

Rushdoony, Neoplatonism, and a Biblical View of Sex

by Daniel B. Wallace

Daniel B. Wallace explores the misconceptions surrounding the biblical view of sex, emphasizing the dangers of neoplatonism and the true purpose of sexual relations in marriage.

Scripture: Genesis 1:27, Genesis 2:25, John 13:34, 1 Corinthians 7:3, Ephesians 5:28

Topics: "Christian Marriage", "Biblical Sexuality"

Description

Daniel B. Wallace preaches about the misconceptions surrounding the biblical view of sex, addressing the influence of neoplatonism and the false dichotomy between body and soul. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the philosophical underpinnings to view sex properly and highlights the need to correct the distorted views of God's design for sex and marriage. Wallace delves into the biblical purposes of sex, including procreation, pleasure, intimacy, and demonstration of God's love, stressing the significance of commitment, unity, and the mirror image of Christ's love for the Church in a Christian marriage.

Transcript

Preface

I am unashamedly a Christian. But lest you think that I have come here today simply to say, "Fidelity in a monogamous relationship is the only way to go--all else is sin!" I want to set you at ease. I do believe that, but there are reasons for my faith. If you're not a Christian, you may still be interested in hearing the rationale for a Christian view of sex and marriage.

As foreign as philosophy seems from a talk about sex, it is necessary to gain some philosophical underpinnings in order to view sex properly. Consequently, I will address two topics in this lecture: (1) misconceptions about the biblical view of sex and (2) what the Bible teaches about sex and marriage.

I. Misconceptions about the Biblical View of Sex: Rushdoony to the Rescue!

Contrary to popular opinion, God is not a cosmic killjoy. He is not out to ruin all our fun! Unfortunately, many people have viewed God that way for centuries. Some have even castrated themselves in alleged obedience to the divine will. In some measure, this is because Christians have promoted such a false view

of God. . .

Among the many influences on Christianity almost from its inception, one of the most pernicious--and arguably the most destructive from a philosophical view--is neoplatonism. Neoplatonism is simply 'new' (neo) 'Plato-(n)ism.' It is a dialectical dualism which pits spirit against flesh, body against soul, mind against matter, etc. It crept into the church in the second century AD through the route of gnosticism. Now the gnostics were an early Christian heretical group, quite popular in Egypt, which viewed spirit as good and matter as evil. They found a difficulty accepting the biblical teaching of creation: "God created the heavens and the earth. . . and it was good." So they posited a series of semi-creators between God and the earth. That is to say, God created the next being who was not, like God, pure spirit, but was instead an amalgam of spirit and matter (though mostly spirit). He then created the next being who had a bit more matter to his make-up. And so on down the line: the last creator created the earth, pure matter. Jesus Christ was considered very high up on the ladder--hence, the gnostics did not view him as real man.

The result of all this was that by mixing the Bible with ancient Greek philosophy, Christians began to see a dichotomy, a dialectical struggle within man, between body and soul, between emotion and reason. In reality, such a view of life was merely neoplatonism in Christian garb. Unfortunately, it has plagued Christians--as well as all of western civilization--for nearly twenty centuries. We might, with some justification, call it the 'Spock syndrome.' (Spock, as you well know, was the science officer of Star Trek fame: as the son of a vulcan father and a human mother, he constantly wrestled with reason vs. emotion. Any time he gave in to his human nature, Dr. McCoy was quick to point it out to him! [Incidentally, it is no accident that the very human--and emotional--McCoy was the medical officer, i.e., he dealt with bodies, while Spock was the science officer who dealt with things related to pure reason.] Although Gene Roddenberry had glamorized Spock [he was just about everyone's favorite character], in reality a person who adopts a world-view that sees body and spirit in mortal combat is a moral monster.)

We might illustrate, rather crudely, the neoplatonic view of life:

I'd like to illustrate how extensive and pervasive this neoplatonic world-view has infected Christianity by quoting heavily from a very important book: Rousas John Rushdoony's *Flight from Humanity* (Craig Press, 1973). Although this will seem somewhat pedantic, it is crucial for you who are Christians--as well as you who are non-Christians--to understand the difference between what many people believe about Christianity and what the Bible teaches.

First, Rushdoony gives some examples of how ancient Christians mixed biblical Christianity with neoplatonism:

"For a Christian, the lives of 'the saints' are sometimes painful reading. Intelligence and faith are sometimes wedded to the most ludicrous practices and to ideas alien to Biblical religion ... When, after a very hot journey, Jovinus washed his tired feet (and hands) in very cold water, and then stretched out to rest, the 'holy' Melania rebuked him:

Melania approached him like a wise mother approaching her own son, and she scoffed at his weakness, saying, "How can a warm-blooded young man like you dare to pamper your flesh that way? Do you not know that this is the source of much harm? Look, I am sixty years old and neither my feet nor my face nor any of my members, except for the tips of my fingers, has touched water, although I am afflicted with many ailments and my doctors urge me. I have not yet made concessions to my bodily desires, nor have I used a couch for resting, nor have I ever made a journey on a litter.

We learn nothing about Biblical holiness from Melania, although we do begin to realize what 'the odor of sanctity' could have meant." (pp. 1-2)

". . . the sin of Adam [was] to be as God, to transcend creatureliness with all its limitations and become more than a man. Macarius of Alexandria gives us an example of this:

Here is another example of his asceticism: He decided to be above the need for sleep, and he claimed that he did not go under a roof for twenty days in order to conquer sleep. He was burned by the heat of the sun and was drawn up with cold at night. And he also said: "If I had not gone into the house and obtained the advantage of some sleep, my brain would have shriveled up for good. I conquered to the extent I was able, but I gave in to the extent my nature required sleep."

Early one morning when he was sitting in his cell a gnat stung him on the foot. Feeling the pain, he killed it with his hands, and it was gorged with his blood. He accused himself of acting out of revenge and he condemned himself to sit naked in the marsh of Scete out in the great desert for a period of six months. Here the mosquitos lacerate even the hides of the wild swine just as wasps do. Soon he was bitten all over his body, and he became so swollen that some thought he had elephantiasis. When he returned to his cell after six months he was recognized as Macarius only by his voice.

To attain perfection meant forsaking every evidence of creatureliness, every element of bodily desires and needs, and becoming pure spirit in a virtually dead flesh." (pp. 3-4)

But lest we think that this view of Christianity only plagued the ancients, let's listen to a more up-to-date illustration. Michael Wigglesworth was a Puritan pastor (b. 1638-d.1705) who gave Puritans a bad name. Puritans, the Victorian era, etc., all seem to have received bad press nowadays--as though they were all up-tight, prudish, stick-in-the-mud, killjoys. This was certainly true of Wigglesworth, but hardly of the normal Puritan. Here's just a few examples of his lifestyle:

"He . . . saw himself as guilty for lacking the Biblical attitude toward his parents [i.e., he had very little affection for them], and yet guilty for considering the creature at all. His blend of neoplatonism and Christianity ensured his guilt at all times." (p. 39)

In other words, since the Bible teaches that children are to honor and respect their parents--and care for them in their old age--Wigglesworth condemned himself for failing to live up to this standard. On the other hand, as a neoplatonist, he felt that any consideration of fellow human beings was a sign of weakness, of giving in to his emotions, etc.: consequently, he felt guilty for even his dismal spark of feeling toward his parents.

"Like every neoplatonist, his world is egocentric; to rise above egocentricity to consider other people and to love them is to lose sight of God, in Wigglesworth's eyes." (p. 41) In a very real sense, neoplatonism has spawned narcissism and the 'me-generation.'

"He enjoyed bad health; it was a way of denying the body; he enjoyed guilt, because it was a way of proving his dislike for the things of this world and his 'sensitivity' to their false claims. His 'spiritual' sensitivity rested, however, on a false premise which made him a moral monster" (*italics added*). (p.43)

Wigglesworth was a pretty fair poet in his day, though his poems were gloomy, reflecting his brand of 'Christianity.' Rushdoony tells us that:

"He also wrote, in 'Vanity of Vanities,' 'what is Pleasure but the Devil's bait?' Beauty, friends, riches, all 'draw men's Souls into Perdition.'" (p. 48)

"Thus, as a good neoplatonist, he could write also a poem on 'Death Expected and Welcomed.' There was nothing in life that Wigglesworth enjoyed, or if he did, that he did not feel guilty about. He included also 'A Farewell to the World,' of which he said that it 'is not my Treasure.' Although he looked forward to the resurrection body, he had no good word for his present body, on which he heaped every kind of insult:

Farewell, vile Body, subject to decay,
Which art with lingering sickness worn away;
I have by thee much Pain and Smart endur'd;
Great Grief of Mind has thou to me procur'd;
Great Grief of Mind by being Impotent,
And to Christ's Work an awkward Instrument.
Thou shalt not henceforth be a clog to me,
Nor shall my Soul a Burthen be to thee.

This is good neoplatonic dualism. It is alien to Biblical faith." (p. 48)

This syncretistic blending of neoplatonism with Christianity plagues us to the present day. Two illustrations will suffice. (1) James Michener's dislike of Christians is obvious in his book, Hawaii. The missionary (played by Max von Sidow in the movie) in the name of God promotes neoplatonism. It is quite unfortunate that, as much of a caricature as this portrait is, there is still an element of truth in it: neoplatonism has infected Christianity to the present day.

(2) Sex is often considered dirty by Christians. Several years ago when I worked in a machine shop I worked beside a man whose son was to be married soon. The young man and his bride-to-be were good Presbyterians and were going to get married in the church. The day before the wedding, this fellow lathe-operator told me that the wedding was off. I inquired why. He told me that the girl had just the night before announced that they were not going to have sex on the honeymoon. She intended to have sex only three times because she wanted to have only three children! Not only did she have a lot to learn about sex, but she had a lot to learn about the biblical view of sex!

All of us know of Christians who have tended toward a neoplatonic world-view. What I ask is that if you are a Christian, consider how it has infected your view of life. If you are not a Christian, listen further to what biblical Christianity is all about.

However, let's put the shoe on the other foot. Neoplatonism has plagued western civilization in toto. It is, in fact, at the root of much drug abuse, the hippie movement, and radical feminism--as well as chauvinism. Listen again to Rushdoony:

On hippies (the book was written in 1973):

"This attitude is very much like that of the modern hippy, who despises the flesh and shows contempt for the body and its dress. The hippy, in his sexuality, expresses contempt for the body, either by treating sexual acts as of no account in casual promiscuity, or by a bored denial of sex. There is far more abstention from sex among hippies than is generally recognized. Either in abstention or in casual, unemotional promiscuity, it is a contempt of the flesh which is manifested. Dirty bodies and dirty clothing are other means of manifesting the same faith." (p. 5)

On radical chauvinism (p. 11):

"The gospel of Sir Thomas More was his Utopia, wherein man's mind imposed its idea on all of the world of matter. For More, wives were to be selected after being inspected naked; their minds were not important enough to count. So unimportant was matter or particularity, so little was it the world of the spirit, that wives were to be chosen without regard to the unity of mind and matter, naked on inspection like cattle."

At least More was consistent--he practiced what he preached. When his daughters were old enough to be married, he herded them onto a platform, stripped them down before their courtiers, and married them off!

On inverted neoplatonism (p. 12):

"Inverted neoplatonism glorified nature and therefore women. The troubadors of medieval and Renaissance Europe downgraded love in marriage, because it belonged to the world of grace, which they identified as the platonic world of spirit. Adultery, on the other hand, belonged to the world of nature. The wife was thus a low creature, and the illicit lover a queen of love. As Valency noted, in writing of such adulterous love, 'However illicit it might be from the point of view of religion and society, it had the sanction of nature; as matters stood it was grounded on firmer stuff than the marriage bond.' 'The sanction of nature,' this is the key. Two worlds exist for neoplatonism, as for all dialecticism; they are alien to one another, so that, however much they exist as one, the world of matter and spirit, nature and grace, or nature and freedom, are somehow at odds with one another. If one is favored, the other must suffer. If the sanction of nature, illicit love, is exalted, the sanction of grace, lawful marriage, must be downgraded, because it is in principle unnatural for love and marriage, nature and grace, to be compatible."

This inverted neoplatonism has reared its ugly head again in the 1960's. One of the reasons it has done so, I'm afraid, is that the antithesis, neoplatonic morality, denied the goodness and joy of sex.

This inverted neoplatonism "is reflected in Demosthenes' speech against Neaera, when he pointed out that 'The hetaerae [prostitutes] are for our amusement, our slave women are for our daily personal service, and our wives are to bear us children and manage our household.'" (p. 25)

This produced something of a schizophrenic psychology, for one constantly saw a battle within himself between mind and body. ". . . some philosophers resolved the schizophrenic psychology in favor of the body, and hence concupiscence. Aristoxenus reflected this opinion:

Nature demands that we make lust the zenith of life. The greatest possible increase of sexual feeling should be every human being's goal. To suppress the claims of the flesh is neither reason nor happiness; to do so is to be proved ignorant of the demands of human nature.

The Cynics in particular were intellectual champions of this position. "In every case, the warfare of body and mind was assumed; this conflict was in essence a metaphysical, not an ethical or moral conflict." (p.

27)

"Modern man has not escaped the dilemma of Greek psychology. Some have chosen to 'solve' the problem by denying the body, as witness Christian Science, and others have denied the soul, as witness the Behaviorists. These 'solutions' are metaphysical, not moral. They leave only a fragmented man, as in the last days of the Greco-Roman world. The same is true of those who seek in the drug experience a flight from the world of the senses into the supposed timelessness and oneness of the world of the soul." (p. 31)

Finally, neoplatonism has infected radical feminism:

"Much of what has been condemned as a product of Catholic and Protestant teaching has been the continuing influence of neoplatonism and best exemplified in its original form among Greeks and Romans.

"Neoplatonism was very powerful in the feminist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries. Now, however, the roles were reversed. Woman was seen as pure and spiritual, and man as coarse and material. Women, it was thus held, are more 'spiritual' and therefore superior beings. . . . Virginia Leblin in *The New Era: Woman's Era; or Transformation from Barbaric to Humane Civilization* (1910) said that the lowest prostitute was better than the best of men." (p. 65)

We can now illustrate the 'descent of neoplatonism' this way:

Summary

1. Neoplatonism sets up a false antithesis between body and soul. It forces one to make a choice (which one do you say 'sick'em' to?), when the biblical picture of the relationship of the material to the immaterial part of man is quite different. The apostle Paul says, for example, "Husbands, love your wives as your own body, for your wife is a member of your body. Now no man ever hated his own body, but he nourishes it and takes care of it" (Eph 5:28-29). If Paul had written this after the era of Michael Wigglesworth, he would have written, "No sane man ever hated his own body"!

2. As Rushdoony points out, this false antithesis is due to the fact that people have rejected the real antithesis, the one between God and man:

"For Scripture, however, there is no such dialectical tension. The warfare is not between matter and spirit, nature and grace, or nature and freedom, but between sinful man and God. Man by his sin has declared war on God, and as a result is in a state of tension and warfare because of sin, not because of a dual nature. Man's problem is moral and ethical, not metaphysical. Neoplatonism not only misrepresents the problem man faces, but, by making it metaphysical, makes it necessary to truncate or castrate man of a basic aspect of his being before he can be delivered." (p. 12)

In other words, each man is in a battle, yes. But the battle is not within himself, but between himself and God. The Bible says that "God commended his own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). That is, we are antagonistic toward God, but he has extended his love toward us. One of the curious things about neoplatonism is that it is universal. It is not found only in the west. In fact, the Greeks took some measure of satisfaction in noting that in India they could find ascetic parallels to their own philosophy. Rather than confirm the truth of neoplatonism, this confirms the direction in which all men travel when they reject the battle as having a vertical dimension. If God is left out of the picture, since all people sense a struggle, the only logical choice is a dialectical struggle within each

person (after all, we all struggle with sin when no one else is around, so we can't blame it on others all the time).

Now the illustration is complete:

Once a person rejects a world-view which sees man in conflict with God--a conflict only overcome through the payment of man's sins by the death of Christ, the God-man--he virtually must adopt a one-dimensional view of the world. He no longer sees man as having the material and immaterial in partnership (the biblical picture), but instead sees them in conflict. By rejecting faith in God, he now must choose between mind and body, between the Spock syndrome and the Playboy philosophy. Most of us do not make a decisive choice, but instead swing the pendulum, creating fertile soil for schizophrenia.

II. A Biblical View of Sex

As lengthy as the first half of this lecture was, it provides a necessary backdrop for the remainder which, in reality, can be quite brief. All I want to do is touch on the four purposes of sex mentioned in the Bible.

A. Procreation

The Bible is very explicit that procreation, reproduction of the species, is a very important aspect of human sexual relations. It is the most important, in fact (Gen 1:27-27). That is one reason why most Christians believe that abortion is wrong: even when a woman conceives unintentionally, since procreation is so important an aspect of our sex lives, bringing the fetus to term overrides other considerations (not to mention the fact that most Christians also believe that the zygote, at conception, is a living human being). This is also one of the reasons the Bible speaks against homosexuality: by its very nature, homosexuality cannot fulfill the 'prime directive' of one's sex life.

Unfortunately, some have viewed procreation as having exclusive rights on the use of sex (such as the young lady who wanted to have sex with her husband only three times because she only wanted three children).

B. Pleasure (or Recreation)

This might surprise you, but the Bible speaks a great deal about marital sex as a great pleasure. In fact, Paul even commands married couples not to refrain from sexual activity, because their bodies belong to their partner (1 Cor 7:3-5). I have known of couples--Christian couples--who didn't touch each other for months at a time. This is hardly the biblical view of sex.

Again, Rushdoony makes a corrective about the normal Puritan view of sex when he writes:

"With respect to sex and marriage, the normal Puritan view was a robust and healthy one. The Rev. William Gouge, in *Of domesticall duties* (London, 1634), used Proverbs 5:18, 19, to express the joy and beauty of marital sex: "Let thy fountain be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of thy youth. Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times, and be thou ravished always with her love." The Puritans often spoke of marital sex as one of the great delights and joys among earthly blessings. Frye tells us that a 'favorite Biblical passage cited by Puritan churchmen is Genesis XXVI. 8 where it is recorded that "Isaac was sporting with Rebekah his wife."' (p. 36) The Hebrew word for 'sporting' there does not mean, I assure you, 'playing checkers'!

There is a text in Deuteronomy which says that a young man should take a year off from war, once he gets married, 'to cheer up his wife.' Although the text does not say that the first year of marriage should be one long honeymoon, it does indicate the tremendous importance of the marriage in general and the wife in particular. And the Hebrew word for 'cheer up' really involves a profound sense of intimacy: find out what pleases the wife in every way possible.

There are many other passages which speak of pleasure in marriage. Most are 'R rated', however! The Song of Solomon extolls the joy of sexual pleasure within the bonds of marriage. In fact, it is so explicit that the ancient Jews forbade young men from reading the book until they turned 30!

There is an underlying assumption to the view of sexual intercourse as that which is 'intended for pleasure' (as Dr. Ed Wheat has dubbed it): If God created sex, and if the Bible tells us that he created it for our pleasure, then he knows how we can get the maximum benefit out of it. The view of God as a cosmic killjoy is quite wrong; for every 'NO' there is a 'YES'! It is quite true that sex outside of marriage is considered utterly sinful in the Bible. But that is only half the story: within marriage it is profoundly beautiful and utterly good.

As an illustration of this, some time back I read a book called Everything you Wanted to Know about Sex but were Afraid to Ask. In the book the author detailed the how of sex, but not the why. On one page he made the statement that what one can expect in a lifetime of sexual activity is perhaps three or four really good (A+, in the idiom of the university) sexual experiences. (Of course, this is relative: as my brother has said, "when it's bad, it's still pretty good; and when it's good, it's great!") Nevertheless, I was a bit depressed by the statement. When one focuses only on the mechanics of sex--viewing people in a one-dimensional way--I suspect that only three or four superb experiences are all one can hope for. I can testify, however, that in my thirteen+ years¹ of marriage, in which a lifelong commitment to each other stands at the foundation of such a relationship, my wife and I are enjoying one another sexually better now by far than when we were first married. What we thought was wonderful on our wedding night doesn't hold a candle to what we are experiencing now. (Incidentally, someone asked me why we didn't get bored with each other after that much time together. The answer is simply that sex for us is not simply the joining of two bodies, but the uniting of two persons. And we are changing and growing constantly as persons. There is a great deal of diversity, of variety, within the unity of marriage when two people are committed to each other as whole people.)

C. Intimacy and Unification

Monogamy and commitment to one person "till death do us part" are the only things that can produce the deepest intimacy. And intimacy, I believe, is what people are really after when they go after sexual experiences.

Genesis 2 says: "they were naked and were not ashamed." Emotional and physical vulnerability between a man and woman can only take place without fear at the level of the deepest commitment.

It is quite the opposite with one-night stands or casual sex. Repeated violations of the monogamous ideal can only produce emotional sterility. A good example of this is the prostitute: although she would like to think that sex is merely the joining of flesh--something which she can divorce from her emotions--by her attempt to keep her emotions out of it, she becomes hardened, cynical. Ultimately, she is incapable of love.

The Greeks had three or four different words for love. Agape, which is love as commitment (and can extend toward those who even return hate) is the broadest kind of love. The cognate verb, agapao, is used in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that every one who believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life." Also Romans 5:8: "God commended his own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." At root, it is volitional.

The second kind of love is called phileo. This is love which is reciprocated. It is love between friends. Hence, it is narrower in scope. It involves the emotions.

The third kind of love is eros (from which we get 'erotic love'). It is intended by God to be displayed for one other person. Hence, it is the narrowest love of all. At root, it is physical.

All this can be illustrated as follows:

In any relationship, agape should always take the lead. In a marriage this is expressed in the vow, "till death do us part." Many marriage vows express something of a phileo-eros sentiment only: "as long as love shall last." When eros leads, there is no control, no steady course through the hard times. The relationship depends on whim.

Another way to look at sex within a Christian marriage is the following:

The Bible does recognize that man is composed of the material and immaterial--but that is where the similarity with neoplatonism ends. When both are placed in partnership under the will--and the will under God--harmony results. Only when we make a choice between body and mind do we have chaos.

D. Demonstration

Finally, in the biblical view of sex, the marriage relationship is also intended to be a demonstration of God's love for his people. In John 13:34-35 Jesus told his disciples that their love for each other would be a demonstration of God's love. Paul makes a specific application of this principle: "Husbands, love your wives even as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." The point is that the bond between a man and a woman is intended to mirror the bond between Christ and the Church.

There is a distinct side benefit to all this: a truly Christian marriage is inherently stronger than a non-Christian marriage. The reason is that a Christian marriage always has a reference point greater than oneself. In a marriage which keeps God out of the picture, if one person decides to peel out of the relationship, the other person only has himself/herself as 'leverage.' But in a Christian marriage, both people have already made a prior commitment to Jesus Christ. The Bible speaks of this commitment as eternal, while the marriage-bond is only bound to this life. Consequently, there is a double commitment involved--and much more at stake. If a spouse wants to forsake the marriage, he or she is also disobeying his or her Lord. On the other hand, as both husband and wife grow in their relationship to Jesus Christ, they also grow in their relationship to one another.

Diagrammed, the relationship looks like this:

You can see why I cannot speak plainly and fully about commitment in marriage without saying something about commitment to Jesus Christ: a biblical view of sex demands nothing less.

1 Keep in mind that this lecture was originally given in 1987; a few more years can now be added to this line!

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