

Social Awareness. Living Truth.

Human Sexuality: Understanding Holy Sexuality

Rosemary Flaaten

DON'T! Don't have sex before you're married. Don't even kiss before you're married. Don't watch porn. Don't wear short skirts. Don't deny your husband good sex. Don't look too long at that beautiful woman. Don't be alone with a man who isn't your husband. All too often these and other messages have been what have characterized the directives for Christian sexual practices.

Beyond the negative warnings, many evangelical churches have shied away from including sexuality as part of discipleship. There are varied reasons for this with many of them stemming from fear. Fear that if we talk too much about sex we'll give our young people ideas (aka: they might start "doing it"). Fear that there will be a backlash from those who think we should stick to Bible teaching and leave these "social" topics to someone else (aka: stay out of our bedrooms). Fear that we'll not be able to approach the topic in a way that connects with your congregation (aka: what does he know, he's been married for how many years?) Fear that if we teach a traditional biblical ethic, we'll be labelled old fashioned and out of touch with current reality (aka: no one really believes, let alone actually lives like that, do they?). Fear that as a leader, our own sexual dysfunction and addictions will be found out (aka: I'd be a hypocrite to teach on Sunday morning after what I did Saturday night).

Unfortunately, as churches and Christian leaders (including parents) have pulled back in fear, our culture has moved with great velocity into the vacuum of silence. What we have failed to teach, culture has proclaimed loudly through every conceivable medium. When we have failed to tell our stories, imperfect as they may be, cultural pied pipers have mesmerized and are leading generations to their sexual, relational and spiritual demise. As a result, what we are experiencing is that "Tragically, the church has absorbed many of the same perspective [of culture] and so has come to reflect the surrounding culture rather than transform it."¹

Also missing in most attempts of discipleship is an understanding of the significant impact that the cultural misinformation has shaped our thinking and actions. This myopic approach to cultural formation runs the risk of trying to incorporate a few biblical boundaries and then send people off to work it out for themselves. We don't need to look too far to see that this approach of "add a little Bible" is not working in helping Christians lead lives that honour God with their sexuality, relationships and love. "Basically, our inability to perceive the influence of cultural misinformation is undermining the power of the Christian gospel to guide and form people so that it can work its pathway to sexuality maturity."²

This paper is primarily a vision paper to help leaders catch anew the "what could/should be" for our sexuality as Christ-followers. "Sexuality can be described as that deep desire and longing that

drives us beyond ourselves in an attempt to connect with, to understand, that which is other than ourselves. Essentially, it is a longing, to know and be known by other people (on physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual levels)."³ The ultimate goal is transformation of our beliefs and behaviours to the original significance of the divine design.

There will be three perspectives presented: Holy Sexuality, Holey Sexuality and Wholly Sexuality. Holy Sexuality will cast the biblical vision. As we come to understand the true purpose and meaning of sexuality, our thinking is renewed as an important first step in discipleship and transformation. Juxtaposed against this biblical vision will be the cultural messages (Holey Sexuality) that have deeply impacted both our reasoning and practise. The light from Holy Sexuality will shine into the brokenness of the Holey Sexuality. The practicality of Wholly Sexuality will frame sexuality within the context of an all-encompassing *holistic discipleship*. Functional theology conveys that how we think impacts our behaviour, but likewise our behaviour shapes our beliefs.⁴

Biblical Vision for Holy Sexuality

The primary meaning of holiness is to be set apart. There were holy objects, holy individuals, and a holy people. In a similar way, it's proper to consider our sexuality as holy in that there are particular purposes and meaning given to it. Although it is ubiquitous, it is not inconsequential in its commonness. Scripture's portrayal of the sacredness of sexuality, marriage and relationships is consistent. Although many biblical characters provide examples of how to demean and tarnish the holy design for sexuality, its value and sacredness is never diminished. Knowing the divine design as created sexual beings and the ultimate purpose of sexuality is critical for a Christ-follower.

The first chapter of Genesis records God's designs and purposes. In the beginning, God created all things. This account ends with humanity being made as the pinnacle of God's creation. Being made in the "image of God", means that humans (both men and women) reflect the very nature of God. This sets us apart from all creation as we are the only creatures enlivened with the breath of God. People are made alive first and foremost by their connection with God.

Genesis 2 recounts in more detail the creation of humanity as male and female.⁵ After the first man, Adam, was created, it says in Genesis 2:18 – The Lord said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." (NIV) It is at this point that God causes Adam to sleep and he forms a woman, thereby creating sexual differentiation. We see then that one of the core purposes of our sexuality and of our nature as people is the longing for connection with others. We are somehow incom-

¹ Grant, Jonathan. Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age. (Grand Rapids: Brazo, 2015) p17.

² Grant, p23.

³ Hirsch, Alan & Debra Hirsch, Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), p213.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection (Grand Rapids: Eedrmans, 2010), p.50.

⁵ For a deeper discussion on this topic consult the SALT paper on Human Sexuality: Understanding Gender.

plete in and of ourselves, and our need for connection has been made intrinsic to our nature as people. This sexual differentiation is not inconsequential. God provided a creature that was like the man (another human versus an animal) but was different from the man. This sexual difference was distinctive and intentional so that there would be wholeness and balance in the world and in relationships. It is also a kingpin in the Christian belief that God's design for marriage is to be reserved for a man and woman.⁶

As Christians, we believe that the fullness of God's nature has been revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus reveals to us that God's nature is that of being a Father who is in relationship to a Son who is Himself also God, as is the Holy Spirit. We can know then that humanity being created as beings-in-community is a reflection of the very nature of God who Himself exists as community (Trinity).

Every part of us is a reflection of our Creator, including our need for love, desire for relationships and expression of our sexuality. These aren't purely human characteristics, rather they reflect a Trinitarian Creator who designed humans from the centre of their love. Humans were created from love and for love. Fundamentally we can say that the two deepest drives in life and the core of our longings consists in having a deep connection with our God and meaningful connections with other people. This need for community and human connection may be described as "social sexuality" which is part of, but unique from, the emotional, physical, spiritual act of sex.

At numerous points within this paper, the reader may feel like I am making blanket statements that although they may apply to a large portion of society, will have exceptions. Where these exceptions apply to your setting, I would encourage you to make a conscious differentiation between your reality and the cultural norm. However, I would also encourage you to consider how culture may have influenced your thinking beyond your conscious bias. Above all, I would encourage you to take these words and prayerfully place them before Jesus, asking Him to reveal to you where there may be truth in your life, church and community and what He wishes for you to do in order to turn the tide of cultural sway back to a sexuality that reflects God's good design.

Divine Design and Purpose

Genesis 2 goes on to describe the nature of marriage between a man and woman, and the purpose and design to the sexual act between them. There are 3 aspects of sex mentioned in Genesis: bonding, pleasure and procreation.

1. Bonding

Genesis 2:24-25 – Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

We can see from the text that sex is an intense physical connection between a man and woman. We know from the way men and women's bodies are designed, that they "fit" physically with one another. This is even seen in the meaning of the Hebrew words used for man and woman. In Genesis 1:27 the Hebrew word for female is neqebah which literally means "punctured;

bored through,"⁷ while male is zakar and means "to leave a mark, to make an impact."⁸ The word choices give a visual representation of what happens to each of the male and female bodies as they come together in sexual union. Additionally, the hormone oxytocin is released during sexual intimacy and orgasm and has a bonding effect similar to the deep connection between a nursing mother and her baby when this same hormone is released. The bonding effect of sex is not an idea that humans conceived; rather it points to a mastermind Creator.

In their connection, the first man and woman knew "no shame". The image we see is of a man and woman standing before one another, naked, vulnerable, and sharing all of who they are without fear. This is a powerful image that reveals the sexual act to be a unique and profound encounter. Sex is more than simply a physical act, but an act of the total giving of oneself to another. Later in Genesis 4, the word used for sexual union is yada, which can be interpreted as "knowing."⁹ We can thus say that sex involves the connection and union of two people at a deeply emotional and physical level. To go even further into the depth of sexual union, Paul, in 1 Corinthians, alludes to how the sexual union of two people joins them spiritually. In summary, sex is a profoundly unique experience of two people deeply bonding – emotionally, physically and spiritually. Because of the intensity of sexual bonding, God's design was to protect this experience within the covenant of marriage. Attempting to experience the full power of sex outside of marriage, erodes the bonding and weakens the significance for which it was created.

I suspect that this is not new to the readers of this paper; in fact, you may very well have taught these concepts. However, the light of these biblical truths is flickering in a culture that scoffs at their significance and has moved away from the transcendence of the sexual union. In the holey sexuality purported by culture, sex is viewed as a means of personal expression and self-satisfaction. More about this later in this paper.

2. Pleasure

This physical connection goes beyond the coming together of certain body parts. Sex was designed by God as something to be enjoyed by men and women. We know this from observable human experience, but Scriptures also witness this fact as we see clearly and unashamedly graphic in the Song of Solomon. In this book, we read of a husband and wife taking delight in one another, oftentimes describing their physical activity in poetic and graphic description. The Bible is not ashamed to talk about the pleasurable nature of sex! Science backs this up by revealing that the hormone dopamine, otherwise known as the pleasure chemical, is released during sexual intimacy. This is also what creates an addictive response and has us coming back for more, much like a drug addict is never satisfied by one fix. "Today we mistakenly either separate sexuality and holiness by a huge chasm or merge them in a pantheistic, immanent unity. The church often makes sexuality nonspiritual, just as the world substitutes a sexual encounter for a spiritual experience."¹⁰

Culture elevates pleasure as the most important goal of sexuality. If my needs aren't being met, then it's time to seek fulfillment elsewhere with someone else. Personal gratification has become an idol that supersedes anything that might be construed as hindering it. Any suggestion of chastity and commitment are rele-

⁶ For a deeper discussion on this topic consult the SALT paper on Human Sexuality: Understanding Homosexuality.

⁷ Crabb, Dr. Larry. (2013) Fully Alive: A Biblical vision of Gender that Frees Men and Women to Love Beyond Stereotypes. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013) p43.

⁸ Crabb, 67.

⁹ Hirsch, Debra. Redeeming sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality. (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2015). p27.

¹⁰ Allender, Dan B. & Tremper Longman III. God Loves Sex: An Honest Conversation About Sexual Desire and Holiness. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014)p19

gated to archaic or even harmful ideology.

At the same time there is the erroneous teaching that women don't want sex. This narrative particularly pervades Christian conversations. Christian wives are told they have a duty before God to satisfy their husband's sexual needs, but seldom is this same directive given to men to satisfy their wives sexual needs (and I don't just mean to connect emotionally before having sex). I will refrain from getting into a debate about which gender has the strongest libido. Rather, we must remember that God's good design made men and women in his image and that nothing in the creation account indicates that men were created with a greater longing for sex than women. Men's and women's bodies were both wired for sexual pleasure and for the emotional connectivity that sexual union offers.¹¹

3. Procreation

In the rolling out of the sexual design, God gives the mandate to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28). This is not a fragmented offshoot of our sexuality, rather it is integral to its design. Being made a sexual person is to have the capacity for sexual intercourse, which has the potential to result in new life. Sex was designed to result in children, and the producing of the family. This is not an optional outcome, rather it is woven into the original design and a primary focus of relationships that all people have been created to experience – we are all part of a family. One of the purposes of sexual activity is geared towards God's vision of the creation of new life. Sex creates life beyond oneself. This again reflects the nature of God, whereby we seek to extend and be a part of life beyond ourselves.

4. Reflects God's Covenant with His People

In Ephesians 5:28-33 the creation of man and woman and how they are to relate within the design of marriage is connected to Christ and his relationship with his Bride, the Church. This passage foreshadows and is an icon of the purposes of God in salvation history. A man leaves his father to unite with his wife in a similar way to how Jesus left his Father to search for a bride, to unite himself to her. This transcendence gives meaning to the marital covenant far beyond any other type of relationship or commitment. The unique part of a marriage relationship is the sexual union. Consummation seals the covenant between a husband and wife in the same way that Christ's blood seals God's covenant of everlasting love.

Culture tells us that to be fully authentic we must express our sexuality in whatever realm we choose. Rather than viewing marriage as protecting the sanctity of the sexual union, marriage is seen as overly restrictive and if things don't work out, then temporary and easily discarded. We've put our confidence in sex but lost our faith in marriage.¹² Individualism, personal happiness and expression have pushed biblical views of marriage to the category of optional while sexual expression is seen as essential. This view is reiterated through the focus on sexual identity as the most basic of all identifiers.¹³

5. Traditional Biblical Sexual Ethics

Within the meaning and purpose of sexuality, God places boundaries and rules around sex (Sexual Ethics). Because sex is such

a powerful reality (uniting two people, producing offspring, and pleasurable), it is reserved for those who have entered into the exclusive and permanent covenant of marriage. It is not an activity to be engaged in any other type of relationship, such as within family, friends, for money, in coercion, etc. Being in a covenant relationship with someone where you commit in "sickness and health, better or worse, rich or poor, for life", is where sex is designed to be life giving.

The traditional biblical sexual ethic elevates sex to be celebrated, but constrained, within the marriage of one woman and one man. Every sexual act outside of this falls within the biblical definition of the sins adultery or fornication. Jesus broadens the definition beyond the physical act to include our sexual images within our thought life that include anyone beyond a spouse.¹⁴ This distills down to a definition of holy sexuality which "consists of two paths: chastity in singleness and faithfulness in marriage... Both of these embody the only correct biblical sexual ethic and unambiguously articulate the exact expression of sexual behaviour that God blesses."¹⁵

Scripture gives warnings around sexual immorality. Prohibitions are not to be understood to mean that sex is bad. But they are there to protect the profound and powerful good of sex. The severity of the warnings of sex outside of marriage, is a reflection of the powerful nature of sex (bonding, pleasure, procreation). It would be much like the difference in warnings between using a power tool and a screwdriver – the more power involved, the more care required. 1 Corinthians 5 & 6 lays out the significance of this power and the care given, because sex impacts our being in ways different than other types of activity or sin.

Another metaphor to describe this is fire. Within a fireplace the fire is powerful, good and enjoyable. When the fire stays within the boundaries of a fireplace we can enjoy its many benefits. If we take even a small burning log and place it on the mat in front of the fireplace (it's still pretty close to the boundaries of the fireplace), the fire will wreak havoc and destruction. This sexual ethic was put in place so that the sexual fire within marriage could burn brightly, affording the husband and wife to bond, enjoy intense pleasure together and to see fruit come from their union. All of this was provided within God's created design for humans and was part of the declaration that his creation was "very good".

6. Sexuality meets Spirituality

At the risk of staying too serious or negative about this topic, we mustn't forget that sexuality and spirituality could be viewed as opposite sides of the same coin. Within our desire for pleasurable sexual experience is the deeper human longing for eternal connection and ecstasy. There is something deeply spiritual about sex, that goes beyond our genitalia. Sexuality as it encompasses our capacity for relationships, our longing for love, our identity as male and female, all point to the Eternal One. "Sexuality is so interlaced with longing for and experience of spirituality that we cannot access one without somehow tapping into the other."¹⁶ When taken seriously, this has huge potential for discipleship.

¹¹ <https://tolovehonorandvacuum.com/> Sheila Wray Gregoire, is a Canadian Author, Speaker and Blogger who speaks boldly about the purpose of joint pleasure in marriages from a Christian perspective.

¹² Grant, p16.

¹³ For a deeper inquiry into sexual identity read SALTS paper Understanding Identity.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:28

¹⁵ Yuan, Christopher. Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Sex, Desire, and Relationships Shaped by God's Grand Story. (Multnomah, 2018) p47.

¹⁶ Hirsch. p23.

Cultural Forces of Disintegration - Holy Sexuality

Sexuality throughout history has always been a messy affair, all too often causing great pain, sadness, and harm to people. The breakdown and effects of sin came from Adam and Eve and immediately we can see how sin impacted their relational dynamics; Adam blames Eve, she blames the serpent, and instead of being companions together, there is a distortion and disintegration. Holes start to appear in their relationship, trust and innocence. God's people are not exempt from sexual brokenness. Paul's letter to Corinthians was addressed to the believers who were living in Corinth famous for temple prostitution and sexual liberties, which was a city not that different from Las Vegas. Sexual brokenness has continued in various forms throughout history. However, things have shifted in our culture in the last 60 years that have shaped our modern worldview around sex, creating a mainstream acceptance for practises that were previously viewed as divergent. These changes and influences affect how we view sexuality, and what we've come to expect from sex in 2020.

Sex as seen in Scripture is an integrated phenomenon. It is tied to a marriage relationship, emotional intimacy, and to the wider commitments of family and community. Much of that integrated vision has been dismantled in our modern culture, creating a disintegrated view and practice of sexuality. This has a profound impact on us today and has large implications for what must be addressed in our modern discipleship. The following gives a snapshot of this shift in our culture's view of sexuality.

1. Sex & Children

Having sex was always connected to having children, or at least the potential. Thus people would be careful about who they had sex with, as it would bind them to those people for life. The consequences of sex were lifelong (in having to raise children), so there were natural boundaries and strong considerations around your choice of sexual activity. This consideration would change drastically in the mid 60's – early 70's as contraception became legal and its use became widespread and normative.

Contraception profoundly changed how people thought about sex, as now the act of sex became totally detached from the consideration of children. People could now experience sex, without thinking of any further consequence or repercussion beyond the immediate experience of sex and their sexual partner. It became detached from the larger idea and meaning of family, community, etc. Access to abortion and the birth control pill obviously plays into this change of view as well. Birth control is used by many married couples as a joint decision to limit the number of children they have. This is a healthy use of birth control. My purpose for this paper is to heighten our awareness of how contraceptives and abortion have impacted our view of sexuality, especially as they are used outside of marriage.

Sex is about pleasure with spouse > Children and family are optional

2. Sex & Marriage

Since sex no longer carried consequences of children, you didn't have to be as invested in the relationship. Marriage lost significance, because you could have sex before marriage with no consequence of kids, and so marriage as the context for sex eroded. The message from culture was that sex was primarily about two people coming together for mutual enjoyment. If that happened in marriage it was great, but it was not essential. This disintegration of sex and marriage is rampant in the practise of sex in

media. Movies started to portray sex as simply an expression of intimacy between two people, whether married or not. It is just one more way of "getting to know" someone.

Sex is about pleasure with another > Marriage is optional

3. Sex & Real Intimacy

The idea that sex involved the entire person (physical, emotional, commitment) also slowly eroded as interest in sex as a distinct activity began to grow. During the sexual revolution of the 1960's, the focus of sex shifted from a mutually enjoyable and mutually satisfying activity to one of personal experience. Our personal right to sexual expression (unconstrained by other's rules or opinions – including the Church and Scripture) was elevated. Sex was exposed and focused on as a fulfilling personal physical experience. Playboy and pornography, focusing simply on the bodily act of sex, became mainstream. This way of thinking of sex and sexuality for the mere sake of pleasure has become the global norm with hyper-sexualized media. People are encouraged to pursue sex for its own benefit to the self, not taking into account how it affects or impacts the person you have sex with. This perpetual message communicates our need for sex, our desire for sex and the great fulfillment of sex as a paramount need. For the most part, we have lowered sex to an animal impulse while giving it god-like power in our lives.

Sex is about my physical experience > Commitment is optional

4. Sex & People

A further disintegration has taken place with the mainstream access to online porn, and the explosion of sexual content online. Now, there is the consumption of sexual acts, feeding desires, achieving orgasm, without another human person. The focus of experience is now on the individual person. The questions around sex are focus on how it will be a good experience for me? How will I find fulfillment and satisfaction? We live in a time where we now no longer need other people. Sex is best when its by yourself. Stimulated alone, fantasizing alone, satisfied alone. A famous Woody Allen quote "Don't knock masturbation. It's sex with someone I love."

Sex is about my personal fantasy, need, and physical experience > Other people are optional

Sex now has become an isolated NEED, DESIRE, EXPERIENCE, WANT ... totally disconnected from family, marriage, commitment and others. The generation of today has expectations for sex built largely on fantasies and disintegrated messages, with a sense of sexuality being a personal right to fulfill. We are immersed in the reality of a highly sexualized culture. Its crucial that we acknowledge that we have been shaped by this train of thought. Cultural formation within the church and Christians has occurred.

Popular culture today teaches that one cannot be whole without being healthily sexual. That is correct. However, for the most part, it thinks of sex only as having sex. That is a tragic reduction ... One can have a lot of sex and still lack real love, community, family, friendship, and creativity. (Sex) should not be asked, all by itself, to be responsible for community, friendship, family, and delight in our lives.¹⁷

The nature of being a disciple of Christ means that you follow His example and become like him. This requires us to undergo a counter-formation: a straightening out of what has become twisted. If we lack the insight to see ourselves as twisted, we

¹⁷ Rolheiser. Ronald. The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality. (Image Books, 2014).

won't be able to work with the Spirit to have us brought back to God's intent for sexuality. The original design was perfect; sin warped; Christ has provided the way to bring us back to that original position of living out God's good design for sexuality. All three parts of this picture are needed for Holy Sexuality.

Challenges to & Pursuit of Holistic Discipleship (Wholly sexuality)

1. Selfish Sexuality

The primary view within culture is that sex as a personal right to fulfill, not as part of a larger reality of relationship, marriage, and family. In fact, sexuality as a whole has become conditioned in human experience to have the exact opposite impulse of what God intended it to be! In the beginning, God said it was not good for man to be alone. The creation of two beings, similar in their humanity but different in their gender, afforded sexual union for bonding, pleasure and procreation. Sexuality was provided to solve the problem of aloneness. The act of sex was intended as a profound activity which binds a husband and wife together, and which further extends life beyond the self through children and the expansion of the family. Yet today, sex is now all about what I get. Sex is about what makes ME happy, not unlike the pursuit of autonomy from God and others at the Fall where personal fulfillment trumped faithfulness.

Holistic Discipleship frames sexuality within the context of covenant not just an experience. God's redemptive and restorative power should be reflected within our relationships, marriages, families and beyond as we live out the virtues of fidelity, chastity and courage. Covenant is integral to God's design for marriage where it is expressed through mutual submission out of reverence for Christ.¹⁸ Having an other-focused sexuality reveals the destructive power of abusing our sexuality both against our own bodies and also the impact it has on the other party. As we shift our thinking away from sex being about fulfilling our own needs, we can learn to cherish the other in their status as a child of God. This is not just for sex outside of marriage but is true within marriages as well. Gary Thomas refers to God as his father-in-law and if Gary should do anything to harm God's daughter, he's going to have to answer to Him.¹⁹

2. Distorted Expectations

On one hand, we view the sexual act casually, as though it doesn't impact us in any significant way.

Our sexual vision has become so distorted and unbalanced that we view casual sex as just a "normal" part of people dating. We've become immune to the destructive forces as youth and children explore sexual experiences at younger and younger ages.

On the other hand, we have an obsession with sex and give to it a weight of responsibility and expectation it was not meant to bear. We are constantly told that sex can meet our needs, bring ultimate fulfillment, bring us the pleasure and peace we desire. Many Christians are led to believe that if they are able to wait for sex until marriage, then sex will always be a wonderful fireworks experience and they will reach the ultimate fulfillment of hap-

piness and humanity. The message portrayed is that if we wait, then God owes us a great sex life. Sadly, many men and women have experienced a deep disappointment and even distrust in God's design when they have waited and not experienced the promised euphoria. Sex is an important part of marriage but it is not the greatest or most important part of the covenant relationship. Additionally, this inaccurate message communicates that sex must be experienced to really live. But sex is NOT essential to life! Jesus modelled this for us, as have many single celibate men and women throughout the ages.

Holistic Discipleship takes sexuality and orders it aright. Wonderfully powerful; powerfully destructive and worthy of including it in every aspect of our discipleship programs. Let's not let culture be the teachers of our children. Let's be proactive in helping our singles find constructive ways to live a healthy sexuality. Let's support the marriages in our church to be vibrant and living out godly sexuality. "Our pastoral approach should be double-edged, seeking to challenge our culture's worship of sexual desire and personal fulfillment while offering a different vision of human flourishing. Christ formation involves both resistance and redirection."²⁰

3. Sexuality as Identity

Sexual desire has become so central in human experience, it now has become the primary arena of personal identity (LGBTQ+). Our sexual feelings and what we desire defines our personhood. Feelings around our likes or dislikes of gender stereotypes, now define our given reality more than our physical bodies. Variants beyond monogamous heterosexuality are proclaimed as freedom. One's sexual behaviour is the basis of identity.

Holistic Discipleship firmly plants our identity coming out of who God says we are, not how we feel about ourselves.²¹ This theological anthropology is a true, faithful and accurate understanding of self that begins with God. We must upend the cultural belief that experience supersedes essence. "True identity is not what I do (for example, I am a writer). Nor is it how I am (for example, I am happy). True identity is who I am. In other words, identity in Christ means union with Christ."²²

4. Dualism

Dualism or practical Gnosticism is the belief in the separation between the sacred from the secular, our minds take precedence over our bodies, feelings trump facts, and theology and morality is private, subjective and relativistic while science is public, objective and valid for everyone.²³ This fractured worldview of relativism has settled into our thinking as Christians as we separate body, mind and spirit and relegate sexuality to the periphery. Portrayal of our bodies and their sexual design is often communicated as gross, dirty or just plain unimportant. This denigration of the body can negatively affect our capacity to enter into a healthy sexual experience once married. "You have so carefully guarded your sexuality and set such rigid boundaries that you have repressed your sexual feelings...Nudity and sexual activity can be scary or even repulsive [when first married]"²⁴

Holistic discipleship weaves God's design and esteem for sexuality through every aspect of discipleship. Our identity as males

¹⁸ Ephesians 5:21

¹⁹ This concept is described in Gary Thomas, Sacred marriage: what if God Designed Marriage to Make us Holy More than to Make us Happy. (Zondervan, 2015)

²⁰ Grant, p186.

²¹ God's proclamation of identity of Jesus at His baptism – Luke 3:21-22

²² Christopher Yuan, p12.

²³ Pearcey, Nancy. Love thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018) p12.

²⁴ Douglas E Rosenau quoted in Lauren F Winner, Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity. (Grand Rapids: Brazo, 2005) p96.

and females made in the image of God remains at the forefront. Because sexuality engages our whole selves, it flows out of our identity as integrated socio-pycho-somatic beings. Our willingness to talk frankly and frequently about the topic will communicate the holistic nature of our identity and the good gift of sexuality. Quelling sexuality is not the secret. The church should be the best place to bring our questions about sexuality, relationships and love and have honest, open conversations and teaching. Instead “we are seeing a disconnect between people’s spiritual world and their Friday-and Saturday-night lives. They seem to be getting their view of God from the church and their view of sex and relationships from popular culture.”²⁵ *Holistic discipleship* will bring these back together so that the teaching of sexuality no longer is limited to the annual “sex talk” for the youth group or in a much dreaded sexuality series.

5. Individualism and Moral Relativism

Culture preaches that we must find the truth within ourselves. We have been captivated by the tantalizing idea that personal integrity calls for freedom and ongoing choice. Modern authenticity encourages us to create our own beliefs and morality. Within the paradigm the most important rule is we must choose that which resonates with who we feel we truly are. This has fuelled the rise and strength of the LGBTQ+ mantra: I must express who I believe I am. This has transposed Pierre Trudeau’s famous line, “The State has no business in the bedrooms of the nation” into the message for many Christians that the church has no business in the bedrooms of the believers. We dare not criticize or judge other people’s choices. The new rules focus on personal happiness and “do no harm” to others. Rather than seeing ourselves as necessarily connected to other people, such that we become our full selves when we’re in relationships, “selfism” views each person as an autonomous being. Within this model, true freedom involves becoming self-sufficient and freeing ourselves from the control and dysfunction of other people.²⁶ This breaking free from the control of others includes parents, the authority of Scripture, and any significant influence of church leadership on moral and sexual decisions.

Holistic discipleship must involve teaching and education regarding the sources of authority that should inform the Christian life. Personal experience and desire are only one source of knowledge, which must be balanced by an understanding of the authority of Scriptural revelation to govern and discern human experience and action. Shaping a broader view regarding sources of moral guidance must involve a consistent explanation of how the commandments and moral guidelines of scripture are not simply prohibitions set against human desire (God as tyrant against my freedoms and happiness), but as guidelines given by a wise creator, who has the best intention towards his creation in mind. A robust theology of the ongoing struggle of sin and temptation in the believer’s life, would also help shape a proper understanding of the warring desires and longings which will realistically continue in the believer’s life. The effects of an individual’s decision on the community must also be recovered in our individualistic culture. Biblical stories such as the sin of Achan (Joshua 7) help illustrate how decisions cannot simply be made based on the impact on the individual.

6. Consumerism

A consumerist attitude towards sexuality promises sexual fulfillment as the ultimate goal. By tapping into our longing for something greater (transcendence), sex is used to sell almost everything. But then a bait and switch occurs and instead of transcendence we get a product that falls short and propels us to try to find the next “perfect” product, vacation, person, lover, mate, etc. We have become sexualized consumers. Both men and women get caught in this as we go on the prowl for the perfect mate. Church culture has accentuated this by encouraging young people to look for and wait for their soul mate with the message that God has one specific person waiting in the wings for them. Online dating has the potential to turn longing hearts into serial monogamists where romantic relationships can be dislocated from the context of natural community. Romantic relationships become something we pursue in private, becoming independent consumers.

Holistic discipleship draws out our God-given desires. Human longing in a general sense, forms the foundation of human personhood and as such must be the decisive core of Christian formation. Christian leaders need to redefine and redeem the concept of desire to encompass far beyond a yearning for sexual fulfillment. By attending to the deepest longings of our hearts, we will help people develop “Thinking Hearts”²⁷ Such discipleship will awaken both the rational and the volition, stimulating our hearts and our heads and thus informing both our thinking and actions.

7. Jaundiced Sexuality

Much of culture’s touting as “great sex” and the church’s “don’t” messages portray a weak, anemic version of God’s design for sexuality. Four skewed beliefs have drained sexuality of its true potency.

1. Sexual desire is simply the longing for a certain type of sensory, physical pleasure. It’s a natural appetite like eating.
2. Sex is about physical pleasure. What’s important is not what we express but how we experience it, thus becoming performers and consumers.
3. If we suppress our sexual urges, it will harm us psychologically, whereas sexual expression leads to health and maturity. (Thanks Freud!)
4. We must free ourselves from negative or unhealthy attitudes and restraints that cause us to feel guilt, shame or regret.²⁸

Holistic discipleship communicates that sexual pleasure and bonding are part of the design. This sets us apart from the rest of God’s creation. Restraint is not harmful but rather builds character²⁹ and elevates the sexual act to its rightful boundaries within the covenant of marriage. Allowing God to restore our purity is not a one-time act. Rather whether married or single, young or old, we need to experience the redemptive power of God restoring and renewing our purity/righteousness in His sight. (Isaiah 6:8). A holistic discipleship elevates our sexuality; it does not debase it, diminish it or discard it.

²⁵ Grant, p18.

²⁶ Psychologist Paul Vitz as quoted in Grant, p75.

²⁷ Grant, p77.

²⁸ Grant, p99-100.

²⁹ 2 Peter 1:3-11

8. Starvation Diet³⁰

Desires are dangerous and must be quelled. When it comes to sexuality, a salvation diet is viewed as the holiest option. A malnourished gospel communicates that “your desires (at least your sexual desires) are bad, and they will only get you in trouble. So you need to repress, ignore, or otherwise annihilate them. But follow all these rules, and you’ll be a good, upstanding Christian citizen.”³¹

As part of the starvation message, we’ve told the lie that pre-marital sex is guaranteed to make you feel lousy.³² Somewhere, somehow, somebody let it out of the bag that this isn’t actually true. To the young person who is experimenting with sex, it usually feels pretty good. Consequences are forgotten in favour of the thrill of the moment. The message of the starvation diet has lost its potency for many in our congregations.

Holistic discipleship enlivens the desires within us and helps us find fulfillment for those desires in God. All our desires, including our sexual desires, point us to something greater. We must grow in our capacity to fully open to God, the designer and fulfiller of our desires. When we live in abandon to this vertical outpouring of love, the need for satisfaction from our horizontal relationships will be measured. Abandonment to God gives us the control that is needed in our interaction with others. All too often, our discipleship focuses on how to control our desires within our horizontal relationships without pursuing an abandoned surrender to the love of God.

9. Fast Food Diet

If given a choice between starvation or a meal of greasy chicken nuggets, most of us would choose the nuggets.³³ Often as a reaction to the starvation diet, the unrestrained consumption of sexual imagery and content has become an epidemic addiction in our culture. People use sex as a way to gratify desires, as well as a way to numb negative feelings, and escape the realities of life. Sex is often the drug of choice, to meet emotional/relational/spiritual needs in ways that are habitual and destructive.

CS Lewis: Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.³⁴

Holistic discipleship invites us to a great feast. The stoic older brother (from the Prodigal Parable in Luke 16) refused to join. The Younger Brother addict realizes his deepest desires are not met by his indulgences and so he returns to his Father’s house where he is invited to a great feast. The mystic learns to acknowledge his deep desire for God as expressed in Psalm 63:1 “You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.”

While we acknowledge the dangers of unrestrained desire and indulgence, we must be wary of swinging too far and naming evil what can be appreciated and enjoyed within God-given limits.

³⁰ West, Christopher. *Fill Their Hearts: God, Sex and the Universal Longing*. (NewYork: Image, 2012) p.14.

³¹ West, p16.

³² Winner, p85.

³³ West, p23.

³⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (HarperCollins, 2001), p26.

³⁵ Yuan, p61.

³⁶ Yuan, p64-65.

Taking delight in other’s gifts and beauty and appreciating the gift of sex in marriage are examples of how to enjoy good things within limits. However, maturity regarding the limits of what any given experience can provide is a long and hard battle for most. Acknowledging the constant battle against idolatry (the temptation to view a limited good as being an ultimate good) is necessary to create a healthy environment for people to honestly wrestle with unruly and out of control appetites and expectations.

It is also wise to keep in mind that ultimate fulfillment of our desire will not be met this side of heaven. The “groaning” of our bodies as the Apostle Paul articulates must be an ongoing expression of the Bride of Christ on earth, who expresses the ache of longing which ultimately cannot be fulfilled by any human experience or union.

“The Moral value of any desire is determined by whether its ‘end’ transgresses or conforms to God’s standard.”³⁵ Each of our desires must be put to the test to see if where they lead us aligns with God’s will. Honest reflection to this question is critical for all Christ followers: What is the end goal or purpose of my desire? If you’re married and your romantic desires are for your spouse, those desires are good and blessed. If you are single and have romantic desires for someone of the opposite sex who is a potential spouse in biblical marriage, then those romantic desires are permissible. All other romantic desires are improper and should not be allowed to grow our flourish. That’s true for everyone – male or female, opposite-sex attracted or same-sex attracted.³⁶

10. Hyper-sexualization

Sexual education has moved from the family to the church to the school system to the internet with an ever decreasing age of exposure. At a younger age and with more graphic detail, our children are being educated by a hyper-sexualized medium where love and commitment are seldom part of the equation for sexual expression. Pornography is the new teacher and it’s accessible on every smart phone and iPad in every home. No one is exempt from its lure. All too often, parents, pastors, educators and politicians stand by ringing their hands and bemoaning the rapid deterioration of a healthy sexuality within our children and young people and yet for the most part these changes have gone uncensored and unchallenged.

A true story: Michelle grew up in a Christian home, was home-schooled and was very active in her youth group. At the age of 12, during online research for a school project, she came across pornographic images. She was horrified with what she saw and quickly shut down the site. But the image had entered her mind and had tantalized her imagination. Although dealing with guilt and shame, she found herself drawn back to see them “just one more time”. She kept it hidden from her parents as she managed to find ways around the parental controls they put in place. A deep addiction to porn and masturbation took hold in Michelle, “the good Christian girl”. Only through the power of the Spirit and accountability through community has Michelle found freedom. Michelle emphatically wishes her church had been a safe place to talk about this. She wrongly believed that she was the only one dealing with this sin.

Holistic discipleship boldly steps into the arena, both pointing

out the pitfalls and providing a grander vision (transcendence) that reflects the true nature and purpose of sexuality. There is an urgent need to talk about sex in our churches and ministry contexts in a way that engages the spirit of the age. We cannot afford to be timid on this topic. Gone are the days where we could just hope it all turned out OK. As leaders, we need to push into an uncomfortable realm where we lead the way to bring God back into our bedrooms. "God is waiting for an invitation to come into our bedrooms just as much as He desires to meet us in the sanctuary on Sunday morning. If we invite God into the bedroom on Saturday night, we will meet God in a new and fresh way on Sunday morning. Worship is adoration directed towards God. He desires it on Sunday morning, He desires it from our living rooms, and He desires it from our bedrooms."³⁷

11. Sacred Siblings³⁸ in God's Family

One way that culture's hyper-sexualization has infiltrated the church is our view of each other as men and women. All too often someone of the opposite sex is seen as either a potential mate or as a threat to our marriage. Hyper-sexualization has made it difficult to relate to each other as brothers and sisters within the household of God.

Holistic discipleship places us first and foremost within the family of God as His children. Over 350 times throughout the New Testament the word *adelphos* is used for brother/sister. It was the key term of intimacy in the Body of Christ.³⁹ True brotherhood and sisterhood equally treats men and women as deserving esteem, honour and care. Discipleship should include how to treat each other using passages such as Ephesians 4 where it talks about how to live in unity and peace as part of God's family. Discipleship that spends more time on how to get along with the whole family sets the groundwork for healthy romantic relationships. So often we go straight into how to have a good marriage without laying the foundation for healthy relationships. Fear and avoidance of sexual immorality should not be the framework for relational or sexual education. Certainly the example of Joseph who fled sexual temptation is important to teach but so is the proactive foundation of how to build healthy relationships, control our sexual urges and treat others the way we would want to be treated. Biblical stories such as the rape of Tamar by her brother Amnon could be used as an example of "this is not how it should be"⁴⁰ similar to how Jesus spoke about leaders trying to grab control and he said "not so with you."⁴¹ The church's ability to live well together may be our most important witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A true story: John, a pastor in a small community, had entered ministry fully espousing the "Billy Graham" rule which ensured that men and women, who are not married, would never find themselves alone in a room together. This stemmed from a desire to protect reputation and marriages. Understandably, the intent was noble and the practice has its benefits. However, over time, John realized it had developed into viewing women as potentially dangerous to his career. He knew it was important to have proper safeguards, but to make a *carte blanche* rule that he must never be alone with another woman, even at a coffee shop, had caused both an emotional and physical chasm that had become a detriment to effective ministry. He realizes he is more likely to install men in leadership positions than a better suited woman because of the ease of meeting. He

acknowledges that the greatest safeguard to an inappropriate relationship is the strength of his own marriage and consistent accountability.

12. Is Marriage the Goal?

We are all striving for the "good life". Culture has sold us the idea that we can have our cake and eat it too. We can have sex whenever we want, however we want, including outside of marriage AND then also have a happy marriage if that is what you choose. All too often those who follow this hedonistic way of life seem to get self-indulgent sex in their youth AND a beautiful spouse. Meanwhile, the church tells us "True Love Waits" with an underlying message that if we make a deal with Jesus to remain a virgin, then He is obliged to bring us a spouse, within our time frame. As decades pass with a litany of single Christians with no spouse and unmet expectations feeding crushing disappointment and fuelling doubt about God's goodness, is it any wonder that the largest portion of our young people are going with the "cake"? Idolizing marriage as the epitome of "the good life", elevates it to a position it was never meant to have.

Holistic discipleship esteems both marriage and singleness as valid options secondary to following Christ. That statement may seem paradoxical – how do you esteem both? By putting Christ-following as the paramount goal, it places marriage or singleness as valid options. Under the Old Testament covenant, marriage was necessary to propagate the people of God – Israel. Without marriage the chosen people would have been overtaken and eliminated by their enemies. Under the New Testament covenant, singleness is a viable option, and according to the Apostle Paul even a preferred option, to see the growth of the family of God.⁴² We need to affirm marriage and the significance to our sexual lives within marriage, without making it the epitome of our faith. Pragmatically, both marriage and singleness should be treated as a vocation within God's mission. One isn't lesser than the other. Our programming, sermon examples, leadership opportunities and community time should all represent the esteem given to marriage and singleness.

A true story: Barry, a single man in his 30s, started attending a mid-size church. He strongly desired to get into the church community and was excited to see that the church encouraged opportunities to show hospitality and meet new people by organizing events called "Dinner for Eight". Barry contacted the pastor and asked if they ever had "Dinner for Seven"? The pastor replied that they would do their best to find Barry a date.

13. Esteeming Singleness

Culture has reduced sexuality to sex, when in actual fact our identity as sexual beings is in greater part "affective" or social sexuality. Affective sexuality describes our fundamental need for relational intimacy across a broad range of nurturing friendships rather than a strictly, myopic view of sexual encounters. The challenge as a single who wishes to follow the Biblical sexual ethic is to find a means to express their sexual energy inline with this divine purpose.

Holistic Discipleship promotes a range of deep and diverse relationships that properly affirm our personhood and sexuality. Our churches need to facilitate genuine communities of friendships that don't segregate singles from married, but rather integrate

³⁷ Flaaten, Rosemary. *A Woman and Her Relationships: Transforming the Way We Connect*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2007) p161.

³⁸ Edwards, Matthew, Rogers. *Mixed Ministry: Working Together as Brothers and Sisters in an Oversexed Society*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel. 2008). p22.

³⁹ Yuan, p129.

⁴⁰ 2 Samuel 13

⁴¹ Mark 10:43

⁴² Danylak, Dr Barry. *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010)

as a diverse family. We must promote social spaces and ministry contexts within which peoples' fundamental needs for relational intimacy are being met and where our social/sexual energy can be expressed in line with its divine purpose.

A true story: Judy is a single woman in her 50s. She had longed to get married but refused to sit around and wait for Mr. Right to come along. She has used her time, talents and finances to reach out and make a difference in her community. When asked how she has dealt with sexual frustration, she replies that the best way to deal with unfulfilled sexual desire was to pour herself into relationships and opportunities where she was "on mission". Diverting her attention from her unmet needs to the needs to others was her most effective tactic to getting through the lonely nights. Was it easy? No. But it wasn't impossible and in the long run, the rewards far out shone the challenges.

14. Marriage as an Icon

With sexual experience being divorced from the marriage covenant, we've experienced a significant drop in the relevance and ultimately, the importance of marriage. Identifying the idolatrous position we've given to marriage does not deteriorate its significance. Rather the opposite occurs. Idolatry, by definition, is taking something that is good in its rightful second place and giving it first place, god-like stature. Marriage in its rightful place, reflects God's relationship to us His Bride, the Church.⁴³ Sex is the unique activity that occurs between a husband and a wife, that is not to be shared with anyone else. Culture has sought to trivialize and empty sex of its depth and significance. Christ elevated sex and set it apart.

Holistic Discipleship uses marriage as an icon that reveals to us how God views us His Bride. Likewise, the relationships of love and sacrifice that Christ revealed to us, is a symbol of how we are to treat each other. Rather than marriage being just a status we all aspire to, we should view it as a reflection of how we should relate to God and each other. For those who enter into a marriage covenant it is something to be protected and nurtured. Faithful marriages, where sex is mutually enjoyed, could be one of the most important witness to the gospel within our culture. Such relational apologetics could have a huge impact on our communities. Imagine if Christians had the strongest marriages and best sex lives and were willing to talk about them? Imagine if Christian couples were willing to disciple others as they shared their marital and sexual journey? Just imagine the changes this authenticity could have on our congregations!

15. Sanctification

When we sin by stepping outside God's design for sexuality, we find ourselves like Adam and Eve in the Garden, aware of our sinfulness and shirking in shame as we try to hide from God. Shame is a cruel master as it tells us we do not warrant God's love or forgiveness.

Holistic Discipleship teaches not only justification but the three P's of Sanctification.⁴⁴

1. Positional sanctification – We are dead to sin and a new creation in Christ Jesus.⁴⁵
2. Progressive Sanctification – the daily process of struggle and growth is a work of God in and through us, making us more and more like Christ.⁴⁶
3. Perfect Sanctification – the future aspect of sanctification that speaks to the believer's perfect state in glory.⁴⁷

16. Mimetic Sexuality

We were created to be followers. Scripture describes us as sheep – creatures that don't think for themselves but rather follow the crowd or the leader to which their ear is attuned. Modern sexuality would string us the line that we all do our own thing, but in actual practice we end up modelling our lives after something and someone. Various forms of media have become our shepherd.

Holistic Discipleship expresses sexuality from a discipleship model [so that] we intentionally use the influential relationships we have so we can train others and model how to surrender sexuality to God. We sexually disciple so that followers of Christ can know what it means to yield every area of life⁴⁸ to the lordship of Christ Jesus, including every area of sexuality.⁴⁹ Romans 12:1-2

This is exemplified in Paul's directive "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."⁵⁰ Together we search Scripture to discover our true identity and meaning to life and relationships. We make Scripture our primary text, allowing it to read us. We tell our stories of both the mountain top successes and dark painful valleys. Public and private testimony of God's work becomes narrative discipleship that gives tools to navigate life and love. Its not enough for leaders to simply teach, we must show what the Christian story looks like. A leader's sexual life is not his or her private business. Rather, the pastoral challenge of living a faithful and disciplined sexual life provides the fodder to becoming storytellers who teach through the gestures and rhythms of their lives as much as with their words. What story are you telling?

17. Who Belongs?

The religious elite of Jesus' day stood unswervingly on the Law that sexual sin was to be dealt with in the harshest of ways. Discriminate application was used to keep out the sinful. Churches can be guilty of taking the stance Belief + Behavior = Belonging. Getting your life (including your sex life) "straightened out" is not a requirement to worshipping together and enjoying community. All who come to the doors of our church or join our community, should feel that they belong.

Holistic Discipleship welcomes all into the fellowship of the believers and then invites them to move further into following Jesus in a way that reflects His life and character. "Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to new life."⁵¹ The Great Commission is given to us so that we will teach the disciples entrusted to us to obey everything Jesus has commanded us to do.⁵²

⁴³ Ephesians 5:22-33

⁴⁴ Yuan, p144-145.

⁴⁵ Romans 6:11; 2 Cor. 5:17; Hebrews 10:10; 1 Cor. 1:30; Romans 6:5

⁴⁶ Hebrews 10:14; 1 John 1:8; Romans 6:22

⁴⁷ 1 Thess. 5:23; Rev. 21:5; 1 John 3:2; 2 Cor 3:18

⁴⁸ Romans 12:1-2 "Offer you bodies as living sacrifices"

⁴⁹ Dr Juli Slattery, *Rethinking Sexuality: God's Design and Why It Matters*. (New York: Multnomah, 2018) p28.

⁵⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:1

⁵¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer as quoted in Debra Hirsch, p193.

⁵² Matthew 28:18-20

Our Commissioning

Isaiah 6:1-8 lays out a 4-stage perspective on holiness, sin, restoration and commissioning.⁵³

Isaiah receives a vision that first and foremost reveals the holiness of God. Despite all the upheaval that is happening in the world around him, he sees with fresh eyes that God is still in control and that the whole earth is full of His glory. It is from this overwhelming deep awareness of God's holiness, that Isaiah also sees afresh his own sinfulness. Without a fresh awareness of God's holiness, our own awareness of our sinfulness can start to wane. Humans have a tendency to compare and in doing so we can usually find someone who is in worse shape than we are. We don't need to look too far before we can find someone whose sin seems more abased than ours. Sexual sin has made its way to the top of the list of sins – some of which have often been labelled as unforgivable. How often have we listed homosexuality or adultery as the chief sins among us while leaving slander or greed with a simple shake of the head or slap on the wrist. All sin is a "missing of the mark". It is only as we compare ourselves to the holiness of God that we see our sinfulness for it is – ubiquitous and woeful.

With this acute consciousness, God initiates a restoration of Isaiah's purity. God's atonement restored that which had been guilty, bringing healing to Isaiah's brokenness. Nothing is unforgivable but neither are our choices unimportant. This is the seeming paradox that becomes challenging in our discipleship training. We want people to make choices in their lives, relationship and sexuality that reflect God's good and perfect design. Choosing to follow God's directives will lead to fulfillment, peace

and joy in both this life and the next. But when, and note I did not say if, we fall short of these directives, God's grace and forgiveness is always there to redeem and restore. The live coal that the angel used to touch Isaiah's lips purified in the same way that the blood of Christ purifies and cleanses our hearts and minds.⁵⁴ Our responsibility as leaders is to firstly have experienced the purifying blood of Christ in every realm of our own lives. We must pursue sexual purity but when we fail, whether in thought or deed, we must run to the cross, crying out that God would create in us a clean heart.⁵⁵

After Isaiah has been overcome with God's holiness, his own sinfulness and has experienced the purification that comes through God alone, he is compelled to respond to God's invitation. In response to the request "Who shall I send?", Isaiah jumps at the chance to go and be the mouthpiece and the living example of God's love to the people around him.

Will we go? Will we unreservedly bring the truth of God's word regarding sexuality to our people? Will we create an environment where nurturing and encouragement is provided as our people live out these critical truths? Will we do our very best, so help us God, to balance love and truth?

Teaching holy sexuality as part of a holistic discipleship is not going to be without its challenges from those both within or outside our congregations. But to avoid it or to simply represent sexuality as a negative ethic loses the brilliance and power of the original design. Much rides on our willingness to step into the foray of this topic. May God bless you and keep you as you respond to his invitation with a resounding "Send Me!".

⁵³ This same progression is the framework within Psalm 51 written by David after his murder and adultery are revealed.

⁵⁴ Hebrews 9:14

⁵⁵ Psalm 51:10

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About the Author

Rosemary Flaaten teaches sexuality, spirituality and leadership at a number of post secondary institutions in Alberta. She frequently preaches and teaches at Centre Street Church, as well as pulpit fill for other congregations. She leads international leadership training groups for several organizations and is also presently working on her DMin in Leadership from Denver Seminary. Rosemary is married with three adult children. If you wish to discuss any of the topics in this paper or have Rosemary speak at your church, contact her at rflaaten@shaw.ca.

Editorial Comment

The SALT Commission is grateful to the author for providing us with their academic and personal exploration of this topic. We encourage all readers to prayerfully consider how to integrate this culturally relevant information into their Biblical worldview and ministry context.

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