



CFI Study Notes – Bukuru, Jos

Sexual Morality, Rome & the Church

This module looks at the kind of world Rome was and how the church broke into that world with the love of God.

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The Vision

These notes review sexual morality in the context of pagan culture and in the overall picture of God bringing a new liberty to humanity and to the creation in its entirety. We see that in pagan culture there is a bent towards destruction. God's law was a partial step in turning people back from this direction.

It is in this background that the laws on sexual morality appear. Their setting is freedom for humanity, and these laws were given within a new culture of respect for all creation. That is, environmentalism is part of the new vision that God gave. It's about respecting the way creation works, and carrying on life within this creation that is both sustainable and which tends towards the flourishing of all things.

It wasn't God's purpose just to set up a spiritual system of worship. His purposes are tied to the creation he made, and to his love for that creation and for all who inhabit it, people and animal life. The purposes of God are a holistic program of renewal and wholeness.

Though God initially brought these lessons to us by the law, the law wasn't intended to be the way in which this life should conquer our hearts and world. God would have to demonstrate this life himself, by his own self-giving, to set our hearts free from the paganism that infects us all.

So the early church went out into the Roman world, set free to love. A love for God and what he had done for them; a love for each other and the value of all human life; a love for their enemies, to live for restoration, rather than condemnation; and a love for the natural environment.

After creation, God rested, signifying the peaceful fulfilment of the creation project. This sabbath rest became an important theme of the law. Israel were told to rest the seventh day. Their land was to be given rest every seven years and slaves were to be freed. The sabbath was incorporated into other laws, like the Jubilee, which occurred every fifty years, after seven agricultural sabbaths. This was to return land to its original owners, and all debts were to be forgiven.

The Jubilee was meant to be a magnificent rehabilitation from the effects of an abusive economy. Sabbath was also reflected in all laws which led Israel to care for the poor, and look after the refugee. The Sabbath was incorporated into laws prohibiting Israel from having a king, and limiting the accumulation of weapons and prohibiting a standing army. Helping the dispossessed was to be Israel's way of peace. Care and contentment, not commercialism and war, gives the land rest.

All these laws were aimed at giving the creation wholeness and shalom by caring for the land and people. The sabbath was against harmful, predatory social and economic practices, and for the liberty and wellbeing of the environment. As such, laws about sexual immorality were part of this sabbath principle, setting creation in order, to function for people's security and good.

The point of sabbath: God loves his creation and desires to dwell in it with us. This is the aim of the gospel, as we see fulfilled in Revelation 21-22. The purpose is that this sabbath rules our heart, meaning that in an age of hedonism, our understanding of love has a focus on the common good. Sabbath means taking time to stop and to examine the ways we have allowed our lives to be conformed to this world.

Sexual Morality in Rome

In Rome, we saw the consequences of unbridled pagan culture. Paganism has dominated the world since its creation and the call of Israel was the beginning of God speaking a vision of a kingdom of peace into our pagan world.

Sexual morality in Rome was based upon class and in favour of the stronger men. Marriage was for procreating a male heir. The wife was not allowed sex outside of marriage, to ensure that the husband was the father of any child. If the wife was unfaithful, the husband was permitted to rape the male in return, and flog the wife. If the wife was pregnant from the affair, the child was killed.

De-paganising our Lives

Moses' laws on sex were, as was common in that day, partly designed to protect property rights. This shielded people from poverty, just as the Jubilee returned property to dispossessed families. But sexual morality in the Hebrew nation was also to protect people from exploitation and to honour the image of God in humanity, which today is often called human rights. Yet these laws were still disobeyed, both in letter and in spirit, mainly through a patriarchal culture.

The purpose of the Hebrew law was to turn around the pagan tide. Israel had come out of Egypt, where the value of human life was about zero. The Pharaoh had invested the whole image of God in himself. The Hebrew culture, which the church adopted and carried into Rome, was about driving back pagan oppression and bringing freedom to humanity. The sexual revolution the church brought was just part of the dismantling of pagan greed and violence.

The primary objective of the law of Moses, was to go some way to restore this image of God to the weakest of humanity. It rejected kingship as a way of rule. It rejected armies as the way to build peace. Its sexual laws were part of this. Its prohibitions were freedoms. They gave safety back to humanity. We might say, "So what if we allow a little sex here and there among consenting adults?" The law saw that boundaries prevent a culture of the domination of the strong.

The sabbath concept gave rest to a creation overcome by empire. It corrected flagrant greed, wrecking the environment, turning people into workers and soldiers, or objects of sexual predation. The sabbath was a call away from Pharaonic oppression. These abuses existed before the Flood. They were the trademarks of the tyrannical rulers who destroyed the creation. Pharaoh followed the same instincts. All kings did, with their harems.

Treating any of these matters as God's random likes and dislikes makes the law flippant. Thousands of years of history are not to be thrown behind us. None of this is about God's likes and dislikes. It's all about the liberty of humanity. Law sets us free from vulnerability, until we can be set free in our hearts, in the way we treat others. When we are free, all can flourish and the creation can be filled with the flow on of God's unique gifts to each one of us, without destruction.

But the law had a problem. Or rather, we had a problem, and that is our self-righteousness. The law brought division between those who kept parts of it and those who didn't. The law in our hearts also demanded retribution against those who didn't follow it. These are things that Jesus came to rectify. He sent a church out into the Roman world that sought to heal and not condemn. This was something entirely new.

In our Christian thought today, there is tension between Paul saying, “evil associations corrupt good manners,” or John saying, “come out from among them,” and the act of God in Christ, who didn’t stand off from the world, but came to us in the incarnation, into our homes, and took our sufferings. The tension is answered by seeing that in coming to us, to become a slave for us, God didn’t become like us. His act of serving us is what set him apart from us. Holiness doesn’t mean separation. As seen in God’s holiness, it means self-giving.

The Roman Scene

The Roman husband could have sex with whomever he wanted, whether prostitute, male or girl child, slave or house helpers. Sexual relationships between older men and younger boys were common and seen as wholesome. They could even rape people of a lower class. Incest and bestiality were honoured among some of the Greek gods and carried over into Rome. The sexual system was exploitive. The stronger dominated the weaker.

This matched the Empire’s military machine. It also was a “strong take over the weaker” system. The soldiers were rewarded after battles, with sexually exploitive behaviour. Their sexuality was part of their overall worldview of violence and greed, making havoc of human life. Sexual ethics wasn’t a separate category in their life. It matched their general view of the value of humanity.

“Virtue” in sexual ethics meant that any sexual liaison was acceptable, even honoured, so long as the Roman citizen male took the dominate role. Sexual honour was along these lines of social dominance, of class, and assuring sexual activity didn’t risk property ownership. The ethic was to build a culture of dominance, and a culture of property acquisition, not to protect the property of the poor. Sex was appraised within this context.

The Coliseum was a main centre where Roman brutality was carried out with rapturous pleasure. Countless numbers of “lower people” were killed with the greatest possible cruelty, as crowds placed their bets and roared with delight. Sex was part of this conquest. Poets and artists of the day recount animals being trained to rape their victims, in honour to the god Jupiter.

Today’s authors may debate the immorality and cruelties, to debunk the consequences of a godless society. They had rules or “ethics” in sex, but the rules were, “If you were a male, you could do anything you wanted, to anyone you wanted, of a lower class.”

Commodus

The Emperor Commodus had a harem of 300 girls and 300 boys. This sexual depravity was part of the culture of violence, depreciating the value of human life. Commodus organised all the crippled, homeless people of Rome to be tied together in the shape of a large human body in the Coliseum. He then personally clubbed every one of them to death and ordered Rome to herald him as a “giant killer” of great fame.

This was just one of his many “exploits,” designed to devalue the human body. Other emperors were worse. In contrast, the Christians were not only among the main martyrs in this arena, but they also led a movement of feeding the homeless in the Empire, even their enemies who hungered.

The Children

The ones who suffered the most from the sexual ethics of the Roman Empire were the children. They were aborted, thrown away, left for dead at birth, neglected through their early years of development, or left vulnerable in the wider world, to become slaves, sexual objects, and trained for

warfare. Ruins of public Roman baths reveal large numbers of skeletons of new born babies. Most who survived became part of the system of sex and abuse.

Men had babies all over the Empire, whom they knew nothing about and took no responsibility for. Newborn children were laid at the feet of their father, who decided whether the child should live. It was an abuse of human life on a massive scale. Estimates are that between 30 to 40% of all children born alive, died before the age of five.

Consistent Love

We have pagan culture in our nations today, and we tend to point out the features of this that we abhor and leave others alone. Male domination cultivates rampant home violence. Our view towards abortion often gives no value to a child, even up to the point of its full-term birth. Racism is pagan culture. Class separation and economic abuse of the poor is pagan culture. All these things militate against the *agape* love of the church in the first century, and its renewal of our paganism.

God is consistent. We all, from whatever persuasion, tend to dislike other people's sins and not our own. God's witness is about all the things that degrade humanity, not just the ones he may happen to personally dislike. This was the life Jesus lived. It wasn't about his own needs. His treatment of other people was a consistent treatment of value in every area, including his own faultless sexual morality. To Jesus, love was about the common good.

The Early Church

So, when the church lived a different sexual ethic, it was largely because of their renewed view of humanity. In building “family” that included people on equal terms from Jewish and gentile backgrounds, the value of humanity came to the fore. This new liberty for people was expressed in terms of sexual morality, freedom from the abuse of the stronger person.

This was a revival of the creation intent, of each person made in God’s image, giving value to every individual. The church reflected this in their relationships, both economically and sexually. It also meant a brotherhood with slaves and a reduction of privilege between the rich and poor. Sexual morality was a part of the breaking down of the culture of exploitation of the vulnerable.

Marriage

The early church freed their neighbour from oppression. It didn’t do this violently, but through the development of new communities, in which abusive values were not permitted. Sexual morality was one of the ways in which culture was being transformed from seeing people as objects. A marriage commitment was one way of protecting these values. Marriage was for the protection of humanity.

The early church didn’t see marriage as something they interfered with legally in the world. It was rather the values they adopted within their own community. This is how they influenced the world. They adopted the Genesis one and two view of marriage, regardless of what the world thought of marriage. And the Genesis concept wasn’t for property rights. It was for companionship and for procreation.

Any movement to undermine this marriage concept within society, eventually moves us back to the lack of humanitarianism we saw in the Roman Empire. Gradually, sex lacks commitment and people become objects, whether intentionally, or accidentally.

Human Value

Children become a prey, and weaker people are at risk, of unwanted pregnancy, ill-health from abortions, other health risks, economic risks, careers at risk, and the risk of only having value as objects. Women lose their freedoms, respect and protection. One of the reasons we have such a high rate of abortion is that we still live in a patriarchal society. The men often just don’t care.

The church initially came as a movement to transform the world, and the sexual transformation was a major part of this new freedom, love, personal value and life opportunity for people. It is people God cares about, and this is the reason he acts in the gospel for our welfare.

So, Paul said in his letters, sexual promiscuity is a part of this overall violence, aggression and self-centredness, which breaks down human value and care, and brings destruction to lives. Sexuality isn’t just one thing Paul singles out, but part of a whole scenario which he terms the flesh, meaning that which destroys human value and flourishing.

These are put on the same level as violence, economic abuse, environmental abuse, racial abuse, or anything else that militates, whether actively or passively, against God’s love for his creation and the people and other life that fill it. God is love. Anything that does not practice love will eventually pass away from his renewing kingdom.

Facing Hedonism

These things are much bigger than ourselves. We tend to think of things as we feel they affect us personally, and not the bigger future that is building, the impact upon others and our communities. We look at freedom the way we see it affects us, not the freedom of communities. Hyper individualism is harmful to individuals. It breaks down communities and it is the wellness of the community that protects and nourishes us as individuals.

We say, "What is wrong with some little drugs? It's my body." But it contributes to a culture that erodes life opportunities for other people. Its like fair trade. What difference can we make in our little corner? All our little decisions build a world that effects many lives.

We hear calls to update our sexual standards to "modern times," but nothing has really changed. Sexual morality is still sexual morality. And it comes as part of a package. It is part of mankind's predatorial nature which becomes more unleashed as more allowances are made. It is part of an overall abuse package, and unleashing it in "modern times" will bring the same kind of bondages and retreat of human liberties that we saw in ancient pagan times.

And as part of a package, sexual abuse hardens our heart against the wellbeing of other people in general and opens the door to all kinds of human rights abuses in our societies. We can't pick and choose. A reduction in one form of morality brings a reduction in all forms of morality. It brings our whole society into the control of the strongest and most dominate. Our age of democracy and freedoms will be gone.

Paul's View

It has been said that the early church, including people like Paul, took into their evangelism of the gentiles a negative view on sex. This isn't true. They took in the Hebrew view on sex. In this view, sex is good and part of God's creation. It isn't thought of in a guilty way. But it is held morally, in the way it was designed, for enjoyment/ fellowship/ joining of lives in a committed lifelong relationship and for procreation.

This was clearly Paul's view. He said that marriage partners should give themselves with benevolence to each other sexually. The guiding principle in sex in marriage, wasn't some sense of guilt for its enjoyment, or any ritual restrictions, but rather love, considering the partner and not our own desires.

This reflects the view of sex in marriage in the Old Testament, as in Proverbs and the Song of Solomon, where the marriage relationship was encouraged in the fullest sense of mutual love and enjoyment. There was no religious shamefacedness regarding sex within marriage. It was celebrated in Hebrew culture.

Paul said to refrain from marriage, may be good in the time of the first century trials. Some have said the early church expected the soon coming of Christ and advised non-marriage. That isn't true. They saw the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the wars of that period and the difficulties child raising may pose at that time. But they did not tell people whether to marry. They held no such power.

Paul did not promote sexual abstinence within marriage, except for short periods of prayer, and only if both partners desired this. No one could command abstinence. Paul said married couples should be generous in their sexual lives with each other, and that this would also help keep away temptations. Paul fought against attitudes which opposed sex in marriage and which opposed marriage in general, that had already crept into the Corinthian church.

Paul claimed abstinence from sex in marriage was a doctrine of demons, meaning it was not rooted in true Hebrew or Christian faith. This false teaching of abstinence from marriage, or from sex within marriage, came from the Greek culture, not from the Hebrew culture.

Greek Views

Some sectors within Greek culture were of the abstinence camp. Some philosophers taught that the body was evil, along with any bodily appetite. Some even claimed that all material things and even the earth itself, were evil and created by an evil god. Some said Christ was a phantom, who came without a body and saved us in the spirit, by taking us out of the body. Elements of this teaching are in the church today, including a denial of the physical resurrection of our bodies.

But this teaching about sex and marriage has nothing to do with the Hebrew faith, nor with the teachings of Jesus or of the early apostles. These teachings came into the church by the Greek fathers, after the first apostles, and this because of their Greek cultural background.

It is true that some apocalyptic passages in the New Testament use symbols, like virgin, for purity of heart, but this is symbolic only of faithfulness to God. Some symbols were picked up from intertestamental period literature, which had been influenced somewhat by Greek ideas, but when adopted into early Christian literature, their meaning was only symbolic. It is the clear statements of the New Testament that interpret the symbols, not the other way around.

There is no value in sexual purity by abstaining from marriage. But, if you are so gifted, and you delight to abstain from marriage to give yourself full focus on your service of God in the world, then that is good. But there is no moral merit in it. It is good only if done voluntarily and only if the gift (grace) to remain without marriage is assuredly given to the person.

The austere attitude toward sex, that was prevalent in the Victorian era of British history, wasn't from the Hebrew or early Christian background. That wasn't a Christian view of sex. But then neither is immorality a Christian view of sex. The austere view came down through church history through the Greek fathers and this took precedence at many times in the Roman Catholic tradition and in the Puritan era, and in other movements.

The Christian view of sex isn't austere, but neither is it immoral. It says that sex was made for marriage between a woman and a man. There is no biblical teaching that says otherwise. There is no biblical teaching that hints towards marriage between two people of the same sex.

Creational Fullness

Creation also says the same, marriage between male and female for companionship and family raising. This is the biblical definition of sex. If this definition is changed, then there is no way of defining sex in our societies, and there will be no end to its different expressions.

The Christian view of sex is that it is good, like the rest of creation is good, and to be enjoyed, but also that, like the rest of creation, our treatment of it can't be taken for granted, our definitions don't change what has been created. Creation can't be redefined, abused, or used to please ourselves, whether in rampant commercialism, sabbath breaking, or in sexual morality, without breaking down its interdependencies of wholeness.

We might say that one person was made one way, and another person was made another way. But we could this about any number of things, and choices, and behaviours, that may not be good for the general community, or may have consequences in the future that will be contrary to the common good. The biblical vision, the Christian vision, is the common good. The individual is called to serve the common good, just as Christ served us all, not thinking of himself. This is what gives us individual fulfillment. We are each a unique part of a body.

It's just like our use of land. It must be respected, or it won't yield high nutrient food, and humanity eventually starves. In the environment, everything is related. What happens to one part effects all. Likewise, we can't say our body is our own, and that it doesn't affect anyone else. There is a way of living, as a part of creation, that yields "high nutrient" outcomes. Horticulture and sexual morality are part of the same creation. And creation has one God, who has built sabbath rest (wholeness) into every part of it for our wellbeing.

The cost for abandoning the Christian vision of sex, is seen in the Roman Empire. Rome abused and destroyed the world, its people and environment, because it rejected sabbath definitions for the creation. That is the alternative, with the demeaning and captivity of the human person for sexual pleasure. We may not intend this by our private decisions, but it is still the long-term outcome. That is the eventual alternative to the Christian vision. We have seen that in history. We know that.

It's a choice between modern commercial paganism, or creational sabbath. The first destroys, brings us into conflict and war, the second restores life. Like someone we said, "We can avoid reality, but we cannot avoid the consequences of reality." This is what our cultures face. If God is no longer our God, we make idols of ourselves. What comes next is the law of the jungle.

Relaxing Temple Laws

Paul defended the gentiles coming into the church without having to follow the Jewish temple laws and circumcision. There has been confusion about which laws of the Old Testament have been done away in Christ and which laws still apply.

Reconciliation

The issue isn't really one of law. The Old Testament laws were largely about how Israel were to live well as a community. The law was given in the context of their fallen relationships and their sense of estrangement from God. The sacrifice and temple laws were to clear their conscience and draw them back to God. But these laws also separated them from people who didn't follow them.

In the New Covenant God has removed the barrier in our conscience between us and him. He did this on the cross, where we see his love for us and his free acceptance of us, even when we sinned so much against him. The cross shows us his forgiveness.

This has removed the need of the temple laws. The temple laws pointed to God's free forgiveness, but the laws themselves couldn't really enter our conscience and set us free. But the love of God shown us on the cross can remove our sin from our hearts. This removes the need for the Old Testament laws, because we know that in God's love our sins are forgiven and gone.

It's a bit like if we had hurt someone very powerful and were scared to come near them. If that person had proved his love towards us, then we would feel safe to approach. We would feel forgiven and reconciled to that person. We would come close to them again. This is what the cross has done for us. It proves God loves us. We feel reconciled and able to love him again.

Spirit Led

But the other laws Israel had, were more about their relationships with each other. These laws were more to do with how creation works, and how community can flourish. We shouldn't need these laws. Our hearts should desire to learn what is best for the community and should want to follow that. That is how our hearts should be. But they weren't like that, so we had laws as guideposts, to keep our community safe.

Today, these laws are written on our hearts, when we come to faith. Now, we realise that we don't live by the letter of the laws. The laws aren't things that we use to strike people down and count people out. They aren't used to kill and condemn others, but as guidelines for how we can be healed and restored to wholesome community living.

Now by faith, we live by the Holy Spirit, since we have become friends with God. The Spirit leads us in how to heal each other, and away from using the law to hurt each other. The Spirit leads us in how to restore each other, when we have been hurt and trodden down by the abuse of others. All of humanity is in this condition in some way, needing healing.

Serve to Heal

This is what Jesus showed when he came. He didn't use the law to point the finger, but to point to what a healed community looks like. Then he stretched his hand, in fact he stretched out both his arms on the cross, to help us get there. This shows us how to serve others, and this service fulfils

what the law pointed us to. The cross shows us that God doesn't come to us with law, but with service. His only desire is for our healing.

Healing is sometimes very difficult in this world. The world is filled with complexities. Therefore, it takes patience for us to care for each other and serve each other as we become stronger in faith. Our faith is to be used with patience and care. It is never to be used as a gun to wipe out the sinner. If we wipe out other sinners, then we are also wiping out ourselves for our sin.

Life of Kindness

Sometimes we are not fully healed, but we learn to walk daily by God's grace towards a better world, towards a life that is more about community wholeness, than what we may want for ourselves. As we mature from childhood, we learn that we can't treat God, creation and life, like things that always give us what we want. We have a relationship with creation, where we grow in responsibility towards the common good.

This is what the laws of Israel were pointing them towards. They all had a relationship with each other, and with the world God made for them to live in together. The laws pointed towards living this life in wholeness. Part of this were the sex and family laws, but most of it was about laws of kindness towards those in need, hospitality, relieving the poor, setting the slave free, helping the foreigner and refugee. But they are all really the same law: true kindness.

These laws were about how to live in harmony with the creation. They show us that greed and violence put us out of kilter with our environment. These things destroy the balance of creation and our community's existence. God put it like this, if we live in this greedy and violent way, relying on our armies, and not on providing mercy to those in need, then the land "will spew us out."

These things are the laws of creation. Creation has been designed towards justice. It may take time, but creation is designed for our good, which means that sin eventually destroys itself, it removes itself from the creation. This is the judgement of God, the way his wisdom has made creation, for our wellbeing.

All God's laws were about wholeness. They were given in the context of the hardness of our hearts, so they don't reflect this shalom perfectly. But they point in that direction. It is through Christ that we see the heart of God perfectly presented to us.

The purpose of God revealing himself in Christ, is to point our communities towards a better way, a way of living that leads us out of covetousness, self-absorption, and violence, towards picking up our neighbour from the road to Jericho and healing him, no matter what sinful or racial background he or she is from.

Gentile Renewal

It was towards this world that Paul wanted to point the violent and destructive gentile cultures. But to get to that place, Paul had to drop the Jewish temple laws. These laws became a barrier between the Jews and other people. They stopped them coming together, and healing can only come to our world, when we come together and join our lives to care for each other.

This is what Jesus faced in the gospels. The laws of the temple were being used as an excuse not to serve the sinners and foreigners, who were separate from the Jews. Jesus pointed out that this isn't the world God was leading us to, but to a world where we receive and serve each other. So now that the cross has fulfilled all these temple laws, we don't insist on those rituals we used to cleanse our conscience, but which divided us from the rest of humanity.

The cross launched Paul and the early disciples out in a new world, where they could receive and care for each other. We see this immediately in Acts, where people from all backgrounds eat together and share their wealth in restoring each other's lives. And this didn't depend on them keeping any temple laws. It was just a new love between them, where they were trying to follow the love Jesus showed us on the cross. This is the world God wanted to bring us to.

With the temple restrictions relaxed, the new church can move out among the gentiles and start sharing, in their own lives, the real meaning of the Old Testament law. Its real meaning wasn't the temple restrictions, but love and care for neighbour. In sharing this with all our neighbours, our communities could get onto the road of healing, and overcome our selfishly motivated separations.

Now this church can share the heart of God in a fallen and violent Roman world. It can shine the light of God's real character, which God has shone on our hearts through his love on the cross. On the cross, he showed forgiveness to us, when he should have judged us for our injustice towards the week, even towards himself. But he didn't. He loved us in return. Now he sends us out to pass this love on to all, living the same love among them. We are to do for others what he has done for us all.

The love of Christ has brought a new leaven to the world. This leaven was shown in the law, and spoken of by the Prophets, but demonstrated by Christ. The early church was sent out with this leaven filling their hearts, not written as a letter in laws. This is the part of the law, now made new and complete in Christ, which the church was called to pass on to the gentile world.

Living Torah

The purpose of relaxing the temple rituals amongst the gentiles, was so that the real values of Torah could infiltrate the world through the church, for the world's renewal. These were care for the poor, value for human life and sexual morality. These are the things that devastated humanity the most and that marked the Roman/ Greek culture of the day.

These values, this new way of life, began to change the world. It was resisted. It would take away the advantage of the oppressors. Those who lived this new way were harshly persecuted. They were fed to the beasts, and burned as night lamps in the streets. But they persevered, being convinced of the love of God. And today the impact on the world has been huge.

We have a choice now, in our generation. Which way do we go? Back to our personal lives and our own fulfillment, or forward, to follow a God who lays down his life in love for others, to bring healing to our world? Healing doesn't come any other way, unless we live it out, paying the cost of love.

This is the reason Paul laid aside insistence on the temple laws, to unite the Jews and gentiles in one body of faith and love. It wasn't Paul's personal calculation. He also resisted it, killing those who refused the Jew's temple laws. But then the purpose of God got through to him.

Law Perfected

We can see here the distinction between the temple laws, that were no longer insisted upon in the New Covenant, and the moral laws that have been perfected in the New Covenant. Really, the temple laws were also perfected in the New Covenant. They have been perfected and fulfilled in Christ.

The other laws have also been perfected and fulfilled in Christ. He has shown us their meaning; renewed creation. He has put them in our hearts and this has fulfilled them in an outward living. The temple laws are also now in our hearts, not in our flesh with circumcisions. The temple laws spoke of reconciliation. Now we live out that reconciliation in love towards the world.

The law being fulfilled, we don't need those Jewish flesh markers of religion. Rather, the mark is love bearing witness, not through arrogant doctrines, not by policing others, but through cross-shaped serving lives, which reveal what the law was about: care for the poor, the value of human life and sexual morality.

These things revolutionise a pagan world, a world that destroys humanity for selfish gratification. These are the destructive issues that a caring church addresses, not by rebuking a world in sin, but by opening its doors to serve those people trodden down by that sin. We take them in, dress their wounds, and show them a better way. Sexual morality is just a part of that way. The way is selflessness and self-giving. This is the way we show a world entrapped in greed.

No Sin

This settles the confusion of why the temple laws were relaxed, but the laws on morality or care for the poor appear like they have not been relaxed. All these laws are relaxed because they all have fulfillment in our life of Christ. When paganism is gone, law and ritual aren't needed, because there is no sin, but rather a new way of living. The temple and behavioural laws spoke of reconciliation and newness. Reconciliation is a life we live out in sexual morality and care towards our neighbour.

Sexual morality is part of what enhances the value of human life, a key witness of the church in a brutal world. This community-building life is the witness of the law, it's the witness to how creation was made. There is nothing we can do to change it, or set any part of it aside. Creation is creation. This is the witness of Christians to a world that is battered and broken.

The theme of scripture is consistent throughout. Something we think is freedom, may not be true freedom. The scripture also consistently tells us not to judge others, for when we think people are doing wrong, in other areas of their life they may be better than us, and besides, God may still be working on them. The scripture rather points us to the cross, to service.

Signs of the Times

In a world where the value of human life breaks down, the key issues that work against humanity often grow together.

1. One of them is the growing distance between rich and poor. This has been occurring in Western nations over recent decades, and the massive accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few show that today we live in an empire. When this happens, we usually are heading for revolution or war. It destabilises society too much for peace to continue.

2. Another issue is the gap that develops between nationalities, races and religious groups. Instead of coming together and learning about the trials each group faces, trying to help, we grow apart more. This ends up degrading the value of human life and eventually takes our world into trouble. Creation corrects this, and the more we refuse the correction, the worse the correction we eventually face. The early church was a witness against this gap, by bringing people together in our communities to serve: the sick, the poor, from all backgrounds.

3. Another issue is violence. As our world grows apart, we develop weapons to protect ourselves, rather than justice and care of others. The world gravitates more towards wars, starting as smaller ones, but growing, as offences and human rights abuses increase. Large budgets go towards these weapons, and the poor and uneducated of our societies suffer even more, making eventual large-scale war even more probable.

4. Another issue is sexual exploitation. This is one of the signs of the degrading of human value. People become commodities, just as they are in war, as collateral damage, or in unjust economics, as social burdens. As sexual definitions change, the result eventually is a self-orientated society, where no one is protected. The weak, whether women, weaker men, or children, become fair game for a self-centred “food-chain.”

5. Another issue is environmental degradation. A society that is unchecked in economic injustice, in its violence against other communities in war, and doesn't care for the value of human life in its sexual appetites, will also not care about the its abuse of the environment. Rome desecrated the landside of Judah, as it sieged and then destroyed Jerusalem. Many wars of our past have left environments to lie in ruin. Today, we also see a growing disregard for our environment. If the church loses its witness for the protection of all life, it loses its identity.

6. Another is our lack of care for the poor. Our lives become consumed with how we look in public, with entertainment and pleasure, often in “non-sinful” activities, but these things fill our lives. We produce a Christian form of hedonism, in a world of suffering. This, when the world is experiencing the highest level of human displacement in its history.

If we no longer side with a creational God, which other God is there to side with? Our witness is for life, all life, or our witness lacks love and our “moral witness” has no relevance. A moral witness joins with God against all creation destroyers; greed, war, killing, child suffering, environmental degradation, sexual immorality, inhospitality, and hatred of any kind. If our witness is against the self of immorality, it must start with our own selfishness.

Package Scenario

The issues above normally occur together, as a society spirals down towards destruction. Greed in one area, means greed and destruction in all areas at once. They come together as a package. Community responsibility in one area, tends towards community responsible in all areas. Today, we hear voices in one of these fields, and other voices in other fields, but we don't hear voices that unite all these together in a holistic message of life. This was the holistic life message the early church brought to a self-centred, brutal Roman world.

When societies spiral down towards destruction, all the above facets normally coincide as part of selfish human life style. And then, you also see a religious, self-serving witness of judgment, like the Pharisees, shut off from the world, caring for themselves and building their own barns. We tend to do this also today, but this is no witness. The witness we are called to is a counter-cultural love, opposite to both the self-serving secular and religious worlds.

As the world spirals down, secular and religious together, fighting and accusing each other, as liberals and conservatives, eventually out of this ruin, a new world is once again possible. Peter called it a new heavens and new earth, that was being birthed out of the ruins of Jerusalem and his Jewish generation. Out of this judgment normally comes a sense of godliness and revival, a removal of our arrogance and a humility to change our ways, to honour the creation in which we live.

Our Response

How does the church respond? We have often sought to do that by legal regulation. But that usually doesn't work. It often amounts to bullying. Trying to enforce our values on a world that doesn't believe in them is seen as abusive. When we don't care about people, but just punish them with laws, not understanding the reason for their suffering and trying to help, we are just bullying. This isn't what Jesus did or taught his followers to do.

Like the way many of us have tried to handle abortion. There are so many things we can do to reduce the amount of abortion in our societies. Just making it illegal doesn't always help. What are the social conditions people are going through? And if women saw the love of the church, trying to understand, trying to take care and help them, then this love would make a greater witness to community, to the value of the baby's life, than all the tea in China.

I am not saying there is no place for law here. But a society can't just make laws against things. It also must support human conditions, renew its cultures of care and understanding.

There are things that need to be handled by law, like child protection, sex trafficking, economic injustice, slavery and the like. But many issues need to be treated by example, just as the early church handled them. They took in babies and lonely mothers, to save children. They changed the values of the society, by showing love to those in need. They did it by example, by laying down their own lives. They took up their cross. They showed the world, the way God showed us, on his cross.

They overthrew inequalities in the society, like the patriarchal culture and they made slaves their brothers and sisters in family. Paul has often been charged as being patriarchal, but he was the exact opposite. His writings have been misinterpreted in this way. We won't go into the details here. He had several women apostles in his team, who were important, leading members of the work.

When patriarchal society is changed, then women can be helped, rather than condemned for abortions. It's like the woman caught in adultery. Where was the man? The church has values. We believe in life. We believe in human rights, even of the unborn. We believe we should act for the

welfare of others, and not according to our personal rights. We show that belief with compassion, by understanding the pain and serving. Not by condemning.

Corruption Free

In our patriarchal societies, we have clearly misunderstood Paul in passages in which he addresses women. Our views of Paul have been at variance with the values that Jesus portrayed, or which the gospel portrays. If we have been so wrong about Paul on this matter, might we also be wrong about things Paul said about sexual morality?

The women issue is a matter of removing hierarchy in our cultures and serving one another in love. This is a matter of gospel freedom and respect. But if we change definitions on sexual morality, we risk undermining the welfare of humans in our societies. Sex becomes irresponsible and then human rights are gone. This is not a matter of gospel freedom and respect, in the same way, except for the respect we are due to show every person, no matter their persuasion.

We might want to relax sexual morality on compassionate grounds, to give freedom to ourselves, but then we find it isn't freedom, but an unexpected slavery, that brings our whole society into corruption. Paul was for freedom, and this is the reason he spoke clearly about our sexual morality.

Corruption begins when we start to honour ourselves above the common good. This happens in government, in business, in ethics and in sexual matters. All these corruptions have the same root, and harm our collective lives. And the corruption happens when the church becomes self-serving and judgemental, rather than serving a world in all kinds of pain and hurt.

Jesus spoke about the signs of the times. By that he didn't mean the end of the world, but the judgment coming on that generation. The signs of the coming judgment were the self-centeredness, their unwillingness to serve others. The issues listed above are part of these signs. They are signs today that are clearly visible.

The only real hope is the witness of the church, and this witness is the selflessness of God in our lives. This brings renewal.

Jesus' View

What was the attitude of Jesus towards sexual morality? He held the same views as the Hebrew law. Marriage was between a man and a woman and it was for life. This was the context for sex. There wasn't much debate about this in the Jewish culture of his time. Other forms of sexual activity were prevalent and well understood then. But the Jewish culture was clear about sexual morality within marriage and the topic didn't come up much in conversations with Jesus.

The Healer

What does Jesus' attitude towards sinners of the day show us about sexual morality? He mixed freely with sinners, but his words of rebuke were for the religious people. It has sometimes been said that this means that Jesus didn't think sexual morality mattered. But Jesus visited people's homes to bring forgiveness and change. Jesus rejoiced at the change that came to Zacchaeus.

Jesus didn't condemn the woman at the well, but he did speak of the hurt in her life. Sexual immorality was a hurt for the woman. He didn't blame her. He didn't come to put out our smouldering wick, but to fan it into life. He knew our need and condition.

To say that he approved of her life style is to miss his whole message. "I have not come for the well, but for the sick." He didn't disapprove because of some austere ethic on sex. He disapproved because of the destruction it brought to the woman and those around her.

The sickness was twofold, the community's rejection of us as sinners, our alienation from each other, and our rejection of ourselves. He rebuked the community for rejecting the sinner, and he healed us by giving us God's free forgiveness. The third sickness was the destruction that our sin brought into our lives and the lives of others. This is what he sought to heal. Condemnation doesn't heal this.

When another woman was caught in adultery, Jesus didn't deny it was sin. He rather affirmed that it was sin, when he said to the men, "He that is without sin should throw the first stone." He came to bring God's forgiveness and this forgiveness had the power to radically change our focus in life.

Like he said to the lame man, "Your sins are forgiven. Take up your mat and walk." He didn't say he hadn't sinned. That would be useless. We don't need to be told we haven't sinned. We know we have. We need to be told we are forgiven. This is what heals. Telling the world they haven't sinned, by changing its definition, doesn't heal our disease. Love forgives, it doesn't deny.

Then Jesus said to the woman, "Go and do not sin anymore." Again, this affirms Jesus' attitude towards adultery. But he also saw the woman's condition. He saw the woman's background, and the way society had given her no chance. He saw the patriarchal powers, shown by the men who wanted her dead. He didn't come to condemn her, but to help her.

Jesus didn't show any disrespect for the law of Moses. He showed no variance from the moral values of that law. He rather affirmed them more strongly. Forgiving sin against the law affirms the law. Jesus lived the law of Jubilee, restoring debtors to life. The Jubilee had pity on us who had fallen into tough times, even by our own fault, and sought to give us another opportunity. It sought to lead us all to treat others with kindness and grace, and not to judge.

Heart Surgery

The account with the woman caught in adultery shows up the heart of the men who wanted to stone her. Their sin was worse. They had carefully avoided open immorality, though it was likely hidden in their hearts, but they accused the woman like satan himself accuses humanity. Jesus showed up our hearts, when we seek to establish our own righteousness by condemning others.

Jesus showed that the harshness of the law of the Old Testament wasn't a reflection of God. Rather it reflected the hardness of our own hearts. Retributive laws, like "tooth for tooth," were to limit our violence and vengeance. Jesus annulled these laws. He said he was giving us a new heart, which would seek to restore the sinner, and the one who wrongs us. He wants us to show the core of the Torah, which was to love God and to love neighbour as our self, to do for our neighbour what we would want them to do for us, if we were in their position.

Those who wanted to stone the woman caught in adultery were motivated by a blood lust, a scapegoating, pack violence. This is especially prevalent in pagan societies. We see it in our modern cultures, when the media and interest groups go after people from other groups who have sinned. They think they are doing good, but "don't know what spirit they really have inside them." They try to crucify others, as much as the people then wanted Jesus dead. They love blood shedding, slaying a person's reputation or career, and then protest the church for its failures.

This blood lust fills the human heart. And if we go back to pagan society, this is what we will face more. The law calls for blood shedding, to limit the human heart from too much violence. But if you take away this law, and take away the gospel, then you won't be left with the faults of the church, you will be left with something far worse than that. You are left with unbridled fallen humanity.

Jesus came to take away our blood lust, to fill us with compassion for others, and for those caught up in any fault. God said he takes no pleasure in the soul that dies, but would rather every person turn from what kills us. He even gave his life on the cross in a call for us to see, to turn. This is what he calls us to do for others. Not to condemn those caught up in a fault, but to give ourselves for them, to help them.

This is the only way we can be delivered from our sin. If we hate those who sin, then a worse sin is inside us. Learning to serve others, even those we abhor the most, our enemies for whatever reason, cleanses our own heart from our sin. We start to get the satan out of our heart, and God's Spirit has a chance of filling us instead.

Service Fulfils Law

The way Jesus loved the woman caught in adultery does not show he condones sin, or that sexual morality isn't the will of God, but it was to deliver us all from a worse sin, and that is our lack of love for others. To love, is the fulfillment of the law, even of sexual law. When we love our neighbour, we will not do any wrong against him or her. This fulfils the law, not our violent punishments.

But we have unfortunate doctrines about punishment being needed to fulfil the law, and we read the cross in line with these doctrines. But this isn't the heart of God and it isn't what his cross is about. It is not about God punishing his Son to fulfil the law. We have misread God, because we love violence. God calls us to overcome evil with good, just as his cross did.

Law isn't fulfilled by punishment, but by love and service. This is what Jesus taught us all when he met with the woman caught in adultery. He was moving us from the Old Testament cultures, which were ordered, regulated and limited by law, to open our eyes to what God is really like.

But Jesus wasn't teaching us that sexual immorality is ok. Going against God's creation plan for our lives brings us many hardships. He didn't come to add to those hardships. The hardships are punishment enough. He came to help us out of them.

Genesis One & Two

So, there is no confusion about the teaching of Jesus. He was fully for the sexual morality of Genesis one and two, creation morality, but he also focused on other critical issues. These are the issues of self-centeredness that rule our hearts, producing the kind of societies that bring hurt into people's lives. Selfish society produces abuse, and this sometimes leads people into sin, and then society condemns them for that sin.

Hurt produces the environment in which sexual immoralities develop and in which more people become victims of these abuses. We may not have fallen into these sins, but into others instead, still as victims of our fallen world. Jesus saw this woman as a victim and helped to set her free. He reserved the harsher words for others who had greater opportunities to bring change to society, but instead served only themselves.

Does that mean that one kind of sin is ok, while others are not? Paul said all sins bring destruction to us and those around us. They are all community destroyers. Paul listed them together, immorality, with greed, dishonesty and anger against others. These all destroy us. And they all take us out of the kingdom of God. They all bring about the fruit of death. Jesus didn't die so we could continue in these things "saved." He died to save us from these things, to turn us to a reconciled living with each other. This new life brings about the fruit of eternal living.

God's heart is not condemning, but redeeming, rescuing a nation of slaves, and rescuing us from our slavery to ourselves. What we see in both Jesus and Paul is a Genesis one and two view of sexuality and marriage. This isn't a cultural view, because our cultures, even the Hebrew culture, often deviated from this in many ways.

This creational reality doesn't change for us. If we shift from this reality as a community, our community will open the door to lowering the value of all human life. And if it is the value of human life that is at stake, which matters to God much more than his own honour, then the church's response must be to care about community restoration through serving.

No Hatred

Jesus was for sinners, for them all, in whatever view they held about things. He wanted to bring a change of heart to us all. He wouldn't get into camps. They often tried to trap him with questions. Like the question about Rome: would he stand for the Jewish zealots, or for the Roman blasphemy. But people on both sides needed his heart surgery. Questions like this, asked on our media today, are self-serving.

Treating issues this way is politics. Our sexual morality is not a political issue. Jesus was about people. Jesus spoke to people about themselves, not about political issues. We don't treat people as an issue. We listen to each other, learn from each other, and desire that God's liberty come into all our hearts. This isn't about what side we are on, but about being set free as people.

It's not like the church can be arrogant and the world has no check on our behaviour. Especially when the church becomes part of the nation's culture, many nominal believers enter it, or even believers who fall and sin. The world corrects in these cases and that is good. But they correct

because they know from the church what is right. But God's revelation isn't only in the church. Even Jethro, a Midianite priest, had valuable counsel for Israel. God's light is in all our hearts.

We need to maintain our freedom to speak on sexual morality. But it doesn't matter if people agree with us or not. Rather, we share in a loving community, that lives and demonstrates the truth. Arguing about these things in our media breeds hatred amongst us. No one who hates is right. The only winner there is satan. Both sides of the debate in sexual morality bully and bring sanctions against those who disagree with them. They are both wrong. This isn't love. It is divisive and manipulative. God isn't like that. All our hearts need surgery.

Child Welfare

One of the main reasons for the Genesis one and two creational marriage is the welfare of our children. Many marriage partners, whether at once, or in succession, lowers the value of children. One mother and one father, with the support of the community, gives safety for children to grow up and flourish. The way creation is set up is for the flourishing of human life. That which doesn't serve the flourishing of creation is destructive.

But there are many other things that can harm children. Poor relationships within a family, neglect by their parents, systemic poverty within the community, illness, or just misfortune, are some of things that can harm children in their development years. God doesn't want any of these things, but we all live with many imperfections, even in our best intentions.

Family Unit

There are some who say that because we now have Christian community, we don't need the former family structures for children. They claim children can grow up in a wider community, not with the traditional one father and one mother. It is said that family is now defined on a broader basis.

We don't see this in the New Testament. Jesus spoke of the church, "Whoever does the will of the Father, is your mother, brother, sister..." This stresses care beyond our central family, to share love with outsiders, from all backgrounds. Love doesn't stop at a self-centred focus on our immediate family. But Jesus didn't undermine the Genesis pattern, of nurture of children within their biological family. We see this pattern in his own life, with Mary and Joseph.

There are things in scripture that aren't necessarily from God, like the patriarchal culture. God's directives sometimes fitted this culture, but God isn't the source of it. His kingdom eventually renews these things in our lives. It's the same with war and many other systems in our cultures. But marriage and family pattern was founded directly from God in Genesis one and two. It didn't arise in time through human culture or religion. What arose was deviations from the Genesis pattern.

We see the wider family in Hebrew culture and in the church. Families were closely wired, with many aunties and uncles. Children had others to look after them, in addition to their parents. But their parents remained, where possible, the children's main nurturing home. We see this in Paul's statements, about parents caring for their children, for children honouring their parents. This was the family unit even in the church. It is not an oppressive human system.

In African culture, the wider family has a lot to do with raising children. We have the village proverb, "Children are for all of us," meaning they are the responsibility of the whole village. But even within this broader and fluid system of care, the central family unit is well intact. The biological parents are still usually the central caregivers and identity of the children.

One biological mother and one biological father, generally speaking, is in the best interest of children. People have come up with studies trying to show children can flourish in other kinds of family structures. Sample studies may sometimes show this, but throughout history, people have stayed with the Genesis plan, because in a broken world, it gives the best average chance for child nurture. Every one of us has a biological mother and father, as a major part of our identity. Our courts recognise, that wherever possible, the best place for children is with their biological family.

We have studies from the past, showing what diminishes child welfare. Whenever the Genesis plan breaks down, the culture tends more towards a reduction in care for its weaker members, and children suffer the most. The Roman Empire is a comprehensive case study. The death and abuse of vast numbers of children, was due largely to the departure from sexual morality and the one father one mother Genesis unit. If we change our definition of sexual morality, then that is the outcome. We know that. We have seen this in history.

Church's Response

We are already seeing a large-scale breakdown of child care in Western society today. Children are living much more vulnerable lives, regarding many different influences. Our cultural trajectory is undeniable. There needs to be a response to this from the church, if we are to serve our society for its transformation. What is our response?

We know that there are many times we don't grow up in ideal conditions. There are many children who don't grow up with two parents, or with divorced parents and remarried parents. Sometimes there are deaths among parents. Other times there are parents who just don't do well, whether for reasons of health, poor opportunities, or we fail in various ways.

This is life. Our communities always have many cases like this. This is what the wider biological family (aunts, uncles, etc), village and church families are for. The church should, and often does, serve as the greatest stabilising factor in helping to repair our broken situations.

Not to judge, but to step in and help. When misfortune, whether people are to blame or not to blame, occurs, we are not to judge, but to help. This is love. We help one another and serve one another, and then single parents and children get the best chances of recovery and of a strong future. They find themselves in a loving, affirming wider family.

Today's "Rome"

This is what the early church did for the wider community. They didn't just look after themselves, but stepped into the Roman world around them, the world that persecuted and killed them. They reached out to the single parents and the children that needed care and they took them into their homes and built orphanages for them.

This is where the concept of caring for deserted children came from. It didn't happen in the world until the church came. This is living out the law and Prophets. In doing this, the church not only cared for countless numbers of individuals, but also brought a new awareness of love and transformation to their culture. People began to look at their lives and change and began to live for the common good of those around them, rather than for themselves.

Today we see many Christians taking the lead in this. We know many families who over the years have had scores of children living in their home. They have made them part of their own family, to give them the best hope of recovery. This is selfless living and this can have a massive impact on lives and on the future of a whole culture, introducing the love of God to many through practical, selfless care. This kind of service is what changes our world.

Non-Christians have done this as well, and people who don't live in traditional family units have also brought in and served children. And some have done it in love. Many of them grew up themselves in Christian homes, or in cultures influenced by Christians values. These values certainly didn't come from pagan cultures.

Some people who claim to believe in traditional morality care for children poorly. Unfortunately, sometimes hypocrites are found among “the people of God,” just as Jesus struggled with many of them in the Gospels. And sometimes it’s just that people with traditional views also come from hurting backgrounds.

We can’t overrule principles that have been clearly demonstrated throughout history, based on exceptional cases. Neither can we judge the kindness and love of people who have cared for children sincerely in non-traditional environments. We are speaking about cultural trajectories and their outcomes. And wherever love is shown it comes from the same source in our hearts, from God’s ethic of caring for others, the ethic of putting the interests of others ahead of our self, and this is the ethic that builds our communities and creation.

We learn this ethic firstly from the cross of Christ and the early movement that followed. This leaven came into our pagan world and transformed it. If we care for our children, we will seek to build the community that limits damage to them. That community is shown in Genesis one and two, the creational definitions of marriage and family, established to guard the value of human life. If we care for our children we will not go back to that pagan world. We can avoid that world by building Genesis families in love, and by bringing in a world around us in need of recovery.

Invaded by Agape

“Roman society was patriarchal, and masculinity was premised on a capacity for governing oneself and others of lower status. ... "valour" made a man most fully a man... Sexual conquest was a common metaphor for imperialism in Roman discourse, and the "conquest mentality" was part of a "cult of virility" that particularly shaped Roman homosexual practices.” (Wikipedia)

According to the disciplined cultural view of the earlier Roman Republic, homosexual relations were agreeable if the man of higher class took the dominate role. In practice, homosexual relations became more generalised in the Roman Imperial age. This isn't said to single out this form of sexuality, but because some have said that peer related homosexual relationships weren't common.

The Image of God

These notes are about all our lives and our call to be faithful to, love and serve each other. But one question that needs to be addressed is this: If a homosexual couple live together in love, serving their church and contributing to the needy in their community faithfully, isn't this the law and the Prophets, love for neighbour?

We know and love many people who belong to different faiths. Some of those we know, we respect highly in different ways. Some of them live better community lives that some Christians we know. We have some vales in common and we nourish these to make our community a better place, also to witness about Christ, who is the source of everything good.

Even in ancient pagan religions, there were always adherents that were good people. They did not follow the self-serving trend of their community. What concerned God wasn't some nominal adherence to the right faith. It was the impact of that faith on the community. If the faith promotes a wrong image of God, a self-serving image that is contrary to the cross, then this has eventual wide-ranging consequences for the nurture of people.

And God loves people. When it comes to sexual morality, God's witness is that this is to be in the context of a marriage between a man and a woman, where there is a love-for-life commitment to each other and to their children. This is God's image reflected into our sexual morality. It may not always work out. We often mar the image of God in some way. That is our brokenness. But when that happens, God doesn't stand over us in judgement. His cross shows his love for us in our fall.

God's Agape

In the Greek and Roman cultures, false images of God had a massive impact on the destruction of life. Love was seen mainly in this role of conquest. People spoke of their many lovers, using the Greek word *eros*, for sexual love. Paul said this way of living shouldn't be seen among us. Sexual immorality and greed belong to the worldly powers, that the love of God is overcoming through us.

In the Roman pragmatic world, when someone was unbeneficial, they may be just cast aside. This was how humanity was treated, like those dying of plague, even relatives, thrown out to die. Rome practiced a mutual charity of, “You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.” They saw non-returned giving as lacking the values that built the Empire. Magic settled disputes, rather than love and possible restoration. If Nero didn't like a senator, he simply ordered him to commit suicide.

It was into this world that *agape* came, as such a shock, through the early church. This is the Greek word for love, most commonly used in the New Testament. It means giving, without the expectation of receiving back again. This is the antithesis of empire. The church protested paganism by service. They took in the dying, at the risk of their own lives. This love brought many to Christ.

Emperor Julian lamented that the church was winning the world, by love for their enemies. This was the contrast between the gospel and the pagan world. It moved the concept of love from the love of self, to the love of neighbour. To compete with the church, Julian put moral reforms and welfare in place. This is what Paul called, the church transforming the powers through service.

The greatest image we have of *agape* in human history comes from God himself. He travelled the furthest distance to come to the weak and lower people. He is God, and yet he came and suffered as a slave. And he forgave us freely, without us earning it in any way. The change of life he brings to us, isn't for him. But a grace and blessing to us. He didn't do any of this for himself.

This is the message the early church took out into the world. They had been so impacted by this selflessness and grace: from Jesus washing their feet, to allowing his suffering to show us God's love, to his non-retributive response. Jesus did what was best for us, not what was best for himself. He didn't save himself. All of this filled the disciples' hearts with a new way of looking at the world, which was real. The resurrection of Christ brought the victory to *agape*.

Agape is the great revelation that hit the Roman and Greek pagan worlds. It fills the pages of the New Testament. John especially erupts onto the scene with this new vision: "God is *agape*. If any man does not *agape*, he does not know God." "We *agape*, because he first gave *agape* to us." "How can we *agape* God, if we don't *agape* our neighbour?" *Agape* becomes our temple, and view of divinity, of culture and of relationships, a revolution of our religious and social lives.

Agape and Marriage

This is how the early church thought of marriage and sexual morality. How would *agape* look at these things? First, the woman is elevated out of a patriarchal way of living. If God has made man and woman in his image, as Genesis shows, then they are equal.

If a woman is expected to be faithful in a marriage, so is the man. In fact, the man now looks at the woman entirely differently. He loves her. He doesn't want anything bad to happen to her. He wants her to have the best possible life in their marriage. This is now what motivates the man.

Think about what a revolution this is, what an impact the church has had on the world in this way. A faithful, life long relationship between one man and one woman. Before the church, women were pretty much fair game. This revolution in our cultures, which has significantly shaped our world today, never happened, it never came into the world, except through the church. Not since Adam and Eve.

The Pharisees didn't practice it. They didn't practice polygamy, but they made up problems with their wives, divorced them and married again. This is what Jesus said about them. It looks like a kind of ongoing serial polygamy. It was the church that said, "God has been faithful to us in Christ, let's be faithful to each other, even when it's tough." This goes for all our relationships, not just in marriage and family. Let's forgive and restore. This is what faith is; faithfulness, copied from the faithfulness of Christ.

Genesis Agape

This is the power of the Genesis narrative. It shows how the creational God acts, just like he acted on the cross. This love gives an authority on how to view life. It shows God's view towards male and female, as both equally made in the image of God, equally deserving of human rights, of human value, to be treated equally with *agape*.

Humanism provides no such basis for living. It provides no authority, except for what each one of us believes for ourselves. God's love lays the foundation for *agape*, or human rights.

Sexuality isn't a personal preference. It is a community issue. Individualism, rampant in Rome, and rampant today, destroys community. It introduces into community a self-definition of love, that has no boundaries, except our own views. It puts the community on this trajectory. It opens us to a hedonism, that is the antithesis of human welfare.

Selfishness is our biggest problem. It comes out in all our lives in different ways. It is the root of all our problems in the world. The only way God can deal with it, is it to die on the cross for us, and then point us to his own image. So, we can't blame others for their selfishness. The idea of non-selfishness must be seen in the church. If we aren't spending our lives on building wider community, we can't blame others for following us.

The cross of Christ and creation show that love is a community ethic. It is living for others, for the best interest of all our community into the future. In former generations people didn't base decisions on their own "love," but on how their actions would affect others. In today's hedonist world, we now decry this as contrary to individual fulfillment.

But where do we draw the lines? What is fulfillment? How do our hearts cultivate love? Love goes through thick and thin. "Love doesn't fail." When we fail, and we all fail, God forgives us freely and picks us up again. It may hurt, it may take time, but he will not fail us. We are not this kind of love, but he is. We are to help and love one another as we go through our failures together.

"A cord of three cannot easily be broken." We stand with each other in failure and walk through together, because it happens to us all. This is all people are looking for, not someone to say we are right, but to be with us when we fail. God doesn't despise our failures, or us when we fail. He loves what we learn from them, how we learn to humbly care for others. Our only fear is what others think, and that doesn't matter.

What builds our world, what keep it safe for all? What protects the image of God in humanity and protects the interest of children? There must be an authoritative answer to these questions. If sex isn't defined by God in Genesis one and two, then who defines it and what is its definition? The answer is paganism, in its eventual outworking.

Agape and Family

It wasn't just love for the woman that changed the men's behaviour in Rome, but also love for the children. This is how the gospel changes our cultures. If God has loved me freely, how can I share that love with others? This is what brings regeneration to a pagan world.

The early Christians looked at the children suffering in the Empire and thought, "How can we bring a new nurturing for these children? How can these weak ones be protected? How can our society shift from its pragmatics of power, and build on a footing of *agape*? The early church found commitment to marriage was the answer. They found that *agape*, putting the interests of others ahead of ourselves, was reflecting the true God into our world, and into the wellbeing of others around us.

This is how the transformation of marriage and sexual morality came into the Roman world. It came in through the astounding discovery of *agape*, shown us by the act of the gospel. It didn't come in through the law. Paul didn't teach these things because of the law of the Old Testament. This law showed us some good principles, but it isn't the life, the motive, and person of God, who we see in Christ. The church fashioned love in the way they did, not because of law, but because God is love.

The men began to change how they live, and the woman also renewed the way they looked at the world around them, thinking only of the welfare of others. This provides the context in which children were put first, not just by keeping the marriage wholesome, but also by making the children's needs a priority, whether those children were male or female, healthy or sick, or had projects in life or didn't. They were of the same value, because Genesis tells us they are equally made in the image of God. This is how God wants us to see all people, not through the eye of pragmatics, or what we call today "quality of life."

Agape isn't just a commitment to a troubled relationship, gritting the teeth and bearing it. It is a commitment to build into that relationship the things that nurture the relationship. It is a commitment to love and build love where it doesn't exist. This is what God did for us. This is the love Paul defined in his letters. Only this kind of love, not a self-orientated love, can bring hope and healing to a world that is broken.

It isn't easy. It takes a heart that is contrite and then open to God's love. But this is what the cross shows us about our human heart. If there is going to be a new world, then this cross must break into our hearts and give us a new vision.

Agape, not Law

The wonderful thing is this: If our sexual morality is founded on *agape* and not on law, then it means we can receive people who we deem have failed in this morality. Law judges and disqualifies. Whenever we found our ethics on law, this is what we do. This is the reason we have shunned others. We have thought that God had given us laws about sexual morality and marriage, and if any people break those laws, then God is angry.

God's anger isn't a human anger. It is sorrow at the suffering, which he came to have compassion on. Com-*passion* means to suffer-with. He was so angry at the suffering, that he came to show us what to do about it, how to forgive it, how to reach out and build bridges with a broken world. He came to suffer with us, to forgive us for the violence, injustice and abuse we did to him, and then to say to us, "It's not law, it's bringing in a hurting community and learning together, slowly, but surely, how *agape* works and saves and remakes us."

When our sexual morality is built on love, then it is about human welfare. It is about healing lives, all our lives, not just "the righteous." That is why the church embarked on their early teachings and their way of living in sexual morality. It was a program to heal, not to judge. It's all about putting all our lives back together.

And if it's about putting lives together, and not a self-righteous code for living, then that means all our lives are equally important, even the lives of those who don't agree with us, and those who are hurt by the "Roman world." These are the ones the early church reached out to the most, to help, just like Jesus did.

Law is a terrible thing to build our lives on. But *agape* works. *Agape* builds bridges with a broken community, just like God did in Christ with us. *Agape* shows us the way. The way is to love our neighbour, not to shun them.

The church is cast into the world, to live out the Genesis truth of human value, which includes all those who don't agree with us, all those who persecute us. Our answer to them is the love of God, to uphold their human value, to serve them in their need, as if they were part of our own family. The way is to build wider community that includes, that heals, that serves, that cares for the suffering, that points the way for us all towards God's *agape*.

Wisdom of Creation

The scripture speaks a lot about God's creational wisdom. Finally, we see that Christ is this wisdom of God, the way God is making his creation new. This wisdom is God's foolishness, his bowing down to the weakest, even if he suffers to do so. This is the wisdom that heals, repairs, and makes the creation new. It isn't Roman wisdom. Their pragmatics destroys. Their power and self-orientations abuse human value.

God has taught the church his creational wisdom. This includes how we build families. It's a way that nurtures, that brings about safety for the weak. This way of marriage and of sexual morality becomes our model for a healing way of life. The nurture the family provides says to us, "Learn how to provide this nurture for others, for those that are broken, those that are hurting, those that are sinners."

The marriage model of Genesis doesn't teach us self-righteousness. It teaches us nurture. It teaches the wisdom that rebuilds a world which has been devastated by abuse. We have abused that world and the people in it, in our pursuit of self-fulfilment. We have put ourselves first, and told ourselves this is the best thing for the world. "If everyone learned to be themselves, then everyone would be happy." That isn't the wisdom of God.

The plan of creation, the God we see in creation, is one of love. He brings together a creation that is carefully nurtured for our wellbeing. He put us in families, to continue this nurture. He says, that this nurture is the way creation is sustained, and when it falls, the way creation is rebuilt, healed and made new.

A Nurturing People

We Christians should be nurturers of a world in need. If we don't learn this self-giving nurturing service from Genesis one and two, and apply that to the broken world around us, then we are more blind than the others. We aren't here to judge others by the Genesis code, but to allow that Genesis narrative to call us to help, to remould us into nurturing people, who care for others, outside our family unit and group.

The way Genesis has often been used, is for those who agree with it to stay together, apart from the rest of the world. The rest of the world looks on at us, and sees our lack of care, and wonders about the God we preach. This isn't what God did. We are using the Genesis story the wrong way. We haven't yet learned what it is saying to us?

God spoke to a world in darkness, and the darkness fled. How did he do this? He sent his word to heal us? How did his word come? In human flesh, among us, and on the cross. This is what Genesis is telling us about the world, about how God builds his creation. This is how God is calling us to drive back darkness.

Not to stand on Mount Sinai calling the world out, but to hang on the cross and show the world that love is about others, and not ourselves. We can't preach this, we must show it. Jesus taught for three years and no one understood. He died and that started the largest movement in the world. Let's regather the true character of that movement, and take over the world in *agape*.

There is so much brokenness all around today. There are broken families, broken marriages, broken individuals. We are all broken in some way. Our doors are to open to all people. More than that, we

are to walk through their doors and care about others where they are and learn to walk together, so God can heal us together, and heal our environment.

God sends the church into Rome, bearing its cross, healing ourselves and Rome. The body of Christ is the family of God, and is to take its example from the Genesis family. Just as God founded that family to nurture lives, so the church is a big family, called to bring that nurture, wisdom and *agape* to his whole creation. This is Adam and Eve's commission, still operative in us through the gospel.

Let's be that family and get on with the work of God, of loving and healing a fallen world, ourselves included. Let's apply the patience that is needed, to love and forgive people who are angry, who mess things up around us, who put our home out of place. Let's follow Jesus.