

SEXUAL INFIDELITY AS EXPLOITATION

Craig S. Keener

The specific experience that moved me to write this article grew out of telling Bible stories to neighbor kids who were expressing concern about the dangerous drug dealers who daily stalk the street. One eleven-year-old girl, most of whose female teenage relatives under her roof have babies, has a bleeding ulcer and cried when I told her that I was leaving town for a few days. When she asked me to be her godfather, I suspected what inquiry soon confirmed: Her father had abandoned his family and broken her precious heart.

Today many young men and women make promises they have no intention of keeping, to "get the goods." In so doing, they exploit another human being's most personal possession — their body — as an object for their own designs. I write this brief essay because the concerns it addresses touch my life personally. I know too many girls around 14 years of age who get pregnant because boys pressure them to have unprotected sex; the girls get stuck with raising the child. (Some of the girls do this intentionally; tragically, in some areas, it is the most they think they can keep of a man). Smooth-talking tongues and short-lived promises crush trusting hearts, further harden those more prudent than to trust, and often produce children to be raised by a single parent or grandparent. The children themselves provide the best proof that the human heart was never constructed to bear such pain. Although most children I know do not talk about it much unless you ask, not recognizing the pathological abnormality of their situation in a society that normalizes their pain, they know that something is not the way it should be.

Because our society traditionally associated sexual ethics with religion, our culture's abandonment of religion (largely on the grounds that religion was too sectarian) was naturally accompanied by an abandonment of traditional sexual ethics. While we retain a small portion of those ethics (such as the almost universal incest taboo),¹ we have as a culture come to regard premarital sexual activity, and often even extramarital sexual activity, as a matter of personal choice, as if that choice affects no one else (including the sexual partner). More recently we have added the caveat that individuals should practice reasonably safe sex, but have defined safety only in

terms of viruses, omitting possible negative psychological consequences of reducing intimacy to purely physical terms or emotionally betraying those who cannot reduce it to such terms.

But while Christian religion naturally functions as a guardian for sexual ethics, such ethics in various forms are components of most traditional societies. I know of no human society which dispenses with marriage and family units, although the nature of such marriage and families vary from one culture to the next.² Most societies have regarded adultery negatively,³ and many also regard premarital sex⁴ and sometimes divorce⁵ as destabilizing forces; many cultures impose sanctions against those who violate these cultural codes.⁶ Our culture's experiment with the anti-traditional sexual ethics of the 60s has ultimately confirmed the wisdom of many traditional societies, and now, apart from the Western religious tradition, some social analysts are recognizing the wisdom of family,⁷ a wisdom God planted in all human cultures capable of survival.

Our society's growing recognition of the value of faithfulness in relationships derives not only from general social observations but also from the basic character of human nature. When we make ourselves vulnerable to others (or are born in that relation to them), and they betray us, that is unethical. This is true whether the betrayal is gossiping about a secret we confided in them or exploiting our sexuality for their own passions, without any intention of commitment.

To invite someone to become so intimate that we admit them into union with our own bodies is perhaps the ultimate vulnerability — and to learn that they wanted "the goods" without so much as an enduring friendship is probably the ultimate betrayal. That such betrayal has often come to be viewed as a natural part of life only shows how far we have gone from respecting one another as persons of value independent from our own desires.

Even though most young people I know have come to expect some betrayal as a part of life by the time they finish college, most of them nevertheless regard it as something to be avoided. Intimacy only flourishes in the context of trust, and trust only flourishes in the context of commitment which nurtures unconditional love. Betrayal can severely damage its victims' capacity for trust, hence the victim's capacity for intimacy; betrayal easily clones itself as novices to love are instructed in its ways. This suggests the now popular twist on the Golden Rule: Do to others before they can do it to you.

We take interpersonal factors in human bonding, especially in marriage and the relationship that leads to it, far

† Craig S. Keener is an ordained minister in the National Baptist Convention, USA, with a Ph.D. in New Testament from Duke University, as well as an M.A. in biblical languages and an M.Div. in missions from The Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. He is Professor of New Testament at Hood Theological Seminary, and is author of *...And Married Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the New Testament and Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage & Women's Ministries in the Letters of Paul* (both available from the CBE Book Service).

less seriously than we should. In many societies marriage includes a monetary transaction, the dowry or the bride-price (money brought by the wife from her father's house to protect her financially, or money paid as barter to the bride's father to symbolically repay the father for raising the groom's future wife).⁸ Thus in some societies, even cohabitation does not mean a couple is married unless there is also a transaction between families.⁹ For all the chauvinism of "primitive" societies, such cultures often respect both parties as individuals from diverse backgrounds, and offer more rules protecting the parties in event of marital failure than we Americans do.

One may compare the ancient Jewish regulation that a husband must provide for his wife at the level to which she was accustomed growing up.¹⁰ Deuteronomy 21, while accommodating a social system quite different from ours, clearly articulates the principle that sexuality, as one's most private possession, is the seal of commitment one saves for one's future spouse. This text regards premarital sex with a person who may ultimately become someone else's spouse as adultery in advance. Those who misappropriate another person's sexuality in rape are punished at the same level as if they had killed a person.¹¹

Because sexual activity was reserved for marriage, the only *cheap* sex one could have in such cultures was with a prostitute.¹² Then, as today, prostitutes were often without other means of support for themselves or their children; in the Roman period, many or most were slaves.¹³ (Some prostitutes today support a drug habit; but I know of others who know no other means to support their children after their husbands abandoned them. Before the AIDS epidemic was widely reported, one male prostitute in Chicago told me that he only did what he did to get a place to stay at night, and his girlfriend would *kill him* if she ever found out.) We rightly lament that prostitutes sell themselves too cheaply, that men are exploiting human beings by using them for a small price.

But too many young men and women I know today sell themselves more cheaply than that. Often it is because they do not value their sexuality as a special gift to offer uniquely to the person with whom they will spend their lives; often it is because they hope to spend at least part of their lives with a person but the commitment on one or both sides proves inadequate to sustain a long-term relationship. In the latter case, their partner has exploited them, or their effective insulation from the counsel of those who should know better misleads them into thinking that what they feel inside is adequate when feelings by themselves are rarely permanent (in which case, society is guilty of abusing them by negligence in providing fair warning).

In many cases I have observed, people sell themselves cheaply because of the low value they place on them-

selves: Their self-esteem is so uncertain that they succumb to smooth compliments or to peer pressure. Children as young as ten are doing it. (If suggesting abstinence is "imposing moral values," what is letting peer pressure, pressure from the opposite gender, and biology take their course before young people have been exposed to the consequences?)

I advise my young friends to value themselves so highly that they don't give themselves away in sexual intimacy to anyone not willing to pay the ultimate price for it: the commitment of his or her whole life. Although this advice appeals specifically to my hearers' self-interest, I believe that the Gospel also summons us to respect the other person that much, whether or not they see their sexual activity in terms of respect and intimacy. I tell them that I am 33 and single, and that I have had plenty of opportunities to use my sexuality wrongly had I not understood that God's way was better. But the longer I have waited, the more I have learned to develop close friendships based on mutual respect, and the more I have grown to appreciate the true treasure that a husband and wife really have to offer one another in marital intimacy.

All of us know the pain of broken relationships; we likewise recognize the evil of sexual harassment and exploitation, which treat people as objects rather than as persons. Because we know that pain, we cannot buy into society's trivialization of that pain. Betrayal in a business deal is breach of contract, but while the pain of betrayal in marriage often goes much deeper, our society seems less troubled by the latter.¹⁴ Fraudulent misrepresentation of one's commitment in a relationship is exploitation of another person's emotions; while it may not entail the violent theft of another person's sexuality as in rape, it emotionally rapes another person's trust and sense of self-worth. It is oppression — the abuse of power (in this case persuasive power to exploit another's trust) — of another human being.

By recognizing that sexual exploitation is a form of oppression, we may find points of contact with a culture suspicious of specifically Christian values. Not everyone in our society has become hardened to his or her own pain; many are tired of hurting and being hurt, and would welcome more intelligent analysis of the social and interpersonal forces that help explain their experience. Although my new goddaughter moved me to venture momentarily outside my own field of study as a New Testament scholar, I trust that writers more competent in the social sciences than I will continue to make their case heard and develop some of the themes presented here. For the sake of many hurting people, we must develop effective ways to articulate responsible sexual ethics that reflect God's design that all human beings be treated as persons of equal worth and dignity.

¹On this taboo's near universality, see N. Graburn, *Readings in Kinship and Social Structure* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 324; cf. T. Parsons, "Kinship and the Associational Aspect of Social Structure," pp. 409-38 in *Kinship and Culture*, ed. F. L. K. Hsu (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), p. 410; for examples, e.g., E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), pp. 29-48; T. O. Beidelman, "Some Kaguru Notions about Incest and Other Sexual Prohibitions," pp. 181-201 in *Rethinking Kinship and Marriage*, ed. R. Needham, ASAM11 (New York: Tavistock, 1971); R. Firth, *We the Tikopia: A Sociological Study of Kinship in Primitive Polynesia*, 2d ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1963), pp. 280-97. For exceptions, cf. e.g., Beidelman, "Notions," p. 190. What constitutes incest beyond the nuclear family also varies from one culture to another (e.g., I. Schapera, "Kinship and Marriage among the Tawana," pp. 140-65 in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, ed. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and D. Forde [New York: Oxford, 1950], pp. 152, 156; R. Needham, "Remarks on the Analysis of Kinship and Marriage," pp. 1-34 in *Rethinking*, pp. 30-31; M. Fortes, "Kinship and Marriage among the Ashanti," pp. 252-84 in *African Systems*, pp. 257, 278-79).

²Polygyny is common (see e.g., W. N. Stephens, *The Family in Cross-Cultural Perspective* [New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963], p. 51; C. E. Welch, III and P. C. Glick, "The Incidence of Polygamy in Contemporary Africa: A Research Note," *JMFam* 43 [1981]: 191-93); group marriage (e.g., among the Nayar; see S. A. Grunlan and M. K. Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979], p. 161; cf. *Plato Rep.* 5.456-57) and polyandry (most commonly fraternal polyandry, essentially wife-sharing among brothers; see e.g., M. C. Goldstein, "Pahari and Tibetan Polyandry Revisited," *Ethnology* 17 [1978]: 326) are rarer but examples exist.

³Either prohibiting it or limiting it to certain situations, although often applying it only to the wife (working against double standards is one area of improvement in modern Western society); see e.g., Firth, *Tikopia*, pp. 119.475-77; Stephens, *Family*, p. 245; I. Schapera, *Married Life in an African Tribe* (Evanston: Northwestern U., 1966), pp. 204-7; Victor Barnouw, "Eastern Nepalese Marriage Customs and Kinship Organization," *SWJA* 11 (1, Spring 1955): 23; cf. M. Wilson, *Rituals of Kinship Among the Nyaky* (London: Oxford, 1957), pp. 134, 258, 262. The double standard may be related to polygyny (cf. G. K. Nukunya, *Kinship and Marriage Among the Anlo Ewe*, LSEMSA 37 [New York: Humanities, 1969], pp. 70-71).

⁴About half the societies reported by Stephens, *Family*, p. 246, had rules against it, though only half of these effectively restricted it and females were more restricted than males. Customs vary; the Anlo Ewe, for example, tolerate it if the couple will marry later (Nukunya, *Kinship*, p. 69).

⁵Normally it is negative; divorce rates range from high (Ashanti, in B. Farber, *Comparative Kinship Systems* [New York: Wiley, 1968], p. 93) to low (Zulu, in M. Gluckman, "Kinship and Marriage among the Lozi," pp. 166-206 in *African Systems*, p. 194), and divorce often results in severing of kin ties for the children (US, in Donald F. Anspach, "Kinship and Divorce," *JMFam* 38 [2, May 1976]: 323-30). Divorce usually involves the failure of one party to fulfill marital obligations (Evans-Pritchard, *Kinship*, p. 96); adultery normally constitutes grounds (Stephens, *Family*, pp. 231-32; Firth, *Tikopia*, p. 477),

but often a wife cannot divorce a husband for his infidelity (cf. Schapera, *Tribe*, p. 204). In polygynous societies it is more common in polygynous households (Nukunya, *Kinship*, p. 110).

⁶Punishments for incest, for example, vary (e.g., Fortes, "Ashanti," p. 257; Stephens, *Family*, p. 263; Needham, "Analysis," p. 27); it can be punished by deities or people (e.g., Wilson, *Pictorials*, pp. 134-35, 187; T. M. S. Evens, "Mind, Logic, and the Efficacy of the Nuer Incest Prohibition," *Man* 18 [March 1983]: 111-33; Nukunya, *Kinship*, p. 68; Dorothy Willner, "Definition and Violation: Incest and the Incest Taboos," *Man* 18 [March 1983]: 152).

⁷For a recent example (shortly before this article was submitted), cf. Joe Klein's comments on James Q. Wilson's *The Moral Sense* in "How About a Swift Kick?" *Newsweek* (July 26, 1993) p. 30.

⁸See e.g., Grunlan and Mayers, *Anthropology*, p. 154; in Jewish and Roman law, see B. Cohen, *Jewish and Human Law: A Comparative Study*, 2 vols. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1966), pp. 348-76; cf. J. F. Gardner, *Women in Human Law & Society* (Bloomington: Indiana U., 1986), p. 97; M. J. Geller, "New Sources for the Origins of the Rabbinic Ketubah," *HUCA* 49 (1978): 227-45; J. R. Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (New York: Oxford, 1988), pp. 80-84.

⁹E.g., The Laws of Eshnunna 27-28.

¹⁰See e.g., Z. W. Falk, "Jewish Private Law," pp. 504-34 in *Jewish People in the First Century*, ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern, 2 vols. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 1:516.

¹¹See C. S. Keener, "Still a Virgin: Letter to a Rape Victim" (Christians for Biblical Equality, 1993), pp. 4-5. Rape was also a capital charge under Roman law (Gardner, *Women*, pp. 118-19), and rape of the betrothed in The Laws of Eshnunna 26.

¹²Greek men, by contrast, typically had sex with slaves, prostitutes, or one another, till their marriage around age 30 (for sexual exploitation of slaves, see e.g., Artem. *Oneir.* 1.78; Mart. *Epig.* 3.33; Ach. *Tat. Clit.* 6.20; m. *Ab.* 2:7). Many cultures have practiced a sexual double standard, but that is another article.

¹³E.g., Mart. *Epig.* 9.6.7; Apul. *Metam.* 7.9; Just. *Apol.* 1.27; Ab. R. Nathan 8 A; S. B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, & Slaves* (New York: Schocken, 1975), pp. 140-43, 192 (for free prostitutes, see Gardner, *Women*, p. 132).

Bibliography

Anspach, Donald F. "Kinship and Divorce." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 38 (2, May 1976): 323-30. It should go without saying that I am not here condemning the innocent party in a divorce or condemning the repentant; see Keener, *...And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the NT* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).

Barnouw, Victor. "Eastern Nepalese Marriage Customs and Kinship Organization." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 11 (1, Spring 1955): 15-30.

- Beidelamn, T. O. "Some Kaguru Notions about Incest and Other Sexual Prohibitions." Pp. 181-201 in *Rethinking Kinship and Marriage*. Edited by Rodney Needham. Association of Social Anthropologists Monograph 11. New York: Tavistock Publications, 1971.
- Cohen, Boaz. *Jewish and Roman Law: A Comparative Study*. 2 vols. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E. *Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951.
- Evans, T. M. S. "Mind, Logic, and the Efficacy of the Nuer Incest Prohibition." *Man* 18 (March 1983): 111-33.
- Falk, Z. W. "Jewish Private Law." Pp. 504-34 in *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions*. 2 vols. Edited by S. Safrai and M. Stern with D. Flusser and W. C. van Unnik. Section 1 of Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum. Vol. 1: Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp., B. V., 1974; vol. 2: Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976.
- Farber, Bernard. *Comparative Kinship Systems: A Method of Analysis*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968.
- Firth, Raymond. *We the Tikopia: A Sociological Study of Kinship in Primitive Polynesia*. 2d ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.
- Fortes, Meyer. "Kinship and Marriage among the Ashanti." Pp. 252-84 in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*. Edited by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde. New York: Oxford University Press, 1950.
- Gardner, Jane F. *Women in Roman Law & Society*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Geller, Markham J. "New Sources for the Origins of the Rabbinic Ketubah." *Hebrew Union College Annals* 49 (1978): 227-45.
- Gluckman, Max. "Kinship and Marriage among the Lozi of Northern Rhodesia and the Zulu of Natal." Pp. 166-206 in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*. Edited by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde. New York: Oxford University Press, 1950.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. "Pahari and Tibetan Polyandry Revisited." *Ethnology* 17 (3, July 1978): 325-37.
- Graburn, Nelson. Introduction to "Incest Taboos: Origins and Functions." Pp. 324-25 in *Readings in Kinship and Social Structure*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Grunlan, Stephen A., and Marvin K. Mayers. *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*. Foreword by Eugene A. Nida. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979.
- Klein, Joe. "How About a Swift Kick?" *Newsweek* (July 26, 1993): 30.
- Needham, Rodney. "Remarks on the Analysis of Kinship and Marriage." Pp. 1-34 in *Rethinking Kinship and Marriage*. Edited by Rodney Needham. Association of Social Anthropologists Monograph 11. New York: Tavistock Publications, 1971.
- Nukunya, G. K. *Kinship and Marriage Among the Anio Ewe*. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology 37. New York: Humanities Press, 1969.
- Parsons, Talcott. "Kinship and the Associational Aspect of Social Structure." Pp. 409-38 in *Kinship and Culture*, ed. Francis L. K. Hsu. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1971.
- Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Schocken Books, 1975.
- Schapera, Isaac. "Kinship and Marriage among the Tawana." Pp. 140-65 in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*. Edited by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde. New York: Oxford University Press, 1950.
- _____. *Married Life in an African Tribe*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966.
- Stephens, William N. *The Family in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963.
- Wegner, Judith Romney. *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Welch, Charles E., III, and Paul C. Glick. "The Incidence of Polygamy in Contemporary Africa: A Research Note." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 43 (1, Feb. 1981): 191-93.
- Willner, Dorothy. "Definition and Violation: Incest and the Incest Taboos." *Man* 18 (March 1983): 134-59.
- Wilson, Monica. *Pictorals of Kinship Among the Nyaky* _____. London: Oxford University Press, 1957.



When the star in the sky is gone
 When the kings and the princes are home
 When the shepherds are back with their flocks
 The work of Christmas begins—
 To find the lost
 To heal the broken
 To feed the hungry
 To release the prisoner
 To teach the nations
 To bring Christ to all
 To make music in the heart—

—Howard Thurman

