

## Our First “Other”

by Jan Ord

In Howard Fast’s *Second Generation*, beautiful thirty-year-old Barbara Lavette is relaxing on the beach, watching the surfers. A blond, tanned, handsome eighteen-year-old walks over to her with a sexual proposition. She laughs it off, and he, surprised that she didn’t berate him, begins to chat with her about everyday things.

If she had been a good, “moral” Christian woman, how would she have reacted? With horror, indignation, wrath?

And what about the young man? Should he be told that what he did was wrong?

Whatever we may think about these questions, we cannot deny that sexuality is a key component in the human personality. Paul said that it is better to marry than to burn with sexual desire. That most of us are or have been married testifies to the importance of sexuality in our lives.

I’m not talking about the sexual act *per se*, but rather suggesting that most of our encounters with people have a sexual element. We can condemn ourselves and others for this aspect of our humanity, or we can accept it as a vital, a moral part of us and allow God’s love to flow through it.

Let’s go back to the beach. Perhaps the handsome blond was too forward, or rude, or even downright sinful, for making his suggestion, but Barbara Lavette turned what could have been negative into something positive. She accepted the young man (only for conversation, mind you!) and listened to him. Instead of worrying about her own pride, she focused on him. And one of the needs that was met clearly related to sexuality.

Although some element of sexuality is present in almost all contacts between the sexes, its full expression is reserved for the marriage relationship. Sex is not meant to merely satisfy a physical craving, but to express love. Love means that we are for others. So how does this work out for Christians?

In our quest to establish our identity as Christ manifest in us, there is a time—as with little children and teenagers—when we focus almost exclusively on ourselves. But finally we mature into adults, confident in the truth of who we are, and then we can turn our attention away from ourselves to others.

At this point, many of us imagine ourselves with a high calling to sacrifice all worldly comforts as we blaze trails hither and yon for the sake of others. But most of us are not really called to leave our families and walk alone as itinerant missionaries or teachers. Instead, we are called to “bloom where we are planted,” following through on the responsibilities God has given us. And this probably means that the *first* “other” we are called to die for is our spouse.

“Oh, dear,” you say. “Now you sound like everyone else, telling me what to do. I thought *Union Life* was above all that ‘outer stuff.’” But is it “outer stuff,” or is it living up to who we are?

Why are there so many extramarital affairs, even among Christians? Is it just because of lax sexual morals? No! It’s because of bad marriages. Men and women who don’t feel loved and accepted, or who are “put down” at home, will eventually look elsewhere. Just saying, “I am love in my form,” is not enough. Jesus told his disciples:

*"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you ... By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34,35).*

Because we are in union with the One who is love, we too become love. That's what union with Christ is all about—a *love relationship* with God.

Yet, love is meaningless unless it is love in action. *"For God so loved the world"* are dead words without adding, *"that He sent His only begotten Son."* God's love *acts*, reaching into every facet of life as He pours Himself out for us, His creation.

As Christ loved the world, dying for each and every one of us, so we are to love others. But wait a minute. Can we honestly call ourselves other-lovers, missionaries or intercessors if we turn our back on our spouse, who is the nearest opportunity to express that love?

God gives most of us the privilege and challenge of laying down our lives in a marriage relationship—and it is a "dying for the other" that goes on for a lifetime. Because of the close intimacy of marriage, every possible irritation is magnified, and our true faith is tested to the limit.

The hippies' slogan of the '60's—"Make love not war"—is a challenge to those of us who claim to live from a knowing that love is Christ in us as us. In the marriage relationship, as in every other facet of our lives, we must make choices at every moment. We can choose to go with our feelings: "I don't want to do what you want to do"; "I don't feel loving right now"; "I feel angry and I'm just going to be my spontaneous self"; etc.; or we can turn away from our "spontaneous" human feelings, and turn toward God—who is love—and "die" for our spouse.

Is it so very hard to believe that in giving up our lives, we will both *gain* life?

It is true that we are all unique individuals, with a right to the expression of that individuality. But in this case, as in every case where God is concerned, there is only one way to preserve our own life—and that is by losing it.

One commonsense key to retaining our own self-esteem is to communicate honestly—but tactfully—our feelings, fantasies and fears. But, to be honest doesn't mean that we blame the other person for the feelings, or that we blurt out every crazy thought that runs through our minds. Think of your mind as a television set. There are dozens of channels, and you are flipping from one to the next. That is what is going on when all those different thoughts flit through your mind. The difference between the "thoughts" and "intents" of the mind is the same as the difference between flipping the channel and settling down to watch what is on it. The "intents" are the ones you "settle down to watch." If you choose to believe that the ones you see as you "flip" are the *intents* of your heart, and you share them with your spouse, don't be surprised if you both get hurt. Remember that being spontaneously who you are in Christ means that He in you is love, joy, peace, and *self-control*.

Tact and self-control in communicating with one's spouse does not mean we have to be repressed or dishonest. Honest communication is vital in the marriage relationship, but one's sexuality is often not talked about, and in some cases, communication about it hardly exists. The attitude of many Christians towards sex, which ranges from a silly modesty to actual fear, probably has its roots in Puritanism.

Puritanism is a form of asceticism; it says that the material world, including the body, is evil, and we must do what we can to escape it. Some Puritan attitudes include: 1) It's OK to make money, as long as you purify what you use for yourself by giving a fair portion of it away to "good causes" and/or the church. 2) You should eat good, wholesome food, but

you shouldn't *enjoy* it too much. 3) Dressing well and taking pains to look attractive is "worldly," and you really are "more spiritual" if you look about ten years out of date. 4) Affection, appreciation and praise should be doled out to people in meager helpings, because too much will cause people to think too highly of themselves. 5) The human body is nasty, and should be covered up, and not drawn attention to. 6) And finally, "nice" people (especially women) don't like sex; and anyone who even thinks about sex has a "dirty mind."

In our modern, "liberated" society, this strange phenomenon even carries over into the media. Our television ads tell women that to be good wives they need to have "downy-soft towels," "no ring around the collar," "a no-wax floor," etc. Women's magazines, and good mothers, tell the aspiring wife that the "way to a man's heart is through his stomach," as if that's what attracts two people to each other, so that they want to spend the rest of their lives together! Yet what is the *first* thing you notice about a person when they speak to you over the telephone, or you meet them in person? Their sex, of course. Most of the time you know immediately if you are speaking to or seeing a male or female. So why do we keep playing these silly Puritan games? Why do we deny one whole aspect of our uniqueness? Why can't we joyfully accept our own sexuality, and that of our spouses?

The answer has a lot to do with the way we look at ourselves. Most communication problems between people occur because one or both parties have never faced into their own deepest inner feelings. One cannot communicate feelings that are always kept at the subconscious level. And yet those feelings affect our behavior. Why do we insist on keeping some things from ourselves? Often because of cultural and religious taboos that are not based on God's word.

When we recognize and, understand who we are and that the way God made us—in His words—is "*very good*," we will have the courage to be completely whole people. Too many of us have secret longings and tears hidden deep in our subconscious minds that we are afraid to face, much less share. To be completely whole, the light that is in us through our union with Christ seeks to shine into all those hidden places, and bring them forth, dispelling the darkness in which those secrets hide. As we dare to look honestly into ourselves, we will be assured by our *Beloved*—Christ—of how special we are. We will be able to quit saying, as the pot to the potter, "*Why have you made me thus?*" At the same time, we can allow others to be the totally unique individuals God called them to be, instead of putting them down for the foibles and quirks that run counter to our own personal "standards."

When a woman says to her spouse, "You never think of anything but sex," or "Men have dirty minds," she is really saying, "You are not a whole person." As long as she continues to see him like that, chances are he won't be. And if men are so busy with church and other activities that they only see their wives at the dinner table and in bed, then of course they can expect resentment. Communion and affection are essential to healthy relationships. While we are busy being "intercessors" and "other lovers," doing all our good works, is it possible we are failing our first commission—to our *first* "other"?

We can talk about life and love. We can tell others who they are in Christ. But eventually all our words will be put to the test—as Paul so eloquently states in the "love" chapter: 1 Corinthians Thirteen. Who are the "other lovers"? Let the words of Jesus Himself to the Pharisees answer:

*"A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.' And he answered and said, 'I will, sir'; and he did not go. And he came to the second and said the same thing. But he answered and said, 'I will not'; yet he afterward regretted it and went. Which of the two did the will of his father?" (Matthew 21:28-31).*

It's easy to talk about love, and about letting everyone be the unique person God made them to be, but do our actions confirm our words? Let's *be* who we say we are, and watch our "first other" become a total person too!

*Note: Two books for women which I feel complement each other, and which are a challenge to apply from a union perspective, are Marabel Morgan's **Total Woman**, and Irene Kassorla's **Nice Girls Do**.*