

MERE SEXUALITY: REDISCOVERING THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF SEXUALITY

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CHRISTIAN VISION
OF SEXUALITY

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CHAPTER 5

WHAT IS SEX FOR?



In this chapter, we will pivot to the topic of sex. The goal here is to think about the *purpose* of sex. Why do we have sex? Why does it exist? What I want you to understand from the start is that the companionate view of marriage, which we discussed in the last chapter, brings with it some ready-made answers to this question. But in the end, it doesn't give satisfying answers.

In the companionate view, sex is primarily for pleasure. Sounds good, right? The pleasure of sex serves to intensify the feeling of emotional connection you have with another person, so we might say that sex can help you feel more in love. According to our culture, this is the purpose of sex—*pleasure*.

You'll notice, however, that this purpose is very oriented to the individual. It focuses on what sex does for us—what we get out of it—and has little to do with the joining of two lives in a one-flesh union. It also doesn't have anything to do with creating life, that is, with making babies. In fact, any talk of procreation or making babies is explicitly excluded from our culture's understanding of sex. If

you want evidence for this, take a close look at the Supreme Court's 2015 decision to legalize same-sex marriage in all fifty states.¹ Embedded in this ruling is the claim that marriage has no intrinsic connection to procreation and thus to children. On this view, marriage begins and ends with the interests of the partners, irrespective of any children who may come from that partnership. If you still doubt this, listen to one same-sex activist who anticipated the Court's decision with enthusiasm for precisely this reason. This legal ruling would, she says, shift the "institution's message" so that marriage ever after "will stand for sexual choice, for cutting the link between sex and diapers."²

Here is an example of where this trend is leading us. My wife recently received an email from a close friend with the following subject line: "You've got to read this!" Attached to the email was an article from a recent issue of *Vanity Fair*. It was titled "Tinder and the Dawn of the 'Dating Apocalypse.'" Perhaps you've never heard of Tinder. I hadn't. It's a dating app, like eHarmony, only it's less a dating app and more a hookup app. It's not about relationships; it's about sex. Which is why this writer sees Tinder and other hookup apps as the beginning of the end of dating as we know it. The article begins:

It's a balmy night in Manhattan's financial district, and at a sports bar called Stout, everyone is Tindering. The tables are filled with young women and men who've been chasing money and deals on Wall Street all day, and now they're out looking for hookups. Everyone is drinking, peering into their screens and swiping on the faces of strangers they may have sex with later that evening . . .

At a booth in the back, three handsome twenty-something guys in button-downs are having beers. They are Dan, Alex, and Marty, budding investment bankers at the same financial firm . . . When asked if they've been

arranging dates on the apps they've been swiping at, all say not one date, but two or three: "You can't be stuck in one lane . . . There's always something better." . . .

[Alex, in fact] says that he himself has slept with five different women he met on Tinder—"Tinderellas," the guys call them—in the last eight days. Dan and Marty, also Alex's roommates in a shiny high-rise apartment building near Wall Street, can vouch for that. In fact, they can remember whom Alex has slept with in the past week more readily than he can.³

The article goes on like this for pages, unfolded with section headings that tell the story: "Sex Has Become So Easy," "Hit It and Quit It," "Boom-Boom-Boom Swipe," "The Morning After," and "People Are Gorging." It's all rather sobering stuff, a neo-pagan rather than deeply Christian approach to human sexuality.⁴

Sadly, though, the approach to sex described in this article isn't unique to users of Tinder or to millennials living in Manhattan. It's fairly routine practice on college campuses across the country, where hooking up has become a pastime.⁵ But it's also common practice at younger ages. Did you know that, statistically speaking, half of all high school students will have sex before they graduate?

Sex has become so casual, so commercialized, so cheap, that it forces us to ask the most basic question: What is sex for? Does sex have any purpose beyond instant gratification? Does it have any higher meaning than, as advertisers would have it, to entice you to buy a new Cadillac or download the latest version of *Game of War* or pick up a case of Miller Lite on your way home from work?

The Blessing of Sex

In the opening chapter of the book of Genesis, we discover the architecture for human sexuality, and what we find is that God has given humanity an amazing gift. As we saw in previous chapters, God created us in his image, not as single, solitary individuals, but as a sexually differentiated pair: "Male and female he created them" (1:27). Two creatures who are alike in so many ways, yet different. Alike in value and dignity, yet not alike in their bodies. They are sexually differentiated.

Then we read that having created them sexually differentiated as male and female, "God blessed them" (1:28). We could call this the blessing of sex, because it refers not only to the blessing of sexual difference as male and female, but to the blessing of our sexual powers: God has given us the marvelous and mysterious ability to unite two lives in a one-flesh union—to create new life. That's power indeed.⁶

Of course, with every gift God gives comes a corresponding call to use that gift to glorify God and bless others. Which is why God moves immediately from blessing the first human pair to calling them to action—a particular kind of action: "And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it'" (1:28). At the heart of a biblical vision of sex is the bold affirmation that sex is a blessing. In our culture, sex may be viewed as a blessing because it feels good. But in the biblical vision, sex is a blessing not because of the pleasure it brings but because of the purpose it serves: to unite lives and to create life.⁷

For the Christian, then, sex has a dual purpose: to unite and to procreate. It serves to unite two lives in a one-flesh union and to bring forth new life from

this one-flesh union. According to the Bible, this is the purpose of sex. This is what sex is for.

When Sex Is Severed from Its Uniting and Procreating Purpose

Our culture has separated the act of sex from the purpose of sex. We have severed the connection between sex and its power to unite lives and create life, so that now, virtually everywhere we look, sex is separated from its uniting and procreating purpose. To put it bluntly, sex has been severed from both the institution of marriage and the blessing of having children.

How did this happen? The reasons are complex, but technology is one of the culprits. In particular, reproductive technologies, especially birth control, gained widespread acceptance in the sexual revolution of the 1960s and assisted in severing the link between the act of sex and the purpose of sex. In fact, this was one of the primary goals of the sexual revolution. Though it was euphemistically called “free love,” in reality it meant consequence-free sex, or sex apart from commitments and children.

So how well did “free love” work out? Well, it hasn’t been free. Our culture has paid the price, or more precisely, our children have paid it. We’ve had to bear the cost of “free love” with broken marriages and children growing up without the blessing of having a father and mother in a family. Another result of severing sex from its dual purpose of uniting lives and creating life has been the trivializing of sex. By robbing sex of its power to unite two lives and make life, we’ve turned sex into something far less powerful and profound than what

it really is. It has become another recreational activity—a hobby, a consumer good, a plaything. As a culture, we’re quickly growing bored with sex, even as we’re gorging ourselves on it. Something has gone ludicrously wrong.

Even as we trivialize sex, we idolize pleasure, and sexual gratification becomes a god. What is the multibillion-dollar-a-year porn industry other than the idolization of pleasure? Let’s make no mistake about it, sexual pleasure, of all pleasures, is a highly addictive kind of pleasure.⁸ The god of sexual pleasure has become a slave master—a demanding and unforgiving one that controls and destroys lives and relationships.

When we disconnect the act of sex from the purpose of sex, we also end up marginalizing children. When sex is simply a means for our personal pleasure, we see children as a problem, an inconvenience. Children are a “mistake” as we pursue our own agenda of pleasing ourselves. This mind-set threatens the well-being of children, who continue to come into this world, regardless of our wishes or desires, as a result of the act of sex. We call these “unwanted pregnancies,” which is a euphemistic way of saying we want the pleasure of sex without the responsibility of creating new life. These are unwanted children, and the most blatant response to these so-called unwanted pregnancies is the blight on our national conscience known as abortion.

But that’s not all. When we divorce sex from its purpose, we treat our body, or someone else’s body, as though it were just a tool, something to be used by us or for us. This instrumentalizes the body in a way that distances us from our body and dis-integrates our sense of self. We inflict damage on ourselves without knowing it, using our bodies as instruments for pleasure rather than reverencing them as part and parcel of who we are.

In ancient Greece, the philosopher Aristotle described a slave as a “living tool.”⁹ This understanding of a person was roundly rejected by Christianity. How demeaning for a person created in the image of God to be seen as little more than an instrument for sexual pleasure! By divorcing sex from its God-given purpose, we harm ourselves and make it even harder to enjoy sex as a healthy experience of uniting lives for the sake of creating life.

“Course Sex Isn’t Safe But It’s Good”

This is why the Bible—and the Christian faith—insists that sexual activity should take place only within the context of marriage. Many people today, including those in the church, see the restriction of sexual activity to marriage as outdated—a puritanical limitation on our freedom. But the Bible teaches this, not to limit our joy of sex, but to increase it. We believe that sex is only for marriage, not because Christians are killjoys, but because we have a realistic and exalted view of the power of sex. Sex isn’t a toy or plaything; it’s a sacred and sovereign power—strong enough, in fact, to bring new life into being. When something is powerful—think of a downed power line or a loaded gun—you aren’t careless when you handle it. You understand that it can kill or harm you if you aren’t careful. Sex is a powerful creative gift, something God gives us for good purposes. But if we misuse it and are careless, it can profoundly harm us.

I remember standing at a crosswalk on Lake Street in Oak Park, Illinois, a few hundred yards from the church I pastor. I was going out to grab a sandwich when I saw a woman, about my own age, staring at me. The look on her face was as if she’d been injured. She stopped me and asked if I was the pastor of the church. She mentioned that she’d visited several times. She then told me she’d

just found out she was pregnant as the result of a one-night stand. I stood there, heartbroken with and for her, as she told me her story. It was sobering to think about the little immortal person, the new life, who had just been summoned into existence through her one-night stand.

Our sexual capacities are powerful, far too powerful to be used anywhere outside marriage. They need the safe and stable environment that comes with a “till death do us part” commitment. We need the uniting purpose of sex to safeguard us against the awesome procreative power of sex.

Unfortunately, we live in a world that has bought into the myth of “safe sex.” But here’s a news flash: there is no such thing as safe sex. Sex is too powerful ever to be safe. In the words of essayist Wendell Berry, “Sex was never safe, and it is less safe now than it has ever been.”¹⁰

There is a famous scene in C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Susan first hears about Aslan the lion, the Jesus figure in the story. Mr. Beaver needs to disabuse her of any misunderstanding about what this lion is like. “Aslan is a lion,” explains Mr. Beaver, “*the* Lion, the great Lion.” “Ooh!” says Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” “Safe?” says Mr. Beaver. “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”¹¹

Our culture often makes the same mistake as Susan. It confuses good and safe, assuming that because something is good, it must be safe. And so it asks, “Sex, is it—quite safe?” The hope is that sex will be simple and uncomplicated, free from consequences. “Yes, hook up with whomever you like, and don’t worry!” But mere sexuality takes sex seriously and offers a realistic answer—graciously, yet honestly. “Safe? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course sex isn’t safe. But it’s good. It’s God’s blessing to us, I tell you.”

Sex Has Public Consequences

When we acknowledge the procreative power of sex, we realize that sex cannot be simply reduced to a private act between consenting adults. Sex is an intrinsically public act. Why? Because it has massive public consequences. What are those consequences? One word: *children*.^{[12](#)}

Many teenage couples have learned this the hard way. What begins as a fun high school romance turns into something more serious when a girl realizes she is pregnant. What they thought was something special and intimate, to be shared just between the two of them, has become something profoundly public and visible—not just to their parents or their families and friends or their classmates and teachers, but also to the son or daughter whose precious life they have inadvertently summoned into existence with their sexual powers—a child who no doubt will want to know one day when and where he or she came from. That's a public impact.

Sex isn't like other private acts. It's not the same as trimming your toenails, taking a shower, or flossing your teeth—all of which, I think you'll agree, are best done in private. Sex is like these other acts because it is done in private, yet it is profoundly different from these acts because it has a power that these other acts do not. You can never entirely sever sex from its public impact or significance. God has given us sexual powers to procreate, to bring another human being into existence, and this means that sex will always have a very public component to it.

Incidentally, this is the primary reason the state (our governing authorities)

has any interest in marriage. It's worth asking: Why should the state have an interest in our sex lives? Again, if sex were like trimming your toenails, it would be ridiculous for the state to legislate on this activity. But again, we need to recognize that sex is different from other private acts. Sex has the power to bring forth other human beings—other members of the state who are granted certain rights as such. The state doesn't attempt to regulate our friendships; you don't need to go to the courthouse to sign a friendship certificate. But you do need state recognition when you get married. Why? Why should the state care about this at all? For the simple reason that marriages make babies, and this is of great interest to the state; indeed, therein lies the future of the state.

I hope you can see now why the state should have no interest in the sexual lives of same-sex couples. It's precisely because their sexual lives are, as a biological fact, sterile and nonprocreative. To put it bluntly, what two people of the same sex choose to do in their bedroom can have no lasting public significance because it cannot bring forth children. Of course, if that were the only concern we faced on this issue, it would be far easier to agree. The push we see today is not for allowance of private acts but for public recognition that seeks to redefine marriage in a way that discounts the procreative power it has to produce children.

Let me also say that this is why we want to promote, wherever and however we can, a strong marriage culture, both within the church and in our society. Marriage is the one institution that weds together the procreative and uniting purposes of sex in a powerful union. And when that happens, husbands win, wives win, and, most of all, children win.^{[13](#)}

Getting Personal

I recognize that for some, sex is a difficult topic to read about or discuss, for various reasons. Sex can be a great good when enjoyed as God intended, but it can also lead to pain. Sex has scarred quite badly some of you who are reading this. To even bring up the topic of sex is to tap into a host of painful experiences for you. I want to say to you that Jesus knows this about your experience, and he shares in the grief of it with you. He offers to heal you. He doesn't look on you with shame, and he won't turn you away in your guilt. He stands ready to forgive and receive you, whatever your past.

For others, the topic of sex evokes not pain, but longing. You would love to be married and to enjoy the benefits of sex and the joy of children, but you aren't currently married. You're single, and that's something you find disappointing, even frustrating. May I encourage you to continue to fight the fight of faith and trust God for his calling on your life, whether to marriage or to singleness. " 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' " (Jeremiah 29:11).

There are still others who are married and don't have kids—not by choice, but as a result of God's mysterious providence in their lives. Perhaps you're having trouble conceiving, and it has become a heavy burden for you. May I encourage you with the thought that the marital union you enjoy with your spouse is in itself intrinsically fruitful, even if the fruitfulness has not resulted in children. (Of course, adoption is also an option to prayerfully consider.)

Others reading this are married and may or may not have kids, but you're not sure you're up to doing the whole "kid thing." You look around at our culture, or you take stock of the pressures and demands of your own life or the challenges and practical burden of raising children, and you're not sure it's for you. I understand how you feel. I am reminded of the title of a *Time* magazine article—"The Economic Reason for Having Just One Child." The author points out that in 2011, the cost of raising a child to the age of eighteen was between \$234,900 and \$390,000.¹⁴ And that amount didn't include college. I quickly did the math for my family of seven children, and it came out to several million dollars!

Wherever you are today, consider carefully that there are valid biblical reasons some may choose not to unleash their procreative sexual powers. But we always need to be open, at least in principle, to the procreative purpose of our one-flesh union. We should be careful not to use birth control to control God in a way that misses out on God's greater blessing for our lives in the form of children.¹⁵ And let us not forget what Scripture clearly says about children—something profoundly and wonderfully countercultural: "Children are a heritage from the LORD, offspring a reward from him" (Psalm 127:3).

Finally, let us not lose sight of our Savior's own attitude toward children: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14). Every husband and wife should adopt a similar openness toward children, especially those who would be the fruit of their one-flesh sexual union.

Marriage and Mission

In our hypersexualized culture, Christians should be at the forefront in championing a radically different vision of sex. We should insist that sex has a higher, nobler purpose than simply our pleasure. Of course we agree that sex is pleasurable—and Christians should be the first to say so! Remember, God is the author of every creaturely pleasure. But Christians should also insist, thoughtfully and respectfully, that pleasure isn't the sole or even primary purpose of sex. God has made us male and female, in our sexual difference and with our unique sexual powers, so that we might unite our lives and create new life. Sex has a splendid purpose.

Yet as important as the procreative and uniting purposes of sex are, these aren't the ultimate end for which God has given us either sex or marriage. Both sex and marriage have a greater missional purpose: the advance of the kingdom of God. Or as Christopher Ash has put it in his excellent book on this theme, sex is to be "in the service of God."¹⁶ As we read in the opening chapter of Genesis,

"God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground'" (1:28).

I appreciate what famed professor of preaching William H. Willimon says about "the blessed burden" of bearing children in today's topsy-turvy world: "In a world plagued by self-doubt and uncertainty coupled with selfishness and irresponsibility which may arise from doubts and uncertainties, the bearing of children as a bold, conscious faithful response to God's offer of new life may become an evangelistic, even missional activity, a bold vulnerability which springs from faith."¹⁷

He goes on to press a question we're all tempted to ask: "The question is recurrently being phrased, 'Can I, with the world in the shape it is in, responsibly bring children into this kind of world?' " But as he says, "The question ought to be (for those who see children as a gift and the world as their responsibility), 'Can I, with the world in the shape it is in, responsibly refuse to bring children into this kind of world?' "¹⁸

How will you answer that question?

“The Gay Couples Study out of San Francisco State University—which, in following over 500 gay couples over many years is the largest on-going study of its kind—has found that about half of all couples have sex with someone other than their partner, *with their partner knowing*” (emphasis original). See also Scott James, “Many Successful Gay Marriages Share an Open Secret,” *New York Times*, January 28, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/01/29/us/29sfmetro.html (accessed February 10, 2017).

8. Hanna Rosin, “The Dirty Little Secret: Most Gay Couples Aren’t Monogamous,” *Slate*, June 26, 2013, www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2013/06/26/most_gay_couples_aren_t_monogamous_will_straight_couples_go_monogamish.html (accessed February 10, 2017).
9. See Lee and George, *Conjugal Union*, 61–67.
10. See Jennifer Roback Morse, “Why Unilateral Divorce Has No Place in a Free Society,” in *The Meaning of Marriage: Family, State, Market, and Morals*, ed. Robert P. George and Jean Bethke Elshtain (Dallas: Spence, 2006), 74–99.
11. Paul Rampell, “A High Divorce Rate Means It’s Time to Try ‘Wedleases,’” *Washington Post*, August 4, 2013, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-high-divorce-rate-means-its-time-to-try-wedleases/2013/08/04/f2221c1c-f89e-11e2-b018-5b8251f0c56e_story.html (accessed February 10, 2017).
12. Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay? And Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible and Same-Sex Attraction*, rev. ed. (Epsom, Surrey, UK: Good Book Company, 2015), 18.
13. Numerous social scientific studies done between the 1970s and early 2000s suggested that, on average, couples were 33 percent more likely to divorce if they had previously cohabitated. It must be acknowledged, however, that some more recent studies challenge this assumption, especially by accounting for the age of partners when they either begin cohabitating or get married (see Arielle

Kuperberg, “Does Premarital Cohabitation Raise Your Risk of Divorce?” Council on Contemporary Families, March 10, 2014, <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/cohabitation-divorce-brief-report> (accessed February 10, 2017).

Chapter 5: What Is Sex For?

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2. E. J. Graff, “Same-Sex Marriage Is a Radical Feminist Idea,” *American Prospect*, June 28, 2012, <http://prospect.org/article/same-sex-marriage-radical-feminist-idea> (accessed February 10, 2017); cited in Ryan Anderson, “Marriage: What It Is, Why It Matters, and the Consequences of Redefining It,” Heritage Foundation, March 11, 2013, www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/report/marriage-what-it-why-it-matters-and-the-consequences-redefining-it (accessed February 10, 2017).
3. Nancy Jo Sales, “Tinder and the Dawn of the ‘Dating Apocalypse,’” *Vanity Fair*, September 2015, www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/08/tinder-hook-up-culture-end-of-dating (accessed February 10, 2017).
4. For a rich, reflective analysis of our hypersexualized culture, see Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015).
5. See Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America’s College Campuses*, rev. ed. (2008; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
6. See J. Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex* (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2012), 17–33.

7. I'm indebted for many of these insights to Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert P. George, *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (New York: Encounter, 2012), esp. 23–36; Patrick Lee and Robert P. George, *Conjugal Union: What Marriage Is and Why It Matters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex*.
8. See William M. Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010).
9. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.11, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicom-achaen.8.viii.html> (accessed February 10, 2017).
10. Wendell Berry, "Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community," in *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community: Eight Essays* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 142. The entire essay repays a careful reading.
11. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950; repr., New York: Harper-Collins, 1994), 86.
12. Ironically, as our culture has severed the public consequence of sex (i.e., children) from the private act of sex, we've felt the need to compensate somehow by putting this private act (i.e., sex) on public display in all sorts of unseemly ways.
13. By "win," I mean to say there are very real and substantial social benefits to marriage. For a succinct elaboration of these, grounded in careful social scientific research, see Girgis, Anderson, and George, *What Is Marriage?* 42–46.
14. Lauren Sandler, "The Economic Reason for Having Just One Child," *Time*, June 11, 2013, <http://ideas.time.com/2013/06/11/the-economic-reason-for-having-just-one-child> (accessed February 10, 2017).
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17. William H. Willimon, "Children: The Blessed Burden," *Duke Divinity School Review* 45.1 (Winter 1980): 42, https://archive.org/stream/dukedivinity-scho45duke/dukedivinityscho45duke_djvu.txt (accessed February 10, 2017).
18. Ibid.

Chapter 6: Friendship, Celibacy, and Same-Sex Relationships

1. Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2015), 19.
2. Ibid., 19–20.
3. I am indebted to Wesley Hill's own masterful reflections in his *Spiritual Friendship*.
4. See Jana Marguerite Bennett, *Water Is Thicker Than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singleness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
5. Hill, *Spiritual Friendship*, 20, emphasis original.
6. Ibid., 21–22, emphasis original.
7. Wesley Hill, "Why Can't Men Be Friends?" *Christianity Today* 58.7 (September 16, 2014): 38, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/september/why-cant-men-be-friends-wesley-hill-friendship.html (accessed February 10, 2017).
8. Ibid.