

Sex Relations without Marriage

A Defence of the Christian Standard

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THE problem to be discussed in this paper was sharply put by a young man who one day expressed himself as follows: "Look here, Padre, can you give me any solid reason why I should not have sex relations with the woman I love, before marriage? You yourself have often said that there is no reason why we should be ashamed of the fact that we have passionate natures. We are not ashamed. We love each other very dearly, and our instinct towards sex relations is the outcome of that love. They would give our love the complete expression we long for. And then the standards of Christianity step in and say, 'No!' What is the real reason for that position? It will be of no use to say to me that you are shocked at me, or that my very question is wrong. I know it is not wrong. Nor will it be worth your while simply to reply, 'The Church says so,' or 'The Bible says so,' or 'Society says so.' We want something much plainer and more intelligible than that. *Why* does the Church take up that position? *Why* does Society, at least nominally, take that position? What is there in the nature of things to justify and explain it?"

The young man was healthy and normal. He was wholly honest, and really anxious to find the way in which the most and the best can be got out of life. It did seem worth while to try to give him the right answer, especially as he was really the spokesman of a great multitude of other men and women. They may not all be so honest or so intent on the best ; but they "want to know." Having been brought up sharply against the Christian standard, they want to have the reason for it clearly explained to them.

Such people offer no plea for the gratification of mere [physical desire apart from love. They do not wish to excuse licentiousness.] It is the above problem they are facing. And I have been much astonished to find that I know of no book in which the answer to their question is clearly stated. Christian teachers may know the answer, but they do not put it into words. Generally, they simply assume the truth of the Christian standard, and assume also that those who do not conform to it have a bad conscience about [their manner of life. And that is, I believe, part of the reason why Christian teachers are not fully meeting the needs of the present situation.

I have tried, therefore, with the assistance of several friends, to put down as plainly as I can the reasons for the Christian standard which are implicit in the facts of the case.

Two preliminary points seem to me of importance : One is that if we want to discover the terms on which we may handle the sexual element in life so as to get the most and the best out of it,

we must do so at some distance from moments of acute desire. There are times in experience when reason is in abeyance, and desire is so imperiously strong as to seem its own sufficient justification. But if this question is to be truly handled it must be by minds that are cool and collected. And if in our cooler and wiser hours we do reach clear decisions, they will constitute guidance even for hours of crisis. They will cause even ardent lovers to take care that passion is not allowed to reach that point at which it is irresistible.

The other preliminary point is this—the whole question obviously has a significance which goes far beyond the lives of any two individuals. Our decisions about it must necessarily affect society as a whole in profound ways, and therefore it cannot be wisely handled by those who leave the claims of society out of account. This fact may be extremely unpalatable to the individualism of youth, but none the less it is obvious to any honest mind, old or young. Conduct cannot be right when it is based on principles which, if given universal application, would result in serious damage to society.

And now to pass on. The answer we are seeking must be based on the essential facts concerning sex-intimacy, and the outstanding truth to be considered is that in human beings the connection between physical acts and the higher emotions is closer in the sexual department of life than in any other. We may satisfy other appetites, such as hunger or thirst, and go on our way quite un-

affected in the other regions of our personalities. But it is not so with sex-intimacy. It cannot be in us a merely physical thing. Its reactions on the other parts of our natures are necessarily profound.

A man may, of course, allow sheer lust to lead him into sexual relations into which he makes no pretence of bringing affection; but even then, at the crisis of his experience, he will be conscious of an impulse towards affection, and may even produce some pretence of it. It is that fact which causes the subsequent repulsion. A number of men have confided in me in regard to this matter, and not one of them has been able to conceal the fact of his sense of disgust. The heart always wants to be allowed to beat in harmony with the activity of the sex nature, and when a man knows that he has pretended affection towards a woman he neither respects nor likes, he is lowered in his own esteem. Two parts of his nature have been at war, and his sexual experience, so far from producing that inward harmony which may be its result, has increased the internal disharmony and strain of his life.

The case of sheer lust is, however, not the one I am concerned to discuss. I am seeking the truth about a complete sex experience—the kind that may be beautiful and happy and harmonising in its effects. And of that kind of experience, it is true that while it can only happen at the call of love, it has also profound effects on the lovers concerned—reacting on their emotional, mental, and spiritual lives in important ways. It is a very

great and moving experience. Body and heart do so fully enter into it, that it leaves the two concerned bound to each other in unique ways. They have given themselves to one another, and thereafter each has a very definite claim on the other. When that claim is gladly honoured it adds to the joy of the whole situation. *But it is there in any case.* Something unalterable has happened.

This is precisely the point about the whole matter which may not be realised by those who discuss it without personal knowledge. They know that the experience of sex-intimacy may have a certain "pleasure value," and they may be inclined to think that they may taste of that pleasure and then go their ways as free as before. But those who have lived through the experience know that it is not so. There is no single issue in the whole of life in regard to which it is so important that those who do know should be willing to share their knowledge, and that those who do not know should be willing to listen. By sex-intimacy links are forged which are morally binding.

The man who has accepted from a woman the gift of herself feels thereafter that he ought to be concerned with the whole of her life, and be ready to serve her in any ways open to him. Similarly, the woman wants thereafter to be in the whole of the man's life, and to render him her special forms of service. And it is through these subsequent services that the whole experience receives its completion and its real moral justification.

No doubt there are people who at this point

will want to ask, "Why should sex-intimacy have these far-reaching results?" That is an interesting question which some day the physiologists and the psychologists may fully answer. But meantime what really matters is that we should face the fact that sex-intimacy does have these results. That is the way we are made. My plea is that we should discover and pay heed to the way we are made.

Those who go through a sex experience together do far more than merely go through an evening of intense pleasure: they bring into activity the deepest and most mysterious regions of their personalities, and the result is that there remains to them no happy and sincere way out of the new relationship.

As a matter of fact, of course, it often happens in real life that two people who have entered on the new relationship do want to break away from it. Though they had enough love for one another to wish to be lovers in the physical sense, they were not prepared to join their lives. Their love was not on both sides the kind of love into which they brought their whole selves, including their whole futures. Therefore they often do part; but *never* without acute pain and real damage to their natures. One or the other has to "break away," and there is generally something rather brutal in the process which hurts both concerned. I have several times been closely associated with men or with women at this particular point in experience. I find them always aware that a certain past event has claims upon them, and yet

they often resist and resent such claims. "Oh, I could not stand him always, and yet I hate having to hurt him!" is what a woman once said to me. And many a man has said the same sort of thing in connection with some woman.

In other cases, of course, both want to part; but even then they do not escape pain and damage.

They entered on a certain experience, and afterwards found themselves unwilling to go on with it to the end. I believe they are always conscious that they have inflicted a certain hurt on their own personalities and on each other—there has been something in their lives they do not like to remember, and internal peace is hard to attain.

It is sometimes said that a woman always feels somewhat degraded or ashamed after such an experience. I do not know whether that is true. I cannot believe that the actual experience itself will always seem degrading when remembered, for a mutual surrender that is motivated by love is not a degrading thing. But I see quite clearly that a woman who cannot go on with the new relationship and allow it to work out its natural consequences in her life will always feel that her life has been disrupted, and that the internal harmonies of her being have been disturbed. The fact that women are often conscious of acute sexual desire has received in recent days a belated recognition, and at least in part it has been realised that such desire is not a characteristic only of "licentious women," but of normal and highly vitalised women. But a woman's sexual desire is not *merely* a longing for a physical ex-

perence with a man. It is an instinctive longing for wifehood *and* motherhood *and* a home of her own in which to express herself. Therefore, for a woman, mere sexual experience apart from these other things is not fully satisfying, and leaves her in a condition of unrest and strain which often becomes very intense and nervously upsetting. If men would but learn this fact, then any honest man might hesitate to allow a woman to give herself in sex-intimacy when he was not in a position to give her all she really wants.

It is no doubt true that the modern world contains a number of apparently happy people who have gone through one or more temporary experiences of sex-intimacy. And in argument such people will often defend their manner of life by saying such things as, "Why should one not have a number of lovers, just as one has a number of friends?" But the things people say in argumentative moods have a very limited significance. My own experience of such people leads me rather to the view that they know in their own minds that such careers of passionate but evanescent experiences are stormy and unhappy affairs. I am impressed by the fact that even the most modern of modern novelists cannot refrain from giving the same impression about them. If that were all that our sex instincts can lead us to, we might well wish to be without them. But as a matter of fact our sex instincts are capable of leading us on to a very wonderful, beautiful, and happy form of experience. When the natural consequences of our passionate attachments are

accepted, and two persons really join their lives as well as their bodies, then because the act of intimacy leaves no after taste and no regrets, it tends to harmonise the whole natures of the two concerned and to lead them into a fellowship of the spirit in which both find the crown of life. Body and mind cease to be at war. Spirit finds expression through the flesh, and so exalts it; and thus our incarnate life becomes to a wonderful extent a unity.

There is something wild and lawless about sexual desire in its most intense forms. It seems to have a natural right to be a law unto itself, and those who are in its power resent all suggestions that would restrain it. But the essential problem for us human beings is to learn how to fit this wild and lawless thing into our lives so that it shall harmonize with all the other factors in our natures. And the solution of that problem lies in the fact that sexual-activity can indeed be fitted into life in ways that will enrich and deepen life, but only on the condition that sincere love is allowed to have control, and that the consequences of our acts be loyally accepted.

Therefore, to the lovers whose question started me on this inquiry, I would like to say, "If you two do really and wholly love one another there is no reason in the nature of things why you should not express that love in sex-intimacy, and so enter on a closer relationship; but there is every reason why you should never cease to live in that relationship. If your love is true it will make the experience a happy and a beautiful one.

But equally if your love is true you must accept each other for the whole of life.† The real question for you is, ‘Are you prepared for that permanent union?’ And if you are not, does not that mean that you are not bringing your whole selves into this love of yours, and that therefore it is not the perfect thing? Sex-intimacy is far too fine a thing and far too significant a thing to be played with as a source of pleasure alone. It has to be allowed to be a life-determining force.”

And now a word about *the question of children*.

It is always assumed by those who put forward a plea for sex relations outside marriage that they will take steps to make certain that no children shall be born to them. The fact is not open to dispute that if children are to have a real chance in life they must be born to couples who will share in the work of bringing them up, and will maintain for them a well-ordered home. On any other terms parents sacrifice their children to their own pleasure.

Sex relations outside marriage therefore do in fact mean sex relations under such restrictions as shall prevent the coming of children. I am not going simply to say that that is wrong. What I am quite clear about is that it is a mistake for those who want to get the *best* out of the sex side of their natures. There is only one perfect sex experience. It is free unfettered bodily intimacy between two persons who wholly love each other, and who give themselves to one another in joyous and spontaneous ways. With the introduction of

mechanical measures to prevent conception, especially at first, the experience is robbed of some of its spontaneity and freedom, and a great deal of the joy goes out of it. Indeed, in many cases a certain element of fear will enter in to poison the experience and take from it its beauty. The psychological content of the experience must be, "I give myself without reserve, and I accept all the consequences without reluctance or fear." It is only on those terms that two persons may find complete joy in the matter and escape all regrets after it.

I believe this to be particularly true for *women*. The natural sequence of events in a woman's life is, first, love, then intimacy, and then motherhood; and when that natural course of events is interfered with, the true development of a woman is interrupted. Doctors tell me that she is liable to serious nervous disorders because of the physiological consequences of that interruption. What I know for myself is that her general moral and spiritual growth is interfered with. She robs herself. The man thus consents to a course of action that damages the best self of the woman he loves. Surely that is not the best that love can do!

Further, a certain general moral truth has to be faced at this point. There is something masterfully selfish in the joys that come with sex-intimacy. The two concerned live for the time being wholly for each other, and as a couple are self-centred. From their mutual love they derive the most intense pleasure which life can hold. Let us

grudge them none of it. Rather let us esteem human life at a higher value because this golden experience can enter into it.

But the experience is in a measure a selfish one. It is a matter of receiving intense joy. For a time that does people no harm. Rather under the kindly influence of such joy their natures tend to blossom out into beauty and power. But if two people continue indefinitely in that self-centred life, drawing only pleasure out of love, a shadow falls upon them. Slowly but certainly mere pleasure without accompanying responsibility stamps their lives as poor affairs. And that no doubt is the reason why those who care most for the spiritual health of men and women have regarded the joys which are rooted in sex with such suspicion. Yet, when intimacy is allowed to issue in its normal consequences the situation rights itself. Out of the activity of love is born the most ennobling and also the most engrossing responsibility which life can hold. Having been merely partners in delight, the two concerned awake to find that they must also be partners in very hard work, and must carry together a hundred anxieties. And so love is redeemed and cleansed of its selfishness. So the delights of intimacy find their abundant justification.

But when intimacy is deliberately divorced from parentage this process is arrested and sexual delights become selfish things. Nor can anything prevent such selfishness from bringing forth its well-known results in character—a strange and pitiful thing to happen as a consequence of love.

We can smile at the young lovers who for a while can see nothing but each other, and live in an ecstasy of bewildered joy. We can accept without criticism their temporary indifference to all other people and all other interests. We know that ere long in the natural course of things they will emerge as responsible parents, and that by the sweat of very hard toil they will be fashioned into true men and women. But when the two continue to try merely to snatch delight out of their love, it slowly but inevitably and most tragically degenerates.

It is also imperative to remember that in many cases the refusal at first to have children is followed later by a strong desire for them, and that nature then often denies fulfilment of their desire to those who have already thwarted her.

In the case of those who would gladly have welcomed children, but to whom that joy has been denied, I do not think that any such result follows. There has been no shadow of fear or selfishness in their love, and the expression of it through intimacy may well continue as a beautiful experience for many many years, just as is the case with couples after the woman has ceased to be capable of motherhood. But I think it is quite certain that the deliberate and continued refusal of parentage does spoil the lives of married persons. It is these latter thoughts about the refusal of parentage which constitute my answer to couples who say in effect, "Oh, we mean to get married as soon as economic considerations make it possible. We are entirely willing and

anxious to join our lives permanently. But, in the meantime, while we cannot afford to set up a home, we see no reason why we should not enter on experience of intimacy."

Yes! What I have written is a deliberate answer to such people. And yet I want to say quite frankly that I realise that what I have written must seem to many "an hard saying." It is particularly hard in these post-war days when economic forces over which young people have no control, and for which they have no responsibility, are postponing the possibility of marriage to an age which may almost be said to be an outrage upon nature. Yes, I realise all that. I shall never forget a couple I once met at an open-air meeting, who were no longer in their first youth but who had found love, and who said to me: "The doctrine you are preaching means for us that though we have found love we must go through the whole of life without giving it its natural expression." They were probably exaggerating. Probably ere very long most such couples will find that they *can* set up house in some simple way. But I know enough about economic facts to realise that there is a cruel amount of truth in the contention they put forward. Yet I ask myself what are the alternatives? They seem to me to be four: One is separation at the cost of heartbreaking pain, followed by lives of enforced celibacy for both, unredeemed even by affection. I have nothing to say for that. A second is intimacy without marriage—a furtive and incomplete affair, which brings complete joy

to neither. A third is marriage without parentage, and though that is better than number two, because there will be nothing furtive and concealed about it, it is also something incomplete and not without its dangers. And the fourth is continuance in such restrained relations of affection as are possible without intimacy, until such time as they are able to enter on marriage with the hope of also becoming parents. And I have no doubt at all that that is the best of all the possible ways open to such a couple. It may be in a measure literally a way of the cross for a while. But it is often true that the ways of the cross are the only ways which lead to life. I cannot say such a thing lightly, or without acute sympathy for many of those on whom the disordered state of society inflicts real wrongs. Yet I do say these things, because the truth of them seems to me beyond challenge.

Marriage Bonds

I HOPE and think that the foregoing pages have given the true answer to the question dealt with in this pamphlet. Yet I feel that something remains to be said about the question of marriage bonds. The idea that two persons ought only to live together as long as they spontaneously want to attracts many. On the other hand, the idea that two people *ought* to remain together when they have ceased to be drawn to one another by love, seems to many a repulsive idea. If the sole justification for sex-intimacy is to be found in love, then it might seem that no sufficient reason for a united life is left, if love ever wanes.

For this reason many are inclined to dispense with anything so formal and official as legal marriage, or at best face up to the necessity for it with reluctance. With this there goes, too, a certain resentment at the intrusion of law or of society into what seems the most personal and private matter in the whole of life. "What does it matter to anybody else what we two choose to do in our lives?" That is a common cry. It will not stand examination, of course, in relation to life as a whole; for civilised life may be defined as life in harmony with social obligations. But in

connection with the personal relations of lovers' it often seems to be a defensible position. Therefore some justification for the imposition by society of legal bonds in marriage does seem called for.

I believe the full and sufficient justification is to be found in certain unalterable facts about the love life of any two persons. It is in general true that human life in any department of it is subject to certain rhythmic periods and to alternating phases. Our life force ebbs and flows, so that at one time we are filled with energy and at another find all activity a burden. It is part of the essential art of life to face this fact and adapt oneself to it. The intensity of our intellectual interests, or of our artistic interests, or of our religious interests, is not a constant quantity. After a period of intense activity our finer emotions demand a rest. No enthusiasm remains at white heat continuously. As a matter of fact we attain to any continuous and purposeful activity only by bringing in sheer and dogged will power to carry us through times when spontaneous desire is lacking.

And this general truth applies to the careers of lovers. When love binds two people together they generally experience for a considerable time a very intense and happy mutual life. Love in full and passionate exercise smoothes out all difficulties, makes small acts of forgiveness spontaneous and easy, and keeps the two persons so concentrated on one another that all interests which might divide them sink into the background. But love, even when it is pure and

genuine, does not remain at that pitch of intensity for indefinite periods. For reasons which are perhaps physiologically explicable, it passes into more quiescent states from time to time. Other interests in life come to claim concentrated attention, and the old joyous and all-sufficient *solitude à deux* ceases. At such times love is not dead. Those who know would say of it that "the best is yet to be." But it is for a time something less than all-commanding. This is even true of the purely sexual aspect of marriage. There come times when the two are no longer driven together by the compulsion of pure passion, and when the merely sexual instinct is partly in abeyance.

Nor do these times necessarily come to both parties at the same time. It may be the man or it may be the woman who for a time seems to the other to have become strangely cold. And then it is that the real problems of marriage begin to present themselves. Because there are elements of friction at the heart of things, minor annoyances assume altogether unreasonable importance. Some of his little ways annoy her. Some of her moods and fancies seem to him ridiculous. The fact that the two are still so very different obtrudes itself upon their notice, and then just because they are so very close to one another they have almost infinite power to vex and irritate each other. It is then that the man is apt to retreat into his purely masculine interests, and the woman is apt to become most annoyingly feminine. Neither can understand the other. No man ever did fully

understand a woman. And a man always remains "a queer creature" to the most understanding of women. That is really why marriage is such a fascinating business. It is the infinite and unalterable difference between the sexes that lends it its piquancy, and provides the possibility of surprises unto the end.

But when these things are being experienced for the first time the problem of making a success of marriage does inevitably become acute. The two are very much on their trial. If by patience and the conscious exercise of mutual loyalty two persons successfully survive such a period, they go on to something that is really better than their first spontaneous ecstasies. They begin really to grow together and to build up a common life that is securely founded on a fuller measure of understanding, and the most excellent basis of forgiveness offered and received by each in turn. Because they understand each other better they know more about the terms on which they can attain and retain sexual harmony. They learn to enter into each other's interests and to accord to each other a large measure of freedom even for those interests which they can never share. In short, they find the way in which the marriage relationship can continue to be an inspiration without being a bondage. And it cannot be too strongly insisted that not until that point is reached do two people ever know the best that marriage can mean. Its joys are at that point fuller and finer than they ever are at first.

It may very well be that two ardent young

lovers will resent as a profanity the very suggestion that such things as I have just pictured could ever happen to them. They are sure that they love each other more than any couple ever did before in the history of the world. But they would do well to listen to those who know. The things I have mentioned *always* happen. And they always happen because we are all subject to certain unalterable laws.

Now, all this means that the problem of getting through the dead or dull periods in marriage may almost be said to be the central problem in marriage. And I suggest most deliberately that, human beings being what they are, the sense that "they have just got to get through those periods" is a very useful and indeed an invaluable help. I desire for a man for his own sake, and because I want him to be happy, that he should have to face the fact that he has entered into certain obligations of loyalty towards the woman he has married, and that he has made society cognisant of that fact. I desire for him something other than an inward moral constraint towards loyalty. It is just his inward moral constraint that may be found weak at times. And then the fact that he has entered into a perfectly definite contract, one of the parties to which is society, is a very useful support—an ally to the best that is in him which he cannot afford to neglect.

Some of our wayward moods by no means represent our true selves. We may well be thankful that the constraints of organised society pre-

vent us from succumbing to those moods. We all want men to be honest from inward and sincere conviction. Nothing less than that will ultimately satisfy us. But it is an entirely good thing for a man when he is tempted to something slim or shaky in business that he should have to remember, "If I do, society will have something to say about it." It may very well be that we are apt to resent the intrusion of society at such times. But then notoriously we resent a great many things that are very good for us. Society may at times present itself in the light of a nuisance, but it is often the case that just at such times society is playing the part of a very useful and wholesome moral support.

And so to return to the case of marriage. If there were no bonds in the matter other than those of mutual inclination, then it is perfectly certain that a good many people would surrender their marriages at the first or the second oncoming of difficult periods, and so would lose for ever their chance of knowing the best that marriage can mean. I remember a young girl who said to me on the eve of her marriage, "I don't like these vows, because if ever he came to want somebody else more than me, I should not want to keep him." I heard that gladly as a rather beautiful evidence of the quality of the love she bore him. But because I did very earnestly want for him and for her the very best that marriage can mean, I was very glad that he was going to take upon himself very solemn obligations, and that before the world. I knew it to be quite possible that the

very fact of those obligations might pull him through times of difficulty in which otherwise he might succumb.

The massed experience of mankind would justify us in saying to any couple that sets out on a career of love, "Now, hold together! Hold together even when the light seems to have gone out! Hold together even though it hurts! Hold together though one or both of you fall into sin! Hold together and go on looking for the way through! For then you will find and possess the fine thing for which you really long—genuine union with one another."

And because bonds are a real help in the holding together business, they serve the higher interests of the race.

Of course lifelong monogamy is a high and difficult ideal for a race of wayward and impulsive creatures like us. The real trouble is that so many couples are allowed to enter on it under the delusion that it is all easy going. We have allowed them to think of it chiefly in terms of happiness. It is far too fine a thing to be adequately conceived on such terms. It is a joint adventure in life—a joint enterprise, the end of which is the management of a home and the upbringing of a family. It is a bid for a real union of two personalities, in which both may find completion of life. And it has *not* failed, though unhappy periods come into it. The finest joys of life are for those who endure through times of unhappiness under the constraint of old-fashioned things like loyalty and duty. If we were to consent to a system according

to which marriage might be dissolved at will by those who for the time being are dissatisfied with the kind of life it has led them to, we should be surrendering one of the finest hopes which western civilisation has at least held up before its peoples, and the thousands of couples who would part and then realise that they had lost their chance of the best, would have reason to curse us for our folly.

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