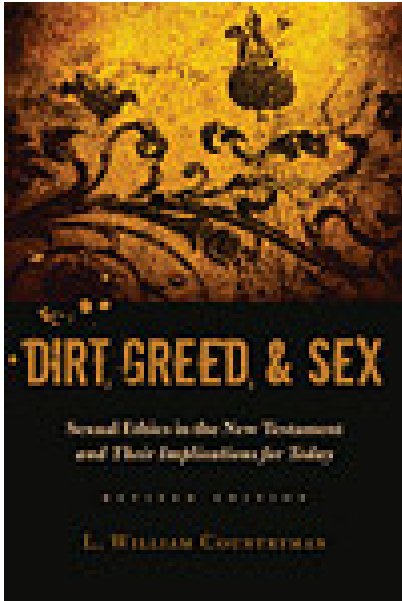


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Countryman, L. William

Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today

2nd edition

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This is the revised edition of a work first published in 1988. The author has made changes throughout, adding new materials (e.g., 230–52) and completely rewriting other sections (e.g., 253–83). His thesis is that the basis for sexual ethics in the Bible changes radically between the Old and New Testaments. In the former, Countryman argues, sexual ethics derive from two sources: a “purity ethic,” defined by ancient Hebrew notions of *physical* purity; and a “property ethic,” based on the patriarchal expectations of ancient Hebrew society. In the New Testament, by contrast, both purity and property ethics are either dropped altogether or radically reinterpreted, resulting in a Christian ethical system that defines sexual sins as sexual acts that cause harm to others or are motivated by greed.

The book is divided into three parts. In part 1, Countryman argues that the purity laws in Lev 11–26 promote an ancient Hebrew cultural perspective as to what is physically repugnant and uses this perspective to define certain sexual actions as “impure,” or “unclean.” These include sexual emissions, intercourse between males, masturbation, and cult prostitution.

In this discussion, Countryman highlights three elements important to his thesis: (1) impurity in Leviticus is a matter of *physical* impurity, deriving from a visceral reaction of

repugnance to something; (2) this visceral reaction undergirds a unified approach to the world in which things are either pure or impure, without further ethical distinctions or considerations; and (3) this is a culturally constructed approach to the world, distinct to Israel and not shared by other peoples.

From here Countryman explores Second Temple writings, finding this purity ethic intact among Diaspora and Palestinian Jews, albeit employed as a system that now also separates Jews from non-Jews and true Jews from heretical Jews. The one exception is the Christian sect of Jews, which rejects all notions of physical impurity and focuses on purity of the heart, understood as the rejection of greed and harm to others.

In part 2 Countryman applies a similar approach to property ethics in the Bible. In the Old Testament (especially Exodus and Deuteronomy), patriarchal rights define a property ethic that results in prohibitions against noncultic prostitution for women, incest, and adultery. In the New Testament, however, Jesus is portrayed as establishing the equality of men and women through his teachings on divorce and adultery. This spells the end for traditional male property rights and the sexual ethic deriving from them, the latter being replaced by a sexual ethic based on Christ's ownership of the body (as emphasized by Paul), the patriarchy of God, and the Christian rejection of greed and harm to others.

In part 3, after briefly considering some alternative approaches, Countryman takes stock of his findings by first putting the ancient ideas of purity and property in a modern perspective. Since physical purity is a culturally specific phenomenon, a particular culture's feelings of revulsion "are not 'evidence' for ethics" (259). Furthermore, "Christianity can accommodate more than one purity code," and membership in the church "cannot be defined by purity codes" (258). In the end, "the one kind of purity that remains essential to Christians is purity of the heart—freedom from hatred, arrogance, violence, deceit, and all other passions that prompt us to violate the love of God, neighbor, and self" (259). As for property, Countryman concludes that property rights still exist within a modern sexual partnership, but they now derive from the element of mutuality rather than male dominance: "'relationship' is the modern term for sexual property without hierarchy."

Countryman then weighs in on specific contemporary issues, arriving at a fairly "liberal" sexual ethics. Thus, divorce and abortion are "lesser evils" (267, 272); polygamy may be wrong in practice but not necessarily in theory (269); for most of the world, "the use of birth control should be the norm" (270); sexual relations should not be confined only to marriage (275); prostitution, from the point of the prostitute, is not clearly a sin (279; see also 102, 174); and, "for Christians who wish to stand in the ethical tradition of the Christian scriptures, affirmation of gay and lesbian co-believers is not a matter of

condescension or even generosity. It is essential to the church's honesty and spiritual health" (282).

In assessing the accomplishment of Countryman's work, I will forgo the issue of whether these intrepid positions are truly supported by the author's arguments and conclusions. Instead, I will focus on three basic aspects of the book that I will distinguish, somewhat artificially, as methodology, scholarship, and theology.

Methodologically, Countryman starts with the assumption that sexual morality in the Old Testament derives almost exclusively from property rights and notions of what is pure or impure, all of which are found primarily in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. Yet this seems too narrow, for I do not think we can adequately describe ancient Israel's moral and ethical traditions by relying principally on its *legal* texts. This risks conceptualizing morality solely in terms of how a society defines proper conduct in political and ritual contexts. Family law, for example, does not exhaust family morality.

Likewise, Countryman's assertions as to how purity and impurity were understood in ancient Israel also seem too narrow. He limits these categories to what Jews considered *physically* pure or impure, arguing that, under such a system, "what marks particular sexual acts as violations of purity ... is that the acts are deemed repellent in and of themselves, like snails or slugs on a dinner plate" (15). Israel's purity codes thus possessed a "relatively inarticulate quality," calling forth a "purity response" such as anxiety or revulsion (23, 28) that was "largely visceral and almost automatic" (35). In this type of "true purity ethic," as he calls it (e.g., 79), there is no recourse to abstract principles or further rationalization (38), no room for metaphorical, spiritual, or even ritual notions of purity. Indeed, when these arose, they only "had the effect of skewing the Torah's purity concerns" (63), which otherwise constituted "a single piece," a "single coherent set of demands" that necessarily stood or fell as a unified whole (43, 45).

In defining these concepts so narrowly and then limiting his investigation of the New Testament to *only* the principles of purity and property (see 4, 230, 256), Countryman produces an analysis of the New Testament texts that is quite wooden. For example, we are told that Jesus' statement in John 3 about a birth *anōthen* ("anew" or "from above") "is playing off the purity code in the Torah" (89). Or again, when Jesus exorcises unclean spirits in Mark 5, "the uncleanness of these spirits is closely linked to the uncleanness of the heart that Jesus substitutes for physical uncleanness" (83).

Regarding 1 Cor 5:1, Countryman states that Paul describes the wrongdoer as "having" his father's wife because the offense is against patriarchal property rights: "Violation of the honor of one's father, even if deceased, was a kind of theft, depriving him of his

legitimate property” (194). Similarly, the “defilement” of the marriage bed in Heb 13:4 refers to “violations of the property ethic through prostitution and adultery” (130).

One result of this simplistic methodology is that Countryman arrives at several programmatic statements that go well beyond the evidence. Thus, Jesus’ prohibition of divorce and redefinition of adultery “took the wife out of the realm of disposable property and made her equal to her husband” (176; see also 183). Or again, Jesus “had little interest in the goals of the household” and was “indifferent to procreation,” although “he saw sexual access in itself as a basic human good” (184, 270).

A second result is the forced ingenuity of Countryman’s exegesis, the most egregious example being, perhaps, his interpretation of Rom 1:18–32: “While Paul wrote of same-gender sexual acts as being unclean, dishonorable, improper, and ‘over against nature’ [*sic*], he did not apply his extensive vocabulary for sin to them. Instead, he treated homosexual behavior as an integral if filthy aspect of Gentile culture. It was not in itself sinful” (116). Other examples are his exegeses of 1 Cor 5:1–6:11 (192–96) and the Jesus traditions on divorce and adultery (169–73).

This brings up the place of scholarship in Countryman’s work. Although he writes for an academic audience (ix), and although he speaks of “the serious student of scripture” (141) and has occasion to describe fellow interpreters as “making nonsense of the text” (114) and being “careless, at best” (115), he seldom interacts with the (extensive) secondary literature. When he does, moreover, it is most often to bring forth a straw man or to offer something of a band-aid to problems raised by the first edition (e.g., 121–22, 161–62, 230–52). His bibliography is selective and idiosyncratic, containing almost entirely works in English. Thus, despite his interest in sexuality and purity in the New Testament and his discussions of the relevance of Stoic morality, there is no mention of Kurt Niederwimmer’s *Askese und Mysterium* (1975) or my *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy* (1995/2004).

In truth, it is only by ignoring even the most basic work of his peers that Countryman can suggest that “flesh” in Paul carries only “the negative connotations of evil and opposition to ‘spirit’” (247; see also 198) or that *epithymia*, *pathos*, and *orexis* might carry “neutral” or “positive” connotations in Rom 1:24–27 (110–11). Indeed, in his efforts to pin down the meaning of “nature” in this and other Pauline passages, he arrives at perhaps the one thing the word could *not* have meant in antiquity: “cultural convention,” “widespread social usage” (112–16, 239, 247–48).

Finally, a word on theology. Countryman maintains that Israel’s sexual ethics were dominated by a logic of physical purity that “takes no account of motive” and under which “it is possible for persons to be pure for the worst of reasons and to combine a high

level of physical purity with vicious attitudes and behavior in other respects” (80). By contrast, New Testament authors “subordinate physical purity radically to another kind of purity subsisting on the level of intention and its expression in life” (79; see also 82–85, 139). Yet, as the last twenty years or so of feminist biblical scholarship has made clear, this sort of unbridled (and unsupported) eulogy of the New Testament at the expense of the Torah is both offensive to Jewish feminists and continues anti-Jewish stereotypes.

In summary, Countryman’s book raises an interesting question: How does the element of *physical* purity figure into biblical sexual ethics? His entire approach, on the levels of methodology, scholarship, and theology are so flawed, however, that he does little more than raise the question.