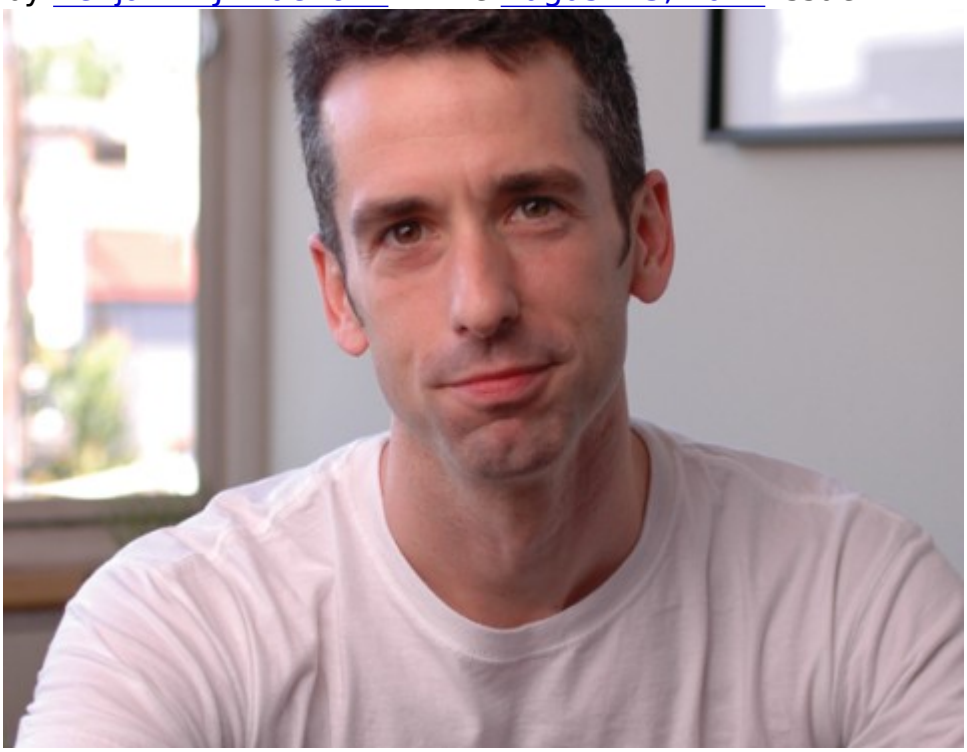
Dan Savage interprets adultery

For better or for worse, the sex columnist provides real-time exegesis of the seventh commandment.

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the August 23, 2011 issue



When Congressman Anthony Weiner resigned his seat over embarrassing online activities, the possibility that the revelations might shed light on the uses of the divine law in Reformation theology was not foremost in the national conversation. All the same, Weiner's fall raised an interesting question about how a sex scandal can unfold without actual sexual contact. The biblical commandment "You shall not commit adultery" forbids only a narrow, if important, slice of sexual life: intercourse between two people, at least one of whom is married to someone else. Sending lewd pictures seems to fall outside of its jurisdiction.

Jesus, however, famously turns this commandment inward in the Sermon on the Mount, condemning even the desire that could lead to disrupting the bonds of

marriage. By that more demanding standard, virtual affairs are forbidden. The original commandment can be thought of as corresponding to the first use of the law in Reformation theology: it restrains our destructive impulses for the sake of civil peace. Jesus' elaboration corresponds to the second use of the law: it calls for a purity of motive that drives the sinful human to rely on the grace of God.

While violating provisions of the Torah or the Sermon on the Mount does not by itself constitute grounds for driving someone from office (even in the hive-mind of 24-hour cable news), reactions to the Weiner scandal tended to borrow their moralism from these sources. Voices from inside politics and out, and across the political spectrum, were quickly raised in indignation. Even Weiner's defenders tended to criticize his actions while insisting that they were private, legal and ultimately a distraction from serious public issues.

One prominent pundit went considerably further in defending Weiner: "Weiner does not have a problem. He has a *computer.* The whole world has Weiner's problem: same old horniness, brand new box." This incredulous voice of moral realism belongs to Dan Savage, longtime author of the "Savage Love" sex advice column and editorial director of Seattle's alternative weekly *The Stranger.* With a column read by millions in alternative weeklies and online, a weekly podcast and a televised version of his ongoing question-and-answer tour on college campuses currently in the works, Savage has developed a vast following by dint of his willingness to talk about any sexual topic in the frankest terms available. He's used his platform to write books on love, sex and family; his newest is based on the It Gets Better Project that he initiated to support LGBT youth who face bullying and isolation (and for which Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America created a video).

Preachers, teachers and counselors who aren't listening to Dan Savage should be—he is one of the more interesting church substitutes in American culture. He started in the 1990s answering questions on rarely discussed sexual practices, but he has since come to address a much wider range of concerns (including the moral and political implications of online affairs, whether by politicians or private citizens). When it comes to answering the ethical dilemmas and disappointments that persist even among those with knowing and disenchanted attitudes toward the how-tos of intimate life, Savage's authority has no peer.

Reading the exchanges in "Savage Love" for the first time can be a polar-bear plunge into the world of sexual diversity. A member of New York City's fetish scene recently wrote in to ask how to skip a birthday party orgy ("I hate to decline because these are really good friends and good people"). Characteristically, Savage was unwilling to hold her hand or to dramatize what he views as entirely normal behavior. "If you're old enough to be a part of the 'scene,'" he advised her, "then you're old enough to open your mouth" and tell your friends about your limits.

Yet for all the variety of behavior described in Savage's columns, the same issues come up again and again. Interpreting the commandment against adultery is a preoccupation of both Savage and his readers. Savage, an atheist, wouldn't put it that way—yet he considers questions about the nature and boundaries of monogamy with the precision of a rabbi or canon lawyer.

Some cases are easy. Consider the 50-year-old man who tells Savage that his heart and mind have been thrown "into a tailspin" by a 25-year-old friend. Savage replies, citing the man's letter: "You're happily married, you've got kids, you have a great sex life—sorry . . . but you're not gonna get an infidelity permission slip from me, not today."

A marriage might survive an attack of bad judgment, he goes on, "but your marriage won't survive if you make the mistake of confusing infatuation and/or lust for love." Here Savage sounds a lot like an evangelical preacher: the heart is deceitful above all things.

Another letter raises a very different case. A man writes that his mother ("a beautiful woman with a lot of opportunities and social skills") is having an affair without the knowledge of his father (who is "an antisocial psycho" and a "physical wreck"). His mother had kept her family together for religious and cultural reasons. The letter writer and his brother have been traumatized by news of the affair. Should they tell their father?

Savage replies: "You're not going to confront her about this affair or any other affair that you might uncover between now and your father's death and you're not going to tell your mom you snooped and you and your brother are going to go right on defending your mother to your father and you're going to show a little respect—a little retroactive respect—for your mother's privacy by pretending that you don't know what you do know.

"Your mom sounds like a lovely woman, and you and your brother should be happy that she managed to find a little solace, a little love and tenderness, in the arms of a man who isn't a raving asshole. She deserves that, doesn't she?"

People immersed in Christian sexual ethics are likely to have a hard time facing the latter scenario as directly and honestly as Savage does, much less with the confidence and authority he projects. Even more challenging are situations that fall between an obviously reckless infatuation, on the one hand, and a survival measure on the other.

Savage has, on request, laid out rules for cheating in the context of what he calls a "monogamous commitment," rules for both the married person and the person on the side. "Cheating is permissible when it amounts to the least worst option," he writes,

> i.e., when someone who made a monogamous commitment isn't getting any at home (sick or disabled or withholding-without-cause spouse) and divorce isn't an option (sick or disabled or withholding-without-cause-spouse-who-can't-be-divorced-for-some-karma-imperiling-reason-or-other) and the sex on the side makes it possible for the cheater to stay married and stay sane.

A person who gets involved with a partnered individual in the absence of these conditions is, like the partnered individual, a "cheating piece of shit." (Savage is liberal in general but strict when violations of mutual agreement are at stake.)

This advice, however, covers only deviations from ostensibly monogamous relationships. Savage has also been called in to manage the complications arising from deliberate nonmonogamy. As he sees it, open relationships have to be open for both partners, and the degree of openness must be continually negotiated. After reasonable attempts to work out sexual incompatibility, an affair might be agreed to as a responsible and humane alternative to divorce.

"Ask to have a 'safety valve' installed on your marriage," Savage advises a bored husband (before pointing out that it's possible that his wife is just as bored and might leap at the prospect of some fresh adventures together). But Savage has also expressed some surprise and frustration when the mutual practice of nonmonogamy proves as liable to abuse as the monogamy its practitioners have abandoned.

For better or for worse, Savage provides real-time exegesis of the commandment against adultery in dialogue with the immensely varied norms and habits of his readers. Modern monogamy faces manifold pressures. Travel, childcare, the arbitrary intrusion of old flames and newfound fetishes, the freshly expanded online world of anonymous exploration, the relative ease of hiding affairs, the moving target of marital expectations—all these turn up in questions asked of Savage.

Today more than ever, by the time people get married they have had a great number of prospective partners to choose from—and the freedom to be apprenticed into sexual and domestic life with them. Yet married people seem no less given to dissatisfaction. When such dissatisfaction arises in situations where children are involved, Savage—to his considerable credit—stresses family stability. (Children "deserve whatever stability and continuity you can provide for them between infidelities," he advises a married person in the grip of a delusional fixation on an old lover.)

He also urges forgiveness wherever possible. To a correspondent whose spouse lapsed in a way that fell far short of adultery, Savage offers this: "A successful marriage is basically an endless cycle of wrongs committed, apologies offered, and forgiveness granted, all leavened by the occasional orgasm."

In refereeing tough questions about monogamy and its variations, Savage arguably upholds the substance, if not the letter, of the adultery commandment. The frankness and realism with which he handles such questions provide a sharp contrast to the tepid affirmations and bashful silences that characterize much mainline preaching and thinking on sex.

Still, Savage's work poses some difficulties. His basic ethic is dramatically individualistic. While the emphasis on personal autonomy, mutual exchange and sexual fulfillment may be refreshing to people who come from sexually inhibited or abusive backgrounds, it is shaped by the expectations of the market for goods and services. In the world of Savage's advice, individuals act much like firms and intimate relationships are quasi-commercial transactions—initiated, maintained and dissolved for mutual benefit. Sexual fulfillment becomes a valuable commodity to be sought by whatever means a partner will accept. Neither monogamy nor polyamory is an idea derived from a vision of the good that transcends individual preferences; they are matters of contract. (Tellingly, Savage's condemnation of bestiality is based not on the categorical indignity of the act but on the inability of animals to give

consent.)

Such legal and commercial metaphors are defining more and more of our lives, public and private alike. To engage with these ideas theologically, we need to return to the distinction between law and gospel. The contemporary sexual ethics that Savage represents give some degree of order to intimate life; they help manage the human disaster. But such a goal is not enough for a Christian community called to explore the depths of God's love as reflected and refracted through shared life. We also need sexual ethics to reveal our deeper needs and failings, to create space for the forgiveness of sins and to shape lives redeemed by grace.

As an instrument of familial and civil peace, the commandment against adultery needs a bottom line—something for which Savage has a sharp instinct. Counselors and pastors should expect temptation and infidelity to happen; lingering itches are likely to be scratched. Sex tends to be cloaked in superstition, and stripping this away allows us to regard sexual lapses as no less inevitable than any other sin. We tend to forgive serial monogamy more readily than deviations from stable monogamy. Perhaps this norm should be reconsidered.

Meanwhile, however, monogamy is no longer the default expectation for many couples (though it still correlates with relationship longevity). The church's historic promotion of the dignity and fullness of the marriage bond might not enjoy cultural prestige for much longer.

In its civil use, the adultery commandment might function as a flat prohibition or as a pragmatic sliding scale. But in neither case does it touch on the drastic vulnerability of sexual intimacy, on its transcendence of otherness. A sexual liaison creates a little society, tinged like all societies with injustice, excess, covetousness and selfishness. Young adults may be armored against the slings and arrows of intimate life, but even the most casual affair can leave wounds.

In a curious way, then, American culture may be more open than it has been in recent memory to the theological uses of the commandment against adultery. Read in isolation, Jesus' commandment against lust might lead either to a neurotic regimen of self-policing or to despair at our wretchedness. In the context of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, however, it suggests the infinite value of one's neighbor—whether enemy, beggar, creditor or spouse. It is not a dour and punitive standard but one that both kills and revives with its overwhelming idealism.

In this sense, monogamy does not consist of refraining from sex outside marriage any more than true worship consists of avoiding idols. Instead, undivided sexual intimacy is a sign or sacrament of a full and altruistic unity that touches every aspect of domestic life. This unity may be adulterated in countless ways short of sexual intercourse, from casual neglect to the dreaded Facebook affair. Most marriages experience such diminishment. Yet most marriages also offer opportunities for sanctification—for a heroic ethic of life together that not only manages the human disaster and perceives its true depths but also calls us to transcend it in the name of hope.

In his lectures on Genesis, Martin Luther calls the house of Abraham "the true church"—it is "nothing else than a kingdom of the forgiveness of sins and of grace." The home, no less than the church, lives distinct from the world by the forgiveness of sins and the sharing of grace. In a society increasingly characterized by unconstrained choices and the devouring logic of consumption, perhaps monogamy is the most radical lifestyle choice of all.

This article appears in the print edition with the title "Advice and consent." Read Dueholm's earlier article on Savage in the Washington Monthly.