

The Silver Ring Thing (with some thoughts relating to marriage) - expanded

Some Americans have invented a new custom, of the use of a silver ring to symbolise the obligation of the Christian to refrain from fornication.

We dislike new customs, even in a good cause. It is not as if the golden wedding ring symbolises the obligation to refrain from adultery! (The ring is not a universal feature of Christian marriage rites, and while the Church of England vehemently insisted on retaining it, the Prayer Book contains no statement of its meaning. The blessing of the ring, and the giving of a ring by the woman to the man, are incidentally both recent innovations in the Church of England.)

Christians (it should be stressed that we offer guidance to them alone) are indeed bound to refrain from fornication, but they are also bound to refrain from many other sins. Why should this one be given special emphasis? Some other sins such as gluttony are much more insidious, because they consist in excess and so can be drifted into; but this sin, at least at the simple physical level, has either been committed or not - it does not admit of uncertainty and it is not a matter of degree. Some would say that the temptation is more obsessive. There may be some who find it so; if it is a general problem, is this a permanent feature of (fallen) human nature or a temporary feature of hedonic Western life which is part of the alien world in which Christians have to live? If the latter, what is the remedy appropriate to the problem rather than to one among many of the symptoms?

Christians are indeed bound to refrain from fornication, but the Lord imposes much more strenuous requirements in this area. "I say unto you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:28)

However, this warning has to be applied somewhat more carefully in relation to the unmarried Christian (who has not undertaken a vow of celibacy). It is highly unlikely that the attempt to form a relationship with a view to marriage will happen without some element of desire (lust), yet the attempt to form such a relationship is not sinful in itself. If the mere refraining from fornication (and adultery) is too low a view of the Christian's obligations, we must not invent too high a view. (This is on a par with teetotalism; Christians should not get drunk, but should normally follow their Lord in drinking alcohol rather than the Baptist in total abstinence.)

It is very likely (and within limits appropriate) that as a relationship approaches marriage, so will physical gestures increase. It is indeed difficult (particularly in contemporary Western culture) for Christians to manage the growing relationship without at least venial sin, but it is also possible to forbid too much. We should beware of oversimplification. The "silver ring" may, possibly though misunderstanding, add to those difficulties; it may also help as a reminder that such management is indeed a duty (for both parties).

Marriage (as the Western church understands it) consists in the consent of the parties. Such consent may be given before the public ceremony (which is not therefore of the essence of marriage except to satisfy some requirements of secular law). It is therefore possible to be married as a matter of moral consent without public ceremony (whether that ceremony subsequently takes place or not). Intercourse in such cases would be within marriage and not fornication. The practical problems of organising both purchase of a matrimonial home and modern over-elaborate wedding celebrations are such that "living together" may be the only solution available. Outsiders will not be well equipped to judge of such cases.

It is wrong to assume that all those who live together must "really" mean marriage; nor do all those who go through the public ceremony mean what it says (assuming that it is carefully designed to express the consent that is required, as may generally - "obey" is debatable - be said of the Prayer Book Solemnization of Matrimony but not necessarily of all such forms). This is another reason for concentrating on the moral consent of the parties (harder though it is to know the truth of it). Certainly it is the duty of any Christian contemplating marriage to appreciate the proper nature of matrimonial consent, and the duty of the Church so to teach.

We have Christian forms of public ceremony for marriage (it was not always so!) It is a duty of charity to other Christians (and to the wider world) for the couple to use the public form and not simply to be satisfied with a private moral consent. Christians (and indeed many others) would naturally wish to be married in the explicit sight of God (and of his Church and of other people), and to receive his blessing and their prayers for the matrimonial state. It is odd (a rejection of both the privileges and the duties of membership) for Christians to avoid such a blessing when entering that state, and clearly the more closely it can be linked to the practical beginning, the better.

This may seem a long digression from the narrow topic of fornication, but many Christians will pass through courtship and the approach to marriage; it is unfair to them to offer no other guidance than "don't".

The view that sexuality is especially closely associated with the Fall may be in Augustine, Cranmer and Milton (and none of these are exemplars of Christian marriage!) but that does not make it an undoubted element of Christian doctrine. *All* aspects of humanity are damaged by the Fall, and *all* are healed by grace. It is dangerous to prioritise one aspect of the Fall over another. On the other hand, we must not trivialise sexual acts. They do naturally strengthen marriage (and do harm outside it); they are

never morally neutral or merely physical. Study I Corinthians 6.18-20.

It is false to say that the Church is obsessed by sex. It is not. Only fools would say, for example, that sexual matters are given vastly disproportionate space in the current Roman catechism - let them count the pages! The Church (all the faithful, not just the clergy) has a duty to help in this *and all other* moral aspects of the life of the Christian.

Christians are indeed bound to refrain from all sin, but much more to grow in faith, hope, charity and the other virtues. Why not something to remind us of that? The best tangible reminder against sin is the crucifix, because it reminds us what sin cost the Lord; and this is also a sign of the grace given us to grow in virtue. The best remedy for sin and means of grace is the regular Eucharist, prepared for by self-examination and followed by thanksgiving and prayer to use the gift conferred (which will include abstinence or the proper use of marriage as applicable). Again, notice that we cannot offer moral guidance to outsiders separate from Christian conversion.

None of this makes the use of the "silver ring" wrong. Those who believe themselves weak (as may indeed be the case for the victims of the current Western culture, and which of us dare claim to be strong) may use any (not themselves sinful) means to resist temptation, and may fairly ask the Church to bless such. It may be irrational, it may suggest magical thinking, and it may reflect a poor sense of Christian obligations, but it does show some good will, which the Lord will reward.

Further thoughts: the question of "obsession"

What do we mean if we say that sex is obsessive and gluttony not? With so many people overweight, the case is superficially similar for both. In Saudi Arabia they do hold that sex in the male is obsessive in a plainly comprehensible sense, and therefore determine women must be as near as possible unrecognisable as such, for fear that men be provoked into lust or worse. We know that bad theology very easily drifts into this posture in all religions, not least in Cranmer.

I simply do not notice either in myself or in others that the mere sight of a woman is more than trivially provoking. It is not just that I am old! I have as a colleague a young male nursery nurse and it is absurd to say that he is unable to do his job because of the presence of many young female nurses. (I have no idea of the female equivalent of all this.) This is not to say that there is no such thing as temptation, nor to deny that many people are sexually active outside marriage; only that in our culture most people most of the time seem to be able to decide when to be excited (and more) and when not. It seems to me that "obsessive" has been made a technical term which does not have its natural meaning. I therefore need to know what the technical sense it and whether it is in any way compatible with Christian doctrines of free will and responsibility.

This of course relates to the philosophical conundrum that if extramarital sex were obsessive in an ordinary language sense, such that it were impossible to resist the temptation, then there could be no guilt. We do not accept the doctrine of "total depravity", and certainly not for the redeemed. We believe that resistance to the mortal sin of fornication (or adultery) is difficult but possible *under grace*; and because possible, it is right to talk of sin and to require repentance when there has been sin. Even at the more venial level of sexual promptings perhaps noticed but hardly indulged, as already suggested, many people manage to maintain decorum or better much of the time. We would not be so silly as to commend even to Christians a course of both conduct and attitude unless we believed it, under grace, to be possible of performance.

Perhaps the saddest feature of modern life is that the "silver ring" is not (as is too easily assumed) an interim ethic for a few difficult years, but the likely lifelong situation for most Christians. If modern education teaches both sexes to obtain qualifications and careers before anything else, burdens both sexes with debt from university and then requires several further years for professional qualification and to become moderately established in a career, (with geographical mobility at all these stages) it follows that there will not be sufficient stability for Christians to contemplate marriage until the parties have spent over a decade of adult life living alone. Any faithful Christian will therefore have developed practical strategies which restrain the sexual impulse - including, very likely, a mild distaste for the opposite sex. Small wonder then that they cannot readily adjust to married life and either decide never to try, or, more sadly, fail. (To say nothing of the difficulty of finding the right Christian partner!) Either way, it is celibacy in practice without (probably) the positive vocation freely accepted. This is the obligation and we must commend it; we can fairly recognise that the world has made this particular burden of original sin much harder to bear.

Yet further thoughts - two years after.

We now have the scandal that a school has forbidden the wearing of the silver ring, yet allows some distinctive forms of dress allegedly prescribed by some forms of Islam and other religions. A secular institution openly declares it has the right to decide what is and is not a Christian obligation, when it would not dare to exercise such a judgement in respect of other faiths. It further insults Christianity by treating the wearing of the ring as a mere moral stance unconnected to religion, whereas the moral stance is clearly required by Christianity.

Whatever view we hold as to the true nature of the One Church, it is obvious that there is no consensual authority for all those who call themselves Christians, and therefore the only authority which a secular body can consult as to what is a Christian obligation is that of the individual Christian body, large or small, to which the individual pupil (in this case) belongs. The Quakers maintained a distinctive dress code for several centuries, so the possibility has been exercised in (admittedly the distant fringes of) Christianity. More importantly, in some parts of Orthodoxy women were forbidden to wear veils (or at least agreed among themselves on a practice of not doing so), in order to distinguish themselves from Moslems. While I doubt that a secular body has to respect every item of dress that anybody asserts to be commanded by his or her (probably non-existent) religion, it is a different matter if a Christian congregation (or larger unit) does issue a ruling, or even commends a practice to its members.

A court has now ruled in favour of the school, in the process exercising more authority to determine the nature of Christian obligations than the Pope would claim!

The school's action may be viewed as part of a very dangerous initiative by secular society, also visible in the "public benefit" test now *retrospectively* imposed on charities, whereby that society arrogates to itself the right to decide matters wholly outside its competence. Secular society (whether we speak of a government institution such as a school or the Charity Commission, or of alleged majority public opinion) *does not know* what is holy, commanded by God, right, good or even beneficial to the public. It has no standard from which to form such judgements. Its decisions can only be purely arbitrary, and so should be as few as possible, restricted to the reduction (if possible) of the most obvious instances of harm.

The wearing of the silver ring (whatever my personal doubts about it) is a legitimate experiment in Christian self-discipline, neither more nor less, which in our divided condition a Christian body can make and which other such bodies should support *as an experiment*, while being under no obligation to copy the experiment until there is more evidence of its fruitfulness. All Christians are in any case obliged as a matter of religion to abstain from fornication, and no Christian body can dispense from this obligation. It is equally open to a Christian body to advise against the wearing of the silver ring. This is essentially part of the freedom within the One Church to determine rites and ceremonies, which Christians should respect but which need not be identical in all times and places. There is a similar freedom for Christian bodies to commend practices without making them obligatory. Those who are Christians have accepted the discipline of such a body upon themselves. They are bound to respect it, and we claim for them the right to behave accordingly in public.