

Confidence and Humility in Moral Judgment

Sondra Wheeler

Starting Points

First, some ground-clearing. I do not think it is either faithful or wise to follow the course that some in our church are recommending, or even simply taking for granted. This is the position that we need not wrestle with moral disagreements in this realm because all matters of sexual conduct are essentially private judgments. On this view, decisions in this arena are to be made by individuals according to their own lights and are not of relevance to Christian life and community. Such views are not completely anomalous; I have heard officials in the church argue that all language in the *Discipline* referring to “immorality” should be deleted as having no relevance in the modern world. Similarly, I sometimes find I must make a case for our youngest seminary students as to why sex (apart from child abuse and forcible rape) is a matter of moral concern in the church at all.

Such an attitude of indifference, widely accepted in secular society, partakes of the new Gnosticism so prevalent in contemporary culture: the claim that it does not matter what one does in the body so long as the mind and will are unimpaired and there is no coercion involved. But embodiment is essential to human being as Christians understand it, a fact grounded above all in the central doctrine of the Incarnation. Our reasons for caring about, bluntly, who sleeps with whom are not merely a matter of inheritance, but have biblical, social and theological foundations. From a Christian standpoint, sex cannot be treated as just a technology of pleasure or a means of self-expression. It is a medium of relationship, uniquely capable of transmitting both life and death. It is the body’s share in the personal union of partners, but also an image of the passion with which God longs for communion with human creatures. It can even be, I would argue, a vehicle of grace. We have good reasons for caring about sex.

On the other hand, there is something pathological about our focus on sexual morality as if it were the center of Christian ethics and its most essential part. It is not, at least not on any construal that can be plausibly argued from scripture or Christian tradition more broadly. The New Testament spends more time and ink on ethical questions about possessions and power than on those regarding sex. Later Christian preoccupations with it we owe more to philosophical influences like Stoicism in antiquity, and cultural tropes like Victorian ideals of the family in modernity, than to the inheritance of Israel or the teaching of the apostles. In the Bible, sexual life is simply one more realm of human existence to be ordered under the sovereignty of God, to protect the vulnerable, preserve the welfare and good reputation of the community, and secure our freedom to serve God with an undivided heart.

Nor is it a topic of particular attention in the works of John Wesley. It is true that he is a man of his time, and takes utterly for granted the norms of traditional Christian ethics about sex as he received them. Accordingly, he regards all sexual activity outside of marriage as sinful, and understands marriage as intended by God to be heterosexual, monogamous, and lifelong. However, he is too scrupulous a reader of scripture to ignore how standards of sexual life among God’s people have changed over time. He notes, for instance, the toleration of concubinage, polygamy, and divorce (for men) in Hebrew society, and its endurance into the period of the early church so that bishops must be enjoined to have only one wife. In his notes on I Timothy,

he indicates that these changes are to be understood as movements toward God's real intention, calling casual divorce and multiple wives sins that church leaders, even above others, must steer clear of. At the same time, he does not seem to be especially troubled by those shifts, or unduly preoccupied with matters of sexual behavior as the core of Christian faithfulness. Taking these observations as my starting point, I will be looking for an approach that treats sex as a matter of serious moral engagement without turning it into the touchstone of all morality, or the sole and decisive test of fidelity.

Resources

Wesley's Catholic Spirit?

There are probably few texts from Wesley's corpus which are more frequently appropriated (or more variously interpreted) than his sermon on the catholic spirit. It is a standby of Methodist ecumenical engagement, and invoked regularly by those who wish to promote tolerance and good will between those who harbor differences in doctrine or understanding. Which of these appropriations is legitimate, of course, depends on what one regards as essential verses, what is subject to dispute, and on what it means to have one's heart right toward another while still holding to different views. In the sermon in question, Wesley makes it clear that some convictions are definitive of the Christian faith, like the perfections of God and the divinity of Jesus Christ. Other commitments he sees as entailed by the profession of faith, particularly a desire to please God by avoiding sin, something he identifies summarily with "abiding by his holy law."

So, for all the invocations of mutual affection, and the regard he offers for sincere differences of conscience, it is only fair to point out that John Wesley himself would almost certainly have regarded moral standards about sexual behavior as beyond dispute, and adherence to them as a requirement already entailed by the General Rules. We, of course, need not necessarily follow him in that regard. We might find changes in social context and in human self-understanding to justify changes in some of our moral judgments about sex, in the same way we as a denomination have found them to justify changes (in one direction or another) regarding the tolerability of slavery, divorce, and abortion. Changes in moral norms about sex will inevitably be hotly contested, as were the others. And they are not likely to be universally accepted, certainly not over any short period of time. (As indeed the other shifts were not readily embraced, nor have they all been uniformly adopted as standards of conduct.) The question that confronts us here is how to understand and respond to normative disagreements that threaten unity and conscience on all sides of the controversy. Can such disagreements be acknowledged and taken seriously without fracturing the church, or depriving it of any ability to function as a community of moral discernment and moral formation?

Methodist Social History on Divorce

It is possible that we might find in the history of earlier changes in normative understanding a model for how to negotiate differences of judgment and the diverse standards of conduct to which they give rise. The nearest analogy would be to the change in social norms and accompanying ecclesial rules regarding divorce and remarriage in the Methodist church as these are inscribed in the *Book of Discipline*. As many of you will know, prior to World War II, the only reason for divorce recognized as legitimate was adultery, and only those who were the

innocent parties to such divorces could be remarried by ministers of the church. By 1940, legitimate grounds had been extended to include cruelty and physical peril, in recognition of the reality of domestic violence. By 1960, the list of acceptable grounds had disappeared altogether from the *Discipline*, replaced by general statements about the “sanctity of the marital covenant” balanced against the possibility that partners might be “estranged beyond the possibility of reconciliation.” The language of the 1972 *Discipline* simply declares a broad right to divorce and remarry.

Surely such rapid and dramatic normative change did not occur without dissent, nor was everyone persuaded by the arguments in favor of liberalization. Indeed, many felt that the accommodation to changing social mores had been too uncritical and gone too far, so that experimental services proposed for recognizing divorce in the early 1970s were withdrawn amid a storm of criticism. But for good or ill, and likely for both, expectations and practices within the church for both laity and clergy did change in accord with broader social changes.¹ Actual diversity of conscience, needless to say, continues on this as it does (more sharply) in regard to the acceptability of abortion, both within the United States and in the global church.

The New Testament: Paul on Sabbath and Idol Meat

Perhaps the richest of all resources for sustaining the unity and charity of the church amid sharp divisions about Christian behavior comes from Paul, from the passages in his letters to the churches at Rome and Corinth regarding disputes that threatened to split those infant communities². In Romans 14:1–15:5 and 1 Corinthians 8, he deals at length with the issues of food that has been sacrificed to idols, and what Paul refers to as regarding “one day as special” (Rom. 14:6 NIV). The distance of centuries and the dramatically different cultural context make it difficult for us to take these issues seriously, but that is a matter of blindness on our part. The issue of “special days” is almost certainly a code name for Sabbath observance in this mixed community. No one who understands the centrality of the Sabbath as a marker of Jewish identity and loyalty to the covenant can fail to grasp its seriousness as a dividing line between the Jews and Gentiles whom Paul had labored to unite in one body. The question of the acceptability of meat offered in temple sacrifice is equally potent, seeming to tread very near the line of idolatry. This scandalized the consciences of both scrupulous Jews and recently converted pagans, to whom it seemed to risk relapse into former ways. These questions cut near to the bone of faith and community, and were altogether sufficient to put the survival of these churches in question.

For this reason, it is especially surprising to see how Paul responds to the controversies brought to him by his churches. He refuses to pronounce judgment on who is right and who wrong in the disputed questions, indeed barely comments on the presenting issues at all. (The most pointed thing he says is “we all know idols have no real existence.”) His attention is focused instead on what is edifying or destructive to the body of Christ. He admonishes all parties to look, not to their own freedom or moral certainty, but to what is helpful to others in the community. Those who have no scruples in these matters are to be careful not to scandalize or tempt those who are troubled in conscience; and those who are persuaded that faithfulness requires doing or avoiding certain things must not presume to condemn those who believe that God is not offended in these matters. “Who are you to pass judgment on the servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.” (Rom 14:4 NRSV) In summary, he says, “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (v. 23).

Here, perhaps, is a model for living together in humility and charity when we harbor serious and sustained disagreements about the shape of faithfulness in regard to some standard of conduct. It is not to violate your own conscience, but neither is it to presume to draw the lines between true and false believers at the point of disagreement. (Something those on both sides of the debate over same-sex relations have been tempted to do. Liberals are quite as prepared to cast out the intolerant as conservatives are to exclude the unchaste.) It is a way to take the liberty and integrity of conscience seriously without denouncing everyone who reaches a different judgment, or embracing moral indifferentism as the only alternative to mutual excommunication.

A Wesleyan Doctrine of Grace

Here is what I see as Wesley's distinctive theological legacy: his recognition that in God, the universal call to repentance, the free offer of unconditional pardoning love, and the insistence upon total transformation are not merely compatible, to be properly nuanced and held in the right balance, or viewed as aspects of a paradox. They are the same thing. They are together the shape of perfect love toward a fallen world, unified as creation, redemption, and consummation are unified, in that each makes sense only as part of a single story. No account of Christian conviction that leaves any aspect to one side, and no picture of Christian existence that allows us to counter-pose one to another can be truthful, for God's work of redeeming creation remains beyond all human power to dissect. It is here in Wesley's doctrine of salvation that we find his "moral theology" if you will, and what I see as his greatest gift to the contemporary church. In his conception, the understanding of mercy has been transformed from part to whole, from mere pardon to reclamation, and so seen as itself transforming. It is not finally God's willingness to overlook evil, but God's determination to overcome it.

This way of conceiving of grace undergirds a distinctive picture of Christian faith and life, one that leaves whole what the church from earliest times has recurrently been tempted to divide, and often to place in tension one with the other. It preserves the gratuitous character of salvation, its quality of springing from the very being of God with no antecedent but God's free goodness. It stresses the entire sufficiency of grace, the touchstone of Protestant piety that made early Methodism so powerful and liberating as an evangelical force in England and America. This it manages to do without producing the deformations of evangelical thought that have plagued the church since the first Christian communities were gathered: spiritual complacency and moral indifferentism. And it retains the upward pull of "growing into the full stature of Jesus Christ," which is so prominent in Paul (and so much less so in many of those who claim him as inspiration), without closing the door of the church to those whose conduct falls short of the standard, which is never less than Christ himself.

The question is whether we can embrace such an understanding without falling into the kinds of pathology that have recurred among those strands of Christian tradition that have stressed spiritual growth and the aspiration to actual holiness. I will leave to one side the lapse into "works righteousness" outright, and also the construal of holiness as a matter chiefly of worldly pleasures to be foregone rather than holy charity to be cultivated. These are possible, and certainly have occurred in such traditions, but they are not the distortions to which we in our day are most prone. I am thinking, rather, of other deformations. One is a constant anxiety about our own state, the self-preoccupation and self-doubt that taint all service to God and eat away at confidence and joy. This I raise partly because one sees signs of it in John Wesley himself, in the journal entries late in his life that yet struggle with the reality of his own faith. This is a

pathology to which an age steeped in the fear of divine judgment often gave rise, but any experienced pastor can tell you it still rears its head today.

Another distortion, perhaps more prevalent in our time, is the temptation to read the story backward. This is the seemingly logical but fatal leap from the conviction that real faith leads to real transformation to the belief that we are in a position to discern with confidence the spiritual standing of other people based on our own judgments about their behavior. For what it is worth, I believe that the barriers to these distortions are also present within Wesley's work. I think he offers us concepts and practices that might preserve both the capacity to rest in the sure and sufficient mercy of God, and the desire continually to draw ever nearer to his likeness; both the ability for the church to serve as a community of moral reflection and accountability and the humble refusal to judge one who is, after all, the servant of another. The resources I have in view I will gather under the rubric of the sovereignty of grace.

The Sovereignty of Grace

This is, of course, a term of art, one of the touchpoints of conflict and disagreement between the followers of Calvin and of Wesley, each of whom embraced the concept while meaning quite different things by it. For Calvin, its necessary corollary lay in the doctrine of eternal election, which preserves the freedom of God's mercy. For Wesley, conversely, God's sovereign will is expressed par excellence in the universality of the call to repentance, and the universal bestowal of the capacity to heed it. But despite the polemics on both sides, John Wesley is not simply an eighteenth-century Pelagian. For all the activism that Wesley's message inspired, it is important to note that Christian life is, on his model, fundamentally receptive, its repeated pattern consisting in accepting what God gives and does. Thus, one employs a freedom restored by preventing grace, receives the reconciliation offered in Jesus Christ, and presents oneself for the healing and transforming work to be accomplished by the Holy Spirit. All the practices that distinguished Wesley's followers were only this: the means of grace, ways of waiting for a healing one could not effect in oneself. At every point, God is the actor, and the human being the recipient of God's saving work.

This account does not, of course, leave us simply inert. The renewed capacity of the will must be exercised in a particular way, the gift of pardon must be accepted, and the places and practices wherein God has promised to meet us and nurture our restoration must be steadily frequented. At every point, the promptings of the Holy Spirit can be heeded or ignored, and the freedom restored by grace may be used to say, finally, yes or no, [NB: This has the effect of not resolving but relocating the mystery of perdition, from the impenetrability of divine election to the opacity of human freedom as created and restored, which can yet be exercised to one's final undoing.] The sovereignty of divine grace as Wesley conceives it means not that the fullness of salvation must inexorably come, but that it is genuinely possible, genuinely available to all. And if the mercy of God is not "irresistible," it is indeed indefatigable. In all those who remain willing to receive, God remains instant and powerful to act. In anyone so willing, or even willing to be brought to willingness, God's own will for the holiness of charity will be fulfilled in the end. And this conviction has a number of implications for how we understand and live out our lives in the moral community of the church. These I will try to sketch, along with a few connections to our current situation in The UMC and elsewhere, and then be done.

The Dynamism of Grace

Wesley does not understand *grace* as an attainment, or a state, or a final decree regarding judgment. He views it as rather as the disposition and activity of God in relation to God's creatures. Thus, it is permanently dynamic, like a flame that looks like an object but is really an ongoing event. Alive and unchanging in the eternal God "whose will is ever directed to his children's good,"³ its work in us is a process. While God's loving disposition toward us is unshakeable, we are anything but, being always in the midst of change. As creatures caught in time, bombarded by sensory experience and susceptible to myriad influences, we cannot truly stand still, but only move in one direction or another. This underlies Wesley's contention that, spiritually speaking, we are always either being drawn toward greater nearness to God, or else turning away. Even what appears in us as stability is in reality intensely active, the work of the Holy Spirit engaging to defend us against the powers (without and within) that would tug us toward the darkness.

This dynamic conception of grace entails that one is never done with coming to faith, never finished with repentance and reformation, never secure in any attainment of character. All must be continually nourished and sustained by the living mercy of God, as the candle's flame must be constantly fed by fuel and oxygen to remain alight. Even *perfection* as Wesley understands it is not static or fixed so that one might rest upon it. It is simply a state of being undivided in heart so that there are no competing motives to draw one from the path of obedient charity into intentional sin. But this as a human condition is realized in time; it is not immutable, not proof against confusion or despair or rebellion outright. Just as the promptings of the Spirit to repentance can be ignored, and the grace of justifying faith can be neglected and allowed to atrophy so that it hardens into indifference and finally into unbelief, so even perfection can wither and die. Worse, it can be distorted into self-righteousness or complacency that leads to spiritual pride, that most deadly of all sins.

On this understanding, all religious life is fruit of the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit, an expression of God's will to redemption, calling us away from destruction toward the light and life constantly poured into us. Therefore, holiness in us, even salvation itself, cannot be a possession or a status, but only a relationship, whose one sure sign is the "love of God shed abroad in our hearts," as John Wesley so loves to quote. But our continuing dependence upon grace need not be to us a source of uncertainty and unease. It can be instead a bulwark of perfect confidence and peace. If we can never be secure in our own right, never settled comfortably into the status of "once saved, always saved," never finished with the call to holiness of life and heart; neither can we ever fall from within the compass of God's power and will to rescue. There simply is no place one can get to where one is out of the reach of God's mercy, deprived of the power to turn—or even beyond the risk of God's pursuit. The sovereignty of grace means that while it may be squandered, it cannot be closed off.

God Is Not Done with Us

And, of course, what each of us may apply to our own case applies equally to everyone else in the broad and tragically divided church of Jesus Christ. It is not given to any of us to see the end of our own story, much less the final outcome of another's. Whatever positions we may reject, whatever behavior we may deplore, whatever we may in conscience be obliged to name as wrongdoing or corruption, only one thing can we know with certainty: that God remains at work in every believer, awakening and correcting conscience, offering pardon and new life, re-inscribing the image of God's own goodness in the creature made to bear God's likeness. All of

which is to say that those we are convinced are wrong in judgment or action remain our sisters and brothers in faith. Rather than chiefly those “on the wrong side,” they are chiefly those in whom the same grace of God in which we trust is at work, “those for whom Christ died” as Paul says, and fellow journeyers with us on the way of salvation. (Plus, there is always the possibility that we might be wrong about whose conscience needs correcting.)

This last is the sort of thing we are ready to affirm in theory, but altogether averse to taking seriously in practice. It is always tempting to ignore all the elements of human construction that go into any specific ethical decision or concrete moral judgment. This is particularly the case when—as so often in our own highly polarized environment—our passions are deeply engaged in the argument. But even Thomas Aquinas, not usually regarded as some namby-pamby liberal, says that the only perfectly certain principle of moral theology is that good is to be done and evil avoided. This is because he sees that the work of moral reasoning is always partly constructive, and thus contingent. All actual choices involve judgments of fact and likely consequence, the motives and intentions of other people, the interpretation of texts and the application of rules and principles that frequently appear to conflict with one another.

At every point in the analysis, there are ways for people of intelligence, good faith, and good will to come to very different conclusions. One need not be a moral relativist to recognize this. However objectively true and false, right and wrong may exist in the mind of God, our access to that objective reality is qualified by ignorance, mistake, and sin. But this is no call to the abandonment of moral conversation and moral discernment in the church. (I’m a moralist, after all, and think we have too little of that, not too much.) It is a call rather to humility about our own judgments, and charity toward those who reach different ones. Above all, we dare not presume to move from opinions about any particular position or behavior to judgments about the state of someone’s heart and mind before God. As Paul writes to the partisans of an earlier moral controversy in the church, “Who are you to pass judgment on the servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand” (Rom. 14:4 NRSV).

Finally, a Thought Experiment

What follows is not addressed to those who are convinced that the traditional stance regarding same-sex behavior is based on a historical pattern of the sexual use of weaker parties, such as children and slaves, not applicable to the present question. Neither is it intended to change the position of those who see such norms as rooted in ignorance or misunderstanding regarding human sexuality and its deep psychological roots. It is not offered even as a statement of my own views. It is intended only as a mental exercise for those who remain persuaded by the limited but uniform witness of scripture, and the long tradition of teaching in the church, that same-sex relations cannot be positively affirmed. It is merely a thought experiment, a question for reflection.

Would it be coherent and faithful to regard same-sex relations that are intended to be mutually faithful and permanent in the same way we presently regard remarriage after divorce? Clearly, according to the Bible, divorce is not expressive of the perfect and intentional will of God for marriage, which the New Testament repeatedly declares to be monogamous and lifelong. Furthermore, there are several texts that explicitly call divorce and remarriage adulterous and hateful to God. But many who take the witness of scripture regarding marriage with great seriousness have come to see second marriage as something that may in some cases be

a faithful way forward. It can be seen as a way of accommodating the brokenness that marks all of human sexual life, indeed all of human existence, as potentially a vehicle of grace and a witness to God's abiding mercy, despite our failures; and might one who continued to regard heterosexual marriage as the divine intention for human sexual relationship see the acceptance of faithful and committed same-sex partnerships as a similar accommodation, a way of caring for those who have found themselves simply unable to live according to the normative vision? I am keenly aware that such a proposal cannot win enthusiastic agreement from any quarter. It is not affirming enough for those who seek full acceptance and endorsement for same-sex relationships on a par with heterosexual ones. Nor is it rigorous enough in holding to traditional teaching for those who regard this as required by faithfulness to scripture and tradition. But it might offer a path for acceptance on the part of those who cannot in conscience embrace same-sex unions as simply one more option, a path that does not ask them to affirm what they cannot honestly believe.

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¹ It could be illuminating to research the minutes of General Conferences over this period to get a sense of the shape of the conversation that accompanied these changes, something time has not permitted me to do.

² The exegetical foundation for this work is to be found in the 1988 article by Wayne Meeks, "The Polyphonic Ethics of the Apostle Paul" in the *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 8:17–29.

³ "A Modern Affirmation," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 885.