



# Sex and the Supremacy of Christ

John Piper | Justin Taylor

EDITORS

This is the rare book that delivers more than it promises. Pick it up to learn about the true joy of sex: you will, and you'll also learn about the joy of God.

—MARVIN OLASKY, editor-in-chief, *World* magazine

This book is a glorious start to forming a Christian mind that expresses delight in God's gift of marital intimacy—a Christian mind that so desires to delight in that which God delights in, that it revels in rejecting the cheap substitutes pawned off on this passing age as true pleasure, and instead only finds satisfaction in what is purest and highest and noblest and best. The book considers the subject of human sexuality biblically, theocentrically, Christologically, and thus helps form a well-rounded Christian outlook on sex.

—J. LIGON DUNCAN III, Senior Minister,  
First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, Moderator,  
General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America

In a culture that's desperately asking sex to be the alpha and omega, this book shows how sex is better when Christ is the Alpha and Omega.

—ANDRÉE SEU, Senior Writer, *World* magazine

I cannot think of any gift of God that has been more abused and misused than that of sex. What was intended to be a stunning, pure, earthly picture of amazing heavenly, eternal realities, has been perverted into an alluring but false god that is in fact a grotesque caricature of the true God. The contributors to this volume have provided a refreshing, insightful, and much-needed treatment of this sacred subject, calling us to bring our thoughts and lives into captivity to the supremacy of Christ and to reflect our ravishment with our heavenly Bridegroom in our sexuality. I pray that this resource will make a profound difference in how God's people think and live.

—NANCY LEIGH DEMOSS, author, host of  
“Revive Our Hearts” radio program

Sex is a wonderful gift from God; but it makes a terrible idol, brutal and unyielding in the misery it inflicts. These authors are a breath of fresh air, because unlike our culture's self-proclaimed "sexperts," they respect biblical authority and warmly embrace the Lordship of Christ. Hence, they can lift up the torch of divine truth and expose the enemy's lies about sex that have penetrated not only the darkest corners of our culture, but of our churches. I pray that *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ* will demonstrate to readers that Christ being Lord of all means that he must be Lord of all we think, say, and do about sex—and that in his lordship we will find deliverance and joy.

—RANDY ALCORN, author, *The Purity Principle*

Another Christian book on sex? This is so much more. We don't need another book on how not to look at the girl in the miniskirt. We've read that. We don't need another bedroom guide with chapter titles containing the word "hot." Basically, we don't need another book on sex that's all about us. We need to have our gaze lifted. We need to consider the God who made us sexual creatures for his glory. This book will help you form a Christ-centered, Bible-shaped understanding of sex. This is something we all need.

—JOSHUA HARRIS, author, *Sex Is Not the Problem (Lust Is)*

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## INTRODUCTION

From him and through him and to him are all things.  
To him be glory forever. Amen.  
ROMANS 11:36

Whether you eat or drink, or  
whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.  
1 CORINTHIANS 10:31

JUSTIN TAYLOR

These are among the Bible verses most often quoted by evangelicals. But *quoting* Scripture texts is different than *shaping a worldview around them*. If the church today truly took seriously the significance of the term “all things,” wouldn’t we witness a steady stream of provocative sermons and books on the theme of “How to Have Sex to the Glory of God”? Instead, the mere suggestion of preaching such a sermon would probably elicit little more than a nervous chuckle or red-faced embarrassment.

The genesis of this volume and its attempt to answer that question was the Desiring God National Conference (2004), entitled “Sex and the Supremacy of Christ.” We wanted to approach the topic with frankness and reverence, with the supremacy of Christ as both our foundation and our aim. What do sex and the supremacy of Christ have to do with each other, and what implications should this have for our everyday lives?

### **What the Bible Says About Sex**

Suppose you wanted to know what the Bible teaches about sex. How would you go about finding out? A word search on variants of the word *sex* in an English Bible shows that it almost always occurs in the context of *sexual immorality* (Greek, *porneia*—from which we derive the word “pornography”). So you might conclude that the Bible does not

have much to teach us about sex, and that when it does address sexuality, it does so only in a negative, prohibitory, prudish fashion.

But this would be a rather shallow conclusion. *Scripture has a lot to say about sex, because Scripture has a lot to say about everything.* So rather than searching the Bible only for the word *sex*, a more productive strategy would be to search the Bible for the term *all things*, since *sex* is obviously a subset of *all things*. Here is a sampling of what this kind of search would reveal in God's authoritative Word:

- Sex is created by God (“by him *all things* were created”—Col. 1:16).
- Sex continues to exist by the will of Christ (“in him *all things* hold together”—Col. 1:17).
- Sex is caused by God (he “works *all things* according to the counsel of his will”—Eph. 1:11).
- Sex is subject to Christ (“he put *all things* under his feet”—Eph. 1:22).
- Christ is making sex new (“Behold, I am making all things new”—Rev. 21:5).
- Sex is good (“*everything* created by God is good”—1 Tim. 4:4).
- Sex is lawful in the context of marriage (“*all things* are lawful”—1 Cor. 10:23).
- When we have sex, we are to do it for the glory of God (“*whatever* you do, do *all* to the glory of God”—1 Cor. 10:31).
- Sex works together for the good of God's children (“for those who love God *all things* work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose”—Rom. 8:28).
- We are to thank God for sex (“*nothing* is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving”—1 Tim. 4:4).
- Sex is to be sanctified by the Word of God and prayer (“*everything* . . . is made holy by the word of God and prayer”—1 Tim. 4:4-5).
- We must be on guard not to be enslaved by sex (“I will not be enslaved by *anything*”—1 Cor. 6:12).

- We are not to grumble about sex (“do *all* things without grumbling”—Phil. 2:14).
- We are to rejoice in the Lord during sex (“rejoice in the Lord *always*”—Phil. 4:4).
- We are to be content in sex (“having all contentment in *all* things at *all* times”—2 Cor. 9:8 mg.).
- We are to practice and pursue sexual relations in holiness and honor (“each one of you [is to] know how to control his own body [KJV: “possess his vessel”; RSV: “take a wife for himself”] in holiness and honor”—1 Thess. 4:4).
- Spouses are not to “deprive one another [sexually], except perhaps by agreement for a limited time,” that they might devote themselves to prayer (1 Cor. 7:5).
- But then they are commanded to “come together again [sexually], so that Satan may not tempt [them] because of [their] lack of self-control” (1 Cor. 7:5).
- In this fallen age, sex is both pure and impure—“To the pure, *all* things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, *nothing* is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled” (Titus 1:15).

What a sermon series this would be! A careful study of these verses, in the context of the whole counsel of God, would show that sex cannot be understood rightly or practiced properly without seeing how sex relates to God. It is our hope and prayer that the chapters collected in this volume will help you orient your entire life and worldview—including your sex life and views on sexuality—around the glory of God in Christ.

### **Shame in the Church**

One of the hindrances to a frank and edifying discussion of sexuality is the issue of shame. Shame can be healthy, and shame can be sinful. By and large, our culture is hell-bent on shedding any vestiges of propriety and shame in all things sexual. As an overreaction, the church is often too timid to even broach the topic, for fear of violating Paul’s command that “it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret” (Eph. 5:12). But this proper shame can easily morph into improper

embarrassment and an unhealthy reticence to apply the whole counsel of God to an issue of paramount significance. Such is not an option, however, for the body of Christ, as Al Mohler so helpfully reminds us:

Christians have no right to be embarrassed when it comes to talking about sex and sexuality. An unhealthy reticence or embarrassment in dealing with these issues is a form of disrespect to God's creation. Whatever God made is good, and every good thing God made has an intended purpose that ultimately reveals His own glory. When conservative Christians respond to sex with ambivalence or embarrassment, we slander the goodness of God and hide God's glory which is intended to be revealed in the right use of creation's gifts.<sup>1</sup>

### Sex in the World

In the 1950s, there was broad assent to an external moral order outside of ourselves, governing and framing our discourse and our ethics. That shared understanding collapsed in the 1960s with the advent of the sexual revolution. In its place a new ethic arose. Some suggest that what we have instead is rampant relativism and narcissistic nihilism. But such an analysis tends to miss the mark. The new ethic—sometimes called an “ethic of authenticity”<sup>2</sup>—“insists that the inner voice is morally authoritative and should be followed without question.”<sup>3</sup> Dinesh D’Souza refers to this as the “imperial self.”<sup>4</sup> To worshipers and obeyers of the Imperial Self, a bare appeal to “objective morality” is not likely to make significant inroads. Frederica Mathewes-Green writes:

These students have an objective morality. It's just different from ours. They believe that it's objectively wrong to dump someone in a callous way. It's wrong to have sex with someone who isn't willing. It's wrong to transgress any one of a hundred subtle etiquette cues about who may sleep with whom under what circumstances. There is plenty of objective morality on their side, and they think it's better than ours. As far

<sup>1</sup> R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “The Seduction of Pornography and the Integrity of Christian Marriage,” an address delivered to the men of Boyce College (March 13, 2004), available online at [www.sbts.edu/docs/Mohler/EyeCovenant.pdf](http://www.sbts.edu/docs/Mohler/EyeCovenant.pdf) (accessed 1-14-05). This address is an absolute must-read for all men.

<sup>2</sup> See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Dinesh D’Souza, “The Imperial Self,” available online at [http://www.tothesource.org/12\\_1\\_2004/12\\_1\\_2004.htm](http://www.tothesource.org/12_1_2004/12_1_2004.htm) (accessed 1-26-05). I am dependent on D’Souza’s analysis here for this section.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

as they can see, theirs is working and ours looks pointlessly difficult. Why should they switch? This argument sounds like nothing more than “because I said so.”<sup>5</sup>

“Because I said so” is not very persuasive to five-year-old children throwing a temper tantrum, and “because I said so” is not very effective with twenty-five-year-old college students in bed with one another.

What is needed in its place is a worldview built around the proposition that *God said so*. Our calling is not merely to parrot those words, but to set forth a biblical theology that takes seriously the gracious prescriptions and the gracious prohibitions of our holy, loving Creator.<sup>6</sup> As we challenge the church and the culture, we must strive to live out Paul’s description of the Christian life as “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10). We must learn to speak both frankly and yet with discretion; prophetically and yet with nuance; with boldness and yet with a brokenhearted spirit. In short, we must learn to become who we are: the redeemed body of Christ—sinners being sanctified who reflect both the tough and the tender mercies of our Lord and Savior.

### **Sex Is a Pointer to, Not a Substitute for, God**

Bruce Marshall, in his novel *The World, the Flesh, and Father Smith*, wrote a very provocative sentence: “The young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God.”<sup>7</sup> What Marshall saw—and what few are saying—is that there is a deep connection between God and sex. Peter Kreeft sees it. After arguing that “sex is the effective religion of our culture,” he explains:

Sex is like religion not only because it is objectively holy in itself but also because it gives us subjectively a foretaste of heaven, of the self-forgetting, self-transcending self-giving that is what our deepest hearts are designed for, long for and will not be satisfied until they have,

<sup>5</sup> Frederica Mathewes-Green, “What to Say at a Naked Party,” *Christianity Today*, February 2005, available online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/002/14.48.html> (accessed 1-21-05).

<sup>6</sup> Those looking for resources to aid in this task need look no further than the following two outstanding books recently published by Crossway Books: Daniel R. Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004); and Andreas J. Kostenberger with David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004). For a study largely confined to the foundational teaching of Genesis, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Genesis of Sex: Sexual Relationships in the First Book of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Marshall, *The World, the Flesh, and Father Smith* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1945), 108.

because we are made in God's own image and this self-giving constitutes the inner life of the Trinity.<sup>8</sup>

Sex is designed to be a pointer to, not a substitute for, God. The human heart, as Pascal observed, is a God-shaped vacuum that can be filled only by God himself:

There once was in man a true happiness of which now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present. But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.<sup>9</sup>

It is with these considerations in mind that we can consider the connection between sex and the supremacy of Christ.

### **An Overview of *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ***

In the opening two chapters, *John Piper* explores this relationship of God and sex by suggesting two simple but weighty points. Positively, he argues that sexuality is designed by God as a way to know God in Christ more fully; and that knowing God in Christ more fully is designed as a way of guarding and guiding our sexuality. Or to put it negatively: all misuses of our sexuality distort the true knowledge of Christ; and all misuses of our sexuality derive from not having the true knowledge of Christ. In chapter 2—the second part of Piper's message—he expands upon this second point, helping us to see and savor the supremacy of Christ in and over all things. The main obstacle to knowing the supremacy of Christ is the just and holy wrath of God against us, his sinful, rebellious subjects. And the solution is the righteousness of Christ in absorbing that wrath and opening for us the door to eternal life. Piper concludes, then, by asking and answering the question of how the knowledge of the supremacy of Christ—opened to us by the gospel—can guide and guard and govern our sexual lives, making our sexuality sacred, satisfying, and Christ-exalting.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Kreeft, *How to Win the Culture War: A Christian Battle Plan for a Society in Crisis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 95.

<sup>9</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 113.

In his chapter “The Goodness of Sex and the Glory of God,” *Ben Patterson* suggests that C. S. Lewis’s description of worldly pleasure in *The Screwtape Letters*—“an ever-increasing craving for an ever-diminishing pleasure”—is exactly what’s going on in our culture. But God’s agenda for sex and pleasure, Patterson argues, is different. Sex is good because the God who created sex is good. And God is glorified greatly when we receive his gift with thanksgiving and enjoy it the way he meant for it to be enjoyed. To show that this is true, Patterson takes us on a tour of the Bible, showing the importance of marriage—in the beginning, at the end, and throughout. In particular, he marvels at the imagery from the Song of Solomon, and its vision of wholesome, richly erotic sex done in the way and within the context God intends, in contrast to the cheaply toxic sex done in the way the world recommends. In the second half of his chapter, Patterson examines the theological foundations for the celebration of sex within the covenant of marriage. God not only created all things good, out of nothing, but he sent his only Son in human flesh, showing that the physical is a fit vehicle for communion with God. And God demonstrated this goodness by creating us male and female, as sexual creatures who were made to be together and to find ourselves as we give ourselves away. Patterson closes his chapter by offering a poignant example from his own life where he experienced afresh the gratitude and joy of being given his wife by a good and gracious God.

In Part Two we turn to issues surrounding sexual sin and brokenness. *David Powlison* argues that we are all engaged in a battle, and it is longer, wider, deeper, and subtler than people realize. We must lengthen our view of the battle, seeing it as a lifelong battle. We must widen our view of the battle, not focusing only upon the high-profile sins and thereby missing the big picture. We must deepen our view of the battle, recognizing that sexual sin is but one expression of a deeper war for the heart’s loyalty and primary love. We must also recognize that the battle is subtler than we often think as we begin to see the complex layers of sin in our hearts—some obvious, some subtle; some externally manifested, some only internal; some involving our sin against others; some involving others sinning against us. The goal of the battle is not “just say no” and not just the “means of grace,” but rather the goal is to see Jesus Christ himself. For Christ’s love is itself longer and deeper and

wider than we can imagine. Powlison ends his essay by giving us some practical counsel on getting down to business in today's skirmish of the Great War.

One "marquee sin" in our culture is homosexuality. So much of the discussion in the church and in the culture has been framed in terms of "us" versus "them." But *Albert Mohler* explains why he views "Homosexual Marriage as a Challenge to the Church." The challenge has to do first and foremost with the kind of people that we—the body of Christ—will be. Mohler convincingly argues that "we must be the people who cannot talk about homosexual marriage simply by talking about homosexual marriage"—that is, we must start with the larger issues at stake. "We must be the people who cannot talk about sex without talking about marriage, and the people who can't talk about anything of substance or significance without dependence on the Bible. We must be the people who have a theology adequate to explain the deadly deception of sin, as well as a theology adequate to explain Christ's victory over sin. We must be honest about sin as the denial of God's glory, even as we point to redemption as the glory of God restored. We must be the people who love homosexuals more than homosexuals love homosexuality, and we must be the people who tell the truth about homosexual marriage and refuse to accept even its conceptual possibility, because we know what is at stake."

Part Three of this volume focuses specifically on sex and men. *Mark Dever* opens the chapter on "Sex and the Single Man" by observing the unique challenges faced today by single men, due in part to young men waiting longer to get married and the culture's devaluation of marriage. Dever argues that there is a biblical alternative to this pattern of extended adolescence and passivity toward marriage. In the next section of this chapter, *Michael Lawrence* sets the theological foundation for sex. Far more than a list of do's and don'ts, Lawrence shows us the meaning of sex as God designed it and the implications this has for sexual intimacy and for masturbation. *Matt Schmucker* focuses on the physical intimacy issue, demonstrating that most of us have a double standard when it comes to how married men are to interact with women who are not their wives, and how single men are to interact with women who are not their wives. Schmucker then offers four reasons as to why physical intimacy with a woman who is not your wife should be pro-

hibited. So what *should* a biblical relationship look like? After defining courtship and dating, *Scott Croft* explains their different motives, mind-sets, and methods. Working with the biblical principle that commitment precedes intimacy, Croft makes a case that the courtship model is the one most consistent with the biblical rules for a relationship with someone of the opposite sex.

*C. J. Mahaney*, in his chapter for married men, takes us back to the Song of Solomon for instruction on godly sexuality. Along with most contemporary evangelical scholars, he respectfully rejects an allegorical or typological interpretation of the book, arguing instead that the book involves the modeling of a godly, passionate sexual relationship in the covenantal context of marriage. Mahaney argues that one of the main lessons we can draw from this book is that in order for romance to increase in our marriages, we must learn to touch our wife's heart and mind before we touch her body. This involves carefully composed words and the cultivation of romance through intentional planning. He offers practical suggestions for how to touch her mind and heart. In the final section of the chapter, he provides wise and biblical counsel on sex itself and the gift of marital intimacy.

We turn to the subject of "Women and Sex" in Part Four. *Carolyn McCulley* begins by making some observations about sex and the single woman in twenty-first-century American culture. But how, she wonders, can committed Christian single women who are by God's grace avoiding sexual immorality address our culture on this topic? She insists that in order to do so, this counterrevolutionary message must be centered upon the gospel and the sin-bearing, life-changing power of Jesus Christ. She then turns to examine what the Bible teaches about the gift of singleness and the gifts of the Proverbs 31 woman. Along the way she deals with issues like avoiding sexual temptation at work and how singles should function in the church as indispensable members of Christ's body. A single woman's ultimate hope cannot be for marriage, but for the presence of Christ. God's seeming silence is not an indication of rejection, but a preparation of revelation, as single women commit to living their lives for the supremacy of Christ.

*Carolyn Mahaney*, in turn, speaks to the married women about sex. She is not oblivious to the pain and confusion that many women have experienced through past sexual encounters, but she argues that no sit-

uation is beyond the reach of God's grace and the power of Christ's cross. She insists that by God's grace all married women can enjoy the sexual relationship with their husbands, and she proposes to examine what such a passionate relationship would look like from a wife's perspective. Recognizing that the Bible does not provide explicit instructions on marital sex, Mrs. Mahaney does see several biblical principles that can cultivate what she calls "Grade A sexual intimacy." Wives, she argues, are to be attractive, available, anticipatory, aggressive, and adventurous. She closes with words of gentle encouragement and wise counsel to those women who are in danger of despairing and losing hope about their sexual relationships with their husbands.

In the final part of the book, "History and Sex," we turn to a historical couple and a historical movement to give us some perspective. In my chapter on "Martin Luther's Reform of Marriage," I look at the life of Martin Luther, the great German Reformer. As Luther set about the task of reforming marriage through his teaching, preaching, and writing, he was convinced that he himself had been called to singleness and would never marry. After all, he thought that he would probably die a martyr's death in just a few short years! But God had different plans, and a crucial component of Luther's rehabilitation and reformation of the marital institution was his brief courtship and long marriage to Katherine von Bora, a young nun whom he had helped escape from a convent. Their life together—along with Luther's teachings on sex, marriage, love, and children—had a revolutionary impact upon Reformation Germany and continues to influence the evangelical church today.

In the final chapter, *Mark Dever* examines the role of the Puritans and sex. The Puritans and sex? Did they ever enjoy such a thing? Isn't "Puritanism" the "haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy"?<sup>10</sup> Dever refutes these historically ignorant suggestions and, in quotation after quotation, allows the Puritans to speak for themselves. After surveying the historical background of the Roman Catholic tradition and the Lutheran revolution, Dever details the Puritan view on marriage, sex, romance, sexual sin, and pleasure. Dever shows that the Puritans were not opposed to pleasure per se; they were opposed to plea-

<sup>10</sup>H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 624.

sure insofar as it was insubordinate to pleasure in God. Dever closes by drawing together eight lessons we can learn from the Puritans regarding a biblical view of sexuality. Also attached to his essay is an appendix that surveys the study of the Puritans within the academic world.

May Christ bless you as you read this book. Our prayer is that it would draw you closer to him, as you see his supremacy in all things—including sex.

### **Acknowledgments**

The process of editing and writing a book never occurs in a vacuum. Our wives, Noël and Lea, graciously and joyfully support us in this ministry, and they deserve special thanks for their help and for their patience. We stand in debt to many friends, without whom this project would not exist. Jon Bloom, the executive director at Desiring God, keeps the wheels turning in this ministry. Scott Anderson, the conference coordinator at Desiring God, labored many long hours to pull the “Sex and the Supremacy of Christ” conference together. Vicki Anderson, our administrative assistant, frees us up to work on projects like this. We would also like to express our appreciation to Carol Steinbach and Robert Williams, who graciously and quickly pulled together the Scripture and Person indexes for us. We express our deep thanks to the contributors to this book, who agreed not only to present their talks in Minneapolis, but also to turn them into written chapters in the midst of hectic ministry schedules.

Most importantly, we acknowledge our debt to Jesus Christ. Our lives once revolved entirely around anything and everything but you. But by your grace, you have placed yourself at the center of our solar system. We pray that this book would honor you and the supremacy of your name.

## CHAPTER 1

# Sex and the Supremacy of Christ: Part One

JOHN PIPER

There is a connection between the beheadings of Jack Hensley and Eugene Armstrong and Nick Berg and Paul Johnson and Kenneth Bigley in Iraq, and this book on *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*.

I look at them and I see their hands and their eyes. And I think of my hands and my eyes and my death and my faith. And then I hear the words of Jesus put it all in perspective, and in relation to sex.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. (Matt. 5:27-30)

In other words, there is something far more important than to keep your eye or your hand—or your head—namely, to receive eternal life and not to perish in hell. And Jesus links it with the war that we are waging not in Iraq but in our hearts. And the issue is sexual desire and what we do with it.

Everywhere you look in the world, it seems, there are reminders that

life is war. We are not playing games. Heaven and hell, Jesus says, are in the balance.

### Two Simple, Weighty Points

I have two simple and weighty points to make. I think everything in this book will be the explanation and application of these two points. The first is that *sexuality is designed by God as a way to know God in Christ more fully*. And the second is that *knowing God in Christ more fully is designed as a way of guarding and guiding our sexuality*. I use the phrase “God in Christ” to signal at the outset that I am going to move back and forth between God and Christ because the biblical assumption of this book is that Christ is God.

Now to state the two points again, this time negatively, in the first place *all misuses of our sexuality distort the true knowledge of Christ*. And, in the second place, *all misuses of our sexuality derive from not having the true knowledge of Christ*.

Or to put it one more way: *all sexual corruption serves to conceal the true knowledge of Christ, but the true knowledge of Christ serves to prevent sexual corruption*.

#### 1. *Sexuality Is Designed by God as a Way to Know God More Fully*

God created human beings in his image—“male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27)—with capacities for intense sexual pleasure and with a calling to commitment in marriage and continence in singleness.<sup>1</sup> And his goal in creating human beings with personhood and passion was to make sure that there would be sexual language and sexual images that would point to the promises and the pleasures of God’s relationship to his people and our relationship to him. In other words, the *ultimate* reason (not the only one) why we are sexual is to make God more deeply knowable. The language and imagery of sexuality are the most graphic and most powerful that the Bible uses to describe the relationship between God and his people—both positively (when we are faithful) and negatively (when we are not).

Listen, for example, if you can without embarrassment, to both the

<sup>1</sup>I would argue that when God wills singleness for any person he designs it as a way of knowing him more fully. There are unique ways of knowing God through sexual continence in singleness and unique ways of knowing God through sexual intimacy in marriage.

positive and the negative in God's words spoken through the prophet Ezekiel. Keep in mind that God has chosen Israel from all the peoples on the earth to experience his special covenant love, until the day when the Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ, would come and live and die in the place of sinners, so that the gospel of Christ would overflow the banks of Israel and flood the nations of the world. So what we hear God say about his love for his people Israel in the Old Testament is all the more true of his relationship to those who believe in his Son, the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Here is how God describes that relationship with Israel according to the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 16. He speaks to Jerusalem as the embodiment of his people and rehearses over a thousand years of history. Starting at verse 4:

“On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born.

“And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare.

“When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine. Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. . . .” (Ezek. 16:4-10a)

That's a picture of God's utterly free and undeserved mercy. That is how Israel was chosen. That's how you were brought from death to life and from darkness to light and from unbelief to faith, if you are a believer. “I said to you, ‘Live!’ and made you flourish. I married you. You are mine.” That's how Israel began. That's how the Christian life begins. The mighty mercy of God. Then he goes on with the image:

“Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord GOD.

“But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his. You took some of your garments and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore. The like has never been, nor ever shall be. . . .

“Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband! Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side with your whorings.” (Ezek. 16:13-16, 32-33)

There’s the picture of the faithless Israel. Her idolatry—her turning from the Lord God to foreign gods—is pictured as the work of a whore. And I say again what I said earlier: *God created us with sexual passion so that there would be language to describe what it means to cleave to him in love and what it means to turn away from him to others.* Now comes the word of judgment:

“Therefore, O prostitute, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated. I will gather them against you from every side and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness.” (Ezek. 16:35-37)

It may look as though God was finally finished with Israel. Judgment had fallen. The wife was put away. But that is not the last word. God hates divorce. Therefore, though he judge and separate, he will not finally forsake his covenant people—his wife. He will make with her a new covenant and bring her back to himself at the cost of his Son and by the power of his Spirit:

“For thus says the Lord GOD: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant, yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant. . . . I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord GOD.” (Ezek. 16:59-60, 62-63)

The end of the story is that God, after giving up his faithless wife into the hands of her brutal lovers, will not only take her back, and not only make with her a new and everlasting covenant, but will himself pay for all her sins. Are there debts this prostitute owes? This husband will pay them. “When I atone for . . . all that you have done, declares the Lord.” Indeed he will pay with the life of his own Son.

And so in the New Testament, after Jesus Christ has died and risen and is gathering a people for himself and his heavenly Father, the apostle Paul calls all husbands to live with their wives like this. Model your love on this kind of love:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25-27)

This is the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision: “I will remember my covenant with you . . . and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant. . . . and you shall know that I am the LORD . . . when I atone . . . for all that you have done” (Ezek. 16:60-63). Jesus Christ creates and confirms and purchases with his blood the new covenant and the everlasting joy of our relationship with God. The Bible calls this relationship marriage, and pictures the great day of our final union as “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9).

Therefore, I say again: *God created us in his image, male and female, with personhood and sexual passions, so that when he comes to us in this world there would be these powerful words and images to*

*describe the promises and the pleasures of our covenant relationship with him through Christ.*

God made us powerfully sexual so that he would be more deeply knowable. We were given the power to know each other sexually so that we might have some hint of what it will be like to know Christ supremely.

Therefore, all misuses of our sexuality (adultery, fornication, illicit fantasies, masturbation, pornography, homosexual behavior, rape, sexual child abuse, bestiality, exhibitionism, and so on) distort the true knowledge of God. God means for human sexual life to be a pointer and foretaste of our relationship with him. That's the first of my two points.

## *2. Knowing God Is Designed by God as a Way of Guarding and Guiding Our Sexuality*

My second point is this: not only do all the misuses of our sexuality serve to conceal or distort the true knowledge of God in Christ, but it also works powerfully the other way around: the true knowledge of God in Christ serves to prevent the misuses of our sexuality. So, on the one hand, sexuality is designed by God as a way to know Christ more fully. And, on the other hand, knowing Christ more fully is designed as a way of guarding and guiding our sexuality.

Now on the face of it this will seem to many as patently false—that knowing Christ will guard and guide our sexuality. Because many will list off the pastors, priests, and theologians who have committed adultery or who have been found addicted to pornography or who have sexually used little boys or girls. Surely, then, if pastors, who hold the sacred office of tenderly shepherding Christ's flock, can be so sexually corrupt, there can be no correlation between knowing God and being sexually upright, can there?

I think this question should be answered from Scripture, not from experience, because if the Scripture teaches that truly knowing God guards and guides and governs our sexuality in purity and love, then we may be sure that a pastor, or priest, or theologian, or anyone else whose sexuality is not governed and guarded and guided in Christ-exalting purity and love does not know God—at least not as he ought. So what

does the Bible teach concerning the knowledge of God and the guarding of our sexuality?

In answering this question let's remember that knowing someone in the fullest biblical sense is defined by sexual imagery. Genesis 4:1, "Now Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain." *Knowing* here refers to sexual intercourse. Or again in Matthew 1:24-25 we read, "When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but *knew* her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus." He "knew her not" means he did not have sexual relations with her.

Now I don't mean that every time the word *know* is used in the Bible there are sexual connotations. That's not true. But what I do mean is that sexual language in the Bible for our covenant relationship to God does lead us to think of knowing God on the analogy of sexual intimacy and ecstasy. I don't mean that we somehow have sexual relations with God or he with man. That's a pagan thought. It's not Christian. But I do mean that the intimacy and ecstasy of sexual relations points to what knowing God is meant to be.

One of the books of the Bible that makes this clear is the book of Hosea. Listen to the way God speaks through Hosea to describe the restoration of his marriage with faithless Israel:

"Behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness,  
and speak tenderly to her.

And there I will give her her vineyards  
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.

And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth,  
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

"And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. . . . And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. *And you shall know the LORD.*"  
(Hos. 2:14-16, 19-20)

I think it is virtually impossible to read this and then honestly say that *knowing God*, as God intends to be known by his people in the new covenant, simply means mental awareness or understanding or acquaintance with God. Not in a million years is that what “knowing God” means here. This is the knowing of a lover, not a scholar. A scholar can be a lover. But a scholar—or a pastor—doesn’t know God until he is a lover. You can know *about* God by research; but until the researcher is ravished by what he sees, he doesn’t know God for who he really is. And that is one great reason why many pastors can become so impure. They don’t know God—the true, massive, glorious, gracious, biblical God. The humble intimacy and brokenhearted ecstasy—giving fire to the facts—is not there.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I haven’t shown this from Scripture yet. I only said, *If* the Scripture teaches that truly knowing God—truly knowing Christ—guards and guides and governs our sexuality in purity and love, then we may be sure that a pastor, or anyone else, whose sexuality is not governed and guarded and guided in purity and love does not know God—at least not as he ought.

So is this what the Bible teaches: that knowing God—knowing Christ—is the path to purity? Is it indeed the case that the true knowledge of God promised in Hosea (and Jer. 31:34) brings the powerful passions of the body under the sway of truth and purity and love?

This entire book will be an answer to that question. But let me simply point you to some of the texts that provide the answer.<sup>2</sup> Each of these texts teaches that knowing God as revealed in Jesus Christ guards our sexuality from misuse, and that not knowing God leaves us prey to our passions:

Since they did not see fit to have God in [their] knowledge God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. (Rom. 1:28, literal translation)

Suppressing the knowledge of God will make you a casualty of corruption. It is part of God’s judgment. If you trade the treasure of God’s glory

<sup>2</sup> See these other texts not referred to in this chapter: 2 Timothy 2:24-26; Romans 12:2; Philippians 1:9; Romans 10:3; Hosea 4:1, 6; 5:4; 6:3.

for anything, you will pay the price for that idolatry in the disordering of your sexual life. That is what Romans 1:23-24 teaches:

[They] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.

This is the old way. When we come to Christ, we take off the old way like a worn-out garment. Ignorance of God's wrath and glory does not fit us anymore. The new way is sexual holiness, and Paul contrasts it with not knowing God:

This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles *who do not know God*. (1 Thess. 4:3-5)

Not knowing God puts you at the mercy of your passions—and they have no mercy without God. Here's the way Peter says it in 1 Peter 1:14-15:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of *your former ignorance*, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.

The desires that governed you in those days got their power from deceit, not knowledge:

Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt *through deceitful* desires. (Eph. 4:22)

The desires of the body lie to us. They make deceitful promises—promises that are half true, as in the Garden of Eden. And we are powerless to expose and overcome those half-truths unless we know God—really know God, his ways and works and words embraced with growing intimacy and ecstasy.

When Paul describes the new person in Christ, who is putting off the old practices and the old slaveries, he says in Colossians 3:10 that

“the new self . . . is being *renewed in knowledge* after the image of its creator.” In other words, “I will betroth you to me forever, and you will know me.” And in this knowledge you will be renewed—including your sexuality.

Peter’s second letter has one of the clearest passages in the Bible on the relationship between knowing God and being liberated from corruption. In 2 Peter 1:3-4 he says:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, *through the knowledge of him who called us* to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, *so that through them* you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

The divine power that leads to godliness comes “through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.” And we become partakers of his divine nature—that is, we share in his righteous character—through his precious and very great promises. In other words, knowing the glorious treasure that God promises to be for us frees us from the corruption of lust and shapes us after the image of God.

Or as Jesus said, most simply in John 8:31-32: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and *you will know the truth, and the truth* will set you free.” Not *all* truth. The truth that you find in his Word. The truth that you find in relation to Christ as his disciple. And what is that truth? “I am the way, and *the truth*, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). “No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:27).

The Son knows the Father with infinite truth and intimacy and ecstasy. The joy that the Son has in the Father is unparalleled. His gladness in God the Father exceeds all gladness (Heb. 1:8-9). And this he shares with us who trust him as Savior and Lord and Treasure of our lives. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11). “No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him”

(Matt. 11:27). And if he chooses, we will know the Father. And if we know the Father the way Christ knows the Father, we will be free.

### **Conclusion**

Let me therefore state again the two points that fly as a double banner over this book: 1) *sexuality is designed by Christ as a way to know God more fully*; and 2) *knowing Christ more fully in all his infinite supremacy is designed as a way of guarding and guiding our sexuality*. All sexual corruption serves to conceal the true knowledge of Christ, and the true knowledge of Christ serves to prevent sexual corruption.

I will come back to this in the next chapter, and all the other contributors to this book will unfold it. And as they do, let the double banner over this book fly with the words of Hosea to the wayward wife of God, and to you: “*Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD*; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth” (Hos. 6:3).

Amen.

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—**J. Ligon Duncan III**, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS and Moderator, General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America

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"The contributors to this volume have provided a refreshing, insightful, and much-needed treatment of this sacred subject, calling us to bring our thoughts and lives into captivity to the supremacy of Christ, and to reflect our ravishment with our heavenly Bridegroom in our sexuality. I pray that this resource will make a profound difference in how God's people think and live."

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"Sex is a wonderful gift from God, but it makes a terrible idol, brutal and unyielding in the misery it inflicts. These authors are a breath of fresh air, because unlike our culture's self-proclaimed 'sexperts,' they respect biblical authority and warmly embrace the Lordship of Christ. Hence, they can lift up the torch of divine truth and expose the enemy's lies about sex that have penetrated not only the darkest corners of our culture, but of our churches."

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