

CHRISTIANITY AND SEXUALITY

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1. Introduction

1.1. Why Is Sex So Fascinating? God and Sex

Why is sex so fascinating? (Why did you choose to read this essay rather than the others?) That's one question. But why pay any attention to what Christians believe about sex? That's quite another. And yet the very fascination of sex is a pointer to a religious dimension. Every time a lover "worships" his beloved, every time a woman says it will be "hell" to live without her man, whenever someone says to a lover, "take me to heaven," or describes a woman as a "goddess," they use religious language.

Ian McEwan's haunting novel *Atonement* is better known because of the movie. In the novel, when the lovers Robbie and Cecilia first begin to make love, both in the modern sense of sexual union and in the older sense of a declaration by word ("I love you"), McEwan comments that Robbie "had no religious belief, but it was impossible not to think of an invisible presence or witness in the room, and that these words spoken aloud were like signatures on an unseen contract."² In some way, "it was impossible not to think" that something transcendent was happening. The psychotherapist Carl Jung is said to have commented that when people brought sexual questions to him, they always turned out to be religious, and when people brought religious questions to him, they invariably turned out to have their roots in sex. Sex and religion have always been hard to separate—from the gods and goddesses of the religions of the Ancient Near East onwards. At the end of his comprehensive study of the goddess Asherah, Walter Maier concludes how impressed he has been by the geographical diffusion of her worship (from Hierapolis in the Near East to Spain in the West) and by its long endurance (from the second millennium before Christ to the Christian era).³ Sex and religion are hard to disassociate for long. So when Christians speak on the subject, this is not religion muscling in on a subject where religion has no place; rather it is a conversation about a subject where religion has always belonged.

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² I. McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), 137.

³ W. A. Meier, *Asherah: Extrabiblical Evidence* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 37; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 195.

1.2. Culture Wars

Christian voices about sexuality struggle to make themselves heard in the midst of heated culture wars. For example, the USA seems to be moving away gradually from cultural conservatism (with its social or religious permissions and prohibitions) to a growing acceptance that sexuality is a personal lifestyle-choice. The most controversial issue tends to be “gay marriage,” but statistically, the most widespread manifestation of this attitudinal change is the growth of unmarried cohabitation either as a trial period before possible marriage or as an alternative to marriage. More than half of married Americans below the age of fifty lived together with their current spouse before they were married. Does cohabitation make later divorce more or less likely? Does it make any difference for children to have cohabiting but unmarried parents? Societal attitudes are roughly evenly divided, but in general, the younger a person is, the more likely they are to regard unmarried cohabitation as a good trial for marriage, or even a good long-term arrangement outside of marriage.⁴

1.3. Recognizing Prejudice

Because I write in the midst of culture wars, it is especially important to recognize that we all come to this question of sexuality carrying prejudices. We have vested interests in the answers to moral questions because these answers judge us. This includes me as the author. The philosopher Roger Scruton claims “to look on the human condition with the uncommitted gaze of the philosophical anthropologist,”⁵ but there is no such thing as “uncommitted gaze.” However open-minded we may pride ourselves on being, each of us brings prior commitments to our consideration of the subject. Our prejudices are shaped partly by the society to which we belong and partly by our own personal histories. Our society shapes our beliefs as to what behaviors are normal, acceptable, and tolerable. It does this more powerfully when its assumptions are unexamined. Soap operas, movies, novels, magazines, blogs, and radio stations all tell stories of people’s lives, and in the telling they convey values, sometimes by explicit approval or disapproval, more often by a silence that just assumes a behavior is acceptable.

But our personal histories also powerfully condition our response to thinking about sexuality. Each of us comes to this question carrying a history of experience or inexperience, of delight or disappointment, of thanksgiving or regrets. That is to say, we come to the subject as participants in the subject, not as objective observers. What we know about sexuality we know from within sexuality, as sexual beings, and therefore our knowledge is at least in part an existential knowledge by subjects who participate in what we know. Therefore we want a worldview and ethic that in some way affirms who we are and how we have behaved. We naturally want to justify ourselves and are prejudiced in favor of worldviews that enable us to do

⁴ See “By Age 24, Marriage Wins Out” (August 11, 2008), available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/109402/Age-24-Marriage-Wins.aspx>. The report combines evidence from fifty-nine polls between 2006 and 2008, including nearly 60,000 US adults.

⁵ Roger Scruton, *Sexual Desire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1986), 14.

that. By contrast, the worldview I commend here does not affirm me, my thoughts, my attitudes, or my behavior; on the contrary, a Christian worldview by definition challenges me and calls me to change my mind and my behavior. We need to expect this to be uncomfortable if it is true. But that is the question: Is the Christian view of sexuality true?

2. Sexuality and Creation Order

The Old Testament speaks poetically of the earth being built upon pillars or foundations, as a way of saying it is stable, with a moral order that will in the end be upheld by its Creator. For example, in Hannah's prayer (1 Samuel 2:1–10) her assertion that “the foundations of the earth are the LORD's” (2:8 NIV) is the basis for her confidence that right will be vindicated against wrong, that moral order will be upheld in the end. We see the same idea in Psalm 75:3–5, where holding the pillars of the earth steady is equivalent to humbling the arrogant and wicked. Again, moral order is upheld.

Another way of speaking of this is to say that the world is built according to wisdom. In the imagery of the Old Testament, this wisdom means something like the architecture of the universe. “The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens” (Proverbs 3:19). When God built the universe, like a building, he did so according to the blueprint called wisdom. Wisdom is the fundamental underlying order according to which the universe is constructed. Sometimes we speak of the architecture of a piece of hardware or software, by which we mean the underlying structure, such that, if we understand it, we shall grasp why it behaves and responds as it does. In the same way, to live wisely in the world we need some understanding of the blueprint or architecture upon which the world is built. Christians claim that part of this order is the proper guarding of sexual expression within the security of marriage.

One argument often heard in debates is that changes in sexual behavior and family life are purely the results of cultural shifts and that there are no absolute standards or benchmarks against which to test culture. In particular, it is suggested that cultural conservatives are no more than that, indulging in nostalgia for a mythical bygone era of family stability. In her influential book *The Way We Never Were*,⁶ Stephanie Coontz argued that family change is irreversible and we might as well go with the flow rather than hark back to a mythical imagining of 1950s marriage and family life. Against this, Christian people argue that we are under no illusions about some supposed magical ideal era of the past (be it the 1950s or whenever), but whatever the flows of culture, marriage is a creation ordinance, a way of life rooted in the way the world is and the way human beings are. This is the claim.

When Jesus and Paul spoke about marriage, they referred back to Genesis 2:24 as a foundational indication of the Creator's definition: “For this reason a man will leave his father

⁶ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic, 1992).

and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Matthew 19:5; Ephesians 5:31). There are presumably many ways in which God could have chosen to create humankind, but this definition implies that he created us as sexual beings whose sexuality is to be expressed only in the exclusive, permanent, social, and sexual union of one man with one woman, publicly pledged and recognized by society in what we call marriage. Another way in which the Bible speaks of this is by calling marriage a covenant to which God is witness (Proverbs 2:17; Malachi 2:14). When a man and woman marry, God is always watching and listening (whether or not it is a church wedding), and he will hold each accountable before him for keeping their wedding promises.

In my biblical and theological study of sexuality, I suggest the following working definition of marriage:

Marriage is the voluntary sexual and public social union of one man and one woman from different families. This union is patterned upon the union of God with his people, his bride, the Christ with his church. Intrinsic to this union is God’s calling to lifelong exclusive sexual faithfulness.⁷

The most problematic word for many twenty-first century people is the second word: “is.” How can we say that marriage “is” in such a definite, institutional, and normative way? Surely we ought rather to consider how marriage is evolving, the cultural and social pressures that have caused marriage to change and be transformed, to continue changing in the years ahead, and to be different in different cultures. Marriage may happen to be something in one culture at one time, but it has no stable identity or definition, it is argued. So in a recent essay, Stephanie Coontz begins,

Any serious discussion of the future of marriage requires a clear understanding of how marriage evolved over the ages, along with the causes of its most recent transformations. Many people who hope to “re-institutionalize” marriage misunderstand the reasons that marriage was once more stable and played a stronger role in regulating social life.⁸

But while it is perfectly valid for social scientists and historians to explore the factors that have shaped the contemporary culture of marriage (including world wars, the emancipation of women, birth control, and social mobility), the Bible sets sexual ethics before us as rooted and grounded in an unalterable moral ordering placed in creation by the Creator. However the cultural tides ebb and flow, we want to say that marriage *is* certain things. We must not naively expect to deduce what marriage ought to be simply from observing human culture and experience (the so-called “naturalistic fallacy”). Rather, there is an “ought” that is rooted not in what “is” observed or experienced, but on what “is” given to us in Creation.

⁷ Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 73.

⁸ Stephanie Coontz, “The Future of Marriage” (January 14, 2008), available at <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2008/01/14/stephanie-coontz/the-future-of-marriage/>.

In his magisterial defense of an ethics rooted in Creation Order, Professor Oliver O'Donovan suggests,

[I]n the ordinance of marriage there was *given* an end for human relationships, *a teleological structure which was a fact of creation and therefore not negotiable*. The dimorphic organization of human sexuality, the particular attraction of two adults of the opposite sex and of different parents, the setting up of a home distinct from the parental home and the uniting of their lives in a shared life . . . : these form a pattern of human fulfilment which serves the wider end of enabling procreation to occur in a context of affection and loyalty. Whatever happens in history, Christians have wished to say, *this is what marriage really is*. Particular cultures may have distorted it; individuals may fall short of it. It is to their cost in either case; for it reasserts itself as God's creative intention for human relationships on earth; and it will be with us, in one form or another, as our natural good until (but not after) the kingdom of God shall appear.⁹

This concept is alien to much contemporary thinking. The atheist writer Will Self, looking back on his traditional Anglican upbringing in the UK, wrote about his father's vain attempts to interest him in Christianity:

Try as he might to enthuse us with the sonorous beauties of the King James Bible, as declaimed by middle-class, middle-aged men in dresses, it was far too late. We had already been claimed by the split infinitives of *Star Trek*, were already preparing to boldly go into a world where ethics *so far from inhering in the very structure of the cosmos, was a matter of personal taste akin to a designer label, sewn into the inside lining of conscience*.¹⁰

But we cannot begin serious engagement with the Christian worldview about sexuality unless we understand the Christian belief that ethics does indeed inhere "in the very structure of the cosmos." In the hope that it is not too late for my readers, let me expound the concept of Creation Order as it relates to sexuality, and address some objections on the way.

2.1. Creation Order Is Moral and Not Just Material

Scientists are familiar with the idea that the cosmos has within its structure an order that exists. That is to say, most scientists are philosophical realists. They believe their task is not to invent physical laws or to impose structure upon a disordered cosmos, but rather to discern (at least approximately) a structure that exists.

The Bible extends that concept of material order to the other dimensions of existence, including the moral, psychological, anthropological, relational, and sexual. It speaks of an order that extends to actions and character (the sphere of morality) as much as to materiality (as we saw in Hannah's song, with reference to 1 Samuel 2:8 above). So Creation Order is deeper than

⁹ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), 69 (emphasis added).

¹⁰ *The Independent*, April 12, 1999 (emphasis added)

just an order in the world's material composition (which is the subject of the study of the material sciences). This order extends also to the moral and spiritual dimensions of existence. It is metaphysical as well as physical. The idea that this world has order only in its material aspect but not in its moral aspect is illogical. What kind of a cosmos would it be, in which the physical sciences were a worthwhile enterprise—because they look for structure that is there to be found—but in which the fields of personal relationships and morality are undifferentiated chaos? This would be a world in which personhood is still “a formless void,” waiting to be given shape by the subjective whims of each person or each succeeding culture. Just as the physical scientist pursues the project of science in the belief that there is order to be discovered (which is why so much of the modern scientific enterprise has roots in Christian soil),¹¹ so the believer lives on this earth in the conviction that it is finally not a chaotic universe, but one built upon a fundamental underlying and majestic order.

So Creation Order makes an ontological assertion about the nature of reality. But this ontological claim carries with it an epistemological correlate. For if there is a Created Order, it follows that true knowledge can be gained about only one part of it (sexuality) by reference to the whole. That is to say, we cannot hope to make sense of sex unless we have some grasp of the whole Created Order. We cannot study sex as a self-contained subject, but must at the same time ask the bigger questions, the “God questions.”

2.2. Creation Order Is Given by God, Not Constructed by Human Beings

If there is such a thing as Creation Order, it follows that this order is given to us by the Creator and not constructed by us. If so, then marriage is an institution given by God, rather than a project fashioned by different cultures. (So we cannot expect simply to observe Creation Order in human relationships as they are in a broken world.) This is very different from many contemporary thinkers. Michel Foucault, in his three-volume *History of Sexuality*, assumes that sexual identity is a socio-cultural and psychological construct rather than a given.¹² James Nelson argues that sexuality is formed by “patterns of meaning which are more socially constructed than biologically determined.” We are not born with some sexual identity given to us; rather we “become sexual” by “a social learning process through which we come to affirm certain sexual meanings in our interaction with significant others.” These “sexual meanings are not absolute but rather are historically and culturally relative.”¹³ In Wayne Meeks' surveys of the early Christian communities, he perceives Christian morality as a collection of arbitrary boundary markers that serve to delimit the fence around the believing communities.¹⁴ In a

¹¹ Denis Alexander, *Rebuilding the Matrix: Science and Faith in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Lion, 2001), 81–91.

¹² M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (London: Penguin, 1978).

¹³ James Nelson, *Embodiment* (London: SPCK, 1979), 25–30.

¹⁴ For example, W. Meeks *The First Urban Christians* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1983), 97–103.

revealing postscript to his book *The Origins of Christian Morality*, he writes that “the process of *inventing* Christian—and human—morality will continue.”¹⁵

Creation Order means the rejection of the idea that ethics grows out of human choices. Ethics derives from metaphysics and theology. Ethics is the exposition of order placed in Creation by God; it is not order arising from the human will imposing itself upon an originally disordered moral field. We also reject the idea that ethics is swept along by historical processes, cut free from any trans-historical anchor. In this historicist view marriage would be “an item of cultural history”¹⁶ in a process of constant metamorphosis. The statement “marriage is . . .”, if it is possible at all in this framework, must be heavily circumscribed: “Marriage *in our culture and our time* is But of course it will not always be so and we watch with interest to see how it will develop.”

Now of course we recognize that marriage has been dressed in a wide variety of ceremonies and customs, and this variety extends to the sex and marriage customs evident in the biblical texts. We are not affirming the normativity of a marriage custom just because it appears in a biblical narrative. We are affirming that the publicly-pledged union of one man and one woman, with whatever culturally-varied ceremonies it may be entered, is what marriage is. For the normative structure of Marriage is revealed in Creation, not recorded in transit by snapshots from short exposure film of fast-moving historical moments.

2.2.1. The Alternative to Creation Order

It is easy to criticize the institution of marriage as being oppressive, imprisoning our sexual relations in a structure that gives us no freedom to create our own ways of relating. But it is worth reflecting on the alternative. Brigitte and Peter Berger in their book *The War over the Family*, observe that in humanly constructed ethics, “the family ceases to be an institution, an objective given, and becomes a project of individuals, thus always susceptible to redefinition, reconstruction and termination.”¹⁷ By contrast, it is a matter of joy for Christians to embrace Creation Order, for it comes to us as a “given” in two senses: it is non-negotiable, and it is a gift to be received with thanksgiving.

Givenness as a good gift depends on recognizing givenness as transcendent order. As Oliver O’Donovan puts it, Creation Order is “not negotiable within the course of history” and is part of “that which neither the terrors of chance nor the ingenuity of art can overthrow. It defines the scope of our freedom and the limits of our fears.”¹⁸

¹⁵ W. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1993), 219 (emphasis added).

¹⁶ O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*.

¹⁷ Brigitte Berger and Peter L. Berger, *The War Over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground* (London: Hutchinson, 1983); quoted in Vigen Guroian, “An Ethic of Marriage and Family,” in *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1987), 87.

¹⁸ O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 61.

The alternative is terrible indeed. For it means that morality must of necessity fracture into shards of local, cultural, or individual code. Such moral scattering is, like Babel, a sign of the judgment of God, a descent from cosmos to ethical chaos. On the contrary, the Christian joyfully proclaims, morality does have integrity, and it is to be perceived and understood, not invented.

2.2.2. Truth and Power

Here we must address the objection that to claim that marriage is given to us in Creation is just another modernist power play. All you are doing, says the objector, is claiming the authority of what you call “absolute Truth” in support of your chosen way of organizing society. You want us to conform to your chosen norm of monogamous heterosexual marriage, but we don’t want you to impose this on us just because you are more influential in society.

Some ethics are precisely like that, but when human beings invent ethics, it really is the strongest who win and the weakest who go to the wall. “Might” will be “right” if right is defined by the mighty. Humanly constructed ethics lacks any possibility of prophetic critique from beyond history or from outside one particular group, to challenge the mores of the strong, and to announce salvation for the oppressed. For autonomous ethics any contemporary “norm” is bound to be the strong (the “contemporary”) imposing their mores upon the weak (for the historicist, “the outdated”). Whoever is most influential in society in any given age will impose their chosen ethics on the rest.

Christian (Creation) ethics, however, sits in judgment upon us all. No one group is affirmed by the ethics of the Bible, which goes straight to the heart and calls us all to turn around and behave differently. The person who thinks that the respectably married man or woman can be complacent in the face of biblical ethics has not begun to understand just how radical that ethics is, calling husbands to love their wives with the sacrificial love with which Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25). If a husband thinks Christianity gives him a crown in marriage that will enable him to relax and take life easy, he needs to grasp that the crown given him is a crown of thorns.

A proper understanding of human creatureliness and the givenness of creation safeguards against this abuse of authority. Without Creation Order we have the liberty to devise the uses to which we will put our and others’ sexuality. We would no longer be able to allow the argument that there is a Creator’s purpose to which our stewardship must respond and that sets limits to our choice. If we found we could turn our “sexuality” to some purpose that we found “fulfilling,” who could say we should not follow this path? Far from Creation ethics being a mask for oppression, it is the necessary safeguard against human oppression.¹⁹

¹⁹ O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 52.

2.2.3. Entering the Institution of Marriage

If marriage is neither the result of blind historical process nor the outcome of autonomous human construction, it follows that when a couple marry, they enter an institution whose terms are given to them. They neither invent the particular terms of their relationship nor gradually create their relationship as a project over time. Marriage is an institution within which a couple live, not an ideal to which they aspire. The difference between an ideal and an institution is important. A couple may have in their minds some ideal and strive to move towards that in their relationship. This is deceptively similar to marriage but actually radically different because to get married is to enter a status of relationship *within which* the growth and maturity are to develop. Marriage needs the security of being an institution with boundaries. Within this given order the relational dynamics can safely flourish. The marriage a couple enter has a moral structure within which the Creator calls them to live. To understand this is a necessary precursor to stability and security within marriage; the alternative is the terrifying possibility that each couple must generate the terms and qualities of their particular relationship as they see fit.

So it is misleading to consider marriage simply or primarily in terms of the process of relational growth embarked upon by the couple, important though this is. To do this is to confuse living up to the calling of marriage with the given institution of marriage within which this divine calling is heard. Essentially it removes the security of entering the institution of marriage, *within which* we are called to live lives of mutual love and faithfulness, and replaces it with a terrifying concept of marriage as the project of each couple and their precarious process of growth in love. It is not a long step from this to being able to caricature a couple as reporting, “Our love is growing well; we are considerably *more married* this year than last” or “We are having relational problems and are rather *less married* now than we used to be.” And if our “coefficient of marriedness” falls below some critical benchmark, perhaps divorce proceedings may be expected. This is the logical consequence of confusing the status of being married with the quality of the married relationship. Both status and relationship are important, but if the latter is confused with the former, it removes the stability and the necessary foundation.

2.3. Creation Order Is Universal

The Created Order inheres precisely in all Creation. It is not the preserve of any locality, any period of history, or any culture. So Christian people are not merely commending marriage as an institution they like and which they impose within their own little Christian sub-culture. There is no such thing as “Christian marriage”; there is only marriage, which is the same in every culture and every age, whether or not a culture or era conform to it. In other words, marriage is a Creation given rather than a local or temporal structure. Because an ethics of creation is above cultural relativity and historical transience, it is ethics for all people and all time; it enables the church to speak to the world. And it means that Christian people are not “defending marriage” as though the created order of marriage could be undone by human choice.

2.4. Creation Order Is Revealed in Scripture

It is all very well to claim that there is such a thing as Creation Order, metaphysical, given by God for all people in all of human history. Such an ontological claim is meaningless unless there is some epistemological confidence that this Order may reliably be discerned and known. The ontological and the epistemological poles of our enquiry are distinct and yet inseparable. For every statement about how things *are* we need to address the question of how we may *know* that they are like this. The Christian ethicist believes not only that the Order of Creation exists (it has an ontology), but also that it may be known through the revelation of God in the Bible (it has an epistemology). It is possible by responsible exegesis and theology to discern in the whole Bible a consistent ethic of sexuality. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine this claim, which can properly be tested only in a long study.²⁰

2.5. Creation Order Is Significant

Someone may ask what the concept of Creation Order means in practice, given that different cultures and individuals make their own choices in matters of sex and family life. Are we not in danger of positing a purely theoretical theological construct of no practical importance, a kind of Platonic ideal that hovers above us on another plane of reality, but doesn't intersect with our own? The general truth may be stated simply: "The well-being of man is grounded in the good will of God."²¹ Human well-being is promoted by conformity to Creation Order and damaged when humans ignore or reject Creation Order. This well-being is both individual and social. God has given humankind a uniquely privileged place in the universe. Human beings have the dignity that our moral actions have consequences.²² The Bible relates human moral agency to the Created Order by the language of blessing and curse.

The Created Order is an ontological given, an objective reality. Our subjective freedom is to respond to that objective reality by conforming to it or rejecting it. When a society conforms to that Order, the general truth is that blessing follows. For example, when a society honors parents, its days will be long in the land (cf. Exodus 20:12, the fifth commandment, and Ephesians 6:2–3). This expresses a deeper truth than just taking care of mom and dad. Respect for parents stands in biblical law as the tip of the iceberg of all the laws that relate to respect for authority. When a society systemically rejects proper authority, there is a catastrophic breakdown of order, and the civilization collapses. This is why their days will not be long in the land if they neglect this commandment. It is not an arbitrary command, but one that reflects how things are. When a society chooses to live out of harmony with that Order, curse follows, and we see in

²⁰ See Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2003).

²¹ P. Baelz, *Ethics and Belief* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), 87.

²² Cf. Genesis 3:17: "To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, "You must not eat of it," Cursed is the ground because of you'"

family life how acutely the sins of the fathers are visited on the children down the generations. Sexual chaos will in the end destroy a civilization.

The present significance of Creation ethics lies in this: conformity with Creation Order involves conformity with the will of the Creator, and this means blessing. Nonconformity means rebellion against the Creator, and this means curse. There is a correspondence between human flourishing and conformity to the Created Order. Actions have consequences, and good consequences generally follow actions in conformity to the revealed will of God in Creation Order. In general, a society where sex is guarded by the boundaries of marriage will prosper more than a society where there is sexual chaos.

This is the general truth. But life is not as simple as this. Much of the book of Job wrestles with precisely this difficulty. For example we may place the confident act-consequence framework of Proverbs 6:20–35 (where bad consequences follow from immoral actions) alongside Job 31:9–12. Here Job admits (as one of a succession of hypothetical sins) that if he had allowed himself to be enticed into an adulterous relationship, this would have been “a heinous crime . . . a criminal offense,” and he would have deserved to be punished. But in fact he has not done this, which renders the suffering he endures sharper and more puzzling. Sometimes bad things happen following blameless actions.

What can we say in the light of such moral and consequential complexity? First, we may observe that in the wisdom literature itself and in the psalms (e.g., Psalm 73) there is repeated recognition of this problem. The consequences of blessing and curse must therefore be understood in this life as a general rather than as a universal truth (and only as an absolute truth at the end of history).²³ But a general truth with exceptions is not a worthless truth. Imagine a well-ordered town that has suffered an earthquake. The main lines of the streets are still usually the best way to travel, even though we know we may encounter obstacles that ought not to be there, and indeed there may sometimes open up through a former building an apparently clear path that ought not to be there. Although there is disorder in the ruins, it is disorder superimposed upon underlying order. It is like this with the Created Order in this age.

Having said this about blessings and curses as they relate to the Created Order in the fallen ambiguities of this age, we must reaffirm the strong general corporate truth that a society living in line with the Created Order in the realm of sexual ethics will be a happier and more lasting society than one that does not.

This reminds us that marriage (as a part of the Created Order) exists as a significant institution in the world whether or not societies conform to its beneficial disciplines. So when Christians seek to persuade society about this moral Order, we are not *defending* the institution of marriage as though the God-given institution of marriage were under ontological threat. If ethical systems were voluntarist constructs, that is indeed what we would be doing, engaging in a

²³ A universal truth is something that is always, immediately, and everywhere true (e.g., that obedience always leads to blessing). A general truth is something that is usually but not always true in a direct and immediate sense (e.g., recognizing that righteous people experience undeserved suffering, as Job did).

power struggle for the convictions of people. But it is not within the power of humankind finally to destroy Created Order. It was given to humankind in Creation; it stands above human history and the human will; and finally it will be restored and transformed in the new heavens and earth. No institution that is part of the Created Order can be destroyed by human disobedience. Human nonconformity leads not to the destruction of the Order, but to judgment on human beings. No Christian movement needs to defend marriage: rather we seek to protect human beings against the damage done to them by cutting across the grain of the Order of marriage. That knowledge takes a burden off our shoulders. When teaching ethics Christians are engaged in proclamation of a given Order and appeal to men and women to live in believing obedience to that Order in Christ; we are not engaged in a desperate attempt to turn back the tide of social affairs.

We affirm therefore that marriage is a part of the moral fabric of creation, given in grace by God to men and women as a non-negotiable shape for sexual relations, given for our blessing, within whose free constraints a man and a woman may respond to God's calling to serve him in love.

3. Sex in the Service of God

3.1. What Is the Point of Sex? God-Centered Answers and Human-Centered Answers

If human sexuality is a part of the Created Order, then we may profitably ask—and expect answers to—the question of purpose. It is a matter of near-universal human experience that in adulthood we experience all sorts of sexual drives and desires, often overwhelmingly strong. This is why sex is so fascinating, and why getting the word “sex” on the cover of a magazine may be expected to increase its sales. But why do we have these drives? Why this mysterious chemistry of desire and delight, or for that matter of aversion and disappointment? Why did God create humankind as sexual rather than asexual beings? Presumably he could have made us like an amoeba which, so I am told, when it “wants” to multiply simply divides! And why are these desires so unruly, so ragged and apparently random, overwhelming us one moment and leaving us cold the next (hence the mythology of Cupid and his arrows)? How can we make sense of it all, and can the Christian worldview help?

It should be clear by now that when we ask, “What is the point of sex?” we are not asking a particular individual or couple why they desire or engage in sexual intimacy. There will be as many answers to that kind of question as there are couples (or, to be more accurate, twice as many). Nor is it to ask of a particular culture how or why it “constructs” marriage or other sexual and family relationships. It is to ask the Creator for what purpose he chose to make humankind “male and female” (Genesis 1:27). To ask this question Christianly is to expect an answer from the Bible rather than from “nature” (how things are). The reason for this is that how things are, as we now experience and observe them, is a distorted and spoiled version of how things were in creation. Between the creation and now there lies the great disruption of human disobedience and

consequent alienation from God (Genesis 3). This is why when Jesus was asked a question about marriage and divorce and his questioners referred him to the law of Moses, he turned them from that law (given because of human hardness of heart) back to how it was “in the beginning” before hearts were hard (Mark 10:2–9).

To ask this question Christianly also radically de-centers human beings from the answer. We no longer expect an answer in terms of what promotes merely my fulfillment or my pleasure. Most of the debates are conducted in terms of “what I want to do” or “what we want to do” and “Why shouldn’t we do it if it doesn’t harm anybody else in the privacy of the bedroom?” The debates are about how much individual “freedoms” (i.e., autonomy) can be expanded without encroaching on the “freedoms” of others.²⁴ How much can I do before I come up against tiresome social restraints, and how can we structure a “free” and “tolerant” society that will enable me to do as much as I possibly can and desire while at the same time allowing you to do what you want?

Even if our happiness is likely to be increased by keeping sex within marriage, this is the wrong question to ask. A Christian apologetic for marriage is settling for second best if it says to people, “Join us and live our way because you’ll probably be happier that way (and have better sex into the bargain).” They may or may not be happier in the shallow sense of having better sex. They may have no sex at all: Jesus didn’t. Instead, what Christians say to people is, “Learn that the glory and honor of God is far more important than your personal satisfaction and the fulfillment of your longings and desires. And learn to center your life on his glory and purposes so that nothing so fills your heart with joy as seeing his purposes fulfilled. Then you will have the deepest personal satisfaction and joy in the world, as you rejoice in the glory of God.”²⁵ This is the most radical de-centering of human beings imaginable. But we must do this if we are to make sense of sex.

3.2. What Is the Point of Sex? Three Kinds of Traditional Answers

When people through history have asked the question, “Why are human beings male and female, and why does sex exist?” they have, very broadly, given three kinds of answer.

3.2.1. Procreation

First, they have said that the purpose of sex is to have children. This is, of course, the obvious biological answer—or it has been obvious through most of human history. At one level this does nothing to distinguish human sexual relations from animal (or plant) sexual relations. And it doesn’t explain why God should have chosen to make us sexual beings rather than beings

²⁴ J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Longman, Roberts and Green, 1859).

²⁵ This is the great theme of so many of John Piper’s writings.

who procreate asexually. Nevertheless it is supported in Scripture,²⁶ though we shall see that it has a more than purely biological purpose in Christian theology.

3.2.2. Relationship

Second, sex is for the purpose of deepening relationship, a vehicle for interpersonal intimacy. The purpose of sex may be seen, it is suggested, in its benefits to the couple. These benefits may include shared pleasure, mutual comfort and companionship, and the psychological benefits of mutual affirmation and unconditional acceptance. This kind of relationship, at its best, can meet deep felt needs. Some have gone further, perhaps taking their cue from Genesis 2:18 (“It is not good for the man to be alone”) and suggested that sex is a sign that human beings are social creatures in need of companionship, friendship, and close relationships. The relational nature of humankind is focused in some way on the man-woman encounter. Sex has a symbolic meaning signifying human existence as “being in fellow-humanity.”²⁷ Some have gone much further than this and have seen in sexual intercourse a vehicle for access to the divine. It is, they say, a deeply religious experience, a sensuality that “is God’s invitation to reunion” of soul and body, and “in this reunion God is experienced, whether there is consciousness of the divine name or not.”²⁸ This is much the same as the old sex and nature religions of ancient Canaan. Although the Bible abhors sex-mysticism of this kind and any incorporation of eros into the divine nature, it does speak of the relationship of husband and wife, or bridegroom and bride, as a significant image of the relationship of God with his people and Christ with his church (Ephesians 5:22–33).²⁹

3.2.3. Public Order

The third kind of answer is qualitatively different from the first two. Every stable society has had to say that sex needs to be controlled and contained in some way, and has recognized that this powerful drive in human beings can do great damage if it is allowed to be expressed with no restraint. Every society has some taboos, some regulatory mechanisms, some forms of sexual behavior that are allowed and others that are forbidden. These taboos vary (as social scientists and historians show us), but they always exist in some form or another. So in one form or another, people have said that sex exists in order to be expressed in some ways but not in others. There are safe and healthy contexts for sexual intimacy, and there are dangerous and chaotic contexts. It is a mistake to think that the emancipation of sex in western society since the 1960s has removed the existence of restraint; pedophilia and rape, for example, are still taboo. What has happened is that the boundaries of restraint have changed.

²⁶ “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28; 9:1).

²⁷ H.Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex* (London: James Clarke, 1979), 4.

²⁸ J. B. Nelson, *Embodiment* (London: SPCK, 1979), 90.

²⁹ See Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *Whoredom: God’s Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996).

Christianity echoes this universal recognition that sex needs boundaries, but claims specifically that the only safe and healthy context for the expression of sexual intimacy is the marriage of a man and a woman. Most famously in the Bible, Paul counsels the men and women in Corinth to pair off and marry because they are surrounded by so much sexual chaos (1 Corinthians 7:2). The wisdom of Proverbs warns the roving eye of the young man not to stray to another man's wife, not simply because it is wrong but because it leads to violent and destructive consequences (e.g., Proverbs 6:20–35).

So these three answer (procreation, relationship, public order) are echoed and made specific and precise in Christian teaching.³⁰ But the question we must ask is how they fit together. Somehow it feels a bit random and disconnected, to say that God created humankind male and female to have children, to enjoy relationship, and to guard the boundaries of marriage. None of these go to the heart and root of the matter.

3.3. Male and Female in the Created Order

We need to remember that because sex is a part of the Created Order, we cannot hope to understand it on its own, but only when we have some grasp of its place within a wider moral order. Genesis 1 offers us a foundational matrix for understanding humankind. The creation of human beings (Genesis 1:26–31) is a crucial part of the placing of Order in creation. For human beings are made in the image and likeness of God so as to exercise “dominion” over the Created Order, while being in their own nature a part of that Order. The reason human beings are given this unique dignity of being created in the image of God is that they may fulfill the task of responsible dominion (Genesis 1:26, 28). *In this context* of task, humanity is created “male and female” (Genesis 1:27). And *in this context* humanity is blessed with the possibility of procreation, to “fill the earth *and subdue it*” (Genesis 1:28). Human sexuality is to be understood within this matrix of meaning, encompassing human dignity (in the image of God) and human task (exercising dominion). Within the Order of Creation, humankind is placed uniquely with a dual orientation. On the one hand, towards the Creator, humankind is given moral *responsibility*; on the other, towards creation, they are entrusted with a *task*. Holding these together is the key to the purpose of sex.

3.4. Sex and Human Stewardship over Creation

Why did God make us like this? In the context of Genesis 1, humans are made to rule a world that is already teeming with living creatures, a world that is abundantly fecund, but that will be out of control unless it is ruled. How may we fulfill this task? We also, like the sub-human living creatures, need to “be fruitful and multiply” so that there will be sufficient human beings to exercise responsible dominion. We need to procreate children who will share our

³⁰ One of the classic places where these “goods” or benefits or purposes of marriage are expounded is Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage* (esp. §32) in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004).

likeness just as Seth shared Adam's likeness (Genesis 5:3) and therefore be God-like creatures suitable for stewarding God's world. Although this likeness is flawed and spoiled by human disobedience, it is still true to say that human beings must multiply as God-like creatures, as the Bible continues to affirm after Noah's flood (Genesis 9:1–7).

The emphasis in Genesis 1 is on procreation in order to fulfill the task of dominion. Sex is for the purpose of having children so that these children will share with us in the privilege and task of caring for God's world. When the creation story is told in a complementary way in Genesis 2, it seems there is a shift of emphasis from procreation to relationship. I suppose that Genesis 2:18–25 is the most famous of all Bible passages about sex and marriage. God says that it is not good for Adam to be alone (Genesis 2:18). He brings him the animals to name as an expression of his stewardship over them, but no suitable helper was found for Adam (Genesis 2:20). So God puts Adam in a deep sleep and creates the woman Eve from his rib. Eve, unlike the animals, is Adam's own bone and flesh, his own kind, his own family, a suitable helper for him. Adam rejoices in the poem of verse 23. This Creation narrative lays the foundation for marriage: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24, quoted by Jesus in Matthew 19:5 and by Paul in Ephesians 5:31 and 1 Corinthians 6:16).

It is, however, dangerous to read this passage out of its context. The theologian Karl Barth read this passage as a warm affirmation of the primacy of intimate relationship over procreational task in marriage. Barth argues passionately that "the Old Testament Magna Carta of humanity" is to be found not in the high Old Testament valuation of procreation but rather in the relational delight of Genesis 2:18–25 echoed in the Song of Songs.³¹ The purpose of sex, he implied, is delight and joy in relationship *rather than* having children. We shall see that this is a false antithesis.

As twenty-first-century people, we tend to respond to the words "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18) like this:

Ah, poor Adam was lonely. There he was in that lovely garden in Eden, and he was all on his own with no one to talk to, no one to have "a relationship" with. A pet dog, cat, cow, or goldfish did not meet his relational needs. God will give him a wife so he will not be lonely anymore.

Sex and marriage solve the problem of human loneliness, it is suggested.

But this misunderstands the meaning of verse 18 and the purpose of sex. As we shall see, the consequences of this misunderstanding in contemporary society are disastrous. Let us reexamine verse 18 in the context of Genesis 2. This section of Genesis begins with a portrait of a world that is badly in need of a farmer or gardener: "there was no human being to work the ground" (Genesis 2:6). God makes Adam in Genesis 2:7 because the world needs a gardener, namely, someone to steward and care for it. So we read in verse 15, "The LORD God took the

³¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3.2.291–92 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958).

man and put him in the Garden of Eden *to work it and take care of it*" (emphasis added). There is Adam in this wonderful garden or parkland entrusted with the privilege and task of looking after it. In this context we are told in verse 18 that God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." The natural reading is not that Adam experienced relational loneliness (he may have, he may not, but it's not the point), but rather that he had been entrusted with a task that was too big for him to do on his own. This is why God goes on to say, "I will make a *helper*." Had he been lonely, he would not have needed a helper, but a companion, a friend, a lover. He is given a helper because he needs help to do the task with which he has been entrusted.

In what way will the woman help with the task? Genesis 2 does not tell us. But it is natural to include the procreation and nurture of children, which has been so emphatic in Genesis 1, where humankind has been given the blessing and exhortation to "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it." So presumably one way the woman helps the man is by enabling the procreation, birth, and nurture of children. Not only is the garden too big for Adam to look after on his own; it is too big for Adam and Eve to look after on their own.

So Genesis 1 and 2 suggest to us that both the procreational and the relational purposes of sex come under the wider purpose of serving God by caring for his world. There is certainly delight and intimacy in Genesis 2.³² Here is a natural and innocent affirmation of sexual desire and delight, of nakedness untouched by shame. But this delight is not an end in itself. On the contrary, here is delight with a shared purpose, intimacy with a common goal, and companionship in a task that expands beyond the boundaries of the couple's relationship on its own. As we rejoice with the lovers in the garden, we must not forget that there is work to be done. The garden needs tilling, weeding, watching. The purpose of sex is not ultimately their mutual delight, wonderful though that is. It is that the woman should be just the helper the man needs so that together they may serve and watch the garden.

We may summarize the argument so far by saying that the purpose of sex is the service of God in his world rather than the meeting of my needs.

3.5. Friendship: The Remedy for Loneliness

Lest I overstate my case, it is worth digressing for a moment to agree that human beings are deeply relational, that in the absence of relationships we do experience loneliness, and that the Bible fully recognizes this. My point is not to deny our need for companionship, but to deny that sexual intimacy is the only or the necessary way in which loneliness may be alleviated. The Bible has a great deal to say about the longings of the human heart, but it is very striking to see how very rarely sex has anything to do with these longings being met. Almost all the Bible passages that speak warmly about human love do so in contexts where sexual intimacy is absent.

³² "This one—at last! Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. I shall call this one woman for from man she was taken, this one!" (my literal translation of Genesis 2:23, emphasising the delight of "this one!").

God's remedy for human loneliness, according to the Bible, is not necessarily sexual intimacy, but friendship and fellowship.³³

Part of the problem in western societies may be that adults who are unmarried are very likely to live on their own rather than share accommodation either with other unmarried people or with a married couple. Loneliness is epitomized by coming back at the end of the day to an empty house or apartment. It is not so much the empty bed as the empty living space that deepens loneliness. We want sexual intimacy, but we forget that much if not all of our human desire for companionship can be met by shared meals, conversation, laughter, activities enjoyed together, and relaxation in the company of others we trust.

3.6. Application: How Sex Serves God

Let us apply this overarching rationale for sex as the service of God to the three kinds of traditional answers: procreation, relationship, and social order.

3.6.1. Procreation: Serving God Through Children

First, procreation: How does having children serve God? The answer is that it may or may not serve God. It depends on the children! We are not speaking of the mere physical act of conception (which for many couples is pretty easy, fun, and painless), or even of conception, gestation (which is more costly for the mother), and birth (which is often painful). It is not enough simply to bring new human beings into the world, nor even to care for their physical protection in infancy and their material needs for food and shelter as they grow. Since the goal of their lives (as for ours) is to participate in the glorious privilege of ruling God's world, it is also necessary for them to grow into a relationship of glad response to the call of God. We are speaking therefore of the whole long, costly privilege that begins with conception and continues for many years in patient, loving discipline and nurture. Thomas Aquinas wrote that the purpose of marriage "is the begetting *and upbringing* of children: the first of which is attained by conjugal intercourse; *the second by the other duties of husband and wife, by which they help one another in rearing their offspring.*"³⁴

What this understanding of the purpose of sex does is to reorientate us so that we no longer decide whether or not to have children as a matter of right (I have a right to a child) or of lifestyle choice (I will have children when and if I feel like it). We are not to want children for selfish reasons, neither because we find children sweet (they may or may not be), nor because in some way we need to be needed,³⁵ nor because we desire sons or daughters to care for us in old age. It is because God has entrusted humankind with a noble task, and that task cannot be carried

³³ Ash, *Marriage*, 116–19.

³⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1929), §3.39 (emphasis added).

³⁵ Cf. how the famous actress Michelle Pfeiffer describes herself: "I'm one of those people who needed to have children. I needed to have that center to my life, that base" (*The Times* [April 15, 2000]).

out without a race of men and women conceived, born, and nurtured to know, love, and serve their Creator. So we are to ask God for the gift of a child, recognizing that it is in his gift and not our right, with the hope and prayer that if he entrusts us with a child we will be enabled to bring that child up to love and serve God in his world.

Christians are not asking people to be falsely spiritual about children, but simply to recognize that in a world where people die, each generation needs the next generation to be born. The crime writer P. D. James wrote an unusual novel called *The Children of Men* (now made into a major movie).³⁶ This story conjures up a world in which human fertility has fallen to zero, and the youngest human beings are twenty-one years old. It is a haunting novel with no playgroups, no schools, and no hope. (Well, there would be no hope unless But that would spoil the story!)

This means that under normal circumstances sex within marriage ought to be accompanied by the desire, or at least willingness, to have children. Protestants have, in my view rightly, argued that there is nothing in principle wrong with contraception in the context of an ongoing sexual relationship that includes (or wants to include) children. But a sexual relationship in which the desire for children has (or has had) no place is not in general sex in the service of God. There are circumstances in which a couple may reluctantly decide that they cannot have children (e.g., because of age or for medical reasons), but their decision not to have children is taken within the moral framework of the longing to have had children had they been able to do so. Their intention not to have children is “a reluctant ‘intention.’”³⁷

It also means that when a couple cannot have children we ought to grieve with them because they are experiencing something of what both Paul (Romans 8:20–22) and the writer of Ecclesiastes call the frustration of a broken world longing to be restored and remade. Their marriage is no less a marriage for being childless, but one of the natural purposes of marriage has been denied them, usually through no fault of their own.

3.6.2. Relationship: Serving God Through the Marriage Relationship

Second, how does the delight of the sexual relationship serve God? On the face of it, this enjoyment and fun serve the couple, but not God. The Bible consistently affirms the naturalness of sexual desire and delight, and it positively encourages a healthy sexual relationship within marriage (notably in 1 Corinthians 7:1–6).³⁸ Sexual attractiveness, beauty, desire, and delight are affirmed and accepted as a right and natural part of the world. In Psalm 45:11, the king desires the beauty of his bride, and this is affirmed as right and natural and a cause of rejoicing.³⁹

Furthermore, the Bible chooses this relationship as one of the most significant images to help human beings understand the relationship of God with his people and of Christ with his

³⁶ P. D. James, *The Children of Men* (London: Penguin, 1992).

³⁷ Oliver O’Donovan, *Marriage and Permanence* (Nottingham: Grove Ethical Booklets, 1978), 12.

³⁸ Christopher Ash, *Married for God* (Leicester: IVP, 2007), 69–72.

³⁹ Ash, *Marriage*, 185–99.

church. The Bible even speaks of God himself as feeling like a husband passionately desiring intimate delight with his wife: “as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Isaiah 62:5). This is bold sexual imagery and is possible only because the Bible is warmly in favor of sex within marriage.

The faithful love of husband and wife serves God by providing in this world a visible image of the love God has for his people and their answering love.⁴⁰ God wants this kind of relationship to display one of the ways in which the invisible God becomes visible in his world. When a couple devotes time and energy to nurturing their own love for each other, paradoxically they may also be serving God, if they love one another with the longing that their love will begin to approximate the love between God and his people.

3.6.3. Public Order: Serving God by Guarding Sex for Marriage

Third, to guard sex within marriage serves God by preserving sexual order in God’s world. We keep our sexual urges for marriage and resist the desires to express them elsewhere, not because this is an arbitrary rule imposed upon us from outside, but from an understanding that this safeguard, these boundaries, are necessary to preserve our societies from sexual chaos.

It is worth asking in this connection what the difference is between unmarried cohabitation and marriage. Why not just live together? The main truth to understand is that there is an intrinsic connection between sexual intimacy and permanence. Sex is designed for permanence, and the breaking of a sexual relationship, whether by death, by divorce, or by infidelity, is always the breaking of something created to be maintained. This is expressed in a saying of Jesus: “those whom God has joined together, let not human beings tear apart” (Matthew 19:6). Every married couple is joined together by God. This has nothing to do with whether or not they were married in a church. It is a simple fact about marriage: when a man and woman publicly pledge themselves to lifelong faithfulness, God joins them together and holds them accountable for keeping their promises. Sexual intimacy is either in the context of the public pledge of lifelong faithfulness, or it cuts across Creation Order. This is important for at least three reasons.

Protection Against Injustice

First, the public pledge of marriage helps to provide a measure of protection against injustice. Whenever someone walks out on a sexual relationship, someone is hurt. It may just be the other partner; often it is children as well. If we swallow the myth that “what happens in the bedroom” is not the concern of the rest of us, then much injustice will be done, especially by men, and there will be no redress from those who are wronged. The public pledge of marriage, upheld by a healthy society, begins (at least approximately) to ensure that justice is done.

In the UK legislation is very gradually imposing obligations of justice on cohabiting partners. Perhaps before long no one will be able to walk out of a cohabitation without some

⁴⁰ See especially Ephesians 5:22–33.

obligation to fulfill responsibilities to the other (especially if there are children). We must welcome this. But we must also note that every move in this direction makes unmarried cohabitation less attractive to those who entered it precisely in order to avoid the obligations of marriage. Indeed, we could make a case for saying that society *ought* to treat cohabiting partners as if they were married, with all the obligations that entails. This would mean that to break a cohabitation one party would have to sue for what would effectively be divorce! If that were to happen, then the mere action of moving in together would come to *signify* the commitment verbalized in the marriage vows, and then cohabitation would *mean* marriage. It does not at the moment. And until and unless it does, only marriage provides proper protection for the vulnerable.

The Removal of Ambiguity

Second, the public pledge removes from a sexual relationship all ambiguity. When a man and woman begin sleeping together and perhaps move in together, others are left guessing as to what exactly is the basis of their relationship. Clearly they have agreed to sleep together; otherwise it would be rape. But what have they promised one another, if anything? On what basis or shared understanding are they together? The answers are as many as there are couples, ranging from very little commitment to a fair degree of privately promised commitment, sometimes expressed, for example, in a joint mortgage. But always there is ambiguity. It may be that sometimes the woman's expectations are higher than the man's. Perhaps the woman really thinks this is "for keeps" whereas the man is more cautious and waits to see how good it is, happy to enjoy the benefits while it's fun. Sometimes it may be the other way around. But always it is unclear. And therefore others do not know quite how to relate to them. Nowhere is this ambiguity more painful than when one of them dies. Who is the next of kin? With whom should we grieve most deeply? The parents or the live-in partner? But in a marriage, there is no lack of clarity. Each has publicly pledged lifelong faithfulness to the other. They are next of kin from that day on. They have left their parents in that fundamental sense (Genesis 2:24).

The Accountability of a Public Promise

Third, we must be realistic about the difference between private intentions and public promises. When we make public promises, we lay our reputation and integrity on the line behind those promises. There is all the difference in the world between a fond promise made privately during a cuddle on the sofa ("Will you stay with me forever?" "Of course, darling, how could you ever imagine otherwise?") and a public promise made before witnesses in the cold light of day. Private assurances are terribly easy to break; they evaporate like the morning dew. After all, it is only her word against his when he says that she misunderstood him and that he didn't really say or mean what she thought. We are deeply prone to self-deception in this area above all.

But when all my wider family, my friends, my work colleagues, and my neighbors know that I have publicly made this pledge, then I am much more inclined to keep it. I do not want them thinking I am a liar. Marriage begins precisely with those public promises. It doesn't matter, incidentally, if the marriage ceremony is attended by only a few. The point is that those

who witness my promises represent the rest of society. To say “I am married” means precisely that I have made these promises and that all the world can know it.

Public promises, like the skins or clothing given to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21), are necessary because of human weakness. Someone has said that democracy is possible because human beings are capable of justice, but that democracy is necessary because we are also capable of injustice. That is, we couldn’t create a democratic society without some sense of justice, and we need to create one to provide safeguards against injustice. In a similar way, our capacity for faithfulness makes marriage possible, but our tendency to unfaithfulness makes marriage necessary. We need the public promises to hold us to the faithfulness we pledge.

When we struggle in difficult marriages, it is a great help to know that we have publicly promised to be faithful for life, that everybody else expects us to keep that promise, and that if we don’t, then we must expect to experience shame. All this strengthens and supports marriage and helps us keep to the end the promises we made at the start.

4. Sex As a Substitute for God

One of the paradoxes of contemporary attitudes to sex is that just when we expect more than ever of a sexual relationship, those relationships are becoming more fragile than ever. One historian of marriage writes, “While faced with the spectacle of broken marriages, we have come (by a strange paradox which however goes very deep into the roots of our subject) to expect far more from a happy marriage.”⁴¹ Another observes,

It is an ironic thought that just at the moment when some thinkers are heralding the advent of the perfect marriage based on full satisfaction of the sexual, emotional and creative needs of both husband and wife, the proportion of marital breakdowns . . . is rising rapidly.⁴²

There is a reason for this, which the Bible calls idolatry. To worship an idol is to worship any “god” of our own choosing, our own shaping, our own creation, something created rather than the Creator. When a couple’s relationship is considered an end in itself, it becomes an idol. The Bible says that idols are empty nothings, devoid of any real substance, and that their worshippers become like them (e.g., Psalm 135:15–19; cf. 1 Corinthians 8:4). To make anything or anyone other than the Creator God the object and goal of a human project is to worship an idol and to place oneself on the path towards ever-increasing superficiality and vacuity.

If we expect too much of sex, we make it an idol. In particular, our culture often turns the sexual relationship into an introspective religion of coupledness in which the ideal is the couple gazing with a soft-focus into each another’s eyes, each saying to the other, “Darling, you are

⁴¹ C. Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 8.

⁴² L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London: Pelican, 1979), 427.

everything to me.” If he or she is everything to me, then I am bound to be disappointed. So there is an instability inherent in any attitude towards sex that expects too much of it.

Germaine Greer prophetically scorns the pathological addiction of what she calls *homo occidentalis* to the “religion” of orgasmic sex. Of the spread of this culture throughout the world she writes,

Young grinning couples grace hoardings among the intricate polycellular structures of villages full of families and their message is intensely seductive to the young and restless. The lineaments of gratified desire they see there will be theirs if they abandon the land, abandon the old, earn their own money and have fun. Having fun means having recreational sex: recreational sex means no fear of pregnancy, a wife who is always available and who is content with orgasms in place of land, family, and children—orgasms and consumer durables.⁴³

Social mobility has exacerbated this problem, isolating couples from wider networks of family belonging. Paradoxically, sexual relationships become destructively intense. In their essay *Confluent Love and the Cult of the Dyad*, Mellor and Shilling speak of “patterns of courtship where the couples are structurally isolated, becoming intensely focused on each other.”⁴⁴ The effect of social mobility on relational depth has been perceptively observed by Rodney Clapp in his book *Families at the Crossroads*. Contrasting the American small town with the suburb, Clapp comments, “If the image of small-town life is a sturdy, intricately rooted tree, the image of suburban life is the hydroponic plant that floats on the water’s surface and easily adapts when moved to another pond or tank.”⁴⁵

This has an impact both on the perception and the practice of sexual relationships. The couple thinks of themselves as a unit in a manner that differs from before. In the older paradigm, the couple is a social unit intimately tied by links of wider family, neighborhood, and history to others. Now they are a mobile unit that moves from shallow suburban “community” to another shallow suburban “community.” In his influential book *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Anthony Giddens has coined the phrase “confluent love” for the inherently transient way in which “lives can run parallel only for a time before they diverge again as the individuals concerned pursue new life-courses and seek to fulfill new needs.”⁴⁶

The problem is heightened because of the unrealistic expectations thus loaded onto the man-woman relationship. Not only do I easily slip into seeking my own self-actualization, I also look primarily to my sexual partner to promote and be the major instrument to provide or at least

⁴³ G. Greer, *Sex and Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility* (London: Picador, 1985), 217.

⁴⁴ P. A. Mellor and C. Shilling, “Confluent Love and the Cult of the Dyad,” in *Sex These Days: Essays on Theology, Sexuality and Society* (ed. Davies and Louglin; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 54.

⁴⁵ R. Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 49.

⁴⁶ A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), cited in Mellor and Shilling, 56.

catalyze this result. The couple working at the project of coupledness for its own sake faces the problem that introspection is stifling and self-destructive. “Even the smallest cottage of the happiest of lovers cannot be habitable unless it has at least a door and a few windows opening outwards.”⁴⁷ Anger and frustration grow in the airless atmosphere of a relationship that is an end in itself. Paradoxically, the outward-looking focus of living as a useful social unit in a wider society to serve God by serving others also provides precisely the safety valve we need.

It is the problem of what each *expects* that makes an introspective religion of coupledness so destructive. “The leech has two daughters. ‘Give! give!’ they cry” (Proverbs 30:15). Couple-centered marriage dissolves into self-centered marriage, and self-centered marriage is like a leech. Or to put it another way, it is like a pair of parasites trying to feed off one another. Scott Peck in his best-selling book *The Road Less Traveled* suggests that we can shape other people into host organisms on which we are parasites:

People say, “I do not want to live, I cannot live without my husband (wife, girlfriend, boyfriend), I love him (or her) so much.” And when I respond, as I frequently do, “You are mistaken; you do not love your husband (wife, girlfriend, boyfriend).” “What do you mean?” is the angry question. “I just told you I can’t live without him (or her).” I try to explain. “What you describe is parasitism, not love.”⁴⁸

While loving companionship is a wonderful blessing, marriage that is introspectively “companionate” is dangerous. For in such marriage, “each becomes not only a lover, but companion, friend, and confidant with whom most or all leisure time is spent,” and such a pressure of relational expectation creates a marriage that “is in itself unstable, and . . . contains the roots of its own destruction.”⁴⁹ In contemporary western marriage,

the marriage partner has been culturally defined as *the most significant other* in adult life. . . . This has given to marriage an altogether new weight . . . which . . . has created an emotional burden of its own: There are very high expectations, and tensions and dissatisfactions are likely in consequence.⁵⁰

Therapist Susie Orbach, writing about the weight of expectation loaded onto marriage and family, comments, “The image of the family unit is the gossamer over which we stretch our needs for attachment, for intimacy and autonomy.”⁵¹ Vigen Guroian writes that Americans overload “the nuclear family with too great a responsibility for providing persons with a sense of

⁴⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3.4.224.

⁴⁸ Scott Peck *The Road Less Travelled* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 98.

⁴⁹ M. Richards, “The Companionship Trap,” *Women, Men and Marriage* (ed. C. Clulow; London: Sheldon Press, 1995), 57.

⁵⁰ B. Berger and P. Berger, *The War over the Family: Capturing the Middle Ground* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 180 (emphasis added).

⁵¹ *The Times* (March 27, 1996).

identity and significance in life. . . . Under this moral weight marriage cracks, and the family is incinerated from within by the intense psychological demands placed upon it.”⁵² Guroian goes on to say that families need a *transcendent purpose* for “coming together, remaining together, and raising children.”⁵³ This transcendent purpose we find in Genesis 1 and 2 in the task the Creator has given to humankind.

The word “transcendent” is the key. The reason for sex is not sex; the reason for sex is a goal beyond the relationship itself, for all its intense delight. Theologically, this points to the Bible’s affirmation that sex is a created good, rather than an intrinsic part of deity. The nature religions of Canaan affirmed that sexuality is intrinsic to the emphatically male gods and provocatively female goddesses of their pantheons. By contrast, the Bible affirms that sex and marriage is “a secular reality”⁵⁴ (i.e., a part of the Created Order) which, “though it comes from God, is not a way *to* God.”⁵⁵ In every generation there are those who lose sight of this and begin to speak of sex as savior. Walter Schubart wrote,

The essence of redeeming love is a breaking out of one’s solitariness, a return to the divine whole. . . . The beloved embodies for the lover this unity or offers himself as an instrument to mediate it. When two lovers come together, at one point in the cosmos the wound of individuation is healed. . . . The whole extra-personal world has gathered shape and can now be embraced in the person of the beloved. . . . As the distant roar of the ocean in the sea shell, so the whole of nature is felt in the breath of the beloved. This echo whispers: Thou shalt be released from thy solitariness. Thou shalt go out and meet thy Thou, who will help thee to God. . . . In the end sexual life drives man into the arms of God and effaces the dividing line between I and Thou, I and the world, the world and the Godhead. Genuine sexual love is a *testimonium Spiritus sancti*. It makes possible the interpenetration of life by heavenly powers.⁵⁶

This is romantic nonsense. Tim Stafford comments, “If in the past sex was unrealistically regarded as demonic, it is now viewed as messianic. We study sex as savior: it will tell us our true nature and save us from meaninglessness.”⁵⁷

In his book *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis recognizes that Eros is at its most dangerous (and demonic or idolatrous) when it is at its most powerful and therefore most near (in resemblance) to God. Just as we may be only a few short yards from home on the map, and yet be at the bottom of a huge cliff with home at the top, so Eros may (through sex-mysticism) bring

⁵² Guroian, “An Ethic of Marriage and Family,” 107.

⁵³ Guroian, “An Ethic of Marriage and Family,” 114.

⁵⁴ E. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 12–15.

⁵⁵ T. Stafford, *Sexual Chaos* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 31.

⁵⁶ Walter Schubart, *Religion und Eros* (Munich: Beck’sche, 1941); quoted in Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3.4.126 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958).

⁵⁷ Stafford, *Sexual Chaos*, 61.

us apparently close to God while leaving us far away in reality. So Lewis recognizes that there is something God-like in Eros, the total prodigal supra-rational giving of self, not counting the cost. This total commitment “is a paradigm or example, built into our natures, of the love we ought to exercise towards God and man.”⁵⁸ Eros has an inbuilt tendency to become a religion of love in which it is not usually the lovers who worship one another (that, as Lewis wryly observes, would generally be too ridiculous), but that they worship the concept of Eros itself. Whenever lovers are in love, they make vows of eternal love. And yet they fail to recognize the folly that they are making the same vows they made last year to a different lover. Always the delusion is that “*this* time it’s the real thing.” In a sense, Eros is right to promise eternal fidelity. Eros is an image or foretaste of the eternal fidelity of the Bridegroom in his relations with the bride and must therefore point in the direction of eternal fidelity. But “Eros is driven to promise what Eros of himself cannot perform.” This will only destroy the relationship of the couple who has idolized Eros, who thought they had “the power and truthfulness of a god.”⁵⁹

So when we experience sexual desires and ask ourselves, “What is going on? Why are these desires within me, sometimes overwhelming me?” we are beginning to know in what direction to look for answers. No, we are not the same as animals. Sexual intercourse has biological similarities with mammals, but there is more to it than animal passion and the instinct to reproduce. The movies, the song-writers and the novelists are right to use religious language about this whole mysterious chemistry. It does point to a vision beyond itself. It points to the joyful service of God. One important and neglected answer to the question, “Why did God create humankind male and female?” is that we might marry, have children, populate, and steward his world in a God-like manner as creatures made in the image and likeness of God.

5. Sex in a Disordered World

The problem is that neither our desires nor the world in which we experience these desires lines up in a simple way with the theory I have suggested. It would be fine if, as we grew into puberty, the following occurred: We experienced a simple sexual urge towards one person of the opposite sex. She or he reciprocated those desires. We got married and lived happily ever after, our sexual urges cheerfully channeled into the procreation of children and the creation of an outward-looking, God-honoring home that helped humanity govern God’s world in an entirely harmonious and responsible way. As if!

5.1. Sexual Frustration

But in fact we experience as much frustration as we do sexual satisfaction. There may be a long period before marriage. Some never marry. Others are widowed young. Many experience

⁵⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Fount, 1977), 101 (and see all of chapter 5).

⁵⁹ Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 105.

same-sex desire in some measure for a time, and for some these same-sex desires intensify and stay with them for a long time, perhaps a lifetime. Most people experience sexual desire towards not one, but many other people. Married people experience frustrations and disappointments in the physical intimacy of their marriage relationships. Even those whose sexual relationships are mostly satisfying and easy will experience adulterous or pornographic desires at times. Many who desire children will find those desires frustrated by involuntary childlessness. Others have children, but the children get ill and die, or the children disappoint by godlessness. In many ways, sexual disorder rears its ugly head in all of us.

Perhaps one of the more obvious manifestations of this in western cultures is our obsessive preoccupation with sex, verging on cultural addiction at times, and exaggerated and magnified by the proliferation of easily available pornography on the Internet. It is generally assumed that a person is eccentric and odd if they are not sexually active. And yet a promiscuous young person may carry around with them a dream of happy marriage and children that is quite at odds with their current behavior.

So the practical question is this: What are we supposed to do with our sexual longings and desires in the real world? It is all very well saying that sex is created by God to be used in the service of God, but what if I can never marry, or if my marriage is a great disappointment and doesn't seem to serve God in the way I had hoped? Does the Christian worldview have anything to say to me in the real world of frustration and confusion? How does Creation Order impact living in a frustrated and frustrating broken world?

5.2. A Test Case: Homosexual Desires

I want to address this question by taking as my example perhaps the most painful and certainly the most controversial issue in contemporary culture wars: "gay marriage." I choose this, not because it is the only example of desires that are not ordered according to God's will, but because it is perhaps the most acute of those disordered desires. It is well-known that the past half-century has seen a sea change in social attitudes towards homosexual desire and practice, epitomized in the USA by the decision of the American Psychological Association in 1973 to remove homosexuality from its list of psychological disorders in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.⁶⁰

The Bible regards all same-sex attraction as a disordered desire, and same-sex intimacy as sinful. The arguments of those who wish to claim that the Bible actually accepts and approves homosexual desire and practice have been comprehensively refuted by Robert Gagnon.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *God, Marriage and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundations* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 201n1.

⁶¹ Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001). See also Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995).

So instead of engaging with that issue, I want to ask two questions. First, what is the origin and cause of homosexual desires? Second, what does the Christian worldview have to say to those who experience them?

5.2.1. The Origin of Homosexual Desires

In Romans 1:21–23, Paul speaks of a terrible “exchange” by which human beings cease to worship the one true God and begin to worship idols of their own choice, created things rather than the Creator. This is followed in verses 24–31 by a threefold “handing over” by God, in which human beings are handed over to the consequences of false worship. These verses give a picture of moral disorder, disordered morality that is the consequence of disordered worship. He chooses homosexuality as his prime example.

But why does Paul take homosexual desire as his leading example in Romans 1:24–27? We feel uneasy because Paul seems to make a minority group his prime target for disapproval.

Before answering this, we need to be clear that he *is* speaking of all homosexual desire and practice. He is not just speaking of the Greek practice of sex between men and boys, since he speaks of lesbianism as well: “even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another” (Romans 1:26–27). The word Paul uses here for “natural” means behavior that is in line with Creation Order; it does not mean what an individual finds subjectively “natural” for himself or herself.

There would seem to be two reasons that Paul begins with this disorder. The first is that it graphically illustrates an “exchange” between order and disorder. He picks up the word “exchange” from verses 23 and 25, and uses it in verse 26 of lesbian desire. Same-sex erotic desire is one of the clearest expressions of disordered affection. But we must remember that this is not the root of sin; it is but one example of a sin that is a *consequence* of the fundamental sin, which is idolatry. Further, we cannot draw a one-to-one equation between individual idolatry and individual homosexual desire (cf. John 9 in another context). Paul’s point is that the very existence of these desires in society is an evidence (among others) of God’s handing us over to the consequences of our idolatry. All the other examples in the list also illustrate disordered desire (Romans 1:29–31). All these are the result of disordered worship.

The second reason Paul begins with this is that homosexuality was supremely the Gentile sin. When the Jew looked at the Gentile world, one of the things that most horrified him and made him most happy to be a Jew was the appalling practice of homosexuality. Popular religious books railed against Gentile homosexuality as proof of the moral superiority of the Jews. The Jewish Christian hearing verses 24–27 would have been cheering Paul on, which sets Paul up for the next stage of his argument in Romans 2. He ends chapter 1 by lamenting a pagan society in which people not only do terrible things; they actually give public approval to those who do them (Romans 1:32). These behaviors become accepted and acceptable. Nevertheless, some of his hearers (notably Jewish ones) would have responded to this by saying, “Dear Paul, I quite agree. You may be sure I don’t approve at all of such terrible behavior.” Paul then begins chapter 2 by

writing, “You, therefore, are without excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else” (i.e., who don’t approve). In a way, he wants the self-righteous listeners to applaud the argument of chapter 1 so that he can humble them under grace in chapter 2.⁶²

Paul’s main point is that the moral chaos of the world is the visible evidence now of the wrath of God. God’s wrath is neither vindictive nor arbitrary (i.e., not a celestial temper tantrum, as someone has put it), but rather his hot, settled, personal, and utterly necessary and right hatred of evil. How is the wrath of God being revealed (Romans 1:18)? Answer: by moral chaos. As someone has said, “The history of the world is the judgment of the world.” “Look at a messed-up world,” Paul says, “and you will see that God is angry.” This is clearly not the world as it was meant to be. God’s anger is revealed in present degradation, of which homosexual desire and practice is one example. We must therefore be clear that the existence of homosexual desires is one evidence of the moral disorder let loose on humanity by disordered worship. It is but one terrible result of the fundamental human sin of idolatry.

5.2.2. The Gospel and Homosexual Desires

What does the Christian worldview and gospel have to say to those who experience these desires? In principle, much the same as it says to us all who experience disordered desires in other contexts (cf. Paul’s list in Romans 1:28–31).

First, we must not deduce from our desires that this is our identity or that this is necessarily right. The existence of a desire is no evidence of the rightness of that desire, as we readily admit for a desire like greed. Our identity is not defined by our sexuality. We are human beings made in the image of God. If we trust in Christ, we are defined by being “in Christ” and not by anything we feel, desire, say, or do. We learn that as fallen men and women in a broken world we experience all manner of disordered desires, longings, and aversions that are not in line with the order God has placed in creation. For example, we may feel pleasure when misfortune comes on another (being pleased it did not happen to us); this is a disordered affection, one that we ought not to feel. The erotic desire of a woman for a woman or a man for a man is likewise a disordered desire.

Second, we need to recognize that sexual desires go very deep indeed. The teenager especially is vulnerable in that awkward stage of life when they wonder who they are and begin to experience strong and often confused sexual urges. Although it is mistaken to equate sexuality with identity, sexual feelings go so deep that it is not surprising they are sometimes confused with “who I am.” Those who have not experienced strong same-sex desires need to recognize that it is much easier for us to speak about these desires from a distance than it is for those in the midst of these desires to make sense of them.

Third, Christian people must never forget that our message is one of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, which comes to all of us as moral failures and begins with washing and forgiveness rather than with moral exhortation. Writing to a context of sexual disorder in Corinth, Paul says

⁶² See Christopher Ash, *Teaching Romans* (London: PT Media with Christian Focus, forthcoming).

of the Christians there, “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11). In his earthly ministry, Jesus attracted to himself those who knew their lives were a moral mess, but those who thought they had got their morality sorted out found his message of grace offensive. It ought to be the same today.

Fourth, Christian people affirm and believe that the free grace of God in Jesus Christ has the power to change us.

[The grace of God] teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Titus 2:12–14).

This power may simply take away homosexual desires. Some testify to a real measure of healing in this regard, and there are wonderful stories of those who were deep in homosexual lifestyles but who now experience natural heterosexual relationships in marriage. Others have to endure ongoing homosexual desires, and it is very painful for them. The Christian faith does not promise a magic bullet to change our desires in a moment. What it does promise and offer is a faithful God whose grace is sufficient to carry us through all the moral disorder of a broken world until Jesus returns.

6. Conclusion: Everyone Can Have a Wedding Day!⁶³

We must end by looking to the future. In the present we are mired in a messed-up world full of pain and disorder. But what of the future? The wonderful truth of the Christian gospel is that every human being can be married in the end if they want to be. That applies to those who have never married and may never marry in this life. It applies to those divorced, whether or not it was mainly or even entirely their fault. It is true for widows. Whatever sexual desires and longings you have, whatever your history of experience or inexperience, delights or frustrations, right behavior or misbehavior, you can know all your longings fulfilled in the end, if you want that. Every human being is invited to be married in the end, and not only to be married, but to be blissfully married in the marriage to beat all marriages. The only question is whether or not we will accept this invitation.

The Bible tells many stories of human marriages, both good and bad, from Adam and Eve through Abraham and Sarah, David and Bathsheba, and countless others. All of them, one way or another, are stories of dysfunctional people in spoiled relationships.

But above these stories the Bible tells a bigger story. It is the story of a marriage that includes within itself the whole history and future of the human race. It is the story of God the

⁶³ This conclusion is adapted from Christopher Ash, *Married for God* (Leicester: IVP, 2007), 165–68.

Lover, the Bridegroom, the Husband, and his people his Beloved, his Bride, and in the end his Wife. It is the story that John the Baptist had in mind when he spoke of Jesus as the “Bridegroom” (John 3:25–30), and the story that Jesus himself accepted when he spoke of himself as the “Bridegroom” (e.g., Matthew 9:14–15). It is the story Paul referred to when he spoke of the church in Corinth being “engaged” to Jesus Christ like a pure virgin (2 Corinthians 11:2).

It is the story that John speaks of in the visionary imagery of Revelation 19 and 21. The metaphors are mixed, and the language is vivid and suggestive; we cannot read it literally, and it would not be possible to make a film of this imagery. At the climax of human history, John hears the announcement: “the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7). The Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ himself, is to be married at last. His Bride is his people, every believer of all time, corporately to be joined to him forever in a union of unmixed delight and intimacy. This is a time of joy and amazement. Then in Revelation 21, John sees the heavenly Jerusalem, that is the whole new heavens and new earth, the restored and redeemed created order, coming down out of heaven as a city, but not only a city, also a bride: “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” For this renewed and restored creation is “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:2, 9). All of the people of God in the new heavens and new earth are the bride of Jesus Christ. That is to say, he loves them passionately, and they love him with an answering love.

In that new age their love will be consummated with an intimacy and enduring delight that the best human marriage can only begin to echo faintly. To put it bluntly, the most climactic and rapturous delight ever experienced in sexual intimacy by a married couple in the history of the human race cannot hold a candle to the delight of that union.

This is an amazing and beautiful prospect, a time when all the deepest yearnings and longings of the human heart will be fulfilled. And it is open to all who will come in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ in this age. The invitation is open.

Every time an unmarried person feels frustrated or depressed by their circumstances and unfulfilled desires, this is a pointer to the age to come. Jesus Christ says to them, “Set your sights on your wedding day, which is also my wedding day. You think you are ‘on the shelf’? Not at all, for I love you passionately.”

Every time a married person struggles with conflict or pain in marriage, it is a signpost to the age to come. Jesus Christ says to them, “Lift your eyes above the frustrations and pain, and look up to that wedding day when I will take all my people in my arms forever.”

Every time a man or woman feels the pain of the scars of past mistakes and hurts, Jesus says to them, “Look up to that wedding day because in that wedding you will wear spotless pure clothes and the only scars in that wedding will be the scars I bore for you, the scars on my feet, in my hands, and my side. Because I bore those scars, there will be none on you.”

On that day all the sex within marriage that has been used in the service of God in this age will be taken up into an eternity of sexual fulfilment that will fill the age to come with delight, security, and wonder to beat all marriages. May God help us to be there to enjoy it.

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