

**SEXUAL REVELATION:**  
**BODY THEOLOGY IN CONVERSATION**  
**WITH H. RICHARD NIEBUHR**  
**AND IMPLICATIONS FOR**  
**SEXUAL ETHICS**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### **GOOD IS THE FLESH<sup>1</sup>**

Good is the flesh that the Word has become,  
good is the birthing, the milk in the breast,  
good is the feeding, caressing and rest,  
good is the body for knowing the world,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body for knowing the world,  
sensing the sunlight, the tug of the ground,  
feeling, perceiving, within and around,  
good is the body, from cradle to grave,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the body, from cradle to grave,  
growing and ageing, arousing, impaired,  
happy in clothing, or lovingly bared,  
good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

Good is the pleasure of God in our flesh,  
longing in all, as in Jesus, to dwell,  
glad of embracing, and tasting, and smell,  
good is the body, for good and for God,  
Good is the flesh that the Word has become.

In a small town in southern Idaho, seven junior high boys sat in a circle with their twenty-two year old volunteer youth advisor as he began to butter a piece of bread. After buttering the bread, he licked it, passed it to the ten-year-old boy next to him, and said, “Lick it.” The junior higher responded, “No! Sick! You already liked it.” After a back and forth exchange, he eventually convinced the student to lick the piece of bread. The junior higher passed the bread to the boy next to him, and the youth advisor again said, “Alright, now you lick it.” This continued for awhile, until finally the boys realized it was just too gross. One boy finally said, “This is gross! Why would I want to lick a piece of

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<sup>1</sup> Text from the hymn, “Good Is the Flesh” by hymn-writer Brian Wren, as quoted in James Nelson, Body Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 45ff.

bread that someone else licked?!” The youth advisor smiled, getting the response he had hoped for, and said, “Exactly! And in the same way, why would you want to marry someone and have sex with them, if someone has already had sex with them!” Thus ended a summer, junior high sex-ed lesson.<sup>2</sup>

Underneath such an inadequate theology and understanding of sexuality lie several distorted concepts of the body, sexuality and the doctrine of the incarnation. And this doesn’t just happen in Idaho. Christians today, across the geographical and theological spectrums, don’t quite know what to say about the body. No one quite knows what to say about sexuality; most opinions on the issue are so polarized that it’s either an *abstinence-only* curriculum, or no curriculum at all and an *anything-goes* attitude. Clearly both liberals and conservatives need to think about their theologies of the body and sexuality, and this calls for a more robust and open theology of incarnation.

Theologian and ethicist James Nelson, Emeritus Professor of Christian Ethics at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, called for just such a theology in much of his writing, particularly in his seminal<sup>3</sup> work published in 1992, entitled Body Theology. Nelson believes we have not paid enough attention to our bodies, and instead, have continued to let the Hellenistic Greco-Roman world’s concept of a spiritualistic dualism<sup>4</sup> rule our perspective and theologies concerning the body. He also believes that our bodies, and our body experiences, are monumental parts of our creaturely existence,

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<sup>2</sup> While I did spend two years working as a Director of Youth Ministries for a small church in southern Idaho, I am not the youth advisor in this anecdote. It was one of my youth advisors, and even though I knew this way of teaching youth about sexuality was inappropriate and insufficient, I never once talked about sex or bodies during my two years there – I had no proper guidance and no theology to support a more proper understanding of these crucial issues.

<sup>3</sup> No pun intended.

<sup>4</sup> Nelson, 30.

with deep theological significance: “What, then, is body theology? It is nothing more, nothing less than our attempts to reflect on body experience as revelatory of God.”<sup>5</sup>

This paper will reflect on Nelson’s body theology along with issues of revelation, incarnational theology and sexual ethics. It is my hope that more open and robust theologies of the incarnation and revelation will lead to deeper and more honest understandings and Christian claims about the body and sexuality, which in turn may lead the Church into new ways of thinking about sexual ethics.

## **II. UNIQUE REVELATION, CHRIST’S EMBODIMENT & THE INCARNATION**

H. Richard Niebuhr writes in The Meaning of Revelation that “The special occasion to which we appeal in the Christian church is called Jesus Christ, in whom we see the righteousness of God, his [sic] power and wisdom...Revelation means this intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible.”<sup>6</sup> Niebuhr sees revelation as a once-for-all event that finds its culmination and ultimate fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. He writes that “Revelation means God, God who discloses himself to us through our history as our knower, our author, our judge and our only savior.”<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr argues that although for many in the Christian tradition, revelation has consisted of dogmas and concepts, when speaking of revelation, we should “speak in terms of persons.”<sup>8</sup> And according to Niebuhr, the ultimate and unique revelation was found in a person: the person of Christ Jesus; “the revelatory occasion...exhibits a unique, unrepetitive pattern.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>6</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, date unknown), 93.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 127.

However, there is a tension that exists in Niebuhr; while he speaks of the unique, revelatory event of the person of Jesus, there is some sense in which he seems to believe there is a progressive, continual element to revelation. “Indeed, when the church recognizes the revelatory moment as truly revelatory it is impelled to continuing, progressive interpretation of every occasion in the life of men by means of its great image of the saving word of God.”<sup>10</sup> However, Niebuhr is very careful to then follow that statement with a qualification: “Revelation is not progressive in the sense that we can substitute for the revelatory moment of Jesus Christ some other moment in our history.”<sup>11</sup> Niebuhr holds what appears to be an orthodox position concerning the incarnation, that it is the unique, revelatory event of God embodying human flesh in the person of Christ. However, some contemporary theologians argue that this concept of the incarnation is too limited. By limiting the incarnational event solely to Christ, it seems that we remove ourselves from the possibility of also being incarnational in the world, living out our calling to be *little Christs* in the world today.

Niebuhr himself is aware of this possibility of creating too much distance between ourselves and the incarnation: “Moreover, we must ask ourselves whether the revelation of God as person is not so mystic an event that it becomes wholly separate from and irrelevant to our discursive knowledge and to our moral standards.”<sup>12</sup> James Nelson does not want the incarnation to become something that is foreign to humanity or solely an event in the past. He believes when this is the majority interpretation, “not only is Jesus’ humanity effectively undercut, but also all other human beings are effectively excluded

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 134-5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 155.

from participation in the christic<sup>13</sup> reality.”<sup>14</sup> We will return to this idea of a more inclusive theology of the incarnation later in the paper.

Through the radical act of the incarnation, divinity and humanity were forever linked together through the person of Christ. God visibly said “Yes” to humanity through the God’s embodiment of human flesh, as is made clear through the text of the beautiful hymn found in Philippians:

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!”<sup>15</sup>

God said “Yes” to humanity, to bodily flesh, and it was in the person of Christ that God forever showed that God was *for* humanity and *with* humanity. William Stacy Johnson argues that God is *for*, *with* and *in/among* us through the Triune God: Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer. This is the ultimate act of God’s self-revelation, God’s self-giving to humanity: the concrete, historical personhood of Jesus, the embodiment of a God who is *for* and *with* humanity.

God is *for* us in that God condescended Godself to humanity; as the Philippians hymn noted, Jesus made himself nothing, leaving God’s place in the heavens and coming to God’s created earth. God chose humility over pride, mutuality over hierarchy, and suffering over power. It was in this radical movement downward of God that we are able to see God’s radical commitment to be *for* us. God is also *with* us in that God took the

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<sup>13</sup> Nelson uses the phrase “christic reality” to express the idea that the God-bearing incarnation is not only something restricted solely to Jesus Christ. He writes in Body Theology, “Through the lens of this paradigmatic embodiment of God [the incarnation], however, Christians can see other incarnations: the *christic* reality expressed in other human beings in their God-bearing relatedness” (Nelson 51).

<sup>14</sup> Nelson, 52.

<sup>15</sup> Philippians 2.6-8, Today’s New International Version (TNIV).

very form of humanity, taking on the very flesh, the very body of humanity. In doing so, in taking on the very flesh of created humanity, God visibly affirmed the created order and the bodies of humanity. While in many versions of Christianity, there have been and still are notions that the body is bad and the soul is good, that flesh is sinful and spirit is equated with piety; however, God shatters all such notions by the inbreaking of God's presence and divinity into humanity's body, into humanity's very created flesh. While this is a beautiful image, the inbreaking of very God into human flesh is a messy endeavor: "That Jesus should be a laughing, crying, sweating, urinating, defecating, orgasmic, sensuous bundle of flesh just as we are seems incomprehensible."<sup>16</sup> As God embodies human flesh, God shows that God is *with* us, just as God's condescending shows how God is utterly and completely *for* humanity.

One of Nelson's primary objectives is to open up the doctrine of the incarnation, so that humanity might see their ability to partake in the incarnation, and to see how the incarnation is a continual presence in the world today. However, he still wants to be able to hold onto the unique revelation of Christ, which Niebuhr argued was the fulfillment of God's self-revelation to humanity. Nelson argues in the following way:

"What is at stake for body theology is not the paradigmatic importance of God's revelation in Jesus. In our faith communities history, it is this figure and not another who has been and who is central to us. It is through him that we measure the ways we are grasped by the christic presence. But the marvelous paradox is that Jesus empties himself of claims to be the exclusive embodiment of God, and in that self-emptying opens the continuing possibility for all other persons."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> James Nelson, Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1983), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Nelson, Body Theology, 52.

God's condescension and humility and God's giving-up of Godself are the keys that open the door to humanity's possibility to continue to bring the embodiment of God into the world today.

### III. CONTINUAL REVELATION & INCLUSIVE INCARNATION

James Nelson believes that a proper way to think about an incarnational faith and the implications of that faith, reside in what he has called *body theology*. Again, as quoted above, Nelson writes: "What, then, is body theology? It is nothing more, nothing less than our attempts to reflect on body experience as revelatory of God."<sup>18</sup> Nelson begins his argument by calling men and women in today's postmodern world to stop mistrusting, fearing and discounting their bodies.<sup>19</sup> It is his desire that we would begin to take our body experiences seriously and that we would see that these experiences can be revelatory in their own way, just as the incarnation and God's embodiment was revelatory in history. Nelson argues that Christ is alive, and thus, "God continues to become embodied in our common flesh in saving, healing, liberating, justice-making ways."<sup>20</sup> Like Niebuhr, Nelson would agree that revelation needs to be spoken about in terms of persons, and that revelation is God's way of revealing Godself to humanity.

However, Nelson believes that when we speak of God revealing Godself, that action is not limited solely to Christ. As being God-bearers, just as Christ, humanity has the christic reality within them, and thus, are sharing and revealing God with the Others they encounter throughout their lives. Nelson is not satisfied to simply say that Christ's incarnation is the once-for-all unrepeatable event, because that separates that reality too

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 10.



much from humanity, and makes their participation in being co-God-bearers a seemingly impossible endeavor and calling:

“...the tradition has effectively lost the mystery and reality of God’s continuing and repeated incarnation in and through human flesh. The paradox is that God’s incarnation in Jesus is sufficient only if it nourishes repetition. Jesus as Christ is our faith community’s paradigm, our living symbol of God’s *ongoing* embodiment – and of the possibility of our being, in some measure, body-words of the divine love.”<sup>21</sup>

Through all of this, it’s clear that Nelson does not want to lose hold of the historic significance of Christ being a pivotal, if not the most pivotal moment of God’s self-revelation to humanity and the created world. Christ is clearly important for Nelson and for aspects of his body theology. But it is also clear that any attempt to confine the concepts of God-bearing relatedness and incarnational spirit and presence solely to Christ will be rejected by Nelson. Below is a good summary of how Nelson finds a balance between Christ’s incarnation and the ongoing incarnation in the world:

“The Word became flesh. And the Word continues to become flesh. Both meanings of incarnation are important. If we affirm only the first, we drastically diminish the religious value of all the rest of human history. Moreover, we are led to think of incarnation as possession more than as relationship. And we deny the reality of the present embodiment of God, the indwelling of Christ. But if we affirm only present incarnation and neglect the reality of the Christ in Jesus, we lose the power of that particularly luminous moment in our communal history. We lose the transformative power of that paradigmatic one to nourish and shape the embodied God in us. Both meanings are important.”<sup>22</sup>

The implications for the concept of revelation are clear: this makes revelation a progressive, continual presence in the world today, not simply a one-time event. While

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<sup>21</sup> Nelson, *Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience*, 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

God's self-revelation through Christ's incarnation may have been the most drastic and clear example of God's revelation to humanity, it was not finished through Christ. "The Christian faith is an incarnational faith, a faith in the *repeatable and continuing incarnation of God*."<sup>23</sup> There are additional implications, however, for such a belief in continual incarnations of God. As humanity seeks to see how they should continue to incarnate God in the world today, Jesus Christ serves as the ultimate example of embodiment. Just as God was both *for* and *with* us in the person – the complete person, the life, death and resurrection – of Jesus, so we too are called as God-bearers to be *for* and *with* humanity in the world today.

Let us look again at the ways in which God is *for* and *with* humanity. God is *for* humanity in that God condescended Godself, came to earth in humility after giving up power that rightly belonged to God. God is also fully *with* humanity in that God came to earth and partook of our flesh, just as we are called to partake of Christ's flesh. God came and conjoined divinity with human flesh; by this radical act of embodiment, God affirmed the goodness and holiness of the body and flesh. As we look to Christ as the ultimate example of God-embodiment, we see that we too are called to lives of humility and fleshly bodies. We are called to lives of radical *for*-ness and *with*-ness; one way that we are able to continue to be God-bearers in the world is through our sexuality.

Sexuality? At first, this appears to be an illogical or sensational step to make: how does one get from incarnation to living as God-bearers to sexuality? Nelson believes it isn't such a wildly-irrational place to begin. "God is uniquely known to us through human presence, and human presence is always embodied presence. Thus body language

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<sup>23</sup> James Nelson, Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), 36.

is inescapably the material of Christian theology, and bodies are always sexual bodies, and our sexuality is basic to our capacity to know and to experience God.”<sup>24</sup> So, it is through our body experiences as sexual beings that we are able to be *for* and *with* the Other.<sup>25</sup>

#### IV. SEXUAL REVELATION & SEXUAL ETHICS

Marie Fortune’s book, Love Does No Harm, presents an alternative view of sexual ethics, one that radically departs from the bread-licking sexual ethic presented to the circle of hormone-driven junior high boys in southern Idaho. Fortune has no qualms with laying her cards out on the table as she writes the following in the Introduction:

“If you are comfortable living your life based on a simple, rigid set of rules which has been handed you regarding sex and relationships, don’t bother to read further. If you believe that the only place for sexual intimacy is in heterosexual marriage and that whatever happens in that configuration is by definition good and right, then put this book down. It is not for you.”<sup>26</sup>

Fortune spends the first half of the book setting up a context for her readers. She discusses ethics, power, boundaries and the particularities of the heterosexual relationship

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>25</sup> Just to be clear, I am **not** attempting to make the case that sexual relationships are the **only way** people can be *for* and *with* Others. However, it is clearly an important way that we can continue to embody God and the christic reality to the Other in our lives. As I move into the sexual ethics portion of this paper, it’s important to remember that when I speak about sexual relationships, I’m not arguing for an “anything goes” mentality, where people can “experience God” through multiple partners, unsafe sex, sexually abusive relationships, illegal sexual relationships (including pedophilic relationships) or anything **other** than a committed, monogamous sexual relationship between two adult partners, preferably one that adheres to Marie Fortune’s Five Guidelines for Sexual Ethics, which will be discussed shortly. It is not my hope that one will read this paper and believe that the most important and essential way for them to get in touch with God and incarnate God in the world is to run out and have unsafe sex with as many partners as possible or to engage in wild orgies and sexual escapades. That would be a misreading of this paper.

<sup>26</sup> Marie Fortune, Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us (New York: Continuum, 1995), 16. One interesting note about the book is that body theologian James Nelson authored the Preface to the book, in which he writes the following: “It is a hopeful book because of the incarnational theology that underlies it...it is transparently clear she believes that God is truly experienced in the midst of those everyday relationships that are authentically loving. She knows that as human beings we are so radically relational that our loves of God, self, and neighbor (the partner) are finally inseparable. Self-love is necessary grounding for love of the partner, and when we truly love another human being we are at the same time loving God” (11).

dynamics. With the first half of the book, she sets her readers up for her five guidelines for sexual ethics, and what I think should be used by the wider Christian community as more proper and helpful sexual ethics that lead us away from rule-based ethics that Fortune believes are unhelpful and often simply miss the point.

I first want to lay out Fortune's five guidelines for sexual ethics that are founded on a relational-based system of ethics, one that takes into account the intimate relational framework in which these important sexual decisions take place and uses a robust incarnational theology as the foundation. Secondly, I want to look at how these five sexual ethics guidelines can be used by men and women as they work towards following the incarnational spirit of being *for* and *with* the Other in their lives. Below are Marie Fortune's Five Guidelines:

1. **Peer Relationships:** Is my choice of intimate partner a peer, i.e. someone whose power is relatively equal to mine? We must limit our sexual interaction to our peers. Some people are off limits for our sexual interests.
2. **Authentic Consent:** Are both my partner and I authentically consenting to our sexual interaction? Both of us must have information, awareness, equal power and the option to say "no" without being punished, as well as the option to say "yes."
3. **Faithfulness:** Am I faithful to my promises and commitments? Whatever the nature of a commitment to one's partner and whatever the duration of that commitment, fidelity requires honesty and the keeping of promises. Change in an individual may require a change in the commitment which hopefully can be achieved through open and honest communication.
4. **Stewardship of Sexuality:** Do I take responsibility for protecting myself and my partner against sexually transmitted diseases and to insure reproductive choice? This is a question of stewardship (the wise care for and management of the gift of sexuality) and anticipating the literal consequences of our actions. Taking this responsibility seriously presupposes a relationship: knowing over time and sharing a history in which trust can develop.
5. **Sharing of Pleasure:** Am I committed to sharing sexual pleasure and intimacy in my relationship? My concern should be both for my own needs and those of my partner.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 75-138.

I believe that we can be *for* the Other as we seek out peer relationships that create the environment in which authentic consent is a natural outgrowth of the equality found within the partners. Fortune’s guideline for faithfulness and fidelity is a natural outgrowth of any healthy relationship and serves as the bridge between being *for* another person and constantly *with* them. Finally, as two people come together – man-man, woman-man, woman-woman – through their stewardship of their individual and collective sexualities and the sharing of intimacy and bodily pleasure, they will be *with* that person in a way that no one else can be.

One can learn a lot from popular culture, especially since so much of our contemporary pop-culture is about sex. A few months ago, hit show *Desperate Housewives* aired an episode in which one of the husbands on the show sought out a prostitute so that he could play out fantasies that he didn’t dare share with his wife. Why? Because they involved whips, being spanked with a comb, and being blindfolded; this is just one way that our culture today has sexualized, eroticized and popularized sadomasochism [S/M].<sup>28</sup> The term comes from two words: *sadism*, the tendency to derive sexual gratification from inflicting pain and humiliation on others, and *masochism*, the tendency to derive sexual gratification from one’s own pain and humiliation. The society-at-large seems to have accepted S/M as an appropriate expression of one’s sexuality; however, this goes against the very first guideline for Fortune’s sexual ethics. Fortune believes this casual acceptance of S/M relationships is one factor that leads many to

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<sup>28</sup> Fortune believes many of the tendencies that would lead one to favor this type of relationship, where the power dynamics are so skewed, spring directly from experiencing an abusive childhood. Fortune quotes Sheila Jeffreys, author of *The Lesbian Heresy* as follows: “Practitioners defend S/M by stating that it is the only way they can experience sexual pleasure because their abuse has tied abuse and pleasure so closely together for them that any possibility of eroticism of equality is locked out” (Fortune, 78).

choose relationships where the power dynamics are unbalanced, instead of choosing a relationship where equality, not inequality, is eroticized.

Fortunes believes egalitarian peer relationships, where power dynamics and other differences are minimized are the only proper relationship for sexual expression. Some more conservative readers may look at her ethical guidelines and be frustrated because there is no guideline that expressly states that sex needs to occur within the context of a marital relationship,<sup>29</sup> and accuse her of having no absolutes. However, this is one absolute for Fortune: any relationship that has an inequality of “social power and authority due to role, status, or age”<sup>30</sup> is off-limits.

It is in such an egalitarian relationship only that authentic consent is possible; in fact, it is a prerequisite. “The possibility of authentic consent presupposes a peer relationship in which both persons have the capacity and resources to exercise moral agency and choice. Authentic consent should not be confused with submission, the absence of non-consent or acquiescence.”<sup>31</sup> For many, especially for those who have experienced consensual sex before within a relationship, consent is something that is often taken for granted.

One thing that is important to remember is that because one has received consent before, that does not mean one has the right to sex whenever they desire. This is often forgotten in marital relationships; marital rape is not something often talked about, possibly because of the idea that any sex outside of marriage is *bad*, thus implying that *any* sex that occurs *within* a marriage must then, logically, be *good*. This is far from the truth, because many times within relationships, especially those marked by physical,

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<sup>29</sup> Not to mention the fact that they would probably criticize Fortune’s acceptance of LGBT relationships.

<sup>30</sup> Fortune, 82.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

mental, psychological, spiritual and sexual abuse, authentic consent is nonexistent and impossible because of the abuse and lopsided power dynamics.

As we seek to live our lives as God-bearing bodies, we look to God's own example of self-emptying into human flesh, the person of Christ. Christ was first and foremost *for* humanity, and as we seek to be Christ to the world, we too are called to be *for* humanity, and *for* the Other(s) in our lives. As we look at the way that happens in relationships, especially those that are sexually intimate, we see that Fortune's guidelines of peer relationships and authentic consent can be seen as an extension of the way in which God encountered flesh through the incarnation. Again, we remember the haunting words of the Philippians hymn: "[Jesus] who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God."<sup>32</sup> God emptied Godself in the person of Christ, became an equal with creation, and came to be in relationship with us in humility. God did not become incarnate in human flesh to coerce with God's power or to condemn,<sup>33</sup> but rather to conjoin humanity and divinity, to invite humanity into a relationship where there were no abusive power dynamics, but one in which both God and humanity experienced *koinonia*, fellowship and mutuality in love.

Probably the most clear parallel between how God is *for* and *with* humanity, and how we too are called to be *for* and *with* humanity, is Fortune's emphasis on the role that faithfulness plays in sexual relationships. Fortune writes about how crucially important faithfulness, fidelity and truthfulness are in intimate relationships. However, while these

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<sup>32</sup> Philippians 2.6, The King James Version. \*I rarely use the King James Version because of the outdated language and questionable translations at times, but I thought the harshness and intensity of language was appropriate here.

<sup>33</sup> John 3.16-18: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

aspects are crucial between the two people involved in the relationship, these are not private endeavors:

“Finally, truth-telling is not only an issue between two intimate partners; it is also an issue between the couple and their community. It is very difficult for an intimate relationship to survive and thrive in secrecy and isolation. A relationship needs the context of community to provide it with support, a reality check, encouragement, affirmation, and, when necessary, challenge.”<sup>34</sup>

One aspect of fidelity is promise keeping.<sup>35</sup> It is in the simple but powerful act of keeping the promises we make to one another that we are living out lives and relationships marked by fidelity. Faithfulness and fidelity must be marks of all relationships, whether they are marital relationships, monogamous relationships or other types.

God truly is a faithful God, a God who has promised to never leave us or forsake us. That triune promise was given by God, embodied in the person of Jesus, and continually fulfilled as the presence of the Spirit is with all of creation and in lives of those who seek God and Spirit. Fidelity and faithfulness serve as the bridge between being *for* another person and constantly *with* them. Being *with* them doesn't necessitate a physical locale; rather, the idea of fidelity within a intimate relationship is that no matter where one physically is in relation to their Other, they have promised to be *for* and *with* them. This is also true for God, while God was physically with us in the person of Christ, and when Christ ascended back to be with God; the physical presence is not the same. However, that doesn't change the faithfulness that exists within the relationship. God is fundamentally for and with humanity as God is a faithful God; God has made promises to humanity that God, Christ and the Spirit will not go back on. This is our call to live out

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<sup>34</sup> Fortune, 131-2.

<sup>35</sup> This is not to be confused with the Conservative Evangelical/Fundamentalist men's movement made famous in the early 1990's, known as "Promise Keepers."



the *christic* reality, the embodiment of God in the world; we are called to be in relationship with people in ways that are marked by truth-telling, promise-keeping and faithfulness, just as God has done for and with us.

Finally, Fortune outlines two final ethical guidelines for sexually intimate relationships: stewardship of sexuality and the mutual sharing of pleasure. Both of these guidelines have to do with our bodies, both caring for and enjoying the pleasures of God's creation of human flesh. Living in the age of rampant HIV and AIDS and a sexualized culture, it is more important now than ever to protect oneself against sexually transmitted diseases, and to be aware of and prepared for the actual, literal consequences of sex, especially when it is premarital sex. "Whatever our age, we must realize that the capacity to experience sexual intimacy with another person carries with it enormous responsibility because there are consequences for myself and the other person."<sup>36</sup> There are consequences for our lives, our flesh and our bodies, and it's important to keep in mind the holiness of our bodies: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple."<sup>37</sup> However, while caring for our bodies must always be on the forefront of our minds as we engage in sexually intimate relationships, we must not discount nor diminish the incredible aspect of the mutual sharing of pleasure that takes place through intimacy with an Other.

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<sup>36</sup> Fortune, 113.

<sup>37</sup> 1 Corinthians 3.16-17, TNIV.

As we begin discussing the last ethical guideline of the sharing of pleasure, it's important to remember that this can take place through a sexual encounter or simply through the intimacy present in relationships. Some immediately equate intimacy with sexual encounter. Fortune tells a story of clergymen Eric James and Bernard Lynch as they asked a former Justice of the High Court to define intimacy, and his response was, "Intimacy is penetration of the vagina by the erect penis. If there is no erection, there is no penetration, and if there is no penetration, there is no intimacy."<sup>38</sup> Fortune goes on to claim that this is the "patriarchal, legal, heterosexual definition of intimacy: brief, narrow and inadequate."<sup>39</sup> Obviously, this definition of intimacy excludes all same-sex sex, and also requires that sexual intercourse take place in order for intimacy to occur, which is a very narrow definition of what intimacy and the sharing of pleasure is. Others have very narrow and limited definitions of the purpose of sex: some believe sex is simply a recreational sport, while others believe that sex without the possibility of procreation makes no sense.

Fortune believes sex contains elements of both of these polarized positions, but does not limit its definition to either pole: "Sometimes sex is about deep and abiding love, sometimes it is about joy and playfulness, sometimes it is about the release of physical tensions, sometimes it is about procreation...t is always about relationship to another person and to ourselves."<sup>40</sup> When we engage in intimacy and sexual encounters with the Other, we are in a sense, affirming the goodness and the holiness of the body of the Other. Sex is one of the ways in which we can be *with* another human creation in a real and unique way.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 116.

As has been mentioned throughout this paper, God is a God who is radically *for* us and *with* us. God showed humanity how God was *with* them by taking on the flesh and the body of a human. Jesus Christ was the embodiment of God on earth – a wholly divine and human creature. As God took on human flesh, human flesh no longer remained a separated and estranged aspect of life-on-earth, but rather, flesh took on a whole new meaning. Human bodies now were to be the temples of the Holy Spirit – Christ, Spirit and God resided within, and bodies were affirmed. God cared for the bodies of humanity, and showed the goodness of the body and God’s affirmation of such a creation. As we continue to bring Christ into the world today, as we continue to embody the triune God, one way in which we can be *for* and *with* our fellow humanity is through our sexuality, and living sexually ethical lives with the Others in our lives.

## **V. CONCLUSION: A SEXUAL REVELATION**

This paper has covered a lot of ground, perhaps too much; and it has finally led us to examine sexual ethics in light of the incarnation and revelation. Just as God was *for* and *with* humanity through the incarnation, I believe that humanity is called to the same type of relationship, being *for* and *with* Others, as we live out our lives as God-lovers, Christ-followers and Spirit-seekers in the world today. It is a robust incarnational theology that calls us to this type of living. As we look to Christ as the pinnacle of the example of how to embody God in the world today, we too will strive to be *for* and *with* humanity as God was through Christ. As we strive to listen to and take seriously our body experiences, we will be sensitive to how these affect our theology and the way we look at the world and our relationships.

What would a sexual ethic as Marie Fortune argues for in her book look like if one tried to communicate it to a group of junior high boys on a warm summer day in southern Idaho? I am not entirely sure. However, I believe that it would consist of humility, grace, care for and affirmation of our bodies as good creations of God. Scripture is filled with sex, and I think it is fitting to end this paper with a passage from the most sexually explicit and erotic book in the Bible: the Song of Solomon. There is no mention that the two lovers in the Song of Solomon are married, and there is certainly no mention that the purpose of their love and sexual desire is purely for the purpose of procreation.<sup>41</sup> So many who argue for a legalistic or rule-based system of ethics when it comes to sexuality say “We must go back to the Bible! Back to the Bible!” Well, I agree. However, perhaps before running off to Paul, we should spend some time with Solomon.

I had put off my garment;  
                   how could I put it on again?  
 I had bathed my feet;  
                   how could I soil them?  
 My beloved thrust his hand into the opening,  
                   and my inmost being yearned for him.  
 I arose to open to my beloved,  
                   and my hands dripped with myrrh,  
 my fingers with liquid myrrh,  
                   upon the handles of the bolt.  
 How fair and pleasant you are,  
                   O loved one, delectable maiden!  
 You are stately as a palm tree,  
                   and your breasts are like its clusters.  
 I say I will climb the palm tree  
                   and lay hold of its branches.  
 O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,  
                   and the scent of your breath like apples,  
 and your kisses like the best wine  
                   that goes down smoothly,  
                   gliding over lips and teeth.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>42</sup> Song of Solomon 5.3-5, 7.6-9, New Revised Standard Version.

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