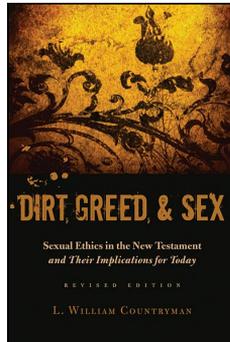


○ **REVIEW OF L. WILLIAM COUNTRYMAN, *DIRT, GREED, & SEX: SEXUAL ETHICS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY***

(REVISED EDITION. GENDER, THEORY, AND RELIGION. MINNEAPOLIS: FORTRESS PRESS, 2007)

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Before I say anything else, I have to ask, what do you think of the title of this book? One can't help but be either attracted or repulsed by it – and, in many ways, therein lies the challenge Countryman poses to his audience. How we respond on a 'gut' or emotional level to issues about such things as masturbation, incest, bestiality, homosexuality, rape, or even just to 'sex' in general, probably says far more about who we are as people – situated in our various cultural and social contexts – than it does about any sort of informed Christian sexual ethic we may think we hold. We may believe that we are responding in a 'biblical' way when we expound our views on abortion or gay marriage, but have we truly considered what principles underlie our ethics? And are these the same principles that can be discerned in the New Testament?

We will return to these questions shortly, but firstly we ought to note that the original edition of *Dirt, Greed, & Sex* came out twenty years ago, in 1988. The subtitle of the book was, and still is, *Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today*. Just as a reminder, 'today' twenty years ago meant that Nelson Mandela was still in jail, CDs overtook vinyl sales for the first time, and Ronald Reagan was still President (although George W. Bush won the election later that year). The Stock Market had crashed the year before, but the fall of the Berlin Wall had yet to happen. Computer viruses were relatively new, as was the AIDS virus, and both Crack and Prozac appeared for the first time. We watched *The Cosby Show* and *Cheers* on TV while the Kurds were gassed in Iraq and the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan. Both the Seoul Olympics and the Australian bicentennial were celebrated, although not without controversy, and televangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker both publicly confessed to various sex and fraud-related scandals. No one had ever sent a text message, or owned a cell phone small enough

to put in a pocket; hardly anyone had a personal computer at home, let alone a laptop; the World Wide Web didn't exist, and the Internet only stretched as far as the States, Canada, France and Scandinavia.

It was into this 'world' that Countryman presented his findings. His aim was to contribute "a useful addition to the ongoing discussion of sexual ethics in our time" by presenting "a faithful reading of the pertinent biblical texts" (x–xi). He argued that the various expressions of sexual morality presented in the Bible could be explained by the ethical principles of purity and property, whose antitheses are dirt and greed (hence the title of the book), and explored the impact Jesus and Paul had on the way the early Christian communities rejected and/or reshaped these principles. This material is covered in the first two parts of the book, appropriately entitled "Dirt" and "Greed." In the third part of the book, "Sex," Countryman then considered the ways in which our own sexual ethics could/should be informed by these principles and suggested that while the sexual ethics of the NT might seem alien to Christians in the twentieth century, the model presented in the NT is "a pattern worth applying to the present situation" (239). He then applied this pattern to various 'current' issues, coming to conclusions that were deemed shocking by many reviewers. While many saw his biblical exegesis as "thorough" and "scholarly" (Reichardt 1990, 375), "refreshing" and "instructive" (Rakestraw 1993, 204), it was his comments on specific sexual issues that were difficult for many reviewers to accept; for example he stated that, "[T]he gospel allows no rule against the following, in and of themselves: masturbation, nonvaginal heterosexual intercourse, bestiality, polygamy, homosexual acts, or erotic art and literature"¹ At best, reviewers found such conclusions "controversial" (Batson 1990, 159) and "thought-provoking (and perhaps a bit jolting)" (Reichardt 1990, 375). Others, however, declared more strongly that, "This was a difficult book for me to review. I argued with the author throughout and at times even walked away in disgust" (Vermillion 1992, 549) and even concluded that the book "is not recommended as a guide to sexual ethics today" (Rakestraw 1993, 204).

It is perhaps not surprising then, that in the preface to the second edition Countryman remarks that his initial aim of hoping to engender some discussion between 'liberals' and 'conservatives' in the Christian communities "has largely been disappointed"(ix). He explains that his reasons for returning to this book are two-fold; the on-going importance of developing a sound biblical sexual ethics (especially as the "level of anger and venom in these conflicts has actually grown with the passing years"(x–xi), and because, as he views it, there is no other "comparable overview of sexual ethics in scripture" (xi). He states, however, that while this new book has benefited from the work done by scholars in the intervening twenty years,² his conclusions have not changed radically; "I remain convinced that purity and property are the central considerations behind the ancient sexual ethics inherited and reshaped by the New Testament writers"(x).

Indeed, in many ways, this book as a whole has not changed radically. To be sure, virtually every sentence has been thoroughly sifted through the various nets of cultural/social/academic sensitivity in order to provide a more nuanced reading; regarding the Bible, for example, rather than saying "some voices invoke *its* authority" (1998 edition, 1. Italics added). Countryman now says "some voices invoke it *as an* authority" (1. Italics added), "the average reader"(18) becomes "the average *Western* reader" (15. Italics added): "homosexual acts"(54) becomes "same gender sexual intercourse" (54); the Samaritan woman "of dubious reputation" (93) is now one "who has a less than ideal marital situation" (89); "pharisaism" (95) becomes "purit-

anism” (91); “Paul’s conversion” (100) becomes “Paul’s encounter with the Risen Jesus” (95); rather than “an *abortive* search for new purity codes” (1998 edition, 124. Italics added) we now simply have “a search for new purity codes” (124) and “family” (168) becomes “household” (164) etc. And in addition, there are some new sentences and paragraphs here and there; for example, we find some reworking of the material on Mary Douglas (37ff) and Paul’s Gentile Mission (123), more information on male-male intercourse (24 and 116f), vice lists (100–106), Jew-Gentile relations (96), Stoic and Pauline language (112f), and an inclusion of some ‘critical voices’ in the discussion on women and children as property in the ancient world (161f). But in general, the first two sections of this book – at least three-quarters of it as a whole – stand fairly unchanged in structure and content from the original edition. Consequently, I couldn’t help but get the impression from this book that while the world has changed radically in the last twenty years, it appears as if virtually nothing has changed in biblical studies during that time; historical-critical exegesis still seems to hold sway in terms of methodology. But perhaps that is too harsh a judgment. The ideological shift required in recognising the need for all those ‘minor’ changes noted above is undoubtedly considerable, and there are many publications in the field of biblical studies that would benefit from making such a shift.

It is in the third section, “Sex”, that we find Countryman has done the most rewriting. To begin with, there is a new chapter entitled “Are Other Principles of Sexual Ethics at Work in the New Testament?” Here Countryman examines four “other avenues of interpretation” that have been proposed since the original book was published (230). He begins by exploring the influence of the erotic focus in the Song of Songs on the NT writers, and wonders “whether a relational ethic, founded in the Song of Songs, might be the Bible’s most important contribution to the modern discussions” (231). He suggests that, at least to some degree, “Song of Songs must lie behind the broad New Testament movement toward equality between men and women” (233), raising valuable points about the way in which such equality was expressed and/or limited in both the NT itself and in the wider first century Mediterranean context.

Countryman then considers recent research into the place of the erotic in the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament. He emphasises not only the importance of recognising the differences in views of sexuality between now and then (the significance of status for example), but also the place of polemic in Greco-Roman and Jewish views, providing some insights into the tension Paul faced in his Gentile mission. Countryman also considers the debate over the influence of Stoicism on Paul, particularly with regard to Paul’s use of the concept of ‘nature.’ He concludes that while Paul was not a Stoic, we would understand the NT better if we acknowledged the influence of Greco-Roman ethics in general, such as the concern for ‘self-control’ that we find in Paul’s writings.

The third area that Countryman discusses is the current evangelical Protestant attempt to identify a ‘Creation’ ethic for determining sexual morality. He rightly critiques this ‘plain-sense’ approach to Scripture on exegetical and theological grounds, and suggests that ultimately “it is hard to imagine its having been created except for the purpose of shoring up an existing set of moral prescriptions that are being challenged, principally the opposition to the presence of lesbians and gay men in the church” (249). Countryman argues that the ideology behind this ‘ethic’ derives from both the Puritan tradition and the middle-class respectability of the nineteenth century – what those from a British heritage might call Victorianism. While Countryman makes a few references to Foucault throughout his footnotes, but acknowledges that he hasn’t drawn on him

for his theoretical foundations, I can't help but wish that he had done so in this section. Foucault critiqued the 'repressive hypothesis' – the pervasive belief that sexuality in the West was increasingly repressed in the past three centuries, culminating in "the image of the imperial prude" (Foucault 1990, I.3), and that this has resulted in "our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality" (Foucault 1990, I.3), (from which we now ought to become liberated).³ Countryman could therefore have given a deeper analysis of (white? middle-class?) Protestant evangelical ideology – but again, perhaps this is too harsh. He states at the outset that his intention is to write a biblical theology of ethics "in a way intelligible to educated readers" (5) but also "accessible to nonspecialist readers" (5) so perhaps delving deeply into Foucault is beyond the scope of this book.⁴

The final new area of interpretation that Countryman considers is the contribution brought to biblical studies by 'liberationist' interpreters. While 'liberation theology' is as ideological as the 'Creation ethic' presented in the previous section, at least its commitment to justice for the poor and marginalised is explicitly stated. Countryman outlines the findings of two scholars in this area – Tom Hanks' work on household structures of the ancient Mediterranean (Hanks 2000), and Theodore Jennings' work on homoerotic narratives in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (Jennings 2003 and Jennings 2005). Of course, an easy critique would be to pull Countryman up on his choice of "two white guys" but both write extensively in Spanish and are pro-active in various LGBT communities in Latin America and elsewhere.

The final chapter of Countryman's book, "New Testament Sexual Ethics and Today's World" may have the same title of that in the original book, but it has been thoroughly rewritten. In the first edition, Countryman outlined a series of six "generative principles" from which some "derived guidelines" were developed regarding various 'current' sexual issues. In this new edition, Countryman firstly outlines some principles of biblical interpretation, before suggesting five principles for each of the two themes of purity and property as they relate to today. Then he considers various contemporary issues (under the headings of Gender, Marriage, Issues of Procreation, Issues of Force, Prostitution & Pornography, and Homosexuality) and applies these principles to these issues. As in the first edition, there are two key points for Countryman. Firstly, "earliest Christianity was deeply suspicious of the implications of a purity ethic" (256) and thus "Christians must resist the use of purity codes to separate humanity into the loved and unloved of God" (258). And secondly, the property ethic, "intimately linked with the patriarchal social structure" (259), was bent by both Jesus and Paul "in the direction of equality" (260) and thus can be understood today in terms of "the wherewithal of being human" (262) as worked out in "relationship" (261) where the rights of others are respected. As a result, Countryman's specific comments on the various sexual issues discussed are in the same vein as those in his first book – and thus will be just as controversial for those of a conservative disposition. With regard to homosexuality, which Countryman states "has come to be the supremely contentious issue of our times" (280), he suggests that the key issue is that of spirituality and asks, "If lesbians and gay men are living lives that manifest the grace of God and the love of God and neighbour, what else are other Christians waiting to see?" (281)

Countryman's hope – now, no less than it was twenty years ago – is that Christians from all ends of the various sexual, social and cultural spectra will engage in dialogue about these issues. The final two paragraphs of both books are thus virtually identical. In many ways it is a pity

that Countryman can still say, “We live in times when great demands are being made on us in relation to justice, peace, and the survival of the world” (283). Perhaps when Countryman writes the next revision of this book (in another twenty years time!?) the outlook will be brighter? I suspect in order for this to happen we will need to broaden Countryman’s framework beyond that of *sexual* ethics, so we can apply principles of the property ethic to environmental and economic issues, for example. Unless Western Christians take the threat of global warming seriously, for instance, there will be little point in worrying about what people get up to in their bedrooms!

ENDNOTES

- 1 Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, & Sex* (1988, 243). Countryman argued that these acts are only wrong if they “involve an offence against the property of another, denial of the equality of men and women, or an idolatrous substitution of sex for the reign of God as the goal of human existence”(244).
- 2 Indeed, we might note that the Bibliography has increased from 4 pages to 10 pages – the number of references included has more than doubled.
- 3 See the discussion in Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, I. Part One: We the ‘Other Victorians,’ and Part Two: The Repressive Hypothesis.
- 4 In any case, Foucault has been critiqued on this issue himself; see the essay by Sandra Lee Bartky (2002, 47–68) “‘Catch Me If You Can’: Foucault on the Repressive Hypothesis”, in *‘Sympathy and Solidarity’ and Other Essays*.

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