BOOK REVIEWS

ON BEING HUMAN: SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND THE IMAGE OF GOD, By C. Norman Kraus, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011, 113 pp., $16.00.

The ongoing contentious debate about sexuality, sexual orientation, and same sex marriage has stirred up considerable emotion and created divisions among those in the Christian faith community. Often the debate seems to revolve around differing interpretations of approximately a half dozen biblical passages. In contrast, C. Norman Kraus' book on sexual orientation takes an important step back to reexamine the theological and cultural assumptions that shape the way the biblical texts are read and understood. For those wrestling with the issue of sexuality, this book can serve as an important resource for critical thinking that goes beyond the same well-worn arguments over particular texts.

Not originally intended for publication, the writing project which resulted in this book appears to be a continuation of C. Norman Kraus' quarter century journey of rethinking his understanding of the subject of sexuality. Over the course of that process he came to realize that that he "…was reading the bible from a different anthropological and theological perspective…" (107). Kraus offers this volume in hopes that it will serve as a useful study tool for study groups, though he acknowledges that it is not an attempt to provide a balanced examination of all of the sides of the debate. Instead he intends his book to open a conversation on the topic and his book models this discussion as it includes four complementary responses from other authors.

Kraus explains his changing anthropological and theological perspectives in the first six chapters of the book (the following chapters are the responses to his essay). In these chapters he discusses the concept of sexual orientation and makes the case for understanding sexual orientation to be primarily about human bonding and relationships, not just physical attraction and physical sex. He critiques the Augustinian tradition and literal readings of the creation account in Genesis which lead people to think of variant sexual orientations as perversions instead of simply variants. In discussing the creation stories he also points out how these texts speak of humanity, not individuals, being created in the image of God. Thus he argues individuals living in community and in shalom with each other reflect the image of God and are a reflection of the perfect community of the triune God. This leads Kraus to conclude:

> "… the morality of physical erotic intimacies is not properly evaluated by the orientation of the partners, but by the moral quality of such physical relationships. In so far as physical sexual intimacy reflects and furthers human *shalom,* it participates in the image of God. In so far as it is abusive and destructive of human *shalom*, it is a desecration of the image of God. This is equally true of all sexual activity" (54-55)

Finally he proposes that in order for the ecclesiastical community to fully reflect the image of God and be an authentic representation of the body of Christ the church should include those with

variant sexual orientations and that their relationships should be held to standards as heterosexual relationships.

This short summary of Kraus' reflection on sexual orientation and the image of God cannot do complete justice to the richness and complexity of his essay. As a sociologist I appreciate his challenge to rethink the cultural assumptions that we bring to the biblical text when we read it. And while I believe that this text is worth reading, and will serve its intended purpose as a resource for study groups, there are a few points worth noting.

First, in his essay Kraus is not always consistent in his the way he labels non-heterosexual sexuality. At times he uses the term homosexuality, at times he talks about gay and lesbians, and at other times he talks more broadly about variations in sexual orientation. The inconsistent terminology and his more frequent references to homosexuality might lead the reader to think that the focus of the essay is primarily on same sex relationships. However the underlying principles in his essay apply to more than just same-sex sexual orientations. A growing understanding of sexual orientation has challenged us to move beyond viewing orientation as a binary, either/or categorization (homosexuality or heterosexuality). This, however, is more than a linguistic or conceptual issue. For example, recent scholarship on the way that churches have responded to sexual orientation has documented how bisexual individuals may feel excluded from not only congregations who do not accept variations in sexual orientation but also from congregations which are predominately composed of gay or lesbian members.

Second, at the end of the sixth chapter Kraus makes a statement which appears puzzling or out of place given the underlying principles which he develops in his essay. In the context of arguing that the church should be open and affirming to those with variant sexual orientations, he indicates it would still be possible to distinguish same sex relationships from heterosexual marriage because the latter has a role in reproduction and propagation of the human race. This distinction does not seem to reflect empirical reality as individuals in non-heterosexual committed partnerships are involved in reproduction and parenting and are using the same technologies or strategies first used by heterosexual couples in order to have children. More importantly, nothing in Kraus' essay hints that reproductive potential should figure into the evaluation of the morality or valuation of non-heterosexual relationships.

Neither of these issues should be reasons to avoid reading the text. Moreover, I suspect that the inconsistent use of terminology and the puzzling statement are a reflection of the fact that this text, as Kraus has indicated, is the result of his long process of rethinking his own understanding of the issues related to sexual orientation, a process for Kraus that is ongoing. In fact, recognition of the writing of this text as part of his ongoing reflection might actually be useful for readers, as it can serve as a way to invite readers to join the ongoing conversation.

Viewing Kraus' essay as a "waypoint" on a journey rather than a final destination might also be valuable in recognizing that his underlying principles for approaching the topic of variant sexual orientations have much broader implications. If, as he contends, we should judge the

morality of physical intimacy by the moral quality of the relationship and the extent to which the relationship reflects shalom, then this also may imply rethinking some of the ways the church evaluates heterosexual physical intimacy. For example, one might wonder if a relationship which is not monogamous might be morally acceptable. Or if a relationship, heterosexual or otherwise, which focuses on mutual pleasure and enjoyment and does not involve a long term commitment might also be morally acceptable. Kraus raises similar questions in the final chapter of his essay but does not directly address them. This does not represent a weakness in the book as such extensions of his thought were not the intent of his essay. Instead, on issues like this Kraus's book invites readers to participate in the ongoing discussion and reexamination of how we all think about sex and sexuality. Thus the text can serve as Kraus intended as a useful resource for study groups and others who are willing to step back and reconsider the cultural and theological presuppositions which shape our thinking about sexuality.

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