even believe that an apology is due for trespassing in someone else's professional domain. The ethicist may seek to develop a Christian ethical reflection that shows scant regard for any theological or biblical foundations. In this way, 'theology' becomes a flag of convenience for a number of related but basically autonomous disciplines. All sense that Christian theology is ultimately concerned with a single, simple subject matter disappears.

This book represents my third attempt to develop an interdisciplinary approach to biblical interpretation that refuses to be deterred by the warning notices that biblical scholars have posted at regular intervals along the boundaries of their discipline: notices that warn against allowing contemporary concerns to undermine the integrity of pure scholarship, and that

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prohibit all serious theological engagement with the biblical texts – on the grounds that such an engagement is inevitably partisan, confessional and divisive. Insofar as they identify a number of possible dangers, these warnings are certainly not groundless. But they should never have been regarded as absolute laws, defining the limits of the discipline and closing it in on itself. They are at best no more than guidelines for interdisciplinary dialogue, and they may or may not be relevant in any given instance.

This particular exercise in interdisciplinary dialogue takes the form of a study in Christian sexual ethics which proceeds by way of a series of readings of three selected Pauline texts. The intention is not to offer an exegesis of the Pauline texts to which is appended, secondarily, some consideration of their ‘contemporary relevance’. Ascertaining what the texts say is indeed a necessary first step, and at this point standard exegetical methods are indispensable. But in the last resort, to interpret is *to use the texts to think with*. To confine interpretation to the ever more precise reproduction or retracing of what the texts say is to neglect their canonical function, which is to *generate* thought, not to restrict it. Their genre as canonical texts demands that they be set *within broad horizons*, and not merely returned to an ‘original historical situation’ in the first century.

The Pauline texts relating to sexuality and gender are few, brief and cryptic. They often fail to say what we think they should say, and we sometimes wish they had left unsaid what they actually do say. They are a problem for us. Yet they have been extraordinarily influential. Along with the texts of Genesis 1–3 which they themselves have mediated to subsequent Christian tradition, these Pauline texts are deeply embedded in Christian ethical reflection, from Tertullian and Augustine to Barth, and beyond. A rich heritage, a living tradition for us to enter into? Or does the extent of these texts’ influence simply increase our unease? If these texts do not say what they ought to say, and say what they ought not to say, then their blindnesses and errors will be writ large across the entire tradition they have helped to shape. In these circumstances, a contemporary Christian sexual ethics might do better simply to *abandon* Paul (after

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subjecting him to the necessary critique). A movement ‘*towards* a Pauline sexual ethic’ is surely unthinkable? ‘*Away from*’, perhaps, or (preferably) ‘*beyond*’, but not ‘*towards*’?

In this book, I shall not be reading the selected Pauline texts uncritically. But my readings are governed by the assumption that the appropriate criteria for judging them are available to us only in and through the texts themselves, in their testimony to the reality of the divine agape. If agape – the inner-trinitarian love opened up to human participation in Jesus and his Spirit – is the beginning and end of Christian faith and living, then it is agape that must provide the final criteria for Christian reflection on sexuality and gender. But this agape is not present to us in unmediated form, and can only be articulated through engagement with the canonical texts. What these texts say or do not say about sexuality and gender must be read in the light of their unique and irreplaceable testimony to the divine agape that has taken the form of a corresponding human agape, in Jesus and, through his Spirit, in a community in which there are both men and women, together and not apart from one another. These men and women are no strangers to the reality of eros. But they practise together a qualitatively different love, whose origin and pattern is the divine love to which they are constantly redirected, in worship, preaching and sacrament, and in their mutual presence to one another. ‘We love, because he first loved us’ (1 Jn. 4.19): whatever is said about sexuality and gender must conform to that confession.

Yet there must be engagement not only with the text but also with the world – the ‘secular’ world which, especially in recent times, has had much to say on the topics of sexuality and gender that is directly relevant to the interpretation of the canonical texts. In each of the three parts of this book, a verse-by-verse theological interpretation of a selected Pauline text is therefore preceded by a reading of a modern text that deals with closely related issues in the conceptuality and idiom of our own times. Although ostensibly ‘secular’ in orientation, these modern texts belong – consciously or unconsciously – within the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Pauline texts with which they are here linked. Texts by Woolf, Freud and Irigaray will naturally not say the

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same thing as the Pauline texts with which they are paired (1 Cor. 11, Rom. 7 and Eph. 5). But not saying the same thing is simply a precondition of fruitful dialogue. Readings of these modern texts open up interpretative possibilities that would never have come to light if we confined ourselves to the safety of the canonical text, refusing the risk of engagement with the secular. A further dimension is added when the Pauline texts are read in conjunction with the readings of Christian interpreters such as Augustine and Barth. Throughout, the intention is to articulate the distinctive logic (or theo-logic) of a *Christian* sexual ethics that necessarily takes the form of a *biblical* sexual ethics – if the term ‘biblical’ can be freed from its biblicistic connotations.

I am deeply indebted to Michael Banner, Richard Hays and Douglas Campbell, for many insights into (respectively) theological ethics, New Testament ethics and Pauline interpretation. Although – the conventional disclaimer – they are not to be held responsible for the views I here develop, I do not think that this book would have been written without them. I am also grateful to Grace Jantzen, Emma Tristram and Nicholas Watson, who read the first chapter in draft and helped me to clarify my thinking about the book as a whole.