DIVINE SEX

A COMPELLING VISION FOR
CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIPS
IN A HYPERSEXUALIZED AGE

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Part 2

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Searching for Truth That Transforms

Introducing a Christian Social Imaginary

Our personal and social identity is being shaped primarily within the complex and yet definite vision of the "modern social imaginary."[1] Most of this formative process occurs at the subconscious level, beneath our cognitive and rational thinking. Our social and cultural context is not something we look at objectively, like a painting, but is more like an atmosphere that we exist within and cannot exist without. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, a fish does not "feel" wet; likewise, we swim in the world rather than stand outside it as detached observers. We are involved in our surroundings in a complex and holistic way, and our context shapes every aspect of our lives, including how we see our sexuality, our relationships, and ourselves.

Despite the all-encompassing nature and palpably significant influence of the modern social imaginary, much Christian discipleship in recent times

1. See Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23–30.

has continued to follow the narrow, cognitive model of spiritual-moral formation. This model basically says, "Knowing and believing the right things about God will determine who we become and what we do." It is therefore natural that the emphasis of Christian discipleship has been on correct biblical teaching and doctrine.

There is, of course, much that we should affirm about this approach. In a world of relativistic reasoning, the authoritative guidance of Scripture is an anchor to which we can fasten our identities and lives. The problem is that this sort of knowledge does not get to the heart of the human condition. It may point us toward the truth, but can it form the truth within us? The cognitive model of discipleship lacks the power to *counter*form people within the rhythms of the gospel in the face of the more holistic cultural formation that occurs within the modern social imaginary. We may, then, be giving people the conceit of knowledge rather than genuine practical wisdom.

The differences between these contrasting visions of knowledge formation are best explored through an analogy. Imagine for a moment an area of a city that is of historical interest. There are two very different ways of getting to know that area. The first is the sort of knowledge that a new tour guide possesses, which he passes on to other outsiders. He gathers this information from maps, books, and other external sources, which give him important functional information that enables him to navigate the area. The map, for instance, shows him how the streets connect, where important landmarks are located, and so on. He may also pick up another level of detail that goes beyond purely functional information, such as interesting history, famous former residents, and notorious events. Yet as vast as the guide's knowledge may become, there still is a yawning gap in the *amount* of information as well as the *depth* of knowledge he acquires as compared with someone who grew up in that area.

Rather than the flat, functional knowledge of the tour guide, the "local" possesses a deep and complex intuitive understanding. This knowledge, accumulated over years of discovery and practice, has largely passed from cognitive thinking into the unconscious parts of his being. It has become part of his essential identity, and he will always be "from there." Without thinking, he knows a hundred different ways to get from one part of town to another, depending on the weather or time of day. What's more, he knows

journeys and histories that don't appear on a map or in a book—such as the shortcuts across the backyards of friends and neighbors. He knows the story of the family in each house, which girls he liked when he was a boy, the different fruit trees, and when the picking is at its best. The tour guide knows a lot of helpful facts about the area, and yet her knowledge and what she passes on to her fellow travelers is fundamentally different from *what* and *how* the local knows.[2]

This example shows the deeply contrasting visions of knowledge formation at play today. Some Christian leaders and pastors are tempted to become spiritual "tour guides." At one level, this is a satisfying role. Our knowledge is clean, clear-cut, and well presented. Our responsibilities are clearly defined and fit within scheduled time frames—our Sunday tours! Yet, at the more fundamental level, tour guides create tourists rather than residents—consumers of knowledge rather than participants in actual communities. We may introduce people to the basic contours and city limits of the gospel—"map knowledge"—but how do we fundamentally reorient them within the new neighborhood of the gospel? Given the significant influence of the modern social imaginary, discipleship must be embedded within a Christian social imaginary in order to be an effective journey of *counter*formation. This will require a new vision of life, a new story to live within, a new community to be part of, and new practices to live by. Indeed, to live well as "resident aliens" in this world, we must know our true home.[3]

The second part of this book is an attempt to paint a picture of a Christian social imaginary. What does it look like, and how can Christian leaders encourage people on the journey of discipleship to live deeply within the gospel story?

More specifically, how does this vision take shape in relation to our sexuality and relationships?

2. I am indebted to the twentieth-century philosopher Martin Heidegger for this image from his book *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 41–42.

3. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, expanded 25th anniversary ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014).

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Seeing the Good Life and Becoming What We See

The Role of Vision within Sexual Formation

Pearls before Breakfast[1]

On an unremarkable morning in January 2007 during the morning rush hour, a young man entered L'Enfant Plaza Station in the Washington, DC, subway. There was nothing distinctive about how he looked; a youngish guy in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. Taking his place against a wall at the top of an escalator, he pulled a violin from a small case and threw in a few dollars and some loose change as seed money. He played for around forty-five minutes to a restless conveyor belt of people—over a thousand in the time he was there. As he played, the preoccupied herd thundered past him; only a small boy lingered for a few minutes before his mother impatiently grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the escalator. The few who did give money tended to toss it into his

1. Gene Weingarten, "Pearls before Breakfast: Can One of the Nation's Great Musicians Cut through the Fog of a D.C. Rush Hour? Let's Find Out," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401721.html.

case on the run, more an expression of guilt than appreciation. When he finished, the young man collected his money, packed away his violin, and left the station. No one applauded; no one even noticed. For his labors he had earned a grand total of $32.17.

The supposedly cultured crowd of largely federal government workers were unaware that morning that the young fiddler in the Metro was Joshua Bell, one of the finest classical musicians of his generation. He played some of the most complex and elegant music ever written on one of the most valuable violins ever made—a Stradivarius worth $3.5 million. A few days earlier he had played to a capacity audience at Boston's Symphony Hall, with people paying upwards of one hundred dollars per ticket. But on that nondescript Friday morning, he was just another struggler competing for the attention of busy people on their way to work. Bell's impromptu performance in the Metro was arranged by the *Washington Post* as an experiment to see if, in a mundane setting at an inconvenient time, true beauty would transcend it. The *Post* posed the poignant question: *Do we perceive beauty in unexpected places?*

The red thread running throughout this book is the conviction that we are, more than we realize, *made* by our context. The cultural philosophy that surrounds us on a daily basis provides the moral wallpaper of our lives, deeply shaping our imagination of what life should look like. To a large extent, we are not even consciously aware of this formation or that alternatives exist, especially in the area of sexuality. Rather than being a dynamic part of our character to be trained and shaped, sexuality has come to be viewed as part of our personality—something that not only is freely expressed as a reflection of our uniqueness but also helps establish that uniqueness. Indeed, the modern self sees sexual expression as a virtue that lies at the heart of human identity. We can only be fulfilled, happy, and mature when our sexuality is set free.

Power Failure: The Church's Lack of Vision regarding Sexuality

A friend recently expressed a typical frustration for single Christians. He described a mutual friend in our church who had had premarital sex and

was now about to marry someone else. My friend was annoyed and disappointed because he felt that he was missing out on both counts. He had struggled for years to live out his singleness faithfully, and here was another Christian who was able to have his cake and eat it too. I had huge sympathy for him; so often, living the faithful Christian life seems like squandering the prime of our youth or maybe even forfeiting it completely. Our sacrifices just don't seem to count toward any reward in the end. In fact, those who are less faithful to the ideal often seem to flourish.

At one level, this frustration is understandable. Powerful dynamics are at play within human sexuality, exerting what sometimes feels like an irresistible force, especially within our cultural milieu. Yet this perspective also reveals a lack of vision or, more accurately, the wrong vision. What we describe as "cake" reveals what we consider deep within ourselves to be worth having—the "good life."

Mark Regnerus, at the conclusion of his comprehensive study of sex and religion among American teenagers, refuses to pull any punches about the failure of many churches to present an inspiring and workable vision of Christian sexuality to their young people. As he describes it,

> The majority of religious interviewees with whom we spoke, the ones who might possibly own some sort of religious ethic concerning human sexuality, could articulate nothing more about what their faith has to say about sex than a simple no-sex-before-marriage rule. For most of them, this is the sum total of Christian teaching on sex. For the most part, congregations are doing a terrible job of fashioning distinctively Christian sexual ethics. Abstinence organizations seem primarily interested in pragmatically doing whatever it takes to stop adolescents from having sex. In fact, despite its numeric successes, the movement is hamstrung and self-limited because of American Christians' disinterest in taking a firmer position on marriage and the family. If family formation is best postponed, and any given marriage can be undone without consequence, why should young people wait to enjoy the benefits of sex within an unstable and temporary arrangement (marriage)?[2]

The complex loop connecting marriage, singleness, and sex has been demonstrated by the True Love Waits campaign with its purity rings,

2. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 214.

exhorting publications, and initiation events. Although it began in the United States, the campaign has influenced abstinence movements in other countries and has become an important global phenomenon. All major campaigns, like political slogans, tend to be overly simplistic in order to be clear and effective. This campaign demonstrates how something that looks like vision can in reality be a misleading distortion of it. As one writer who wore a purity ring from the ages of sixteen to twenty-five describes it, this movement encouraged her to make a "deal" with Jesus rather than to follow him. The deal was, in essence, that if you love God first, he will ultimately deliver you a husband or wife. When she was sixteen, she received from a youth leader a poem written "from God" that said, "The reason you don't have anyone yet is because you're not fully satisfied in Me. You have to be satisfied with Me and then when you least expect it, I'll bring you the person I meant for you."[3]

No doubt the True Love Waits message was presented more deftly and nuanced by other leaders. Yet this was the essential message many young people absorbed, and it highlights some of the problems involved. First, as we've already seen, it falls into the trap of defining singleness only in terms of marriage. The emphasis, then, is on "waiting." This approach distorts the Christian vision of discipleship by turning it from one of devotion and followership into a pragmatic quid pro quo. This is firmly rooted in modern individualism, which sees all relationships from the point of view of personal fulfillment and reward. Most tragically, because it gets the Christian vision of life the wrong way around, this approach inevitably leads to crushing disappointment and anger within people's romantic lives—and with God himself. As the writer poignantly describes,

> It's a graveyard of hearts, this place where single church girls crash into their late 20s and early 30s. Churches see the symptoms. They scramble to reach out to the ever-growing young adult singles crowd who feels alienated by family-oriented services.
>
> But there's something bigger behind it than that. Much bigger. There are a lot of girls out there who don't know who God is anymore—the God of their youth group years just isn't working out. Back then, that God said

3. Anonymous post, "I Don't Wait Anymore," *Grace for the Road* (blog), February 3, 2012, http://gracefortheroad.com/2012/02/03/idontwait/.

> to wait for sex until they are married, until He brings the right man along for a husband. They signed a card and put it on the altar and pledged to wait. And wait they did. . . . But many of them—if they're honest—will tell you that time has passed, and it's wrecking their view of God. If this is who God's supposed to be, then He's tragically late. So some decide to chuck "Lady in Waiting" out the window . . . and possibly their virginity with it. Church goes next. God might go next, too. If He doesn't answer these prayers after they've held up their end of the bargain, why would He answer any others? Whether it was the fault of the leaders, the fault of us girls, or both, a tragedy happened back then. A lot of girls were sold on a deal and not on a Savior.[4]

This approach places people in an awkward stance when it comes to romantic relationships. While it creates an enormous amount of idealistic expectation around God's preparation and provision of a future life partner, it also puts people into a passive stance regarding relationships. We are taught not to pursue relationships because we are waiting for the perfect one. There is, however, no such person. He or she is out there in the messy throng of humanity right in front of us. Jesus calls people to follow him as the source of life, not as the giver of the sort of life we think he should want for us. If we take the latter view of God, then he inevitably becomes an inconsistent parent who gives gifts to some of his children and denies them to others—a cruelly selective Santa Claus.

The writer of this blog wonders whether this view of God "has sold people a solution for life's problems rather than life itself"—Jesus as our helper rather than our goal. The disappointment with God that many people have experienced through this well-intentioned movement shows how important the delicate project of casting vision is within Christian discipleship. In a culture where sexual expression is seen as a fundamental right, we need to give powerful significance to our sexual lives but without making them the goal of our faith. To sum this up, we worship Jesus in our sexual lives because we love and trust him, not because we love what he can do for us. This truth will not eradicate frustration and disappointment from the experience of singleness within the Christian life, but it will certainly place it within its proper perspective.

4. Ibid.

Joshua Bell's unexpected performance in the Washington, DC, subway is something like the Christian vision of sexuality today. It appears dull and inconvenient as people bustle past on their way to seemingly better and more important things. And yet if we pause to really listen, we might perceive that this vision represents the very music of heaven. Despite the awkward acoustics and bleak context of the "subway," the Christian vision of sexuality represents the divine tune played out on priceless instruments. The reality is that in the everyday shape of our sexual lives we get to play the harmonies and melodies of heaven. One day we will hear and be captivated by this tune in its unrestrained richness—in the great concert chamber—but it will be a familiar tune. The gospel, too, asks us, *Will we perceive beauty in unexpected places?*

How Do We Give Vision the Power to Direct Our Lives?

Living faithful Christian lives is impossible unless we are nourished and sustained by a vision of what human flourishing looks like—what philosophers call our picture of the "good life." Unless we really come to love this vision at the unspoken levels deep within ourselves, and come to understand our whole lives as heroic adventures to walk faithfully within this vision, our perspective will be pulled out of shape and distorted by our cultural context, tantalizing us as it does with unrealistic expectations of sexual satisfaction and relational perfection. How can we explain why so many Christians know the "dos" and "don'ts" but struggle to live within them? Christian leaders have perhaps tended to give people rules to live by without articulating a coherent vision for the Christian life that makes sense of it all—a perspective that delivers a big-enough reason to hold fast to our costly decisions when the sirens call.

The very idea that our sexuality, in the narrow sense of its physical expression, lies at the core of our personal identity is largely a twentieth-century innovation. Yet within a few generations, this view of human personhood has become for many the only conceivable way of thinking about their lives. In this vision, we can achieve personal fruition only through full, free, and honest sexual expression. Self-denial is seen as a

form of self-harm or an unhealthy incursion on our self-identity. As a result, even as Christians we may begin to wonder why God and the church would want to deprive us of these essential needs. This demonstrates the grip that our culture's vision of sexuality has taken on our imaginations. That we view sex apart from marriage as "cake" shows that we are deeply suspicious of the Christian way of life. It can feel like grimly clinging to the wreckage of a sinking ship until death sets us free. This perspective sums up the depth of frustration, disappointment, and anger that so many believers experience in this area. *Why would a good God lead me into this lonely pit?* It's a familiar narrative that I've heard from many Christians over the years.

Whatever we set as our loftiest goal and make our highest priority—that is, our highest love—orders everything else that we *want* and *do* in our lives. This idea brings together two essential drivers of human identity: our nature as *desiring* beings and our nature as *moral* beings. Unlike animals, which act purely and reflexively from instinct, we have desires about our desires. This means that we are able to reflect on whether we want the desires we have and to choose other ones. If one of my core desires, for instance, is to one day sustain a committed marriage, this goal will tend to regulate my appetite for one-off liaisons.

Christian leaders should avoid defining "morality" narrowly in terms of what people should *do*—a list of rules or a moral code—without any appeal to a higher truth that gives those rules meaning or resonance. Instead, we need to focus our teaching on moral vision. Moral vision requires articulating the big picture of what the Christian life is about, as well as how to connect every aspect of our lives to this spiritual vision. This involves asking the essential questions, what are we aiming for, and how does each part of our lives contribute to this goal? When we give primary importance to our ultimate desire—knowing, following, and serving Christ—it reorders all our other desires.

I now want to sketch the outline of a Christian vision for relationships and sexuality. What does it look like? Why is this costly journey worth it, not just in the kingdom to come but also in the here and now? It is only when we come to believe in our deepest beings that God is good and that his plan for our lives reflects his goodness that we can travel with purpose and bind ourselves to his vision for life.

A comprehensive Christian vision of sexuality has four essential characteristics.

1. The vision is *eschatological*: it places our sexuality within the bigger context of God's unfolding plan for creation.
2. The vision is *metaphysical*: it aligns our sexual lives with the nature of things as they *really* are, the present reality of heaven. It attunes us to the kingdom of God, seen and unseen, which we seek to reflect.
3. The vision is *formational*: it shapes who we *are* (our character) as we journey toward maturity in the image and likeness of Christ.
4. The vision is *missional*: it shapes what we *do* (our behavior), which gives a purpose to our sexuality that expresses God's character and so witnesses to his mission in the world.

The Vision Is Eschatological

The Christian vision of life must begin with the end in sight. Our ultimate destiny provides a future horizon with which to frame our present existence. Indeed, God has put eternity in our hearts, as the writer of Ecclesiastes says, and our sexuality gives us glimpses of that eternity. It also acts as a homing instinct, drawing us toward this impending hope. Our highest priority, then, is to reorder the Christian life around our future destiny: the kingdom of God fully realized.

What Does the Future Look Like? A Vision of Hope

Scripture paints an image of our ultimate future that is summed up in John's vision of the wedding feast in Revelation 19:7–10. It depicts a state of everlasting joy and celebration in which all social barriers and pain will be set aside; we will know God and others without constraint or hostility, envy or competition. It is a picture of complete social reconciliation and relational intimacy, a time when we will know Jesus face-to-face and each other closer than any marital embrace. As the angel tells the apostle to write, "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!"[5] This wedding party, a joyous celebration of all who are in Christ,

5. Rev. 19:9.

is the fruition that we look for in the age to come, and it shines a very real spotlight on the ultimate horizon for our lives. This is a breathtaking vision that—if we can grasp it—can bear the weight of our present frustrations, disappointments, betrayals, and losses.

What's more, God has given all of us hints and glimpses of this vision in some of the everyday realities of our lives. C. S. Lewis's friend and fellow "Inkling" Charles Williams describes how romantic love, especially the early stages of falling in love, gives us a momentarily restored vision of one other human being—a sort of insight into his or her eternal identity. For a brief time our romantic attraction transfigures this person, allowing us to see the very best in him or her, to ignore or forgive the person's flaws, and to be endlessly fascinated by him or her. One day, we will see every resurrected person in this way, as God sees each of us now.

Some years ago friends bought us a meal at Claridge's restaurant in London, the Soho flagship of the combustible master-chef Gordon Ramsey (I'm sure we heard him screaming from the kitchen at one point!). This never-ending culinary experience was a feast for the senses, with each of the many courses expertly matched with a particular wine. What made this experience all the more enjoyable was that we had greatly anticipated it. We savored the thought of it for weeks in advance and carefully planned what we ate earlier that day so that we arrived for the meal with our appetites fully engaged. So it is with the wedding feast in Revelation 19. God has given us glimpses of this future, whetting our appetites through our present experiences and relationships. We are meant to hunger for our ultimate goal, for only then will we taste life in all its fullness.

Our present sexuality is therefore a penultimate reminder of our real destiny rather than an end in itself. Revelation 19 reminds us of the radical theological anthropology of the gospel, which views human identity and sexuality on a far grander horizon than our present lives. God's mission in the world is to invite all who will accept his welcome to this eschatological banquet, and the urgent task of the church is to share the invitation.

Biblical Sexuality: A Promise and a Warning

Scripture's imagery is almost never one-dimensional. The Song of Songs, for instance, was seen by Israel and most people throughout church history

as a double-sided picture of human lovers and of the intimate relationship between God and his people. Just as this relationship comes to fruition at the eschatological wedding banquet when Christ joins with his bride, the church, it also has important implications for our present sexual lives. When we understand the marriage supper in light of the wedding customs in Jesus's day, these implications become clear.

The wedding had three major parts. First, the parents of the bride and the bridegroom signed a wedding contract, which involved the bride's parents paying a dowry to the bridegroom or his parents. This began the betrothal period, which was similar to present-day engagement except that betrothal was essentially a marriage contract that could be dissolved only in the case of infidelity. This was the crisis Joseph faced when Mary became pregnant during this stage of their marriage.[6] The betrothal period ushered in the second stage in the courting process when the bridegroom went to prepare a new addition to his parents' home, which would become his marital residence. Within the salvation story, betrothal is the moment when we are won by Jesus's blood and accept his invitation into the family of God. As we wait for his return, Jesus promises his followers that he will prepare a place for us in his father's house.[7]

The final stage in the Jewish wedding usually occurred a year later, when the bridegroom went to the house of the bride at midnight with his male friends, creating a torch-lit procession through the streets with the whole village joining in. The bride would know in advance that this was going to take place; she would be ready with her maidens, and they would join the parade, which would eventually arrive at the bridegroom's home. This custom is the basis for Jesus's parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25:1–13. Anticipating the coming of the bridegroom, five wise maidens fill their lamps with oil but also make provision for extra oil. The five foolish maidens fail to bring extra oil for their lamps. When the bridegroom is delayed, the foolish maidens are off buying oil and miss the banquet.

The New Testament's picture of our future destiny, then, comes with an aesthetic vision—joyous intimacy with God and each other—but also with a warning. We must be ready for the bridegroom, living in faithful

6. Matt. 1:18; Luke 2:5.
7. John 14:2.

anticipation of his return even though he is delayed. It is beyond question that in the New Testament this involves not just our spiritual readiness but also the moral integrity of our lives. Referring to the man who was thrown out of the wedding feast for not wearing the right clothing, John Calvin observes that arguing about whether the missing garment was faith or a holy life is useless because the two are inextricably intertwined.[8] Indeed, the New Testament writers all place sexual fidelity at the heart of discipleship. The double-sided parable in Matthew 25 energizes us in anticipation of the bridegroom's arrival even as it creates a sense of urgency regarding the quality of our lives and relationships.[9]

Just like Paul, our goal is to present our communities as spotless and blameless when the bridegroom returns.[10] We must understand and articulate both the *hope*—or vision—of the eschatological wedding feast and the *crisis*—or warning—of the gospel. Doing so gives every aspect of our lives urgency as well as a specific trajectory. According to the New Testament, we are not merely "sinners saved" but also saints on the path to a glorious future.

Divine Affirmation of Our Sexual Lives

This bigger cosmic story gives our sexuality meaning and purpose as an essential and ongoing part of who we are. The doctrines of creation, incarnation, and resurrection all affirm this reality, so that Jesus's gendered and ascended resurrection body provides a sort of prototype for our own future existence. The coming down and joining of heaven with the new earth in Revelation 21 gives real hope and significance to our embodied material lives.[11]

Our sexuality in its fullest sense—that is, its spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects—plays an essential role in the relational vision of the kingdom of God because it speaks of our "incompleteness." Significantly, our one-sidedness as either male or female creates a homing instinct that

8. Matt. 22:1–14. See John Calvin, "Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke—Volume 2," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom32.ii.xxxii.html?bcb=right.

9. See also Rev. 2:20; 9:21; 21:8; and 22:15.

10. Eph. 5:27; Phil. 1:10; 2:15; 1 Thess. 3:13; 5:23; 2 Pet. 3:14; and Rev. 14:5.

11. Rev. 21:1–3.

calls us beyond ourselves, to seek relationship with God and others. Sexual intimacy in marriage gives us something like a momentary glimpse of our future ecstasy. It is a fleeting and shadowy foretaste of the social intimacy we will experience in the age to come, even though sex itself will pass away.

Yet our future destiny also puts sex into perspective. In announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God on earth, Jesus declared that human history is a story that will end. This announcement gave urgency to the mission of the church, and it has important implications for Christian sexuality. Within the biblical cultures, marriage was seen as the norm, a societal obligation or necessary rite of passage. In contrast to this, Jesus's announcement of the kingdom puts our present desire for sexual and relational fulfillment in its ultimate context. The urgency of God's mission to invite all who will come to the future wedding feast focuses the church on this most important goal. As Paul observes in 1 Corinthians 7:32–35, this eschatological priority frees some from the necessity of marriage, so that singleness becomes a meaningful option for serving the community.

Both Jesus and Paul had glimpsed the future, and they each understood the greater satisfaction that is to come.[12] This new emphasis in the New Testament relativizes the importance of marriage and sexual intimacy because our future destiny so completely overwhelms all of our present sexual longing. In essence, our present sexual desires look smaller when viewed from the horizon of eternity. This balanced approach allowed both Jesus and Paul to affirm marriage while also treating it pragmatically. Paul, for instance, says it is better to be married than to burn with lust—but if you can, it is good to remain single and focused on the missional task at hand.

This approach is radical, giving singleness equal status with marriage and making marriage a *vocation* within God's mission rather than a natural or societal necessity. These parallel Christian vocations—marriage and singleness—give coherence, meaning, and purpose to each stage of our sexual lives, even if singleness is a temporary stage for most people. Viewing our sexual lives as vocational has important ethical implications. As Stanley Hauerwas says, Jesus's announcement that the kingdom of God had arrived with his own life changed the status of the world by making it part of God's kingdom. This means that the ethics of the Sermon on

12. See John 16:20–22; Rom. 8:18; and 2 Cor. 4:17.

the Mount, including the teaching on sexual purity and fidelity, are not ideal teachings but represent the new form of life for the eschatological community.[13]

Paul's Use of Eschatological Vision: The Future Made Present

The apostle Paul's sense of the ultimate future played a critical role in his pastoral ministry. He consistently contextualized the purpose and form of Christian living within the greater arc of God's cosmic story of redemption. We see this in his challenge to those Galatians who had returned to placing their confidence "in the flesh," that is, in their own ability to live according to the law.[14] Paul seeks to persuade the Galatians to return to "life in the Spirit" by contrasting the flesh (*sarx*) and the Spirit (*pneuma*).[15] As Gordon Fee explains, Paul uses these terms primarily in their eschatological and theological senses rather than in an anthropological sense.[16] Instead of referring to a conflict between each person's body and spirit, Paul contrasts life in the flesh, meaning the fallen present age, with life in the Spirit, meaning God's future reign made present. In the theological sense, *sarx* (flesh) is seen as fallen human creatureliness, which is opposed to God in every way.[17]

Fee observes that this contrast is not about our "introspective conscience" but has to do with the expression and growth of the fruits of the Spirit within the church as Christians learn to live together as God's future people in the present fallen world.[18] Whereas the age of the flesh (including trying to live out of our own moral power) leads us further into sin and creates a toxic social environment, living in the Spirit brings the socially constructive fruits of the Spirit led by love.[19] Paul explains that Christians live amid the war between these ages and so are not immune to this struggle. He is clear,

13. Stanley Hauerwas, "Living the Proclaimed Reign of God: A Sermon on the Sermon on the Mount," *Interpretation* 47, no. 2 (April 1993): 152–58.

14. Gal. 3:1–5.

15. Gal. 5:17.

16. Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 817.

17. Ibid., 819.

18. Ibid., 883.

19. Ibid., 822. Gal. 5:19–26.

however, that we must choose decisively in which age to live; failure to choose to walk by the power of the Spirit leads to the confused ethical condition that Paul describes in Galatians 5:17, wherein the sinful nature wants to do what is opposed to the Spirit.[20] If we choose to walk by the Spirit—that is, to live in the future age made present in Jesus—then Paul assures us that we will *not* gratify the desires of the flesh. Rather, as Peter confirms, through God's own power we will "participate in the divine nature."[21]

We live in the midst of a cosmic crisis—the age of the flesh still wars against the Spirit—and yet our cultural script lulls us into believing the deception that we can live peacefully and effortlessly within these times. It tells us that what seems to come naturally will be a reliable guide. The gospel, on the other hand, acknowledges the full weight of this crisis and gives us a vision of hope to rise above it. It urges us to live like those five wise virgins in Jesus's parable, faithfully anticipating the arrival of the bridegroom.

New Testament scholar Richard Hays sums up the tension we live with in this "time between the times."[22] Although we are freed from the power of sin, we must struggle to live faithfully in this penultimate age. Referring to our sexual lives, Hays says:

> Those who demand fulfillment now, as though it were a right or a guarantee, are living in a state of adolescent illusion. To be sure, the transforming power of the Spirit really is present in our midst; on the other hand, the "not yet" looms large; we live with the reality of temptation, the reality of the hard struggle to live faithfully. Consequently . . . some may find disciplined abstinence the only viable alternative to disordered sexuality. . . . The art of eschatological moral discernment lies in working out how to live lives free from bondage to sin without presuming to be translated prematurely into a condition that is free from "the sufferings of this present time."[23]

When properly focused, the biblical vision of our ultimate future is an empowering one in which our present sacrifices and struggles are put into

20. James Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 78.

21. 2 Pet. 1:4.

22. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 25.

23. Ibid., 393–94. See Rom. 8:18, 24–25.

proper perspective. Only this stunning reality can give direction and genuine significance to the costs and consolations of our present sexual lives.

Eschatology, then, is not tangential to Christian sexuality but essential to it. Without this clarity and assurance, we are left to the uncertain winds of cultural confusion that seek to erase eternity from our hearts.

The Vision Is Metaphysical

During World War II, when Continental Europe was occupied by fascist regimes, many people were faced with a stark choice: either join the underground resistance movements or become complicit with the foreign overlords and their native puppets. A courageous minority chose to fight for freedom, despite the costly sacrifice involved. These two choices essentially represented a battle of realities. For most Europeans at the time, reality was shaped by the overwhelming and seemingly permanent power of the occupying forces, with their pervasive symbols and agents. Meanwhile, the fledgling and vulnerable underground movements were aligned with the greater invisible reality of the Allies' future victory. Although everything in their immediate context pointed the other way, these freedom fighters were in tune with the world as it really turned out to be. On the ground, almost everyone believed in the daily reality they saw all around them, and so it was both costly and countercultural to identify with the wider perspective of the future Allied victory.

Metaphysics as Sexual Ethics

Even when we help people grasp the connection between our present lives and our future hope—how the story ends—this only gets them so far. We cannot encourage people just to cling to the wreckage of life because of a future hope. On the contrary, the core of the Christian vision is that our lives *now* can enter into and reflect the realities of heaven. Indeed, this expectation forms the climax of the church's most essential prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."[24] An essential aspect of Christian vision involves understanding the nature of

24. Matt. 6:10.

true reality, so that our sexual formation is embedded in and grows out of our metaphysics. Once we are clear on the nature of things as God intends them, then we can boldly seek to live "with the grain of the universe."[25] This vision of reality provides the imaginative landscape within which we can see the world and ourselves within it.

Especially in his letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, Paul emphasizes our participation *now* in heavenly realities. As he says, God has "made us alive with Christ"; he "raised us up with Christ," and we are now seated "in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."[26] This heavenly focus does not undermine or remove our focus from our everyday lives; it should have the opposite effect, sharpening our view of this life within the perspective of heaven.

C. S. Lewis describes how our present lives can express and take part in heavenly realities through what he calls "transposition." If we imagine heaven to be like an orchestral score, played by hundreds of different musicians on many different instruments, then we know that this same composition can also be played on a single instrument such as a piano.[27] Although there is a significant gap between the piano and orchestra in terms of nuance and complexity, the piano still can express the musical themes in a very recognizable sense. Indeed, by practicing and performing a part, a pianist can prepare to take up her place within the orchestra at the appointed time.

In this way, our lives now have the potential to express and prepare us for the realities of heaven. Lewis suggests that this relationship is "sacramental" rather than merely symbolic, which means that our everyday lives can reflect heaven but can also be drawn up into the higher reality and become part of it to some extent.[28] Our sexual lives, then, can play the heavenly musical theme now in anticipation of the great wedding feast when Jesus will be fully reconciled with his bride, the church.

The foundations for understanding our true selves are expressed in Genesis 1:26–27. Being created in God's "image" means that we were

25. Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 6.

26. Eph. 2:5–6.

27. C. S. Lewis, "Transposition," in *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 91–115.

28. Ibid.

designed to reflect him in every way—physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially. Sin is essentially a wedge that separates us from God and our divine-likeness, which in turn leads to fragmentation within ourselves and between one another. Within this crisis, like a physician setting broken bones, Jesus's work of atonement was the thoroughgoing act of restoring human wholeness. As the first man in the new humanity, Jesus put right all that was wrong within the human condition. As members of this new humanity we can now confidently "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."[29] *So what is God like and how can we reflect him in our sexuality and relationships?* We need to think about this within the context of the two Christian vocations of marriage and singleness.

Divine Sex: Imaging Our Creator within Marriage

The Old and New Testaments, the early church, and the whole of church history agree that sex belongs within marriage. Genesis 2 and the Song of Songs are central to both the anthropology and theology of the church. Both Scriptures express the beauty of human sexual intimacy, as well as the way in which this reflects God as the intimate and faithful Creator. Hence the title of this book: rather than being a sacrilegious double entendre, *Divine Sex* reminds us that in sex within marriage, we express something essential about God's own relationships within the Trinity, as well as point to the age when we will participate in these relationships directly.

Right at the heart of Christian confession is God's character as a *social being*, that is, his living within the community of persons in the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This intimate relationship came to be understood as *perichoresis*, or co-inherence, within the divine family. It is often described as the divine dance, meaning that the generous giving and receiving by each person to the others blurs the boundaries between them. The medieval Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux even conceived of this relationship through the metaphor of the kiss from the Song of Songs.[30] Perichoresis is a dynamic in which each trinitarian person relates to the

29. Eph. 4:24.

30. Bernard of Clairvaux, "Sermons on the Song of Songs," in *Selected Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 207–78.

others in complete love, openness, and trust. Whether or not we can grasp it, it is a stunning reality that the whole cosmos rests on God's love. Even more astonishing is that we too are invited into this divine dance through the Spirit so that our own relationships may come to reflect God. Jesus summed this up in a prayer for his disciples in John 17:20–23:

> My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

This picture of divine love provides the empowering vision for intimacy within Christian marriage. Our love can enter into, reflect, and witness to the kingdom of heaven.

Charles Williams describes how our sexuality enables us to participate now in the aesthetic realities of heaven.[31] Our experience of romantic love, sexual desire, and all forms of beauty, he says, is testimony to our ultimate desire for God. In these moments we experience a sort of momentarily redeemed nature, when we feel what we were created to experience—ecstatic intimacy with God and others. In essence, we taste our origins and our future destiny. Sex and spirituality are intricately interwoven because each reflects and leads us toward the other. Sexual intimacy within marriage, then, is a visible sacrament—or icon—that participates in and reveals the unseen God.

Within our cultural moment there is an urgent need to rediscover the sacred significance and mystery of romantic love and sexual intimacy and to understand how this influences our spirituality and relationships. The Bible's holistic anthropology means that we cannot extract our "selves" from our bodies or from our relationships with other people. Sex is therefore a complex language designed to communicate and connect. This mystery is expressed in the biblical vision that two persons become "one flesh,"[32]

31. Charles Williams, *Outlines of Romantic Theology*, ed. Alice M. Hadfield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 70.

32. See Gen. 2:24; 1 Cor. 6:15–20; and Eph. 5:25–33.

meaning that sexual relations always involve us as whole persons, "as embodied souls, ensouled bodies."[33]

Sex matters because it involves one's whole self. It is a uniquely holistic act that provides the closest analogue we have for God's own intimacy within the Trinity and our spiritual union with God. Sex outside biblical boundaries does not necessarily involve greater guilt than other forms of boundary crossing, but it does involve us more intimately. Sex is unique because it reaches closer to our core than anything else. Paul makes this point to those Corinthians who were having sex with temple prostitutes. He administers a form of moral shock treatment by explaining that they, as members of Christ's body, are joining themselves to these women and are thereby becoming "one flesh" with them.[34] He then directly compares this sexual union with another person to our spiritual joining with God: "But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit."[35] In 1 Corinthians 6:18–20, Paul gives particular significance to our sexual lives because of their intricate connection to our spiritual lives:

> Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

In contrast to the modern view, sex does indeed have mystery! It is ordained as an all-consuming act of union between committed lovers that points toward our bonding with God himself. It is little wonder that our enemy has sought to trivialize and empty sex of its depth and significance. The role of sex both as a bonding agent among lovers and as a sacramental window onto the kingdom of heaven makes it a key battleground for Christian formation.

The God we seek to imitate is also a *covenant maker*. God is faithful to his promises and does not change his mind.[36] In Scripture, God's covenant with his people is often expressed as a binding marriage commitment. We

33. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, study ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2009).
34. 1 Cor. 6:15–16.
35. 1 Cor. 6:17.
36. Ps. 110:4; Isa. 45:23.

are called, like God, to let our "yes" be "yes" and our "I will" be "I will."[37] The fundamental principle underlying Scripture's preservation of sex within marriage is that there is no such thing as real sex outside of marriage. Sex *is* marriage, or else it is self-annihilation. Although sex outside of marriage often feels like a powerful bond, it simply cannot carry the weight of this deeper commitment and is prone to a manipulative dynamic by which it is "traded" rather than "shared."

Within Christian marriage we covenant to be like Christ to one another. Paul's instructions to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5 are not "rights" to be demanded by each marriage partner; in truth, they are the generous responsibilities of love, which each of us gives to the other. Being Christ to each other leaves no room for domineering or manipulation and leads us toward self-giving as the way of genuine freedom.

In light of these responsibilities, Christian marriage is a serious and risky undertaking. The idea of binding ourselves to each other for all time, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, is like standing at the foot of a great mountain. We should feel both exhilaration and also the sacred gravity of the journey we are embarking on. In making this commitment and walking purposefully within it, we reflect the God who has bound himself to us for all time. It is no wonder, then, that faithful Christian marriages are some of our most important witnesses to the gospel within our culture. In a world where sex and love have been devalued through hyperinflation, faithful relationships may be the only hard currency left.

Finally, but most fundamentally, in Christian marriage we seek to reflect the God who is *creative*. The first mandate given to Adam and Eve as those created in the image of God was to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth."[38] Having children is a Godlike act, so that sex carries the intrinsic possibility and responsibility of being "fruitful." Sex within marriage, at both the symbolic and practical levels, is essentially an expression of our openness to new life beyond our exclusive relationship as a couple. Even if we use contraception or are unable to have children for other reasons, we are symbolically open to the possibility of children and the responsibility of providing a stable context for them. Envisioning marriage as a Christian

37. Matt. 5:37.
38. Gen. 1:27–28.

vocation is critical because otherwise, within the soul-mate paradigm of modern culture, marriage itself can become an idolatrous fixation, a lifestyle enclave that we jealously guard from outside interference, so that even children become a discretionary accessory.

Singleness and the Full Christian Life

During a Christian wedding my wife and I attended recently, the convening pastor expressed what appears to have become a typical way of thinking about Christian sexuality. He explained, on the basis of the picture given in Genesis 2, that the bride and groom were by themselves two incomplete halves. Now, in their marriage, they were becoming what they had been created to be, a united whole. The wedding guests were mainly single Christians in their early twenties, and the message received was loud and clear: you are not a full self until you are a married self. Indeed, Christian discussions about sexuality often begin and end with marriage. You have either reached your destination or you are still on the way. Because of this, teaching on sexuality outside of marriage is usually also focused on marriage, meaning what *not* to do outside of it.

Yet singleness has a positive and legitimate standing in its own right within Christian sexuality. The New Testament writers articulate a balanced perspective on marriage and singleness. Both are given significance within the Christian community, so that even among the apostles, Peter was married while Paul remained single. Single people are welcomed as full participants in God's service and may even have a pragmatic advantage in this respect.[39] A Christian vision of singleness is founded on a dual basis: singleness reflects God's character and also constructively engages our sexuality.[40]

Imaging God's Openness to the Other

Whereas marriage reflects the intimate bond within the Godhead, singleness expresses God's ever-expanding love for his creation, as expressed in Jesus's prayer that many others would be invited into the divine family.[41]

39. 1 Cor. 7:25–40.
40. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, 181–99.
41. John 17:20–23.

The broader network of friendships and relationships available to single people expresses this divine drive for relationship within the enlarging household of God.[42] It reflects God's desire to invite and adopt all who respond. As Paul highlights in his advice to his churches, marriage and family tend to create a narrow world of commitments that focuses us on our immediate context. As a father of three small children, I can witness to this all-consuming phenomenon! Marriage and family naturally act as a strong centripetal force, drawing our time and energy into the center of these commitments. In contrast, singleness enables us to form a much broader network of friendships, both within the church and outside it. Although single Christians need to be deeply rooted within the church community, they are also freer to be God's scattered seed in the world. Within this vision, single Christians have a special and distinctive mission to reflect God's nature and his will—to be his invitation to those "others" beyond the walls of the church.

Singleness Positively Engages Sexuality rather than Denying It

The Christian vocation of singleness is one of the most countercultural expressions of life we have within the church. For this reason, we need to clearly articulate what it is and regularly affirm why we believe in it. Christian singleness must be affirmed as a positive vision of life because it constructively engages our sexuality rather than ascetically rejecting it.

Adam's recognition in the garden of his solitude and his desire to move beyond himself was sexually inspired.[43] In the same way, our one-sided sexuality compels us to seek completion beyond ourselves through relationships with others. Our sexuality, then, is at the heart of our quest for meaning and personal identity. Yet this sexually inspired search is not exclusively about sex or marriage. Whereas in the Old Testament the primary community was the immediate family, which was based on a sexual bond, in the New Testament the essential community becomes not the genetic family but the spiritual one—the household of God.[44] Indeed, the church (rather than marriage) is actually the New Testament's highest

42. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, 195.
43. Ibid., 32–34.
44. Ibid., 35.

form of community in this age, as well as a foretaste of our future life together—the eschatological wedding feast. As Stanley Grenz suggests, this social process is still founded in our sexuality because "sexuality is the dynamic behind the drive toward bonding in all its forms."[45] We were made for community, and the telos of the church is social reconciliation and intimate relationships.

This vision of singleness embedded within corporate relationships confronts the modern worldview, which has reduced sexuality to sex and thereby marginalized the very essence of human identity. Actually, the greater part of sexuality is "affective" or "social" sexuality.[46] Affective sexuality describes our fundamental need for relational, rather than strictly sexual, intimacy across a broad range of nurturing friendships. The challenge for Christian identity and daily living is to express our sexual energy in line with this divine purpose, thereby resisting our culture's misdirection of sexual desire into desire for sex or consumer goods. We need this range of deep and diverse relationships—with parents, friends, and elders—to properly affirm our personhood and sexuality. These networks of connections are important for single and married people alike.

For the Christian vision of singleness to be lived out in practical terms, we need to facilitate genuine communities of friendship. Leaders need to ask whether they are promoting social spaces and ministry contexts in which people's fundamental need for relational intimacy is being met and where their social/sexual energy can be expressed in line with its divine purpose. In particular, opportunities to serve together in outwardly focused mission can provide a sense of belonging and camaraderie, as well as an opportunity to work together and to get to know one another's gifts, personalities, and character without the explicit pressure of dating.

Summing Up: Vocational Sexuality

The Christian vision of life is that we seek to live in tune with the rich musical score already playing in heaven. Our greatest priority is to understand what life in the kingdom of God looks like and how our lives can reflect that form of community and help to bring it about. As we seek to

45. Ibid., 195.
46. Ibid., 17, 196.

image our Creator, we give expression to the climax of the church's most essential prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We seek, then, in the small decisions, actions, and sacrifices of our everyday lives to live purposefully with the grain of the universe. This is not ultimately an ascetic vision based on self-denial or strict moral rules but rather involves entering into the fullness of God's life. This is where eschatology and ontology come together, giving us both a hope for the future and significance in the present. As Christian vocations, singleness and marriage play different harmonies within the master score, thereby reflecting the reality of heaven—the way things *really* are.

The Vision Is Formational and Missional

There has been a tendency within modern Christianity to think about *discipleship* as an individual pursuit, as though personal maturity were an end in itself. To the contrary, what I want to suggest in this next section is that *moral formation within our sexual lives leads us into healthy relationships.* This dynamic represents a prophetic witness by reimagining the world in light of the kingdom of God. Because of this intimate connection between formation and mission, I have combined these third and fourth elements of vision in what follows.

Sexual Character versus Sexual Personality

As we've already seen, our culture tends to see sexuality in existential terms. Rather than a dynamic part of our *character* to be trained and shaped, sexuality has become part of our *personality* to be freely expressed as a reflection of who we are. Modern society tends to view sexual expression as a virtue in its own right, free from any other concerns or higher priorities. Within this context, Stanley Hauerwas argues for the "necessity of the church to chart an alternative to our culture's dominant assumptions."[47] In particular, he suggests that a Christian perspective regarding the place of singleness and the family is perhaps the most important task facing the church in our society.[48] Indeed, Christian sexual ethics must regain the

47. Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 189.
48. Hauerwas, *Better Hope*, 51.

ability to transform people and to provide a distinctive witness to the world.[49] Furthermore, Christian sexual ethics should be built upon the church's social vision of restored relationships. In other words, for the church to talk sense about sex and relationships, it must have a clear view of the nature of singleness, marriage, and family and what role they play in the church and in preserving good societies.[50] In this way, the disciplining of sex within the Christian practices of singleness and marriage testifies to the community's greater enterprise—to be the "firstfruits" of the kingdom of God. This sort of community can expose the modern fallacy that sexual relations are private and not shaped by our social contexts.[51] Indeed, according to Paul and the other New Testament writers, everything that we do as Christians, including our sexual practices, affects the whole body of Christ.[52]

Resisting Romanticism: Faithfulness versus Fulfillment

The Christian vision of marriage is rooted in the commandment to love the "other" sacrificially, as Christ loves the church.[53] As Hauerwas says, we love—first and foremost—because we are Christian, not because we are married.[54] Marriage is also one of the most powerful tools for personal formation. It forces us to put aside our own singular ambitions and to establish a pattern of self-emptying and faithfulness that extends to our children, the church, and beyond. Indeed, upholding fidelity and self-sacrifice as the animating principles of Christian love provides a weapon of resistance against the distorted conceptions of the self that we have inherited from our cultural formation—particularly the intuition of the romantic, consumerist self who seeks fulfillment over faithfulness and is driven by novelty and change. Christian marriage and family are centered on an open-ended vow, which witnesses to the belief that we are not autonomous beings but are committed to others. We should, of course, actively pursue emotional and sexual intimacy within our marriages. These are essential gifts and responsibilities to be nurtured and enjoyed, and they compose the

49. Hauerwas and Verhey, "From Conduct to Character," 12.

50. Stanley Hauerwas, "Sex and Politics: Bertrand Russell and 'Human Sexuality,'" *Christian Century* 95 (April 1978): 420–21.

51. Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 187.

52. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 392.

53. Eph. 5:25–33.

54. Hauerwas, "Sex and Politics," 420.

aesthetic dimension of our wedding vows. Yet at the same time, our main focus cannot remain on the romantic side of love, which quickly becomes secondary to the much bigger task of keeping on with love.

This is where the missional and formational aspects of Christian sexuality come together. For our lives to witness to the kingdom of God, we must first be deeply formed in the "language" of faithfulness so that we become the sort of people who are able to hold fast to the challenges and sacrifices of fidelity and chastity, both within marriage and in singleness. In deciding *how* to think about intimate relationships, then, we need to decide *what* sort of people we want to become. As Hauerwas and Verhey say, we can live our lives "as pleasure seekers or covenant makers."[55] Sexual fulfillment and covenant faithfulness are not mutually exclusive, of course, but were fused together as the literary and literal climax of God's creation described in Genesis 2. The biblical vision of relationships says that sexual and emotional intimacy can come to their fullest expression only within the trust and security of a permanent covenant between two people.[56] And we can create this sort of environment only if we become the sort of people who can make and keep promises. This is not as simple as it sounds.

Witnessing to the Kingdom of God

As a Christian *vocation*, marriage can be sustained only if there remains a clear understanding of the role it plays within the community that created it in the first place—the church. The command for a married couple to love each other must be based on something beyond the self-enhancement or emotional fulfillment of each person. Classical and traditional Christian notions of friendship were based on Aristotle's three characteristics: affection, mutual benefit, and a shared commitment to the common good.[57] Within this scheme, the third motivation was seen as the most important foundation for a relationship. It was only the pursuit of a common purpose that would sustain friendship through the uncertainties and crises of life. For Christians, this greater common purpose lies in the church's mission to "witness" to God's kingdom in the world. This witness is not about

55. Hauerwas and Verhey, "From Conduct to Character," 12.
56. Ibid., 15–16.
57. Ibid., 15.

proving the superiority of our beliefs on modern evidential terms, such as offering scientific proof for the existence of a Creator.[58] The church bears its clearest witness to God's kingdom through practices that embody its beliefs. In this way we make claims about what the world is like and what God is like if our beliefs are true.[59] Putting it another way, Eugene Peterson observes that God reveals himself in the context of the worshiping community. "Knowledge of God," he says, "comes from Scriptures proclaimed and obeyed in the community of the people of God."[60]

We must take seriously the view that marriage and the church share a mutually reinforcing relationship, so that marriage is central to the faith community and its witness in the world, while the church provides the necessary scaffolding to sustain each marriage. We will need to provide the necessary supports for marriages at each stage in their journey. Within our church communities we will not meekly accept the "inevitable" breakdown of marriages without fighting for their survival by investing time and resources in the material, emotional, and logistical needs that must be met for marriages to survive and thrive. We will be attentive to the warning signs, coming alongside those in need with loving care. This is a critical task for the community of faith.

Resisting Realism: Biblical Vision versus Modern Fatalism

Whereas contemporary culture thinks about sex mainly as an experience, Scripture and Christian tradition have always thought about it in terms of virtue or character. Christian sexuality is primarily something we are becoming rather than something we do. In light of our eschatological destiny, this seems obvious, and yet it is completely opposite to the secular notion that has seeped into and is shaping moral intuitions within the church. Because of this slippage, the theme of sexuality as a virtue must become a priority for Christian formation. Virtues are, in essence, the practiced fruits of the Spirit. When Paul sets out his various ad hoc lists of these fruits, we have a tendency to think of them purely as personal, internal, emotional states—love, joy, peace, and so on. But Paul

58. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 205.

59. Ibid., 214.

60. Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 172–73.

uses them primarily to describe the very practical love expressed through relationships within the community of faith. They are the lived expression of the command to love God and neighbor. So the fruits of the Spirit are also the social dynamics within the community—love *toward*, joy *among*, peace *between*, self-control *with regard to*, and so on. As we become more practiced in these fruits, their roots sink deeper into our lives, becoming permanent states: character traits or virtues.

The gospel's central double-command to love God and neighbor necessarily assumes salvation as a background. "Salvation" in its biblical usage means both "rescue from destruction" and "restoration to health."[61] Indeed, it is only God's healing and empowering grace that makes loving God and others possible. Eugene Peterson notes that at a certain point in Israel's history, the Song of Songs was added as the climactic reading during the Passover meal, the *seder*, which celebrates God's great act of salvation, setting Israel free from Egyptian bondage. The addition, Peterson says, demonstrates pastoral genius because it connects this giant historic salvation event (the exodus) to the everyday contexts of our most intimate relationships (Song of Songs). It communicates that we can live out God's restorative power within our relationships, marriages, families, and beyond.[62]

Similarly, the Jewish festival of Pentecost celebrated and commemorated Yahweh's giving of the law to his people. It is with some resonance, then, that the empowering presence of the Spirit came upon the first followers of *the Way* at Pentecost. The good life that the law had sketched in outline form now burst into animated life in the en-Spirited form of these believers. Applying this confidence to Christian sexuality, Paul makes a startling claim about Christian marriage. He suggests that it can reflect the love between Christ and his church. In our mutual love and responsiveness to each other, we become embodied examples of the gospel.[63]

In terms of discipleship, then, we need to teach the Christian vision of sexuality not just as a future reality but also as an expression of the future made present, albeit imperfectly. Only with this strong vision in place will we resist the brittle idealism and ultimate fatalism of the modern mindset. Christian sexuality must be given its meaning and form by Christian

61. Ibid., 28.
62. Ibid., 30–31.
63. Eph. 5:21–33.

virtues, vocations, and purposes. Its *virtues* include fidelity, chastity, and courage; its core *vocations* are singleness and marriage; its *purposes* include enriching the community of faith and witnessing to the kingdom of God.

Concluding Thoughts: Vision as Our Lodestar

Vision is not a stick that makes people obey the law, nor is it the permissive "I'm okay, you're okay" of postmodern confusion. Indeed, the dry bones of moral rules lack power to move us, while the passivity of "faith without rules" does not provide the connective tissue to give our lives integrity and coherence. By contrast, vision puts flesh on these bones and brings them to life—it animates the form of good life envisaged by the gospel. Compared with legalism, the Christian vision of sexuality is less like putting out "Do Not Walk on the Grass" signs and more like marking out the boundaries of a field so that the game of life can be played well and with conviction. Staying within the boundaries is not our primary focus, but it makes the game possible.

All too often within our times, the biblical vision of sexuality has been portrayed as narrow and naive. Yet when put in proper perspective, it represents an adventure far greater than the restricted confines of our private selves. Indeed, we have been created to launch out beyond ourselves onto the great voyage that awaits us outside the "safe" harbor of the autonomous self.

9

Getting to the Heart of Things

Redeeming Desire and Becoming Our True Selves

Sex clearly holds a privileged place within our culture; if we worship in the temple of consumerism, then sex is its god. Erotic appeal is used to sell everything from razors to race cars; even the G-rated, animated Disney movies we watch with our kids star alluring princesses with adult sex appeal. High-profile politicians and other public figures sacrifice hard-won careers and reputations for the sake of sexual liaisons they seem unable to resist. Their willingness to pay such a high price for a moment of passion points to the power of desire to direct all we do, for better or worse. In an age of rich digital media, lightning-fast networks, and aggressive consumerism, nobody is immune from this daily reality. The book of Proverbs' warning to "guard your heart"[1] becomes an important guide, because our affections and desires so easily take on a gravitational force and direction of their own.

1. Prov. 4:23.

Although the term "desire" is often used to describe our sexual urges, it encompasses a much broader spectrum of human longing. We may pour our lives into high-flying careers or respected ministries out of a desire for affirmation, security, control, or a sense of self-worth. This drive for success gets hooked to our personal identity. Even sexual longing may not present itself in the form of an aesthetic romantic attraction. One self-confessed sex addict explained to his counselor that it wasn't the sex he craved but the sense of shame that came with it. This craving sprang from his upbringing within an emotionally abusive family environment. In adulthood, his sexual desire became a force that he craved and could not control, even though he didn't like it.[2]

Human longing—sexual desire in its broadest sense—is what makes us tick. In this sense, Freud's focus on sexuality as the core of personal identity expresses an essential (albeit distorted) truth. If this is true—if desire forms the foundation of human personhood—then desire is also the decisive core of Christian formation. Contemporary culture has simply confirmed this reality in a counterfeit form, seeking to redirect this desire into the narrow pursuit of sex, consumer products, career success, and so on. The hijacking of human desire and sex doesn't just tap into our *sinful* core, as some believe, but actually taps into our *essential* sexual core. In other words, our culture did not create sexuality. It has just twisted God's good creation.

Within the context of discipleship, if vision is the bedrock on which we stand and the horizon line that we fix our eyes upon, then desire is the beating heart, the energizing core, of the Christian life. Christian leaders need to redefine and redeem people's conception of desire, which has been so heavily sexualized. Although this approach presents pastoral risks, it is our only way to get to the heart of the matter, to transform people in their faith and lives. Indeed, the most common weakness in Christians' sexual lives is not failing to *know* what to do but failing to *want* to do it. Christian living, then, is more a question of our ultimate desires than our knowledge. As James K. A. Smith observes, when we try to address discipleship through ideas and beliefs alone, "it's as if the church is pouring water on our head to put out a fire in our heart."[3] Addressing issues

2. "Does Sex Addiction Exist?," *BBC Magazine*, April 30, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7371171.stm.

3. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 77.

of sexual desire cannot simply mean checking a box in our discipleship program or covering a topic in a chapter of a book, because desire is *the* essential core of the Christian life, the wellspring from which all else flows. Unless Christian leaders attend to their hearts, disciples will be left on thin ice.

Painting a Portrait of the Desiring Self

Given the challenges we face with modern sexual relationships, we can take comfort from knowing that one of the most influential leaders in the church's history had a problem with his libido. If Paul's moral confidence seems a bit out of reach, Augustine of Hippo speaks from the trenches of the sexual battlefield. Before his conversion, Augustine describes a problematic sex life in which he failed to keep his urges under control. He notes that his singular motivation in early life was "to love and be loved" but that his pursuit of love without God led to the corruption of good things and a voracious appetite for false beauty.[4] As a brilliant young scholar, he searched through the classical philosophies and religions of his day to find truth, beauty, and goodness—that is, a vision of a bigger reality that would bring him freedom.

Some way into this spiritual odyssey, and partly through the preaching, friendship, and example of a church leader, Bishop Ambrose of Milan, Augustine came to *see* the truth, beauty, and goodness of God, going through what he describes as an intellectual conversion.[5] Seeing God as the source of all being gave him a vision of true reality. But this vision of goodness only increased Augustine's frustration and led him into a spiritual crisis. Contrary to the wisdom of Socrates and Plato, knowledge and vision of God, by themselves, proved insufficient to bring about real freedom. Seeing the goodness of God did not change Augustine nor help to curb his passions, which remained disordered and uncontrollable. In truth, this spiritual

4. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.

5. This is described as Augustine's "Platonic" or "intellectual" conversion in book 7. His subsequent "moral" conversion is described in book 8. The critical moment in this journey was when he felt compelled to read Rom. 13:13–14 and, freed from self-deception, was convicted of the depth of his own sinfulness. As he recalls, "all the shadows of doubt were dispelled" at this moment (8.16).

enlightenment shone a painful light on his brokenness and the depth of his addiction. Torn between the truth about God and the truth about himself, Augustine prayed one of the church's most honest and enduring prayers: "Lord give me chastity and self-control, but not just yet!"[6]

Augustine's full conversion happened next. Having seen a vision of God, he encountered the living Christ, who took him on a journey within himself through his "memory," meaning his whole consciousness and self-identity. Leading Augustine through his past, Jesus revealed the lies that had shaped his life and spoke truth in their place, thereby healing his whole identity, including his memory. As Augustine prayed, "Look into my heart, my God, look within. See this, as I remember it, my hope; for you cleanse me of these flawed emotions."[7] This vivid encounter of God's intimate grace brought Augustine genuine and enduring freedom.[8]

This conversion experience and his subsequent theological reflection convinced Augustine that we cannot truly love God and live freely through mere knowledge or self-discipline. On the contrary, we can only respond to God's grace through a fundamental reorientation of our whole selves, which itself is the work of God's grace. We must come to *love* the truth before it can become our guide. And we can only come to love the truth by allowing God to love us first. As Augustine writes: "Nevertheless, to praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."[9] For Augustine, "longing is the heart's treasury"; or as James K. A. Smith puts it, "To be human is to love, and it is what we love that defines who we are. Our (ultimate) love is constitutive of our identity."[10]

One of the myths we still carry from Enlightenment rationalism is the idea that clarity of belief by itself will bring about personal transformation. In its simplest form, this popular model of discipleship says that if we know a biblical text or principle, then it will naturally take shape in our lives. Yet our culture's renewed emphasis on feeling and emotional resonance helps

6. Augustine, *Confessions* 8.7. See also Bradley P. Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 71.
7. Augustine, *Confessions* 4.11; 5.1; 6.6.
8. Holt, *Thirsty for God*, 72.
9. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1.
10. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 51.

reveal what Augustine described many centuries ago. Human identity is deeper and more complex than the simplistic cognitive model of personhood. We certainly grow through rational understanding, but in order to come to full Christian maturity, our imaginations, feelings, intuitions, and convictions all need to be aligned with our faith.

In one of his many sermons, Augustine describes how God's original *gift* to us is our orientation to "the good"—being created in his image—and God's *promise* is that in the end we will be made like him. As we respond to this gift and promise in our daily lives, Augustine says, "the image is progressive: as false loves are sloughed off, noble desires are consummated, and the true self emerges."[11] According to Augustine, all is gift and all is desire because we can only come to discern, want, and pursue good desires to the extent that God frees us from our false loves.

I think Augustine gets to the heart of the Christian life as we actually experience it. We *do* find ourselves a battleground of desires, and yet it is desire itself that will lead us to victory. This victory is always a divine gift on the path to the fulfillment of God's ultimate promise that one day we will be completely free.[12] C. S. Lewis affirms this conviction that it is not the taming of desire that will set us free but rather the unleashing and enlarging of true desire: "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."[13]

Chasing Chastity: To Will or to Want?

Sadly, the running battle between rationalism and romanticism in the modern world has distorted the biblical vision of who we are and what really motivates us. Rationalism has tended to set the agenda in modern ethics.

11. Augustine, "Sermon on 1 John," quoted in David Burrell, "Can We Be Free without a Creator?," in *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas*, ed. L. Gregory Jones, Reinhard Hütter, and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 48.

12. Ibid.

13. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 26.

In turn, this has affected the way we disciple people within the church. Our cognitive model focuses on what we should *do* by setting out clear moral rules, rather than thinking about how we might *become* the sort of people who can actually live by these convictions. The flaw in this cognitive approach is its assumption that everyone is morally mature and has the power to do whatever he or she chooses to do. But the heart of the human crisis and the challenge of Christian discipleship is not a lack of knowledge but a problem within the human heart. We are not, it turns out, as free as we think.

"Chastity" is a deeply misunderstood concept today. We tend to associate it solely with sexual celibacy, but chastity is a virtue that relates equally to singleness and marriage; it is not directly about sex at all. Chastity is a disposition or orientation of the self that determines everything else we do. James Houston illuminates this by describing chastity as emotional sincerity or integrity, by which we express our feelings honestly.[14] This explains why counseling and therapy provide such a powerful experience: for many it is the first time they have spoken openly about their inner lives.

This view of chastity also explains the destructive power of Christian models of discipleship based on a "morality of knowledge." This idea is rooted in certain strains of classical philosophy that sought to dominate the emotional life by reason and to suppress the passions by an act of the will. As we've seen, this war between will and impulse was placed at the center of modern identity during the Enlightenment, creating a "head/heart" split within the modern self. The cognitive model makes the fatal mistake of believing that reason, rather than redeemed affections, can lead us into the good life.

Yet as Houston says, such a "morality of knowledge" is not Christian at all, because the heart of the gospel is God's *love* working in us and through us to transform our lives.[15] When the mind dominates, it censors and distorts our emotional life, leading us into a life of simulation rather than genuine communion with God and others. As John MacMurray explains: "To tamper with the sincerity of your emotional life is to destroy your inner integrity, to become unreal to yourself and to others, to lose

14. James M. Houston, *The Heart's Desire: Satisfying the Hunger of the Soul* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2001), 202.

15. Ibid.

the capacity of knowing what you feel. There is nothing more destructive of all that is valuable in human life."[16]

Chastity, meaning true feeling, is our goal as Christians—but it is here where we need God most. It would be a cruel irony if we sought emotional sincerity by ourselves, as an act of the will! Indeed, this is the ill-fated quest for "authenticity," as we explored earlier, that promises freedom and personal integrity but leads deeper into the disordered desires and deception of the false self. By contrast, chastity is the humble acknowledgment that we cannot love anyone or anything authentically without the love of God.

The secret of all genuine human desire is that God, not humans, is the source of love. It is he who loves in and through us. Leaders should ask themselves, then, whether they exemplify and encourage chastity as emotional integrity and honesty within their church communities.

Reforming Human Desire

How do we respond to this challenge? One of the spiritual giants of the church, the medieval Cistercian reformer Bernard of Clairvaux, offers an insight. Bernard is a helpful conversation partner for Christian leaders today because he was also trying to form disciples within a highly sexualized culture. The French courts of the twelfth century exemplified the cultural ideals of chivalry and romantic love, which were akin to our culture's expressive sexuality. Rather than simply rejecting his culture's disordered romantic impulses wholesale, Bernard sought to redirect these sexual passions toward God. He saw sexual desire as a positive and essential part of human identity that reflects both our Creator and the original human condition in Eden. Tragically, the fall led to the disorienting of these good desires. Bernard describes this in terms of humans being made in the image and likeness of God: the divine "image" refers to our being created as desiring creatures (our essential nature), while our divine "likeness" (our virtuous character) is something we lost when these desires became disordered through sin.

Bernard's goal was to encourage the reordering of these powerful desires, which had already been formed in the priorities of romantic culture, directing them instead into a passionate desire for God and each other. Bernard

16. John MacMurray, *Reason and Emotion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1942), 123.

did not focus on God in the abstract but saw the incarnation, Jesus as God in the flesh, as the key to Christian spirituality. He saw Jesus's coming as God's act of divine love, the "divine kiss." Only by immersing ourselves in this intimate gesture could our hearts be changed.[17]

The Journey into Divine Desire

Bernard taught that our desires can only be reordered as we are led by the Spirit through different stages of God's love—essentially the progressive journey from self-consciousness to God-consciousness—as God's love seeps into our deepest being.[18] As we journey deeper into God's love, we become more attuned to loving like God loves, and we better understand who we really are in light of his love. Although our desires start out as self-absorbed and self-directed, by stages they are drawn outward into passionate love for God and others until we come to a place of true self-acceptance where we love ourselves as God loves us.

True self-love, then, is not the focus but a by-product of allowing God's love to pervade and change us. When we experience this divine approval at our deepest core, we become able to love God and neighbor from our hearts. As we breathe in the Spirit's love, we breathe it out into our practical relationships in the church and beyond. This is the picture of relational joy, peace, and intimacy envisioned in Revelation 19 at the eschatological wedding feast, when all self-consciousness and envy will be set aside, and God's love will be all in all.

Bernard's progressive journey of desire shows how Christian discipleship both transforms us and exposes the counterfeit modern quest for "authenticity." This quest is a sham. It seeks to make peace with our false self or, more accurately, the self that is enmeshed in false desires. This form of "self-love" is deceptive because it denies the battle going on beneath this superficial détente. Although this sort of self-acceptance may present itself as self-assurance, what often lies at the heart of the modern "authentic" self is really self-hatred or shame. Because we have to maintain a gap between who we really are and what we present to others, false self-love sabotages

17. Holt, *Thirsty for God*, 86.

18. Bernard of Clairvaux, "On Loving God," in *Selected Works*, 173–206. Bernard thought that the experience of this fourth and final degree of love was rare in this life but would be our constant experience in the New Jerusalem.

our relationships and our ability to love others. We cannot let anyone into the inner sanctuary of our lives because we fear what they will find there. Far from being authentic selves, we become chimeric selves—shape-shifters who present whatever persona we believe will make us acceptable or lovable.

In contrast to this sham authenticity, the Christian journey of desire leads us through repentance—the "putting off" of false desires—into the soaking presence of true Life. Only within the unconditional love of divine acceptance can we come to understand and embrace our true identity.

I want to stress that this is not some esoteric spiritual quest. On the contrary, the journey of genuine desire is *the* critical hinge for Christian formation. True self-acceptance based on our experience of Jesus's love is the only firm foundation from which we can love others freely and sacrificially. Without the freedom wrought by divine acceptance, we tend to curve in on ourselves, becoming slaves to self-consciousness.

Although Bernard's goals were primarily spiritual (his monks became or remained celibate), he shows us something essential about the human condition and the project of discipleship. If we are, at our core, desiring beings, then the Spirit must reach that part of us to restore us to the image and likeness of Christ. And if our sexuality is intricately connected to our spirituality, then our sexual desires must be properly directed to God *before* they can be healthily expressed in our sexual lives.

Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free[19]

The apostle Paul is often depicted as the author of doctrine and destroyer of heresies. Yet like Augustine and Bernard after him, Paul was a theologian of the heart. We see this clearly in his encouragement to the Ephesian church to live as "children of light":

> So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them *due to the hardening of their hearts*. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

19. See F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1977).

> That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, *which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires*; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.[20]

Paul makes it clear that the ignorance of the gentiles' understanding and ways of living springs not from their lack of knowledge—in the narrow sense of beliefs, philosophy, or doctrine—but from the hardening of their hearts. The old false self needs to be set aside because it is being corrupted by its deceitful desires. This image of the "hardening of their hearts" is reinforced by the observation that they have "lost all sensitivity," a classical expression describing callused skin that loses any sensation of pain.[21]

Similarly, in Romans 1:21 Paul says, "They became futile in their thinking, and their *senseless minds* were darkened" (NRSV). The term "futile" is often used in the New Testament to describe idolatry, the refusal to acknowledge God as the source of life and goodness. In contrast to Bernard's journey into genuine desire, idolatry progressively conditions and numbs the mind so that eventually it becomes unable to discern or intuit goodness, and so it becomes morally disoriented. These "senseless minds," which think without feeling, lead the gentiles into confusion as their consciences become "seared"—similar to the vivid language in 1 Timothy 4:2.

For Paul, then, the desiring heart is the key to putting on the new true self, which has been created to be like God. The comprehensive transformation of our desires within the true self allows us to see life in a whole new way and to live accordingly. This is no abstract doctrine for Paul. The reorientation of our hearts has radical, real-life consequences. As an example, Paul puts his finger right on a poignant irony about human sexuality, as true now as it was then. It is not the out-of-control fires of passion that have led the gentiles into an insatiable addiction to every form of unhealthy sexual expression. Quite the opposite. It is the *deadening of desire* within their numb hearts and senseless minds that gives them a continual lust for more.

20. Eph. 4:17–24 (emphasis added).

21. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 355.

Paul's words strike a chord in light of the hypersexual nature of modern culture. He explains why sex today has become so important and yet has also been trivialized as a form of entertainment.

As sex has lost its essential meaning as the mysterious bond between husband and wife at the center of God's creation, people have not lost interest in sex but have gone on an addictive quest for more of it and in more extreme forms. It is no surprise that as sex becomes further removed from real relationships, the insatiable quest for personal gratification has intensified. The numbing and detachment of desire empowers the forces of addiction. Describing the futile cycle of drug addiction, neuroscientist Norman Doidge explains that an addict will shoot up even if he knows that the dose is insufficient to give him a high. Such is the power of "tolerance" that the addict will take the drug even when he knows it cannot satisfy his craving.

It is no wonder that the recent growth of online pornography has turned the previously rare term "sexual addiction" into a mainstream phenomenon within counseling, pop culture, and the church. This is the age-old dynamic of idolatry. At the beginning, an idol promises total satisfaction at no personal cost. It presents the illusion that we are in full control. Unable to fulfill us, the idol draws us further in and requires more from us with each encounter. In the end, having promised us everything at no cost, the idol's false promises ultimately take everything. Having offered us control, the idol becomes our master.

We see this in the sad reality of so many marriages and relationships damaged or destroyed by the intrusion and false promises of pornography or extramarital affairs. In the 1990s the feminist Andrea Dworkin justifiably warned that online pornography risked turning men into dangerous beasts. The truth is even more tragic. Pornography, with its unrealistic fantasies of open-ended desire, actually kills genuine desire by forming men who are becoming incapable of loving their wives. Extramarital affairs offer a similar debilitating illusion. A spouse may initially be drawn to a lover who offers unbridled passion without demanding control or representing the mundane responsibilities of domestic life. The lover is always sexually engaged and never has a headache! Yet such lovers eventually demand the central role, no longer happy to sit in the background. The illusion of "free love" always breaks down under the crashing waves of reality. By offering us alluring illusions, sin distorts and captures our desires, bending them

in unintended directions. Yet whereas sin disciplines and enslaves desire, the gospel heals and liberates desire from sin.

Indeed, Paul sees putting on the true self with its new desires as the key to living in the light. As children of light, we are to be imitators of God without "even a hint of sexual immorality," because this does not fit the profile for God's family.[22] These are strong words, but Paul does not expect us to constrain our sexual passions through sheer self-control, as the Stoics and others taught in his day. The healing and redirection of what we ultimately long for provides the key to living as children of light. We need to be clear that the Christian journey of desire—that is, true discipleship—will not be a smooth or speedy road. It is to be walked with hope, courage, and perseverance, always tethered to the unshakable grace and love of God.

Finding the Right Balance: Reconnecting Fragmented Selves

As we seek to usher people into the Christian journey of redeemed desire, we are faced with a problem. Our schizophrenic culture has caused a split between the head and heart—between thought and emotion—and so has destroyed the wholeness of human identity.[23] "Being rational" is seen as thinking purely with your head, trying to weed out other ways of discerning, such as intuitive feel or gut instinct. Emotions are seen as confusing, unreliable, frightening, or hard to control. A budding relationship may be subjected to an impossible barrage of overanalysis and faultfinding that pronounces it dead on arrival. The perfection trap, where no relationship will ever do, can become a form of self-protection or idolatrous fantasy. As a result, we never expose ourselves to an actual relationship.

At the other extreme, we tend to be led into relationships simply by a powerful attraction to someone, or we might set sexual boundaries according to what *feels* right. This great divorce between the rational and emotive modes has had a dramatic influence on modern sexuality and relationships. Many young Christian couples seem to be in a furious hurry to rush down the wedding aisle, often cramming their courting into a few short months.

22. Eph. 5:3.
23. Houston, *Heart's Desire*, 112–13.

The priority of these relationships seems to be getting to the altar rather than preparing for the rigors and responsibilities of a common life together.

Affirming the Deep Self: The Thinking Heart

The path to maturity in faith and life involves "learning by heart." Saint Benedict described this as bringing the thoughts of the mind into the heart so that the whole person stands in the presence of God, being transformed through this communion.[24] In a similar way, Paul prays for the Ephesians that "the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you."[25] In classical philosophy, "vision"—or seeing—was a way of describing the mind. Paul is asking God to illuminate their thinking hearts. If our moral compass is only oriented by what resonates within us, then our susceptibility to self-deception exposes us to being led astray by these impulses. In contrast, the thinking heart is able to discern between these different emotions and to test them within the boundaries of the Christian life. Whether we are leaders or laypeople, like Paul we need to be midwives of "the heart set free."

Sadly, some influential voices within the modern church have been tempted to define Christian "love" as neutral soil into which we can plant whatever we choose. Giving his support to same-sex marriage, for instance, former pastor Rob Bell draws on Genesis 2 to explain that we need more love, more monogamy, more fidelity, and so on. When asked if he is "for same-sex marriage," he replied, "I am *for* marriage."[26] Yet Genesis 2 is a strange text to use for such an assertion, forming as it does the cornerstone of Christian sexual anthropology. It shows that intimacy within heterosexual marriage is purposeful or teleological (it can bear new life), normative (it expresses God's intended design for sexual relationships), and comprehensive (the complementary natures and bodies of men and women in marriage are a reflection of God).[27]

24. Ibid.

25. Eph. 1:18.

26. Katelyn Beaty, "Same-Sex Marriage and the Single Christian: How Marriage-Happy Churches Are Unwittingly Fueling Same-Sex Coupling—and Leaving Singles Like Me in the Dust," *Christianity Today*, July 1, 2013, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/july-web-only/same-sex-marriage-and-single-christian.html.

27. It is important to note that creation epics in the ancient Near East were theological, anthropological, and polemical. That is, rather than being "eyewitness" accounts of the

Bell's theological innovation replants Eden with a new moral ecology. Yet Christian love, as brought to life in Scripture, is a flourishing garden with defined walls and keen discernment regarding what we cultivate and which fruit we taste. Even more so, following our retreat from Eden, there is a presumption that what we *should* cultivate is not what naturally grows within us. Indeed, our deepest desires are likely to lead us astray, and it took nothing less than God-in-the-flesh to reverse this destructive dynamic. It is strange, then, that parts of the church have been so eager in recent years to bless almost any form of sexual expression, provided it is given and received with genuine feeling and continuity. This development is a reflection of the modern authentic self rather than the genuine Christian self. It demonstrates why Christian desire must be trained within the boundaries of Christian truth. Only this bold synthesis will enable the necessary development of the "thinking heart."

Caught in a Love Triangle

James Houston describes a helpful test for the healthy functioning of desire within intimate relationships, both with God and with others. Love, Houston states, is a triangle with three necessary and mutually supporting sides: passion, intimacy, and commitment.[28] Passion *motivates* love; it is the physiological attraction that compels us toward an "other." By itself, though, it is a fickle force that can go astray or die down after the initial heat dissipates. Intimacy *deepens* love, as physical and emotional closeness come with increasing trust, honesty, and warmth. Commitment *protects* love by providing a safe context in which it can thrive. It acts like a wall that prevents the animals of doubt, defensiveness, or competing lovers from

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process of creation, they were designed primarily to express a vision of the nature of God and his creation. This vision was expressed over against rival creation epics. In this sense, Genesis says important and enduring things about who we are and the nature of God's intended design, thereby providing the cornerstone for Christian anthropology. This explains why Jesus and the New Testament writers draw so heavily on Genesis 2 as a framing paradigm for Christian sexuality. Paul's teaching in Romans 1 clarifies in big-picture terms that when we trade the truth about God for a lie, our culture becomes morally and sexually confused. It is ironic that some interpreters have chosen to quarantine Paul's views to his particular cultural context at just the time that his teaching is most relevant to ours.

28. Houston, *Heart's Desire*, 215. These characteristics closely resemble the three aspects of romantic love identified by Helen Fisher. See Fisher, "Why We Love, Why We Cheat."

destroying the tender fruit growing in the garden. It provides a secure place where vulnerability, trust, and exclusivity can blossom.

If, however, one or more of these sides of the triangle is consistently absent from or overactive within our romantic attachments or our relationship with God, it may point to a scarring or lack of proper attachment that we carry from our childhood. Until we allow God to get to the heart of the issue and heal our foundational desires, our intimate relationships will be lopsided, consistently marked by these dysfunctional patterns.

At the age of thirty, after a string of relational crises, Ben realized that his romantic relationships always fell into one of two categories. Either he was motivated by control and felt compelled to rescue someone in need (who then became overly dependent on him), or else he found himself entering into an emotionally detached relationship. Unnerved by this consistent pattern, he began to meet with a Christian counselor.

At a certain point, the counselor asked him to describe his mother. For as long as Ben could remember, she had suffered from depression. Unable to cope with the chaotic demands of young children, she had put Ben and his older brother into full-time day care from six weeks old, even though she was not working at the time. When they were at home, the children had to stay in their bedrooms for long periods of time because she was unable to cope with their noisy presence. They learned early on that they needed to tune in to their mother's needs rather than the other way around.

Ben realized that this lack of emotional warmth and care during his early childhood had established the pattern for his adult relationships, drawing him into consistently unhealthy dynamics. He found himself either rescuing emotionally dependent women or else becoming emotionally detached, two ways of being that were wired into his early consciousness. When his counselor gave Ben some insightful tools, he was able to identify and avoid those sorts of attachments for the first time in his life.

However, Ben soon found himself faced with the opposite problem. Because he was suspicious of the emotional intuitions that had led him astray for so long, he found that he could only think himself into relationships. Trying to navigate romantic attachments based purely on whether a relationship "makes sense" is also an unreliable guide. We can only exercise genuine discernment in our sexual and relational lives when we have both feeling/intuition and thinking/reflection working together in

a dynamic balance. It is only the "thinking heart" that can lead us into healthy relationships. It is not enough just to engage both of these parts to make good decisions in our relationships. As Ben's experience shows, each part needs to be healed and restored. We cannot think ourselves into a sort of redeemed intuition. This is the work of the Spirit, with a little help from our friends.

Joy Never Ceasing

Joy is a concept that is woven throughout Scripture from beginning to end. The prophet Nehemiah proclaims, "The joy of the LORD is your strength!"[29] The psalmist witnesses that "when anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy."[30] Sadly, joy has become a biblical cliché that seems to have no real meaning or significance within our culture. Yet, crucially, joy is the foundation for Christian desire and relationships.

Neurobiologists have shown that while most brain development stops sometime in childhood, the brain's "joy center"—located and observable in the right orbital prefrontal cortex—is the only part of the brain that never loses its capacity to grow.[31] Although we are born as bundles of potential, our interactions in early childhood lay the path for our future relationships, shaping our capacity as desiring beings for good or ill. As a parent—particularly a mother—tunes in to her infant, the baby mirrors the parent's responses. In this way, the brain begins the complex process of being wired for the back-and-forth communication of human relationships. These positive early interactions create a "joy reservoir" or "joy strength" that acts as the command-and-control center of the entire emotional system. As Dr. James Friesen and his colleagues explain:

> When the joy center has been sufficiently developed, it regulates emotions, pain control and immunity centers; it guides us to act like ourselves; it releases neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin; and it is the only part of

29. Neh. 8:10.
30. Ps. 94:19.
31. James G. Friesen et al., *The Life Model: Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You; The Essentials of Christian Living* (Pasadena, CA: Shepherd's House, 1999), 16.

> the brain that overrides the main drive centers—food and sexual impulses, terror and rage.[32]

They suggest that without sufficient "joy strength" we spend the rest of our lives trying to fill the deficit. Sadly, researchers estimate that around 35 percent of children fail to make secure attachments, creating damaging and sometimes devastating consequences for their future relational lives.[33] Yet the glory of God's design is that he has wired our brains for relational connection, and he has wired them for healing.

When Amelie was first married, she thought that her struggles in life had come to an end. Family life had been difficult growing up as she struggled to connect with her emotionally distant father while needing to care for her emotionally dependent mother. But now she was turning over a new page, having married a great guy from a stable, loving family. It didn't take long, though, for the past to catch up with her. In her first year of marriage, a colleague started paying her a lot of attention. He was an older man, old enough to be her father. Rather than being put off by his advances, Amelie was alarmed to find that they triggered an inner craving she found difficult to resist. The more attention he gave her, the more she wanted. She knew that this developing relationship was inappropriate, but the attention was like a drug she couldn't resist. Fearing that the unhealthy emotional attachment might lead to a sexual relationship, she decided to tell her husband. Reflecting on that experience, she says:

> Telling my husband was terrifying because I didn't know if he would understand how out of control I felt. How could I be so convicted that the relationship was wrong, and yet have such an intense craving for it? But telling him was the best thing I did. It broke through the shame I was feeling and allowed me to seek help. I thought it was going to break us apart but in the end it made our marriage stronger.

Amelie's husband was able to see that this older man was tapping into her unmet needs for a loving and attentive father. Rather than allowing

32. Ibid., 12.

33. Marinus van IJzendoorn, "Adult Attachment Representations, Parental Responsiveness, and Infant Attachment: A Meta-Analysis on the Predictive Validity of the Adult Attachment Interview," *Psychology Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 387–403.

this experience to destroy their relationship, this insight allowed them to address the issue and become closer.

Amelie's story highlights the extent to which our deepest desires, those foundational longings that we don't choose for ourselves, are shaped in our early lives. The ability to experience healthy desire and to move beyond ourselves requires the formation of a resilient self-identity. Indeed, we cannot love others, much less God, when there is no self to do the loving. Healthy relationships require interdependence. This involves two independent people becoming bonded together through the mutual giving and receiving of time, affection, resources, kindness, and trust.

We cannot move successfully toward the independence necessary for entering a healthy, intimate relationship until we have properly experienced dependence during our earliest formation. At the heart of compulsive modes of behavior—sexual addiction, masturbation, eating disorders, overspending, alcoholism, and workaholism—lies a deep desire to fill the vacuum caused by a lack of healthy dependence and attachment as a child. Until the need to be cared for while we are totally dependent is met, we will continually seek to have those needs met elsewhere. Sadly, the unattached self tends to enter into relationships that are marked by fear, control, and self-protection. This foundational need to be cared for is an urge that seeks satisfaction, for better or worse. It's a quest that pastors and leaders need to attend to if they are to lead people into the fullness of the gospel.

Building Communities of Joy

The need to be cared for creates an important formational imperative for parents and families: to invest in building a child's identity at the beginning of his or her life. Yet the joy center's capacity to keep developing throughout life also presents a strategic opportunity for the church. If "joy strength" is developed through the constructive back-and-forth of warm and supportive relationships, then building communities of joy and friendship is a critical pastoral task for Christian leaders. Peer-group ministries, for instance, are places where faith and identity can be placed on a firm foundation.

Jesus's words in John 15:9–11 affirm the importance of this pastoral priority: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in

my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." This may sound like strangely legalistic language, but in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus sums up the Mosaic law as love of God and love of neighbor. We will find divine joy, then, in relationship. Belonging within a community of friendship is an important foundation for the formation of Christian identity. Only when we *belong* can we experience relational joy and the healing it brings. This is also the path to maturity, as we develop a secure identity that is able to progressively focus outward toward others, away from the suffocating focus on self.

Traveling without a Map

Our essential nature as desiring beings has important implications for our approach to discipleship in the area of sexuality and relationships. Because distorted desires can lead to the most destructive human tendencies, we need to redeem these desires and restore them to their God-given purposes. Our affections, for instance, draw us into relationship with others and should play an important role in discerning which romantic relationships to pursue. Although insufficient by itself, romantic attraction plays a more sophisticated role in relational discernment than we often acknowledge.

Like conversion to faith, passionate attraction to someone else provides an important genesis for our story together. When we hit the inevitable storms and deserts of life, remembering our "first love" reorients us with a foundational memory of how we got here and why we should keep going. The Song of Songs has traditionally been read by Israel and the church to have a double meaning, expressing and celebrating both the intimacy of human lovers and God's desire for and commitment to his people. Our relationships should also have a double orientation, characterized both by *eros* (desirous longing) and by *agape* (self-giving sacrificial love for the other).

Before meeting my wife, Esther, I struggled to imagine ever meeting someone whom I would be willing to commit to for the rest of my life. In hindsight, I had some issues centered around being too independent, but at that time, every woman I knew seemed to have more "cons" than

"pros." Subconsciously, I had a long list of prerequisites, and no one could check all the boxes. Yet when I met Esther, she didn't so much check my boxes as dissolve my list. Although much about her character, personality, and gifts remained hidden for years, I instantly fell for her. Perhaps my emotional intuitions perceived the deeper levels of who she was and why I was attracted to her before the rest of me could catch up.

Of course, this attraction did not make our relationship simple. Nor is there any normative formula for how a relationship should unfold. Part of the deep mystery of romantic love is that it has an infinite array of permutations—each couple's story will be different. Yet with Esther, I did experience something of the mystery of attraction as a sophisticated intuitive guide. This force was strong enough to break through the thick wall I had constructed between me and any "other." On reflection, my intuitive reasoning, or thinking heart, was doing its job, and it played an important role in breaking through the wall of self-protection I had built through rational thinking (my checklist). Romantic love has enough explosive power to blow a hole in the barriers we erect around ourselves. Attraction can sum up a whole range of intuitive assessments that we are unable to articulate or rationalize at the time. Although the first years of our marriage were rocky, to say the least, the foundational memory of falling in love provided an important basis on which we sustained our commitment to work things out in those complex early years.

The Heart's Physician: Engaging the Spirit in Christian Formation

An important task within Christian formation is affirming and pursuing the Spirit's role in reconfiguring our loves. It is only through this spiritual-moral healing that we can live as new creations.[34] Gordon Fee describes how Paul views the Spirit's work of transformation in the believer. For the apostle, the experienced presence of the Spirit is the key to personal spirituality, leading the believer into the practical ethical life as expressed in the community of faith.[35] According to Fee, Paul's basic

34. 2 Cor. 5:17.
35. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 871.

ethical imperative—from which all others flowed—is to "walk in/by the Spirit," mainly evidenced in love as the first fruit of the Spirit.[36] Indeed, the other fruits or behaviors Paul describes are examples of love, or *koinonia*, within the faith community.

For Paul, the Spirit should be a dynamically experienced reality for both the individual and the community.[37] The Spirit's progressive transformation of each person is not an ideal but an actualized reality, so that Paul believes Christians will not experience the ongoing dominance of the "flesh," or human sinfulness, in their struggle.[38]

In the Greek and Hellenistic Jewish thinking of Paul's day, the key concern was to control the "passions," or lustful desires, through self-discipline.[39] The Stoics, for instance, sought to master themselves by rejecting all forms of passion or desire. This one-sided approach represents a model of formation by amputation, and it has been a persistent temptation within Christian discipleship. Such legalistic self-discipline offers a measure of control and security but ultimately is ineffective; it actually does violence to our fundamental identity and Godlikeness. Although controlling the passions is also important for Paul, he locates the solution in the Spirit's power to restore our desires rather than extinguish them. Paul believes that "walking in the Spirit" is the key to healing our desires, which then allows us to reorient our lives and choices within the framework of the gospel. Fee challenges Christian leaders to resist the temptation to reshape Paul in our own image on the basis of a lesser experience or expectation of the Spirit's presence and work in our lives and communities.

Finally, Paul sets out the various ad hoc lists of the fruits of the Spirit *not* as systematic moral rules but as examples of "Spirit-living."[40] In Paul's approach, the Spirit is both the existential and the ethical heart of the Christian life. When we relegate the Spirit to a background figure in our lives and churches, we weaken our ability to form disciples in Christ, for it is only the Spirit who can do that. Indeed, attempting to shape Christian sexual practices only through a regime of rules and disciplines tempts us

36. Ibid., 879. See Gal. 5:22.
37. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 880.
38. Ibid.
39. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul*, 75.
40. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 882.

to make the same mistake as those in Galatia, who sought to return to the self-disciplined life "according to the flesh." This is the sort of self-help religion that Paul warns against, for it leads to the very behavior it seeks to avoid.[41] For the apostle, the Spirit is the beating heart of Christ's body, the church—the only power that can restore, heal, and remake each limb for its distinctive role within the body.

Concluding Thoughts: Shooting for the Heart

The goal of Christian formation is to form disciples within the rhythms of divine desire. This is essential to both discipleship and healthy relationships because we cannot love others well until we have experienced God's love within the deepest parts of ourselves. This is what Bernard was driving at with his progressive journey of Christian desire. First, we must be taught to love by experiencing God's love. As we travel this journey into divine desire, we are freed to become genuine lovers, like Jesus, rather than just consumers of love.

Within this model there is an important caution. Augustine reminds us that the healing of our affections is progressive, requiring disciplined training within the Christian life. We need to acknowledge and resist the way that modern romanticism has deeply shaped our commitment to both personal independence and sexual gratification as our culture's highest priorities. If we fail to resist these cultural impulses, we are likely to accommodate them into our vision of life and our approach to discipleship. Although we should affirm the wonder and mystery of sexual intimacy and romantic attraction as God's good creations, we need to set these aesthetic enjoyments within the context of the Christian virtues of fidelity, self-sacrifice, and patience in suffering.

Bringing this together, 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. Christian formation involves both *resistance* and *redirection*. But it is the redirection of our desires that enables our resistance of cultural idolatries. Failure to attend to the dynamics of our desires leads to inevitable self-deception

41. Gal. 5:16–24.

regarding the "freedom" of our actions. Especially within our sexual lives, our hearts must be truly captivated by the goodness of the Christian vision of life, so that our whole self is drawn toward it, or our commitment to live in tune with it will be brittle.

Focusing on the human heart as the key to Christian discipleship might sound like an ambiguous or weak affair, somehow diluting the hard realities of the gospel. But this task is the core of the gospel. As Hans Urs von Balthasar says, "God's covenant is the struggle between His love and sinful man."[42] The heart is where we encounter the most resistance to Christ's lordship over our lives. It is the heart more than the mind that clings to idols and false loves. The mind can be reeducated with good teaching and consistent preaching, but the heart stubbornly and secretly chooses its own way. Only when we get to this essential part of the self, its command-and-control center, can Christian formation push down deep roots.

We need to be clear that the Christian journey of desire will not be a smooth or easily traveled road. It is one to be walked with hope, courage, and perseverance, always tethered to the unshakeable grace of God. C. S. Lewis explains that the Christian journey of desire is unmistakably one of hard sacrifice of our cherished fantasies, as well as ultimate satisfaction in the freedom of becoming our true selves. As he puts it, "We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be."[43] Sacrifice and satisfaction, then, are the two feet that carry us on the long walk to freedom.

42. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 58.

43. C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. W. H. Lewis (Fort Washington, PA: Mariner Books, 2003), 477.