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Virginity at All Costs? Cappadocian Teachings on Virginity for the Life of the Church

RYAN STARR

On cold nights I sleep beneath a yellow quilt. The unraveling blanket is stained from my childhood and too small to cover my body. Often, those who see it at the foot of my rarely-made bed ask, “Why do you still sleep with your baby blanket?” Typically, I skirt the question with a comment about being too cheap to buy a new blanket. The truth is it comforts me when I have no one to hold at night, and no one with whom to share a dark, cinderblock room.

This human longing to be held, touched and physically loved is too often reduced to some form of cheap sexuality. The lie taught by our sexualized world goes something like this: I need meaning in my life; the culture tells me it’s found in sex; I must engage in sex until I find this meaning. This search for sexual meaning traps many in an unhealthy cycle of abandonment and further loneliness. When sexual encounters become the *telos* (goal) of human experience, disappointment abounds. Unfortunately, our churches have failed to offer a counter-story to the world’s sense of sexuality. Promiscuity will continue to trump virginity until the church presents our youth with persuasive theological reasons to remain sexually pure. Stanley Hauerwas places the burden of purity on the church body rather than the individual youth:

What the young properly demand is an account of life and the initiation into a community that makes intelligible why their interest in sex should be subordinated to other interests. What they, and we, demand is the lure of an adventure that captures the imagination sufficiently that for Christians “conquest” comes to mean something other than the sexual possession of another.¹

Writing to a group of young monks, Gregory of Nyssa presents celibacy as one viable alternative to the world’s understanding of sex.² The Cappadocians find answers in friendship. For Gregory, also referred to as Nyssen, the Christian life is not limited to individual pursuit of virginity, but involves the participation of an entire community loving one another rightly. This sense of biblical community manifests itself in the form of right relationship. He maintains that those who are “young . . . must concern themselves with this before all, the finding of a good guide and teaching on this path.”³ Nyssen recognizes that a life of virginity needs the direction, counsel and companionship of others to reap the fullness of an ascetic life. When the body of Christ becomes the place where youth seek and find meaningful friendship, the church will be the alternative to the world.

1. Stanley Hauerwas, “Sex in Public” in *The Hauerwas Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 503.

2. Known as one of the Cappadocians, St. Gregory of Nyssa was a fourth century preacher in a region of modern-day Turkey. Nyssen combines the Cappadocian theology with the practical concern of sexuality in his treatise encouraging celibacy. For a brief introduction to Cappadocian thought, consult John McGuckin, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001).

3. St. Gregory of Nyssa, “On Virginity,” in *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory Ascetical Works*, ed. and trans. by Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1990), 58:69. For Nyssen’s works, Callahan’s translation will be used throughout the essay unless otherwise noted.

NYSSEN'S "ON VIRGINITY"

Nyssen's treatise offers "immature" monks guidance in how to best live out a life of chastity. On the surface, Nyssen writes to persuade struggling aspirants to remain celibate. He recognizes the difficulties of a celibate life but also sees the spiritual rewards. Implicitly, his argument challenges the church to be a place that makes virginity most meaningful. This form of corporate worship assists our brothers and sisters in their pursuit of the divine. Ultimately, when one person grows spiritually, the entire body grows spiritually. Virginity might be possible in isolation—but the body of Christ benefits most from virginity when it is practiced in the open spaces of everyday life.

The open and transparent practice of purity is witnessed by our youth. Mature Christians practicing fidelity in their marriages, celibacy in their singleness, and honesty in their conversations about sex would improve the present deficiencies in our churches failing to persuade our youth to pursue sexual purity.

Nyssen's primary concern deals more with spiritual progress than with sexual retreat. The entire point of Nyssen's espousal of virginity is to enable Christians a way to better unite themselves with Christ, not isolate themselves from the world. Although virtuous, virginity should never be a litmus test for Christianity. While virginity provides a way to "discern the beautiful" and participate in a spiritual discipline, it is never grounds for ostracizing any member of the body of Christ.⁴

VIRGINITY AS DIVINE GIFT

Nyssen speaks of virginity as a "gift of the Great God."⁵ The literal rendering of this passage accentuates Nyssen's emphasis on God as the supreme and only giver of all good gifts.⁶ Virginity comes from God. It is God's gift to God's children—a beautiful gift of innocence and joy and purity and childlike qualities for those to whom the kingdom is promised. In virginity, the world is experienced through a sense of expectation and hope and wonderment that surpasses sexual curiosity. The eschatological promise of that which is hoped for but not yet known comes alive as virginity is pursued. Nyssen affirms, "mortality is truly conquered by life and the life of virginity seems to be an image of the blessedness that is to come, bringing with it many tokens of the goods that are stored up through hope."⁷ C. H. Dodd refers to this "already/not yet" dialectic as "realized eschatology."⁸ Christians partake in a foretaste of the kingdom as they pursue purity in every relationship.

The culture, however, treats celibacy as the world's worst punishment. It portrays virgins as either prizes to win or outcasts to avoid. Judith and Jack Balwick characterize this mindset with the phrase "inauthentic sexuality." When the Balwicks describe postmodern sexual relationships as frequently "unreal, false, convoluted, and unreliable expression of sexual behavior," they also depict sexual reality inside much of the church.⁹

An indeterminable difference between sexual practices in the church and in the world currently prevents the church from speaking with a prophetic voice. The body of Christ, especially its preachers, exists to be prophets to the world. In part, the answer to persuading our youth towards sexual purity lies in the practice

4. Nyssen, "On Virginity," *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory Ascetical Works*, 9.

5. Author's own translation.

6. Nyssen, "De Virginitate" in *Patrologia: Cursus Completus* (Paris: Garnier, 1863), 46:319. Although some translators elect to render the passage as "great gift" (Callahan), it seems more consistent with Nyssen's theology to apply "great" to "God" instead of virginity.

7. Nyssen, "On Virginity," *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory Ascetical Works*, 50.

8. Dodd appears to be among the first champions of realized eschatology. The teaching continues to spur discussion among some of our finest New Testament scholars such as Albert Schweitzer, Raymond Brown and Richard Hays. See C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1928). An engaging study of the development of Dodd's "realized eschatology" is presented in Amos Wilder's article: "New Testament Studies, 1920-1950: Reminiscences of a Changing Discipline," *The Journal of Religion* 64, no. 4, (October 1984): 432-451.

9. Judith K Balwick and Jack O. Balwick, *Authentic Human Sexuality: An Integrated Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 14.

of “authentic sexuality” in our own lives.¹⁰ Authentic sexuality extends to the jokes we tell, the movies we watch, the books we read, and the way parents speak about one another. To slightly modify the words of Knute Rockne, Notre Dame’s former football coach, “One parent practicing authentic sexuality is better than a hundred teaching it.”¹¹

We teach our youth about sexuality as a community. The church speaks verbally with a unified voice: “Don’t have sex before marriage.” This message is clear, concise, and often lacking in grace. In high school I attended an emotionally charged Christian retreat. At the end of one session the pastor asked for questions. One boy asked, “What is the unforgivable sin?” With the room in complete silence, the minister hoisted his hand into the air and declared, “It’s having sex before marriage.” Not one person in the room laughed—I suspect because some boys were not virgins and others agreed with the answer. The remarkable part of this story is not poor catechesis alone, but the reality of how scared our church children have become of sex. Rodney Clapp maintains, “If the New Testament sees celibacy and singleness as permissible and even admirable, it is not because it sees sex as impure.”¹²

An alarming number of churches resort to threatening or scaring our youth into celibacy. This disturbing, almost ubiquitous trend is also apparent in other parts of the world. During an internship with Congolese refugees, I noticed a troubling reason that many girls insist on virginity—fear. In a community where 25-30 percent of the population is infected with HIV/AIDS, sexual intercourse calculates to twice the risk of Russian roulette. But, is this really what Jesus had envisioned for encouraging his children to be pure in heart (Matt 5.8)? The attitude of “virginity at any cost” misses the point of the gospel. Chastity belts are not good news! Exclusion from one’s family, church and community constitutes injurious news. In all likelihood, God has heard worse confessions than, “I was curious at sixteen, and it will never happen again.”

Parents and pastors focused primarily on what youth *must not do* reflect more about the caretakers than the cared for. Too often, upholding an appearance for one’s family and church supersedes biblical reasons for purity. When appearance trumps scripture, virginity is cheapened. Raising our youth to love and fear the Lord is right; however, when an attitude of willingness is fostered, our youth will choose purity over promiscuity more often than not. One might rightly question if forced virginity (by fear or device) is Christian virginity at all. The impetus of virginity is to be more like Christ—not only sexually, but in every way. When the mark of Christian faith is “not having sex,” we cheapen the faith and stifle the child.

Nyssen presents an alternative: virginity as gift. It is a gift to be unwrapped, discovered and pursued. The discovery of virginity might lead to a purity of heart that questions the impurities of greed, wealth, war, materialism, and more. God needs to be a source of hope in our churches. The counter-story offered by the church must be greater than, “Believe in Jesus, and don’t have sex.” Ultimately, trite credos cheapen sexuality and misrepresent the faith of Jesus Christ. When Christianity becomes a list of prohibitions it fails to be a testament of hope. This gift of virginity, for which Nyssen pleads, limits distractions from the purpose of pursuing God, not for upholding a sexual status quo.

In all things beautiful, God is the source.¹³ God is Creator, Sustainer and Giver of all to which we aspire.¹⁴ This pursuit of godliness must be tempered with humility and never tarnished by that which

10. Ibid., 17.

11. Rockne actually declared: “One person practicing sportsmanship is better than a hundred teaching it.” The same teaching holds true within the community of believers.

12. Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 95.

13. David L. Balas notes that Nyssen “constantly affirms . . . that God is the cause of perfection in all creatures.” He also confirms that Nyssen’s view of God as the “source from which Goodness flows is not limited to ‘On Virginity.’” See David L. Balas, *Man’s Perfection in God’s Perfections According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa*, Studia Anselmiana (Rome: I. B. C. Herder, 1966), 55:68-69.

14. The description of God as the “source” is further affirmed in Nyssen’s “On the Soul and Resurrection,” where he asserts, “Since the source of all goods flows continuously, the nature of the one who has a share in them converts everything that flows into it to its own size because nothing is superfluous.” *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory Ascetical Works*, 245.

is “pompous” in word or action. The reception of a divine gift is soiled with sin when not used for the “common advantage” of the community.” Nyssen reminds monastics who might think too highly of themselves as a result of ascetic discipline: “For I think that every intelligent person must seek, not what will make him more esteemed than others, but those things by which he can benefit himself and others.”¹⁵

The church needs to exist as a counterexample to the world’s false hope in sexuality. The lessons of monasticism may be a good place for us to start. Monastics teach us that celibacy far outweighs the lessons of illicit and libidinous sex. Until virginity can be viewed as a gift (instead of God’s ultimate cruelty), the gift of sex will continue to hold the value of a Cabbage Patch doll at Christmas time; once the present is unwrapped and played with for a day, it’s time to throw her away and buy Barbie instead.

VIRGINITY AS “EPECTASY”

For Nyssen, the language of movement is important. Cappadocian thought teaches that the pursuit of God is a continual movement into the likeness of God; movement gives life and idleness brings death. Life is defeated when it ceases to move forward, implying that it comes to an idle rest. Nyssen stresses this consistent pursuit of God is never finished:

[I]f we apprehend at last the perfection of this grace [i.e. the grace imparted through virginity], we must understand well what necessarily follows it; namely that *it is not a single achievement*, ending in the subjugation of the body, but that in intention it reaches to and pervades everything that is, or is considered, a right condition of the soul.¹⁶

This passage reinforces Nyssen’s idea that we are “becoming continually alive” in Christ. In essence, the day we think we have arrived we have ceased living.¹⁷ The continual, upward movement of soul positions us closer to the beauty that rests in God.

To articulate Nyssen’s understanding of a soul perpetually in motion, Jean Danielou coined the word, “epectasy.” Danielou converts Paul’s use of the present participle *epekteinomenos* (straining forward) (Phil 3.13) into a helpful way of speaking about the Cappadocian understanding of the soul’s movement. The focus of “On Virginity” points towards a consideration of how the soul perpetually strains forward, or as Moore clarifies, “cleaves” to the beauty and participation in divine goodness.¹⁸

According to Cappadocian thought, humans best participate with God through an intentional effort at becoming purified from the vices of this present world. This dynamic transformation from the ephemeral desires of the flesh to the ethereal desires of the divine begins with a process of rooting out the passions. Purging the passions that produce *hormai*, or the impulses and instincts that lead to the emotions of lust and anger, is beneficial to those choosing a celibate life. Further, Nyssen contends that *epithymia*, the specific emotion of desire, can be transformed from a longing after the flesh into a yearning after the holiness of God.

Nyssen, in his *Life of Moses*, writes that “passions are not essential to the human soul, but additional to it.”¹⁹ Nyssen’s “On the Soul and Resurrection” affirms, “Only after we are purged of the sympathy we had with [sensual pleasures] in this life are we able to be joined in purity to that to which we are similar.”²⁰ In like manner, “On Virginity” posits, “once he is dead to sin, he lives the rest of the time for God. Death

15. Nyssen, “On Virginity,” *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory Ascetical Works*, 12.

16. Nyssen, “On Virginity,” trans. William Moore, *NPNF* series 2, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 360. (Emphasis added.)

17. Nyssen, “De Virginitate” in *Patrologia*, 372.

18. Nyssen, “On Virginity,” trans. Moore, 361.

19. Nyssen, *Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham Malherbe (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 218.

20. Nyssen, “On the Soul and Resurrection,” in *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory Ascetical Works*, ed. and trans. by Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1990), 58:245.

is no longer his harvest [now that he has] put an end to his carnal life.”²¹ Nyssen is not concerned with the compatibility of the sensual and the spiritual. Instead, his purpose is to instruct young monks to thwart all appetitive passions that separate them from the image of God. While some will complain of Nyssen’s simplicity here, the valuable lesson lies within the clarity with which he writes. He does not muddy the waters with discussions about marriage and hypothetical exceptions. Instead, he keeps the youth focused on the prize of becoming more like Christ every day. The prize is not *not having sex* but growing ever closer to God.

We would do well to replicate Nyssen’s focus on the divine rewards, instead of harping on fleshly distractions. Our youth are well aware of sexual temptations. What they need from their church is the acknowledgment that sexual desires are real and difficult to resist, but that reward accompanies faithfulness. Nyssen admits later in his writings that passions may not be inherently evil. He recommends instead that his aspirants push any questionable emotions to the “border” of the soul; thus, eliminating any “bodily defilements” that impede their pursuit of “purity.”

Nyssen comments that sexual temptation is not the only passion to be harnessed, but all sin must be bridled with force. Nyssen writes, “For we are all equally slaves, even if we do not have the same masters, as long as any sin has power over us and rules us by force.” Metaphorically, Nyssen pictures the need to purify the whole body and the whole mind: “For one stone does not make a complete tower, nor does one commandment bring the perfection of the soul to its desired measure.” Nyssen’s nuanced understanding of the passions rids the body of any negative passions (*pathos*) while streamlining the constructive passions towards God.

For Nyssen, the crux of the argument in “On Virginity” may not hinge on virginity at all. When left unrestrained, God-given passions (e.g., *epithymia*) pursue their natural course and manifest themselves in a “stained soul [that] can no longer be spotless.” Supposing most aspirants already have pledged themselves to celibacy, Nyssen insists that the point of virginity is the creation of a firm foundation. Yet, a solid foundation with a faulty building falls short of its purpose. In other words, “Let eagerness for virginity, then, be put down as the foundation for the life of virtue, but let there be built upon its foundation all the products of virtue.” In the same paragraph, Nyssen sharply rebukes any monk content to rest on the laurels of virginity alone. He compares this defective mindset to a “golden ring in the swine’s snout” and “a pearl trampled under the swine’s feet.”

The achievement of virginity by no means “completes the tower” of sanctification. Instead, virginity’s intended purpose is to allow the mason to cover it in the variegated stones of the kingdom colored with courage, bravery, piety, hope, steadfastness, repentance, justice, wisdom, prudence, self-control and the denial of wealth and materialism. This “pied beauty”²² also emanates with the discernment of purity in all things and rejection of all else deemed “unsuitable and useless.” For Nyssen, “that perfect freedom does not consist in [virginity] alone,” but encourages Christians to seek out Christ in their entire life.²³

CONCLUSION

In his latest monograph, David Schnarch writes a passage vital for the church to hear: “You have to learn to stand on you own two feet if you want yourself to be held. You can make a big show of being fiercely independent, but the deeper truth is that you are still trying to convince yourself that you can stand alone.”²⁴ Often, our society leaves its children with no other choice but to stand on their own. Abuse and neglect have left televisions and gangs to raise our kids. Youth will reflect their culture and their churches, a humbling reality.

21. Nyssen, “On Virginity,” *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory Ascetical Works*, 50-59. (Used for remainder of Nyssen quotations.)

22. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty,” *Gerald Manley Hopkins: A Selection of his Poems and Prose*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Baltimore: Penguin, 1953), 30-31.

23. Nyssen, “On Virginity,” 59. Cf Matt 13.47ff.

24. David Morris Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible: An Integration of Sexual and Marital Therapies* (New York: W. M. Norton, 1991), 107.

It should come as no surprise that virginity is a joke both outside and inside the church. Most of our church's youth are force-fed two competing views: MTV's overt sexualization of the human body and the church's clichés promoting abstinence. Both extremes leave our youth quietly wondering to which side they belong. Something about prostituting their bodies seems wrong, but something about the trivial dismissal of their sexuality seems impossible. Ultimately, neither choice is healthy for physical, mental or spiritual development of our youth.

As the church, we are called to confess our corporate sin of dismissing our youth's concerns about sexuality and to begin answering them truthfully. Of course, telling the truth will mean sharing the fears, stories, and struggles each of us encountered on the way to adulthood. The truth has a way of setting us free—in this case, setting everyone free. No longer will our youth need to wonder, "Am I the only one struggling?" The gift of honesty might just be the way our communities pursue God through sexual integrity.

The beauty of monastic life is its voluntary nature. There must have been something persuasive enough about this ascetic way of life to attract young aspirants to eschew wealth, sex and recognition to become subject to Christ. The young monks became a part of something bigger than themselves. They embraced a community that valued wholeness over greed and purity above fleeting pleasures. The attraction of the monastery was the community and the gift of new life unencumbered by the daily banalities of the outside world. The focus was on loving God continually and loving one's neighbor meaningfully. At its best, Christian virginity constitutes a life lived out for the benefit of the community, not only for the self.

One night last year I received the crushing news that my grandfather was going to prison. The reality and finality of this hurt me deeply. A dear friend invited me to her family's house for dinner. After everyone else went to sleep, we stood on the frigid farmhouse floor in front of the fireplace. She looked into the sadness of my eyes, said nothing and held me until she fell nearly asleep in my arms. The purity of that embrace meant more than any sexual encounter. Her warming arms became my yellow blanket on that cold December night.

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