



GOD

YOU & SEX

A PROFOUND MYSTERY

DAVID WHITE

FOREWORD BY PAUL DAVID TRIPP

“A student of Scripture and seasoned counselor, David White doesn’t just *tell* us that sexuality is a divine gift, he *shows* us vividly and compellingly how that is so and why it matters. God created sexuality for his glory and our good, and we must think his thoughts after him about it.”

David B. Garner, Dean of Faculty and Vice President of Global Ministries, Westminster Theological Seminary

“We need discipleship in the area of sexuality, which is more than a clearer version of the ‘birds and bees’ talk our parents may (or may not) have given us. We need to learn to think biblically and talk conversationally about sexuality. That is what David White provides in *God, You, & Sex*.”

Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling, The Summit Church, Durham, NC; general editor for *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused* (churchcares.com)

“*God, You, & Sex* is a book for everyone. It is timely, honest, readable, and vulnerably practical. Walk with David White through the joys and pleasures, pain and shame, as well as the brokenness and delight of sexuality in a fallen world. You will discover God’s grace and hope all along the way.”

Peter A. Lillback, President, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“David White articulates God’s story on sex with faithfulness and clarity, offering us the perspective we need to both live and teach about sex in all its glory to God’s glory!”

Walt Mueller, The Center for Parent/Youth Understanding

“Sometimes one reads a book and finds it radically different than what one expected. I just didn’t expect the game-changing nature of this book. I don’t believe I’ll think about God’s gift of our sexuality the same way ever again. Read it and rejoice . . . and thank me for commending it to you.”

Steve Brown, Broadcaster; seminary professor; author of *Talk the Walk*

“*God, You, & Sex* invites the believer to think biblically about their sexuality. Its pages paint a bigger and bolder perspective on how the Life-giver calls us to be life-givers both biologically and spiritually. This resource is foundational for singles and married alike.”

Karen Hodge, Coordinator for Women’s Ministries, Presbyterian Church in America; author of *Transformed: Life-taker to Life-giver* and *Life-giving Leadership*

“In the presently over-served Christian market of books on sex, this is the ‘one more book on sex’ that *needed* to be written. David White shows an unusually deep understanding of the spiritual meaning of God-created human sexuality, so needed in our day of frenzied sexual obsession.”

Peter Jones, Director, *truthXchange*; adjunct professor, Westminster Seminary California; author of *The God of Sex*

“To the one who wondered if sex was better than chocolate, David White’s *God, You, & Sex* says a resounding yes. But White proves that sex is also a fearful mystery—of God’s passionate love for the Bride. Let those who would enjoy its pleasures hold to God’s sure terms of use.”

Andrée Seu Peterson, Senior writer, *World* magazine

“David White raises the stakes as he leads us to consider how created and redeemed sexuality leads us deeper into our relationship with God. I warmly commend his work.”

Liam Goligher, Senior Minister, Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia

“In the midst of widespread cultural confusion and sexual brokenness, this book is an excellent tool for any Christ follower seeking to develop and nurture a healthy view of sexuality.”

Hunter Beless, Host, *Journeywomen* podcast

“With a tender pastoral heart, David weaves compassion through his biblical treatment of sex, marriage, and singleness, aware that he is speaking into a broken world. This is a book every Christian should read and that pastors and counselors should plan to keep on supply to give away.”

Marty Machowski, Family pastor; author of *God Made Boys and Girls*, *The Ology*, *Long Story Short*, and other gospel-rich resources

“With great wisdom and the tender care of a pastor, White teaches that sex and sexuality are ultimately about God and our relationship with him in Christ. David has written a timely word and a book that deserves a wide reading.”

Raymond Johnson, Senior Pastor of Christ Church West Chester, West Chester, PA; author of *I See Dead People: The Function of the Resurrection of the Saints in Matthew 27:51–54*

“All too often people view sexuality quite narrowly on a horizontal level, but David White rightly challenges his readers to include the vertical perspective—to include God, the creator of sex—and what a difference it makes! This book will help you personally, it will help your marriage, it will help your church, and it will help you interact with others on these challenging subjects.”

Timothy Witmer, Emeritus Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia; author of *The Shepherd Leader*

“David gives us the needed message that not just sex, but other features of relationships like falling in love are ‘very good.’ His decades of experience mean that his advice is never trite, is sensitive to the variety of experiences with sex that people have, and encompasses contemporary problems.”

Sam A. Andreades, Pastor; speaker; author of *enGendered* and the blog, *Affirming Gender*

“You’ll learn a lot from White’s direct and gracious handling of all the thorny, contemporary issues of sex and sexual expression, but most of all you’ll see how God’s heart longs for you and how yours can respond to him in return.”

William P. Smith, Senior Pastor for Renewal Main Line; author of *Parenting with Words of Grace* and numerous other books and booklets

God, You, & Sex

A Profound Mystery

DAVID WHITE



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For Jennifer,
bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother
and hold fast to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.”

This mystery is profound, and I am saying
that it refers to Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:31–32

Foreword

There is a catalog of adjectives you could use to describe a good book,

thoughtful

provocative

thorough

insightful

practical

illuminating

biblical

approachable,

and I would use all of these terms to describe this wonderful book. But there is another term that immediately came to mind as I worked my way through what White has gifted us with in this book, *timely*. It would be hard to imagine a book that could speak with more helpfulness and clarity to this cultural moment than the book you're now reading. It would not be an overstatement to say that sex is everywhere around us and yet almost nowhere understood. In some way, sex hits you every day—from its use in advertising, its constant presence in entertainment, its use as a political tool, and its dominance on the internet—it's virtually impossible to avoid. In case you haven't noticed, you live in a culture that is so sex-focused it is nearly sex-obsessed. It has so infiltrated the oxygen of our culture that it is almost impossible not to breathe it in. Sadly,

little of the sex talk that is in the air around is good, true, honorable, wholesome, or faithful to the Creator's design.

So, we need writers who will take on this topic, not in a way that is overly critical, defensive, protective, or in some way sex-negative. But rather in a way that celebrates this beautiful gift from the Creator's hand and then helps us to understand what it has been designed to be—not just so we can escape harm, but so we can celebrate it in a way that submits to and worships the Giver more than the gift. Having read this book, I am convinced that David White is just the type of writer I have described. Let me explain to you why I think this is so.

1. *He understands the individual, corporate, cultural, and church confusion about sex.* From advertising to erotica, sex has been misrepresented, misused, misunderstood, and poorly defined. As you read, you will realize that White doesn't just understand this confusion from the helicopter view as a theoretician, but also at street level. He has walked through that confusion himself; he has given many years of his life and ministry to walk through that confusion with others, leading them to a greater understanding and the personal freedom of biblical clarity. He knows well the confusing siren voice of temptation, the confusing pain of past misuse and abuse, and the confusing hurt of regret. He is able to speak into the confusion with a simplicity of wisdom that is so needed in the middle of the din of so many conflicting voices.
2. *He understands that you simply cannot understand sex horizontally.* Sex comes from God, so it connects you to God whether you know it or not, and because it does, it is always an act of the worship of something. Perhaps the most powerful part of this book is its discussion of how sex reveals God to us and is meant to connect us to the kind of relationship to him that grace makes possible. White powerfully demonstrates to us

that it is only when you understand sex vertically that you will experience in horizontal human relationship what it was designed to be, experiencing and celebrating its beauty.

3. *He understands that sex connects you to the deepest and scariest of questions.* There are two cries in the heart of every human being. The first is, “Will someone love me?” The second is even scarier, “Once they get to know me, will they still love me?” These questions are answered first and foremost by the self-sacrificing love of the Lord Jesus. He was willing to die so that we would know the joy and security of active, eternal, unshakable love, the kind of love you could never earn and that won’t be taken away when you mess up. White knows that one of the things that makes sex sacred and holy is that the self-sacrificing, patient, tender, vulnerable, other-centeredness of sex between a man and a woman in marriage is meant to be a visible representation of God’s love for us in Christ Jesus.
4. *He understands that sex, like any other form of pleasure, requires boundaries.* White understands that God created pleasure, and to enjoy the pleasures he created brings him glory. But he also understands that pleasure without boundaries never goes anywhere good. God’s boundaries are not put in place to rob us of pleasure, but so that we can be fully free to enjoy those pleasures in a way that does not harm us or harm our intimacy with him and others. White knows that pleasure isn’t ultimate—God is; and remembering this, is where safe sex begins.
5. *Finally, he understands that the Bible is not sex-negative.* I would imagine that if you asked people on the street about the Bible and sex, the bulk of them would communicate that the Bible leaves little room for us to be free to enjoy sexual pleasure. But David White

knows that the Bible celebrates a God who is good and who blesses us with good things. Sex, as designed by God and enjoyed inside of God's boundaries, is a very good and beautiful gift from the hand of a wise and loving Creator. So, the Bible does not understand sex as a bad and dangerous thing, but rather understands that any good thing God gives us becomes a bad thing when it is used, enjoyed, or manipulated outside of God's loving and protective plan.

So, White has penned here a very needed and timely book. It is a welcomed note of sanity and clarity in a moment of massive insanity and confusion when it comes to sex. It will clarify your thinking while it makes you thankful for God's good gift and the wisdom he gives us as to how that gift is to be used.

Paul David Tripp
7/14/19

Introduction

Do we really need another Christian book about sex? We have plenty of books decrying pornography and homosexuality, numerous how-to manuals expositing the Song of Solomon for married couples, and many books explaining and defending the Bible's teaching on sexuality. Such books are often helpful and commendable. However, I have been concerned by the relative absence of a central feature of the Bible's teaching on sexuality . . .

Sex is about God. He invites us into a deeper understanding of who he is by creating us in his image as sexual beings. Because this is a fundamental aspect of our humanity, regardless of whether we are single or married, all Christians have much to learn about God through their sexuality. God is a God of pleasure, intending that all his good gifts would lead us to a deeper relationship with him. So, this audacious claim that sex is about God flows from the reality that God is our Creator who delights to infuse creation with experiences of pleasure. Humanity is distinct from the rest of the created order because we are fashioned in the image of God. As God's image-bearers, our sexual differentiation as male and female and, for some of us, our sexual practice in heterosexual marriage are ways God reveals himself to the world—calling out to all creation, "I AM!" The goal of this book is to develop a positive, biblical theology of sex grounded in this conviction.

Sex is about God and you. As the gospel story unfolds, Scripture depicts an ever-increasing intimacy with our Creator God, culminating with Jesus revealed as the ultimate Bridegroom. God created marriage as the context for sexuality so that we would have an understanding of his relationship with us! One of the most remarkable statements in the Bible about sexuality comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. While teaching about marriage, Paul referred to God's intention at creation, concluding with an amazing statement, "'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31–32). As with the discovery of a new island or deeper oceanic trench, this mystery has wonders that need to be explored! What does it mean that marriage is about Jesus and the church? How does Jesus as our Bridegroom impact our understanding of what it means to be his? What can we learn about our relationship with God through our romantic drive and our longings to love and be loved? How does the intensity of sexual desire reveal something God wants us to know about his heart toward us?

The New Testament teaches that the love of God is the foundation for our entire lives: "God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God" (1 John 4:16). In the Old Testament, God rescued Israel from slavery—a great act of love—that led to the greatest commandment for life with him: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5; also see Matthew 22:37–38). A mutual exchange of love is fundamental to who we are: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). We are commanded to love God yet told that our love is reciprocal, flowing from his initiation. Reciprocal love, given and received in the context of God-ordained relationships, is central to what it means to be human and to the gospel of Jesus. As we will see, a biblical understanding of sexual love is

anchored in this redemptive reality. Since falling in love is one of the most glorious human experiences, it is incredibly important to see God's love for us in this glorious light. We are created with a romantic drive because God's heart has the passion of a lover! When we fail to see Jesus as our Bridegroom or even our Lover, we are short-circuiting our understanding of his love and, therefore, the potential depths of our love for God. What this means is that *the gospel* is at the heart of human sexuality. Our reluctance to broadly proclaim God's design for sexuality is actually a hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel to a lost and dying world that's obsessed with sex but blind to its true glory.

Sex is good. Much has been distorted by a fallen world, and our own hearts are pulled in many unholy sexual directions. But sexuality remains part of God's good creation. After making humanity male and female in his image—the crowning achievement of all creation—God looked over his vast handiwork and declared it “very good” (Genesis 1:31). Though sexuality often becomes twisted in opposition to God's design, it still remains good. Neither the sexual decadence of our culture nor our shame over our own broken sexuality should prevent us from loudly declaring God as the creator of this good gift and giving him glory as the Giver.

Unless we understand sexuality is ultimately about God and our relationship with him, we will not have a complete picture of the God we worship. Christians have a wonderful opportunity to help people inside and outside the church learn that sex is glorious because its Creator is infinitely more so. The delight we experience through romance, pursuit, and passion are dramas intended to point beyond themselves to the One who came to pursue his beloved, even though this love meant passing through trials, suffering, and death. Every good fairy tale or story of heroism reflects the greatest love story, the wonder of the love of God for us, which is shown in the Son who came to rescue his bride held by the darkest enemy

in the deepest pit, so that we might all *really* live happily ever after. But understanding the passion and heart of the Rescuer is too often absent from our meditation and proclamation of the gospel. I love how C. S. Lewis describes the infinite bliss awaiting us, foreshadowed in the gift of sexuality: “The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water.”¹ There is glory in our current experience of sexuality, but it is a dim shadow of the wonders awaiting us.

Why These Things Matter

Sex is in our face more than ever before. The sexual revolution has finally come to bitter fruition as teens and young adults increasingly shun relationships, embracing the hookup culture. The rise of the internet and the more recent proliferation of mobile devices has made pornography cheaper, more accessible, and easier to hide. The cultural message is clear: sex brings life. Denying the tug of your flesh relegates you to a shrunken existence. In the face of these messages and the pervasiveness of sexual temptation, Christian men and women need a compelling reason to obey God with their sexuality.

For almost twenty years I have served at Harvest USA, a Christian ministry helping men and women overcome sexual sin. (There’s a real need for all those books that have been written!) I have also been educating churches in America from coast to coast about these issues. In this work I have observed several concerning trends.

First, pornography use is growing in the church and there seems to be an increasing acceptance that this is “just the way things are.” This is exacerbated by an approach to Christianity that values personal authenticity more than holiness and

is wary of any teaching that sounds legalistic. In our current situation we urgently need to recover the gospel truth that our sexuality is about God and our relationship to him. This needs to be the foundation for any teaching on sexual behavior.

Second, while the world is obsessed with sex, the church remains either silent or confused in its teachings about sex. Although sexuality is a good gift from God, too often the church's message has been limited to making sure all the prohibitions are crystal clear and instructing teens to wait for marriage. On the other extreme, some Christians embrace sexuality with a zeal that seems to baptize the world's obsession by focusing on enhancing pleasure without considering God's design for sexual practice in marriage. The church needs to have a balanced, biblical approach to proclaiming the goodness of sexuality as it points to God and his relationship with us.

Third, a significant culture shift has occurred among Christians in recent generations regarding sexuality. My experience with Christians under thirty-five is that many are unashamedly sexually active in their serious relationships. There is growing confusion about what the Bible means when it refers to sexual immorality. Many millennial Christians think only intercourse really counts. Some Christian writers suggest traditional morality is too uptight and there should be some permissible sexual activities prior to marriage, commensurate with the seriousness of the relationship. Not only does this add to the current confusion, it encourages sinful behavior that wounds individuals when relationships fail, and it erodes the fullness of delight that God wants them to experience should they enter marriage.

Fourth, there has been a recent seismic shift in evangelical views on same-sex intimacy. Now that the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision has made gay marriage the law of the land, there is greater acceptance in the church. Prominent Christians in the media and increasing numbers of younger evangelicals

are giving enthusiastic support to same-sex relationships. But most pastors do not seem to realize this shift has been underway for a long time. The average Christian spends far more time consuming secular media and entertainment than in prayer, Scripture, or fellowship with other believers. Further, many younger Christians believe homosexuality should be placed within the narrative of God's good creation, rather than a consequence of the fall into sin. Unlike a generation ago, most Christians personally know someone who experiences same-sex attraction, and these personal connections help shape those Christians' convictions about sexuality. While we need compassion for those who have suffered bullying, exclusion, and other mistreatment, Christian sexual ethics need to be rooted in Scripture. Only there do we learn how our sexuality points beyond itself to our mysterious union with God.

Who This Book Is For

My prayer is that this book will enable you to see God's romantic heart for you. It is beautiful and secure to be loved by a parent. There is joy and excitement in a sibling relationship. Friendship provides comfort, affirmation, and intimacy. But despite all the blessings of these human relationships, which reflect our relationship with God, to be delighted in and desired by the Lover is life-changing. My hope is that, as you spend time in prayer, read the Bible, and sit quietly in God's presence, this book will help your sexuality become an avenue in which you are able to worship God in deeper ways because you have an increasing awareness of his love and desire for intimacy with you.

Having greater awareness that sexuality points to God and his relationship with you will inevitably help you in the challenges you face sexually. I am convinced that one tactic of the enemy is to cause us to separate these two things. He's ruthlessly committed to keeping you from learning the depths

of God's love for you, and he seeks to thwart our love and worship at every turn. Growing to see God as your Lover provides a new approach to resisting the world, the flesh, and the devil.

The church also faces increasing antagonism from the wider culture. I suspect you have had the experience of mentioning to an unbeliever that you are a Christian and then being asked, "So, do you hate gays?" I want Christians to have a thorough biblical understanding of why God's design for sex is a lifelong union between a man and a woman. And I want you to be able to connect Christian sexual ethics to a broader Christian worldview.

Likewise, I want to offer guidance to Christian parents on how to help their children develop a healthy sexuality. More than simply telling our kids, "Wait until you're married," this book will equip you to connect your children's sexuality to the rest of their life in Christ, and, in age-appropriate ways, help your kids see God in a wonderful, new light. This is incredibly important as they approach the teen years and begin to wrestle with their emerging sexual desires. We'll consider many of the issues confronting your kids and provide talking points for navigating those conversations. No parent relishes these talks, but it is critical for parenting in the twenty-first century.

This May Be Hard for You . . .

These pages will be easiest to read for those who are happily married and who experience a passionate and fulfilling sex life. Your experience of this good gift naturally leads to worship of the Giver. But that's a small percentage of people who will pick up this book. So my prayer is the chapters that follow will be more helpful to people who are *not* in that category.

All marriages involve pain and challenges, and it is possible that, as you read this book, you are in a very difficult marriage. Your experience of this relationship, and maybe sex specifically, has been fraught with deep pain and disappointment.

While all couples struggle with sex in some fashion, many also struggle with an inability to conceive children. Whatever your particular struggles, the following pages may seem to be a mockery of your trial. I hope you will see that Jesus profoundly understands the brokenness of life and marriage in a fallen world. He is not removed from suffering. The “man of sorrows” (Isaiah 53:3) was wounded by his beloved repeatedly in countless ways. He understands your experience and wants to meet you in your pain. He also perseveres in love, so he knows the grace you need so you will “not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

If you are single, I am most eager for you to read this and be encouraged by God’s heart for you. The experience of singleness can be incredibly difficult. I am poignantly aware of the limitations of a book in assuaging the sadness of lost or unfulfilled hopes. “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Proverbs 13:12). But I pray that the One who understands the challenge of singleness through his own human experience will meet you in these pages and assure you that there is an “eternal weight of glory” coming that renders all our current struggles light and momentary by comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17–18).

If you are unmarried and struggle with same-sex attraction, you face additional challenges. Perhaps you believe heterosexual marriage is impossible for you. My hope is that as you read this book, the issue of your sexuality will be gathered up into God’s incredible work of redemption, so as your identity is more firmly rooted in him, you will find an ability to rest in Jesus, the ultimate Bridegroom.

If you are a survivor of sexual abuse, any discussion of sexuality can be jarring. If you have not processed your traumatic past with a counselor, I would encourage you to consider this as an important part of healing. Even if you have, reading this may still be hard. When your experience of something beautiful has been defiled, it can be deeply troubling to be

repeatedly told that it really *is* glorious. With that disclaimer, this book is about how sex points us to Jesus. Although sexuality is profoundly broken in this world, the hope of the gospel is the renewal of all things. The end of the gospel story is recreation, when the entire cosmos will be made new, every tear will be wiped away, and every pain will be healed. In the great words of J. R. R. Tolkien, the day is coming when everything sad will come untrue.² I hope in these pages your eyes will be lifted beyond your suffering in this world to glimpse the glory awaiting you and the avenging and undoing of all your suffering. One day the world will be made right.

Sexual Redemption: My Story

You may be curious why someone would spend nearly twenty years working in a ministry specifically devoted to helping sexually broken people, as well as teaching the church about sex, sexuality, and gender. I am a man who experienced profound brokenness in my sexuality but wondrous redemption. I was exposed to pornography as a young child. There are some things you can never forget, like when your friend who lives next door says, “You’ll never believe what I found in the basement . . .” This led to a lot of confusion because as a preschooler, I did not know how to process this information. Not to mention the feelings of guilt and shame. Despite my confusion, I intuitively knew looking at these images was wrong. Childhood sexual play with another neighbor compounded my confusion, guilt, and shame. Everything was further exacerbated as I hit puberty, discovered masturbation, began stealing porn magazines from the local drugstore, and watched hard-core films on VHS tapes with friends. Eventually I became sexually active and brought a porn worldview into my real-world experience.

Two decades after my first sexual exposure, I came to faith at twenty-four. The Spirit of God worked in dramatic ways.

Incredibly, my insatiable desire for porn dissipated.³ I praise God for delivering me from this struggle before the internet was a standard household utility, mercifully sparing me from the scourge of online porn. Equally astounding (for a single guy in my twenties), I found incredible freedom from masturbation. So by God's amazing grace, I didn't bring overt, technicolor sexual sin into my marriage, but the undoing of all that past sin, as well as the worldview behind it, took a long time. It was years before there was appropriate freedom and joy in my sexual experience. Therefore, I write as one who has experienced *redemption* in this area of life. By God's grace, I now experience a sexuality that leads to worship of God and a deepening emotional and spiritual oneness with my wife.

There is a further twist to my story of intimacy and sexuality. I had been teaching that sex was about Jesus for almost a decade when my first wife, Sandy, passed away suddenly from a blood infection following her first chemo treatment for breast cancer. As I continued to teach these things, I had a profound awareness that God wanted me to *live* them. During that season of singleness, I needed to experience the hope of Jesus as my "spouse" in the face of unsatisfied desires. God used this experience to impress this deeply on my heart and to prepare me for my current marriage to Jennifer.

I am not saying that I have it all together. I battle temptation daily, and I need to continually ask for grace to love Jennifer well and holistically. But I write with *hope*. I have experienced the goodness of God as he's brought freedom to an area of my life where I once was enslaved. I want to share aspects of this transformation as a means of encouragement, realizing that many readers wrestle intensely with their sexuality. Not everyone has sunk to my depths (though others have gone deeper), but we all have a sexuality impacted by sin. All of us need sexual redemption so that we, with pure hearts, may have eyes to see God through the lens of our sexuality and that it—even in abstinence—might lead us to him. I pray

the following reflections will be transformative, leading you deeper into the profound mystery of Jesus's love.

It Is Always Just a Signpost

One of the dangers in writing a positive Christian book on sexuality is that sexuality can be made to assume an inordinately important place in the Christian life. Since there has been so much silence in the church, it is easy to have the pendulum swing too far in the opposite direction. Some pastors started encouraging married couples to have sex every day. Others have suggested means to make sex more pleasurable or exciting. These are examples of well-intended leaders overcompensating for past silence and missing the importance of the fact that our sexuality is meant to lead us to *God*. Accordingly, what we must keep central is the way our various experiences of sex, chastity, and even sorrow lead us to Jesus, the ultimate Bridegroom. Sex has been a source of great idolatry since the first fall into sin. But if we understand it rightly, it will lead us to worship.

We need to always keep in mind that sex, even at its best, is only a signpost. It points to the Giver of life but will never be the source of lasting contentment, happiness, or life. It should lead to right worship but never become an object of worship. There are seeds of idolatry buried in any experience of pleasure because we are so prone to supplant the Giver with the gift. Sexual experience will always be more like a piece of chocolate cake than a source of life. It is a gift to be received with thanksgiving that should lead to a heart of increasing gratitude, but it will not change your life. Only living in relationship with the Lover of your soul will do that. But the delight of this signpost should thrill us to anticipate what it will mean to see Jesus face to face.

CHAPTER 1

Sex and God

There has been a lot of bad press in recent years about Christianity and sex. The prevailing notion in secular culture seems to be that Christianity is repressive and negative about sex. Where did this idea come from? You will not find it in the Bible! Scripture unashamedly teaches that sex is a good gift from God that he invites us to delight in. God rejoices in human sexuality. Most people are only aware of the ways the Bible limits sexual activity. Admittedly, these restraints seem to go against the grain of our natural tendencies. But the guardrails God places around sexuality aren't just for our practical good, they are absolutely critical to understanding the "profound mystery" that sex points to God's love and delight in us.

Tragically, the church has done little to help the cultural conversation. The typical approach to sexuality has been embarrassed silence. Of course, there are notable exceptions. It's not hard to find fiery sermons against adultery and homosexuality, many of which ignore the real-life sexual struggles of Christians in the congregation. And then there is the youth pastor, whose job description usually includes an annual, "Wait until you're married!" Sunday school lesson. The fact that the Bible's restrictions on sexuality are often counter to our sexual inclinations, as well as our failure to communicate the wonder and beauty of God's design, are significant reasons why millennials are leaving the American church in droves.¹

Apart from a clear articulation of how sexuality reflects the gospel, the mandates of lifelong, heterosexual marriage seem arbitrary and antiquated. Further, I work with many millennials who grew up in the church and received only negative messages about sexuality, which caused significant challenges once they entered marriage. Ill-equipped to joyfully embrace their God-given sexuality, they experience shame and guilt in the very area of married life that should deepen intimacy and oneness.

Prudish or shame-based views of sexuality are foreign to the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is unashamedly positive about marital sexuality. As we will see, a robust understanding of God's design for human sexuality is a beautiful proclamation of the gospel promise that God will be our God and we will be his people.

Seeing and Hearing "I AM"

All of life is about God. From all of creation his voice calls to us, wooing those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. This reality is echoed beautifully in these lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's epic poem, "Aurora Leigh":

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.²

When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, instructing him to remove his shoes, he revealed his name to be YHWH, meaning "I AM," expressing his self-existence (see Exodus 3:13–15). In all areas of life, God cries out, "I AM!" Psalm 19:1 announces, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." But God's glory is not seen only through brilliant, billowing clouds or a sunset

over the Grand Canyon. He is calling out to us through every facet of existence. The delights of sex invite us to approach the God of sex. Yet most of us do not take off our shoes to worship; instead we pursue earthly pleasures, oblivious to the Giver of gifts.

Sexuality Reflects Our Relational Creator

As Scripture unfolds, we read how marriage and sexuality are infused with glory, but the very first chapter of the Bible hints at this profound mystery. The first hint of the Christian teaching that God is a Trinity—three persons in one being—is found in the creation story, in which God, who has existed in relationship for all eternity, creates not a singular being but a couple to mirror his image to the world. The first chapter of the Bible teaches that humanity is modeled after the “community life” of our Creator, and marriage in particular serves to express this characteristic.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1:26–28)

By indicating that the first humans were made “in the image of God,” the Bible sets them apart from the rest of

the created order. Of all the creatures in the world, this designation is for humanity alone. And, importantly, this image includes sexual *diversity* as part of its expression. Though sexual differentiation is something that humanity shares with the rest of the animal world, nevertheless the created plurality of the human family appears to reflect the nature of the God whose image we bear. Did you notice the interplay of nouns and pronouns that refer to God in the passage? In verse 26, God (singular) says “Let *us* make man in *our* image” (plural). In verse 27, humanity was made in “*his* own image” (singular). The same pronoun dance occurs as verse 27 continues to describe humanity: “He created *him*” (singular) followed by “he created *them*” (plural). Why is there this shifting between the singular and plural? It appears that God is one and yet is also able to speak of himself in communal terms; likewise, humanity is singular, yet differentiated into diverse members of a nevertheless unified family. This is the first hint of the glorious unity and diversity within the Trinity and within the human community the triune God created.

We only get glimpses of the triune, communal nature of God in the Old Testament, but as redemptive history moves to the fullness of God’s revelation in Jesus, the New Testament teaches that God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is especially evident in texts such as the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:16–17, where all three persons are present.³ The Trinity means that all three persons of God existed together in personal relationship from eternity past. The creation of two sexes reflects God’s existence as a communal being. God’s complementary existence as Father, Son, and Spirit—most gloriously displayed through their corporate work for the redemption of humanity—is depicted in the complementary relationships in human sexuality. Like a child’s shoebox diorama of the Rocky Mountains, human sexuality is a tiny picture of the divine reality that shaped the cosmos.

This means *love predated creation*. Because of God's trinitarian existence, when the Bible teaches "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), we understand this is literally true! God's personhood has always existed in an eternal relationship of love. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "[Christians] believe that the living, dynamic activity of love has been going on in God forever and has created everything else."⁴ The created universe is the overflow of God's trinitarian love. Because God *is* love, he created a universe to have even more to love. And he designed a diverse humanity as his image-bearers to reflect the wonder of his love.

Corresponding Puzzle Pieces

After Genesis 1 provides the broad brushstrokes, Genesis 2 zooms in to look at the formation of humanity. God first creates Adam, making a single being from the dust of the ground, and places him "in the garden of Eden to work and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). Then we read something astonishing. After the repeated refrain throughout Genesis 1, in which we hear that "God saw that it was good," the Creator now looks at his handiwork and makes a jarring assessment, "It is *not good* that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (v. 18, emphasis added). His specific concern is humanity's solitary existence—Adam is alone and needs a helper fit for him. The Hebrew is important here because a more literal translation would be "a helper like opposite him."⁵ Adam does not need a duplicate but an individual who mirrors him and corresponds to him, like puzzle pieces fitted together. And since both sexual intimacy and procreation are clearly part of this design (see Genesis 1:28; 2:24–25), this complementarity of male and female is distinctly sexual. There are obvious implications for this when we consider God's design for marriage. God's intention at creation was *complementary* partners, uniquely crafted to be fitted to one other. Although this applies to physical, sexual differentiation, as we'll see, this

“fittedness” transcends our physicality. The unique complementarity of male and female is further expressed through the emotional and spiritual oneness fostered in marriage.

But how did this creation of two different, related humans happen? Prior to resolving the problem of humanity’s solitary existence, God dramatizes that problem, drawing it into focus. He creates the animal kingdom and parades it before Adam, who names each of the animals as they appear. “But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:20). The absence of a partner, which God had declared to be “not good,” was thus made part of the man’s *experience*. I think it’s a safe bet that Adam felt something was off. We may imagine his mounting unease: with each successive incompatible partner, his gnawing sense of aloneness grew. Would there *ever* be someone with whom he *fits*? Apparently even in paradise God wanted his children to trust him and to wait for his provision.

And so, in God’s time, “the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh” (Genesis 2:21). This is the only time this Hebrew word is applied to the human body. Elsewhere, it refers to the rings “on the side” of the ark or a man walking along a “hillside.” As we consider what follows, I think it’s helpful to see this surgery as a “splitting asunder” of Adam, rather than the simple removal of a bone. (As an aside, I remember being told as a child that men have one rib less than women. Let me set the record straight here: ribs are always paired, and most men and women have twelve pairs.) God seems to work against his original creation of Adam, taking apart what he had previously made in order to make something new, something better. It creates a situation in which humanity is no longer complete without relational union. Just as the woman’s existence comes about because of the man, so man’s existence in his present form is fundamentally shaped by the creation of the woman and his relation to her. Adam does

not remain unchanged in the process of Eve's creation; both man and woman are what they are because of one another.

It is against this background of two humans formed from one another that we hear the archetypal love poem: "Then the man said, 'This *at last* is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:23–24, emphasis added).

After facing life without a helper, the man is now overjoyed. The period of waiting for the Lord to act has been worth it. Although we are not privy to how he knows the information, Adam is clearly aware Eve was taken out of him and that therefore they belong together.

So, what is at the heart of the marriage union? The single image of God separated into the two sexes is reunited in a physical union powerful enough to create *life*. This is why John Stott commented that while it is possible for humans to have various sorts of sexual relations, only in marriage does a *reunion* occur. Reflecting on Genesis 2, Stott wrote, "It is the union of two persons who originally were one, were then separated from each other, and now in the sexual encounter of marriage come together again."⁶ And it is because God has reunited what was once separated that Jesus commands us to honor marriage: "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mark 10:9, RSV).

Stop for a moment and think about this. In married sexuality, the image-bearers of God, who were torn asunder, are brought back together in profound pleasure that generates life. In the pleasurable experience of sexual union, we reflect the joy of union within the Trinity. Married love is thus a reflection—imperfect but real—of the glorious existence of the Father, Son, and Spirit as they've lived in perfect harmony, joy, and pleasure together from eternity past.⁷ With sex as in all of life, God is calling out to us "I AM!" and inviting us

to worship him. In this way, wedded sexuality is profoundly God-like. It should lead married couples to deeper worship.

Babies Matter

I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that we are sexual beings because we are creatures. This is how God designed us to produce offspring, and it is something we share with the rest of the created order. But, despite the creatureliness of our procreation, this too points us to the wonder of our Creator. It is easy to see the power of sexual addiction rooted in pleasure. But this pleasure is inextricably linked in God's design to the ability to produce life. This is a significant reflection of the *power* of sex that ultimately comes from God, who alone is the Giver of life.⁸

Can you feel the creative exuberance in Genesis 1 as God commands everything he has made to flourish, reproduce, and fill the earth? Beginning with plant life, which is endowed with seed for reproduction (v. 11), God commands all his creatures to “be fruitful and multiply” (v. 22, sea creatures and birds; v. 24, animals on dry land; v. 28, humanity). While the production of offspring is not the only purpose of sex—as we have seen, sex is about *God*—nevertheless, procreation is a central function of God's design for sexuality. Although sex is for *more* than procreation, and although not all married couples are able to have children, it is important to highlight this aspect of human sexuality because sex is widely viewed as primarily a recreational activity today. But as we think about biblical sexuality, it is crucial to acknowledge that *one aspect* of God's creational intention for sex is that it would produce fruit.

As the author of life, God designed sexual activity to include the potential of creating life. God desires that all of his creation would reflect back his beauty and fruitfulness. Biblical sexuality does not mean married couples should care

only about procreation, and it does not diminish the beauty of sexuality for couples unable to conceive. But we should always have in mind that this physical act was intended to bring forth life.

Sexuality as the means of producing offspring points to a God of abundant life. God's design of sexual differentiation, especially since humanity is made in his image, provides a reflection of the delight experienced within the eternal three-in-one relationship within the Trinity. Keep in mind though, we are always seeing only tiny glimpses—little snatches of light, fleeting moments of clarity—as we try to understand mysteries infinitely beyond our creaturely capabilities. Our loving God provides these signposts to spur us on in our pursuit of him.

It's about Oneness

The true invitation of image-bearing sexuality is to be naked and not ashamed. This is the last glorious snapshot of pre-fall humanity: "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25). To be made in the image of God means we are created for relationship (with God and others) and *intimacy*. God's intention for marriage is a relationship in which we are known and accepted. This is one of the reasons the enemy hates marital sexuality so much—it reflects our Creator as his power and goodness are on display in the realm of human relations.

While writing this book I officiated the wedding ceremony for two of my good friends. They asked me to include in their service this quote from Tim Keller, which articulates the power of married love: "To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us."⁹

This loss of our original unashamed nakedness helps to explain why feelings of loneliness can be exacerbated when we are surrounded by other people. It is so painful to *not* be known by others, yet the way of the world causes us to live in isolation from one another. One of the loneliest seasons of my life was when I was a college student living in a little efficiency apartment in downtown Philadelphia. In the midst of a near-constant crowd, I was deeply hurting but no one knew or had the capacity to help. Being surrounded by people all the time while feeling “unknown” made everything worse.

We long to be truly known by others, but at the same time we are incredibly fearful of being exposed. All of us live with some sense of shame, believing that if others *really* knew us, they’d reject us. So, we’re trapped in a classic Catch-22. We long to be known, and, simultaneously, we deeply fear intimacy. This primal fear of exposure lives in our human relationships, but it is fundamentally rooted in our estrangement from God. Prior to the fall into sin, marriage was the original context in which people were “naked and unashamed” in the sight of one another and were walking together in fellowship with God. The devastation of sin ruptured this picture entirely—our intimacy with one another has been stolen, but so has our intimacy with God. Through his self-sacrificing love, Jesus restores us to himself and to one another. In Christ, we are free from shame and free to be known. This freedom comes from being naked and unashamed before the only One whose love and appraisal of us truly matters. Because of Jesus, we are assured of acceptance. Even though he knew all the worst things about us, he “came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). It is an astounding reality that “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). First Corinthians 13:12 points forward to the day when we will know fully, even as we are fully known by him now.

This deep, profound knowing—free from shame—is the destiny of redeemed humanity. We are invited to taste that

now in our present relationships as we grow in intimacy with one another. When I am living in the hope of God's reconciling love toward me in Christ, I am free for those closest to me to know the worst things about me. In fact, I embrace transparency because I realize how much I need the rest of the body of Christ to reach maturity (see Ephesians 4:15–16). God intends for this intimacy to be at the heart of every marriage—a willingness to be absolutely naked and vulnerable with another human being in every way. This deepest human intimacy, rooted in emotional and spiritual oneness, is what separates human sexuality from the mere mating of our fellow creatures.

There is a reason why the word used frequently in the Hebrew Bible to describe sexual activity is *yada*, which means “to know.” This reflects the wonder of image-bearing sexuality. This naked and unashamed *knowing* is the culminating celebration of the emotional and spiritual union created by marriage. Marital sexual union is so much more than physical coupling because humanity has emotional and spiritual depth unlike other creatures. We are created to be truly known in a one-flesh relationship because we are image-bearers. It is the coming together emotionally and spiritually, as well as physically, that makes human sexuality a reflection of our Creator.

I entered marriage to my late wife as a new believer with a sinful past, so there was a long road ahead of undoing the attitudes and approaches I'd developed around sex. Formerly, I approached romantic relationships with a view toward my sexual experience. But after being married for several months, I had a profound experience that marked the beginning of a shift in my perspective on sex and its place in my marriage. At the end of a long day, we were getting ready for bed and having a great conversation. As we sat on the bed together in various stages of undress, the thought flitted through my brain, *I wonder if we're going to have sex after this?* My next thought was a completely novel work of the Spirit: *Actually, it really doesn't matter because this conversation is amazing!* More

than twenty years later, I can't remember what we were talking about. And, beautifully, I can't remember if we had sex afterwards. What stuck with me was the realization that I was connecting with my wife emotionally and spiritually in a way that I had never experienced before, in a way that was thrilling and actually transcended physical intimacy. Sexual pleasure had *always* mattered more to me. But on that evening I discovered something deeper. And this deeper "one-flesh" reality of marital intimacy points to the most wondrous, profound mystery of all: our relationship to God through our union with Jesus.

In this important and engaging biblical teaching on sexuality, David White helps readers develop a Scripture-based perspective that goes beyond the typical message to just wait for marriage.

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