

**GOD'S DESIGN
AND WHY IT MATTERS**

RETHINKING

SEX

UAL

ITY



DR. JULI SLATTERY

foreword by **GARY THOMAS**, author of *Sacred Marriage*

Praise for
Rethinking Sexuality

“Never before have I read such a clear, theologically sound, compassionate, and insightful work on sexuality. Juli addresses all the sexual issues most Christians are afraid to talk about and provides deeper answers than most of us have ever considered. She offers not only practical wisdom to navigate the sexual confusion of our day but also a paradigm-changing game plan to sexually disciple those God has placed in our care.”

—CHIP INGRAM, president and teaching pastor of Living on the Edge
and author of *Culture Shock*

“It is high time we begin to understand the narrative and meaning of one of God’s great gifts to humanity and what it means to grow not only in sexual purity but also in maturity. I deeply respect Juli Slattery. Her thinking is foundationally biblical and wise while also being well informed and thoughtful. I consider this a seminal work to aid the church in growing in a conversation that goes beyond *Just say no.*”

—DAN B. ALLENDER, PHD, author of *The Wounded Heart* and *God Loves Sex*, professor of counseling psychology and founding president of the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology

“Tragically, secular values about sexuality have become integrated into every possible aspect of life. It is frightening, and as moms and leaders, we don’t know how to undo the damage done to hearts, minds, and lives. Dr. Juli Slattery arrives with hope!”

—LINDA DILLOW, speaker and author of *Passion Pursuit* and *Intimate Issues*

“Dr. Slattery is, in my opinion, one of the most articulate, thought-provoking, clear-thinking writers and speakers on genuine intimacy on the planet. Forget the toaster as a wedding gift. Give this book to newly married couples who have grown up in our sexual wasteland of a world.”

—JOHN TRENT, PHD, author and president of StrongFamilies.com

“Dr. Juli Slattery is the expert I trust to balance grace and truth in explaining God’s plan for human sexuality. Like no other expert on this topic, Dr. Slattery combines education, compassion, professional qualification, and biblical conviction to chart a practical path forward.”

—JOHN S. DICKERSON, author of *Hope of Nations* and lead pastor of Connection Pointe Christian Church

“My friend Juli Slattery has dedicated her life to helping men and especially women navigate the often intimidating landscape of human sexuality. She does this with grace, empathy, wisdom, and a deep understanding of God’s divine design for sex as outlined in Scripture.”

—DR. GREG SMALLEY, vice president of marriage and family formation at Focus on the Family

“Dr. Juli Slattery has once again reminded us why she is our generation’s leading expert on human sexuality and questions of intimacy. *Rethinking Sexuality* is a must-read for every pastor in America who desires to marry sound theology with compassion and wise action!”

—CHRIS BROOKS, MA, campus dean of Moody Theological Seminary, Michigan

“We are pounded with the world’s teaching on sexuality from every quarter, every day. Yet the body of Christ remains befuddled and appears powerless before the onslaught. Juli is calling us to know and live and teach the positive case for true sexuality. As she says: ‘It’s time to reclaim sexuality as a holy expression of God’s goodness and love.’ ”

—DR. DEL TACKETT, author and teacher, *The Truth Project* and *Is Genesis History?*

“Our view of God, Scripture, and all relationships flow through the grid of our sexuality. Without a biblical view of sexuality, we won’t get anything right. I heartily recommend Juli’s seminal work. This is one of those ‘must-reads’ for the church. Read it, live it, and disciple others in it.”

—JOSH MCDOWELL, speaker, best-selling author, and founder of Josh McDowell Ministry

RETHINKING
S E X
U A L
I T Y

**GOD'S DESIGN
AND WHY IT MATTERS**

DR. JULI SLATTERY

Foreword by **GARY THOMAS**, author of *Sacred Marriage*



MULTNOMAH

RETHINKING SEXUALITY

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked (BSB) are taken from the Holy Bible, Berean Study Bible, BSB copyright © 2016 by Bible Hub. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, ESV® Text Edition® (2016), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the King James Version. Scripture quotations marked (NKJV) are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

Trade Paperback ISBN 9780735291478

Ebook ISBN 9780735291485

Copyright © 2018 by Juli Slattery

Cover design by Mark D. Ford

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

MULTNOMAH® and its mountain colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Slattery, Julianna, 1969- author.

Title: Rethinking sexuality : God's design and why it matters / Dr. Juli Slattery.

Description: First Edition. | Colorado Springs : Multnomah, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017051234 | ISBN 9780735291478 (pbk.) | ISBN 9780735291485 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Sex--Religious aspects--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BT708 .S544 2018 | DDC 233/.5—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017051234>

v5.3.1

ep

To Mom and Dad.

I can't thank you enough for the many ways you have taught me to love God and His Word. Our Father plants small seeds and uses them to bear much fruit. "To raise a heritage that will reflect God's glory on earth."

All my love,
Juli

Contents

Foreword by Gary Thomas

Who This Book Is For

PART 1

A NEW PARADIGM—SEXUAL DISCIPLESHIP

- 1 Why We Have to Rethink Sexuality
- 2 What Is Sexual Discipleship?

PART 2

LOOKING UPWARD—KNOWING WHAT WE BELIEVE

- 3 The Premise
What You Think About Sex Begins with What You Believe About God
- 4 The Purpose
The Gospel Is Written Within Your Sexuality
- 5 The Problem
Someone Wants to Destroy Holy Sexuality
- 6 The Pandemic
We Are All Sexually Broken
- 7 The Promise
Jesus Came to Redeem Broken Sexuality

PART 3

LOOKING INWARD—LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE

- 8 Our Natural Selves Versus Our Spiritual Selves
- 9 Our Public Selves Versus Our Private Selves
- 10 Love Versus Truth

PART 4

LOOKING OUTWARD—PASSING ON WHAT WE BELIEVE

- 11 Start with Who You Know
- 12 We Need the Body of Christ

Conclusion: Nothing Short of Revival

Acknowledgments

Appendix: Scripture Passages Addressing Sexual Issues

Discussion Questions

Notes

Foreword

“One day it dawned on me. We have been sexually disciplined by the world.”

As a pastor in the nation’s fourth largest city, and as one who has worked with numerous premarital couples, I couldn’t agree more with Dr. Juli Slattery’s comments. Indeed, any honest observer must realize that there seems to be a concerted effort in most forms of entertainment and the media to promote an image and purpose of sexuality that is radically at odds with biblical teaching and historic Christian practice.

Juli’s awakening to this ethical challenge has become our gain because, in response, she has written a very courageous book about the need to pioneer an important new work under the bold moniker “sexual discipleship.” She writes, “Although sexuality presents an enormous challenge to Christians and to the world at large, *it is not a problem to be solved but a territory to be reclaimed.*”

You might recall that as Gentiles mixed with Jews in the first century, the early church had to decide which ethical issues were most important for Jews and Gentiles alike to follow. These issues had to span cultural differences because the gospel was created to be a worldwide influence. Accordingly, the apostles stripped ethical obligations down to only a very few commands. Here’s what they came up with: “Abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20, *ESV*).

About the only one of those points most relevant today is sexual immorality, and yet this is precisely the arena in which Christians seem to be more muddled, more confused, more at odds with one another, and, frankly, so much in the throes of disobedience. Which means sexual discipleship isn’t a peripheral “controversy.” It goes to the very heart and

birth of our faith and beliefs. If we veer off course, sexually speaking, we will not be the unique people God has called us to be.

Dr. Juli Slattery is exactly the right person to lead the way in reclaiming this land. She seems uniquely gifted by God to write this book and champion this cause. Her compassion and empathy cover each page. She is a living embodiment of the “grace and truth” principle she espouses—bold and unstinting with truth, yet quick and generous with grace and understanding.

As you’ll read in this book, Philip Yancey once said, “I know of no greater failure among Christians than in presenting a persuasive approach to sexuality.” Thank God for calling and equipping Dr. Juli Slattery to restake a claim so essential to who we are and to what we believe as the Christ-following people of God.

—Gary Thomas
Author of Sacred Marriage

Who This Book Is For

I wrote this book for Christians who are at some level aware of the pain and confusion represented by sexuality.

It's for parents, teachers, pastors, lay leaders, and others who want to use their influence and relationships to direct people toward God's love and truth.

It's for those who have no clue how to respond to the flood of opinions about sexuality that come across their social media feed.

It's for those who can't sleep at night because they sense the sexual struggles of their children and have no idea how to help.

It's for those who are wading through their own healing journey of restoring shattered innocence.

Thank you for picking up this book. It means that you care, that you are a seeker of Truth. May we find Him as we journey together.

PART 1

A NEW PARADIGM

Sexual Discipleship

Why We Have to Rethink Sexuality

Few things are more terrifying than being completely lost and alone.

When we first moved to Colorado Springs, my husband and I were determined to take advantage of the natural beauty. One evening after work, Mike and I got someone to watch the kids, and we set out to conquer Eagle Peak, a challenging hike on the US Air Force Academy base. It was summer, so we were confident that we could hit the summit and be back in our car by sunset.

Eagle Peak proved more challenging than we anticipated, and we reached the summit with little sunlight left in the day. Mike wanted to enjoy the beautiful view at the top for a few minutes, but I was worried about hiking in the dark, so I got a head start on my descent. Unfortunately, I took the wrong trail.

The evening turned out to be one of the most stressful adventures of my life. Mike headed down the right path, assuming that he would quickly catch up to me. I was left to navigate the mountain by myself in the dark, ill prepared, with no guide and no experience. There were moments of that evening when I wondered whether I would ever see my husband and children again.

By God's grace, I reached the trailhead a few hours later, where my frantic husband was waiting for me. He had Air Force personnel preparing for a search and rescue mission, ready with a helicopter.

While not as tangible as being lost in the dark, the journey of sexuality can be just as lonely and terrifying.

It can be a journey of shame from sexual choices and struggles.

A journey of confusion: *What does God really say about sexuality?*

A journey of division as church families are torn apart by disagreements about sexual issues.

A journey of despair as you watch a loved one trapped in addiction.

A journey of conflict as a husband and wife encounter sexual difficulty.

There seems to be no reliable guide or discernible path toward truth in the middle of this darkness. We feel wholly unprepared to navigate the unfamiliar questions and challenges of sexuality in the twenty-first century.

I believe that God is a "search and rescue" God. His truth is a light in the darkness, and He brings along men and women to guide us when we aren't sure how to find our way home. I pray that this book is one such guide.

Our sexuality is a tremendous gift from God. However, we rarely see it as a gift because it has been so twisted and tainted in our personal experiences and our culture. There is perhaps no aspect of humanity that represents more pain and shame than sexuality.

Once, when I was speaking at a Christian university, a young engaged couple waited to talk privately with me afterward. "Dr. Slattery, how do we invite God to begin restoring us sexually? We are getting married in four months, and we both have a bunch of junk in our past." It turns out that the young man was a pastor's kid and the young woman had grown up on the mission field. Both had come from loving, conservative families, and both were raised in a church culture that never talked about sex, outside of traditional purity retreats.

The young man spoke about being involved in pornography, and the young woman shared that she had been sexually abused by a cousin. They didn't feel safe talking about these experiences with their parents or anyone

in their church families. Before they met each other, both had engaged in self-destructive behaviors (cutting and disordered eating) to try to purge the guilt and shame they felt about their sexual brokenness. Now they carried additional shame for having sex with each other before saying “I do.”

Here they stood, their faces so young and innocent, yet their lives and future marriage marred by sexual wounds. They had been raised in the “ideal” Christian culture, with devoted Christian parents. Yes, God can redeem the stories of these young people. His truth can replace lies and bring healing. But how have we as their parents, mentors, and educators failed in helping them navigate such pain and struggle?

I could tell you plenty of stories from people just like these two. Some young, some old. Some male, some female. Some married, some single. People searching for truth about sexuality and wondering whether God can meet them in such a private journey.

For far too long, Christianity has not represented a safe place for pilgrims to find help related to sexuality. Ironically, everyone seems to be talking about sex but rarely within the context of home and church. It’s time to change that, and it starts with you and me.

The idea of engaging in sexual conversations is a bit overwhelming! Sexual topics are controversial, vulnerable, and potentially painful. So, naturally, we don’t want to “go there.” I vividly remember the first time I spoke publicly (and reluctantly) on the topic of sexuality. The year was 2002, and I was speaking at a women’s conference. I can still picture the room and feel the heat on my face as I talked about the importance of sexual intimacy in marriage and about all the ways it can get derailed. The women were absolutely silent. As their eyes bored into me, I began to break out in hives. Even as I spoke, I silently prayed, *God, I must have heard You wrong. I will never speak on sex again. Just please get me through the next thirty-five minutes.*

As soon as I finished speaking, women began lining up to talk to me. They shared stories of pain, ranging from porn addictions to secret affairs to memories of past sexual abuse. As I talked and prayed with them, my silent prayers changed. *God, I’m so sorry. I had no idea that there was this much pain in this room. Thank You for making this a safe place for women to learn and get help.* I realized that I had been contributing to the problem. I

had bought into the belief that God is squeamish about our sexual questions and problems.

Christians have a long history of avoiding and mishandling topics of sexuality. For generations, we simply didn't talk about things such as sexual addiction, sexual abuse, sexual dysfunction, or even sexual pleasure in marriage. People were left to navigate this terrain on their own or seek help from modern psychology.

When the church has addressed these questions, it's too often been with a judgmental, condemning tone. The focus has been on compelling teenagers to stay virgins and exposing the many ways sexuality translates into sin. Because we tend to address sexuality with this problem-solving approach, we divide people into categories of virgins and sinners, sexually whole and sexually broken. If you found yourself in the wrong category, church was the last place you wanted to seek help.

In today's world, we are unable to ignore the sexual pain and questions around us. And let's be honest: the culture seems to be a more compelling and consistent guide than the church. Ask Christians their views on issues such as sexual orientation, cohabitation, sexual healing, and masturbation, and you will likely get confused stares or conflicting statements of what the Bible actually says. The world is watching and laughing as Christians who worship the same God and read the same Bible can't agree on God's intention for sexuality. We can't guide others if we ourselves are lost.

Although sexuality presents an enormous challenge to Christians and to the world at large, *it is not a problem to be solved but a territory to be reclaimed*. The culture has captured the conversation of sexuality with a persuasive narrative, while Christians seem stifled with an outdated list of sexual dos and don'ts. We will never combat the growing confusion and pain of sexuality by swatting at the issues of pornography, premarital sex, same-sex attraction, sex trafficking, sexual harassment in the workplace, and abuse. Each of these problems is a devastating by-product of a larger tragedy: we don't understand sexuality within the context of the Christian narrative and the call to follow Jesus. As a result, Christian leaders and parents are at a loss as to how to navigate the growing chorus of sexual pain and chaos.

Respected author and Christian leader Philip Yancey stated, “I know of no greater failure among Christians than in presenting a persuasive approach to sexuality.”¹ We worship a God who created sex for a purpose and has communicated His design both in creation and through His Word. The Bible tells us that we have everything we need to live a life of godliness through Christ Jesus.² I believe that includes our sexuality. However, God’s truth won’t make a difference in this area of our lives unless we change our approach and begin reclaiming the lost territory of sexuality.

TIME TO SPEAK UP

Sociologists Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker commented on the most common parental approach to the topic of sex: “American parents just can’t bring themselves to have an ongoing dialogue about sexuality with their teenage or young-adult children. Parents much prefer a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy: We hope our kids won’t ask us about what we did, so we won’t have to tell them. And in return, we won’t ask them about what they’re doing.”³

This strategy isn’t just what’s used in homes; it’s also predominant within the church. Pastors and leaders don’t bring up the topic, hoping that you won’t either. I believe this is beginning to change, but historically Christians have just avoided talking about sex. I’ve been told that “these conversations don’t belong in the church.” If not the church, where do they belong? Sadly, because of this stance, sexual conversations are happening everywhere *except* the church.

Our silence on sex reinforces the belief that sexuality is dirty and ungodly. People conclude that God has little or nothing to say about our sexuality. Silence teaches us to hold on to our secret struggles and questions, which results in isolation and shame.

I hear from many Christians who long for the church to break this silence. Here’s a portion of an email I recently received:

A dear friend of mine shared with me about your ministry.

I had been praying since 2011....Asking God some hard questions and believing that He was going to raise a woman to speak out loud about sexuality and marriage bed issues to not only the “church” but to the world! Why was I praying this?

Difficult betrayal and spiritual/sexual abuse had been occurring in my “Christian marriage” and I as a woman had nowhere to turn. There were no blogs or conferences....I sensed the Christian ministry world was silent on these things. I had gone to my church for counsel and was absolutely devastated by the “guidance” I was given. So I turned to the skies as I was walking out into the church parking lot and asked, “What do You say, Lord?” He brought the chapter Isaiah 61 to my spirit. He would set my “captive” world free!

Freedom is now what I walk in every day because of God’s truths, healing, and His justice! I lean on the Word and His healing nature and character, yet my story of healing was not about my church’s influence in my healing journey. [The church] was silent, shaming and isolating. This prompted me to begin praying. *God, who will You raise up? Who will be a mouthpiece to women?...* I knew I was not alone. When God had me share my journey, my struggles...Wow, women began to talk....A lot of them!

Believe me, I understand the appeal of silence on sex. I’m the mom of three sons. Even with my degrees and counseling experience, I have often found it awkward to address sexual topics with my kids. They don’t blush when there is a sexually charged commercial during a football game, but they blush when I bring up sex.

Now I find myself running a ministry, Authentic Intimacy, with the mission of reclaiming God’s design for sexuality. My job is to write, speak, and teach about biblical sexuality. Me, that girl who could barely say the word *sex* without turning five shades of red. Me, a woman who for many years of my marriage actively avoided sex within the one context God said I should pursue it. Little ol’ peacemaking me, who never wanted to say something that might offend someone else.

This wasn't a calling I willingly signed up for. But I began to see that in every church on this planet, men and women silently struggle with temptation, shame, trauma, and confusion. They stay silent because we stay silent. Our silence tells them that God must be indifferent or too holy to care about their sexual temptations, their sexual pain, their terrifying memories, and their tormenting shame. If these questions and issues are too troubling for the church to address, many assume they also must be too great for God to handle.

God did not take the high road, avoiding difficult and controversial topics. In our efforts to reflect Him on earth, neither should we. He was not shy about addressing sexuality. In fact, the Bible is quite a sexual book. It includes

- an explicit endorsement of sexual pleasure in marriage (Song of Songs)
- references to prostitution (Genesis 38 and Judges 16), incest (2 Samuel 13), and orgies (Genesis 19)
- instructions on avoiding sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:12–20)
- parental teaching on how to steward sexuality (Proverbs 5)
- hope for healing and redemption from sexual brokenness (Psalm 34:18; Luke 7:36–50; John 4:1–42)
- detailed metaphors of spiritual adultery and prostitution (Ezekiel 16 and the book of Hosea)⁴

God has something to reveal to His church; He has truths in His Word that can bring hope and healing. We must be His ambassadors to take this truth to a hurting world.

SEX EDUCATION ISN'T ENOUGH

Some churches are recognizing the need to address sexual issues and are providing educational opportunities related to sexuality. They may offer a marriage course for struggling couples or have a men's group addressing pornography. Their youth groups set aside a few weeks to address dating and sex.

While a sexual education response to people's confusion and questions around sexuality is certainly better than silence and judgment, it still pales in comparison with the world's aggressive messages. When we educate someone on a topic, this education takes place for a specific period of time. The parameters of the class are well defined. The limitations of education are clear when we think of all the information we have forgotten from years of formal instruction.

For example, my first language is English. I think in English and know most of the slang of my English-speaking American culture. To graduate from college, I needed to learn a foreign language, so I took three years of Spanish. This language was foreign indeed. I studied and memorized and even passed the exam, but now, three decades later, I remember little. When class was over, I forgot most of what I learned and moved on to everyday life. Despite the courses I took in Spanish, I was a long way from being fluent. Fluency means being able to think in that language, not simply responding with memorized phrases and questions. People rarely become fluent through an educational model. Fluent thought and speech usually come through immersion in an environment that consistently reinforces and models the language for us.

The danger of an educational model is that it reduces complex issues to a five-week course. We think we are experts when we read the book, memorize some stats, and prepare for the test. When we have been "educated" in what the Bible has to say about sexuality, we know how to spit out answers only to questions we have been prepared to answer. We might be able to show someone a verse about avoiding sexual immorality, but we can't explain the larger issue of why God cares about sex in the first place.

This simplistic understanding of sexuality is also what leads to legalism and judgmental attitudes. Historically, we have just taught a list of sexual dos and don'ts. Those who appeared to be obeying the list were seen as morally and spiritually superior to those who were not. Some sexual sins (such as using sex to control or manipulate your spouse) were accepted, while other sexual sins have been preached against with "fire and brimstone." The sexual crisis of our day is not the LGBTQ agenda or even

the widespread use of porn. Those are simply the most obvious symptoms of the greater challenge: embracing God's design for our sexuality.

Human sexuality is an extremely complicated aspect of our nature. God's design, the many ways we have been affected by sexual sin and brokenness, and how our sexuality is redeemed—we cannot fully grasp these matters with an educational or problem-solving approach.

WE CAN'T SEPARATE SEX AND GOD

Here is an excerpt from a blog post that demonstrates the harmful fallout of the church's incomplete teaching on sexuality:

At the age of 10, I took a pledge at my church alongside a group of other girls to remain a virgin until marriage....

The church taught me that sex was for married people. Extramarital sex was sinful and dirty and I would go to Hell if I did it....

[My virginity] became my entire identity by the time I hit my teen years. When I met my then boyfriend-now husband, I told him right away that I was saving myself for marriage and he was fine with that because it was my body, my choice and he loved me.

We were together for six years before we got married. Any time we did anything remotely sexual, guilt overwhelmed me....

I lost my virginity on my wedding night, with my husband, just as I had promised that day when I was 10 years old. I stood in the hotel bathroom beforehand, wearing my white lingerie, thinking, "I made it. I'm a good Christian." There was no chorus of angels, no shining light from Heaven. It was just me and my husband in a dark room, fumbling with a condom and a bottle of lube for the first time.

Sex hurt. I knew it would. Everyone told me it would be uncomfortable the first time. What they didn't tell me is that I

would be back in the bathroom afterward, crying quietly for reasons I didn't yet comprehend....

I don't go to church anymore, nor am I religious. As I started to heal, I realized that I couldn't figure out how to be both religious and sexual at the same time. I chose sex....

I'm now thoroughly convinced that the entire concept of virginity is used to control female sexuality. If I could go back, I would not wait. I would have sex with my then-boyfriend-now-husband and I wouldn't go to hell for it.⁵

While this young woman got the message to save sex for marriage, she had no context of how to understand sexuality within the larger story of God's love and redemption. As a result, she not only rejected the value of purity, but she also concluded that she could not trust God in any area of her life.

As this story illustrates, sexual issues are ultimately spiritual issues. When our sexuality is confusing, God becomes confusing. When the body of Christ is not willing to engage in these conversations, we allow the Enemy to build strongholds in people's lives. Their most private temptations, struggles, pain, disappointments, and shame represent their doubts about, resentment toward, and mistrust of the character of God.

I know of no issue that more effectively cuts to the quick of our beliefs about God. To the extent that we refuse to talk about tough sexual issues, we allow culture to define God's character and truth on sexuality. Here are a few examples:

Breana was sexually abused from the time she was a little girl. When she turned eighteen and escaped her childhood home, Breana went from one boyfriend to the next, each relationship becoming sexual sooner. In her twenties, Breana had two unwanted pregnancies that ended in abortion. When she was thirty-one, she found herself desperate enough to go to church with a coworker. She heard that Jesus loves her and has the power to forgive all her sins. That day, Breana became a new

creation in Christ. She eventually met and married a Christian man, only to find that her past still haunted her. As Breana grew in her faith, she was confronted with memories and questions. *If God really loves me, why did He allow those terrible things to happen when I was a child? If Jesus died to save me from my sins, why do I still feel so shameful about my sexuality? Am I really forgiven?*

Seth knew he was different from the time he was a little boy. He didn't like sports, and he preferred the company of his sisters and mom. Because he was a sensitive and shy kid, his schoolmates began calling him gay in the second grade. As Seth reached puberty, he wondered whether he was "normal." He wasn't drawn to girls the way the other guys were. Growing up in a strong Christian family, Seth never told his parents that he wondered whether he were gay. Now, as a twenty-year-old, Seth is wrestling with whether God accepts him with his sexual orientation. Was he born gay? How could a loving God create him with these desires and then tell him he can never fulfill them?

Nate is a committed Christian who longs for sexual intimacy in his marriage. Yet his wife, Tina, wants nothing to do with sex because of the trauma of her past. Every sexual advance is treated as a violation of her personal space. Nate wonders, *Why, God, would You allow me to be so lonely and isolated in my marriage? Why can't I reach my wife? Will we live the next forty years like this? What am I supposed to do with my sexual feelings and desires?*

When we have permission to speak our pain out loud, we become desperate to *know* the truth about God. Does He really love me? Can I trust His Word? Can He truly forgive me and change my heart? Is He really God?

Christians have allowed the world to define sexuality, sexual brokenness, and sexual wholeness for far too long. To the extent that we chicken out of this conversation or provide simplistic answers to complicated questions, we add to the confusion.

Sadly, more people seek sexual truth from secular psychologists and mental health counselors than they do from Christian leaders. Many pastors and lay leaders don't know how to address complicated questions, such as the impact of sexual trauma on marriage or how a person can fight sexual addiction. Even with the intention to help, they may feel overwhelmed when addressing topics for which they have no training or that they are struggling with themselves.

We need to tell the world that God cares about our sexual pain, that His wisdom extends into and through our sexuality. When we speak His truth, people are set free! I am privileged to see tears in a woman's eyes when she finally has a safe, God-honoring place to confess sins, express pain, and ask questions. I am able to witness the relief in her face when she realizes that she is not alone, that others are struggling just as she is, and that there is hope for healing and redemption. I see her relief when she recognizes that her passions and even her pain have an eternal purpose. Every person who worships God should experience what I witness through the ministry of Authentic Intimacy.

Throughout this book, I will challenge your paradigm of sexuality. My intent is to teach you how to think biblically about sexuality. Remember that a paradigm shift can't simply stay in your head. It must also influence how you live and how you interact with people around you. When we focus only on theology and truth, we become judgmental and even hypocritical. God wants His truth to transform our hearts and His love to shape how we reach the hurting.

A tidal wave of sexual confusion and brokenness has swept over us, but this is just the beginning. The percentages of those addicted, traumatized, confused, and in bondage will exponentially increase in the days to come. A devastating tsunami of sexual abuse, addiction, shattered identity, and shame is on the way. The body of Christ is in desperate need of mature Christians who are rooted in both God's unchanging truth about

sexuality and His life-changing love toward humanity. I'm asking you to be among them.

We don't have to stay silent or stunted in how we address sexuality. There is another way: an all-out effort to reclaim the lost ground of sexuality. It's a model I call sexual discipleship.

Where is the clear voice speaking to the crucial issues of the day with distinctively biblical, Christian answers? With tears we must say that largely it is not there and that a large segment of the evangelical world has become seduced by the world spirit of this present age. And more than this, we can expect the future to be a further disaster if the evangelical world does not take a stand for biblical truth and morality in the full spectrum of life.

—Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*

What Is Sexual Discipleship?

Let's take a pop quiz. Remember those from your school days? Take out a sheet of paper, and write what you think are the cultural views and biblical views in response to the following questions:

1. My marriage is lifeless and has lost all sexual spark in the bedroom. A friend of mine recommended erotic novels. They seemed to work for a while, but now I'm back to square one. What else can I do to get in the mood?
2. My daughter is marrying another woman. I'm a Christian and am confused about gay marriage. Should I support my daughter? Should I even go to the wedding?
3. My wife hasn't been willing to have sex with me for years. I've asked and asked her. I've even offered to go to counseling, but she refuses to even talk about it. I'm about ready to give up on our marriage. What's your advice?
4. I walked in on my teenage son masturbating. I'm not sure what to do. Should I just ignore that it ever happened, or should I talk to him about it? What should I say?
5. I think it's crazy to marry someone whom you haven't slept with. Sex is very important, and what if you are sexually incompatible?

Chances are you had an easier time identifying how our culture would respond to these questions than what the Bible has to say about them. Why? Because throughout your lifetime, you have absorbed millions of messages teaching you the cultural narrative of sexuality. You have been encouraged over and over again to think about sexuality from the world's perspective. If you went to public school, you were probably introduced to a value-neutral view of sex and told not to judge other people. If you went to a secular university, your professors and fellow students encouraged sexual promiscuity and experimentation as critical landmarks of maturity and identity formation. Over the years, you've seen countless movies and television shows, listened to music, read books, and consumed news reports that have taught you what to think about practically every sexual question.

Now, let's compare that clamor to what you've learned about sex from other Christians and from biblically based sources. Did you just hear that cricket chirping?

I have found that most believers have little idea of how their sexuality interfaces with their Christian faith. I've met men and women who know the Bible backward and forward, have been in Bible studies and discipleship groups, yet still struggle to make sense of sexual brokenness, sexual problems in marriage, and the larger cultural questions swirling around them.

One day it dawned on me. We have been sexually disciplined by the world. What I mean is that we have been taught to see sexuality from the world's narrative. I find that most Christians are more familiar with how to view sexuality through a cultural lens than with a biblical perspective. As we confront questions such as "Why can't I kick the porn habit?" or "Where was God when I was being abused?" or "How can I enjoy sex with my spouse when we are so sexually incompatible?" we are more likely to address these issues with a secular mind-set. We conclude that we should have what we desire, that God is powerless to stop our pain, and that sex can't be good until you find the perfect partner. Why? Because the world has sexually disciplined us, while the church has given us at best slices of information.

When we hear a word such as *discipleship*, we may assume it is a uniquely Christian or religious term. For that reason, the concept of being

sexually disciplined by the secular culture may be a leap for you, but let me explain. *Discipleship* is the integration of what we believe into our everyday lives and relationships. It involves three things: (1) knowing what we believe, (2) living what we believe, and (3) passing on what we believe.

Unlike education, discipleship isn't relegated to a certain time of the week or a specific area of life. Instead of telling you what to think, it trains you how to think. It doesn't solve your problem but forms your worldview.

WHY THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION WORKED

Although Christians may talk about discipleship, the culture has actually achieved it—at least in terms of sexuality. We have seen a rapid, widespread shift of people turning from a traditional sexual ethic to the “everything goes” philosophy of the day. What we know as the “sexual revolution” began in the 1960s and has continued to create “disciples” who reject any traditional or religious definitions of sexuality and gender. This is not simply a random evolution but is the result of a concerted effort to change how people think about morality and authority.

The cultural approach to sexuality is grounded in the larger worldview of postmodernism or humanism. Essentially, the driving philosophy behind the sexual revolution is the conviction that we should throw off external standards of truth and any fixed ideas of right and wrong. Postmodernism aims to give human beings the freedom to define their own reality and morality. God's rules or someone else's ethical standards are irrelevant because I can create my own moral reality. Only I can decide what is the “right” or “wrong” way for me to express myself sexually. The transgender movement is the ultimate expression of postmodern thought, denying even the biological constraints of male and female. Gender becomes something we create in our own thoughts instead of a physical reality to which we must adjust our thinking. What was once called “sex reassignment surgery” is now commonly referred to as “gender confirmation surgery,” indicating that truth is found in what we feel rather than a physical reality.

Even if you don't buy into postmodern thought, you might be surprised to know how much it has affected your worldview. We often make

decisions based on questions such as “What would make me happy?” “What do I really want from life?” and “What does my gut tell me?” Many feel the social pressure to refrain from using words such as *wrong*, *sinful*, or *truth*. Who are you to tell someone he or she is wrong to have sex outside of marriage? “Isn’t that for the individual to decide?”

The culture has done a masterful job of showing us how to live out postmodern thought through our sexuality. We see secular values about sexuality integrated into every possible aspect of life. Think about entertainment, news outlets, government programs, the educational system, and the role models elevated by the world. The latest “pansexual” pop star is applauded, while conservative athletes or politicians are ridiculed for holding to a biblical sexual standard. Turn on the news, browse random magazines, flip through satellite television channels, surf the internet, walk around a college campus, or visit a government-supported Planned Parenthood office, and you will see consistent messaging that sexuality is a personal choice and that no one should limit your freedom of sexual expression. Everywhere we turn, we are bombarded with the world’s sexual doctrine.

The culture is intentional about telling us what to believe about sex. The goal is to get you to think as they do. A young woman recently sent me the following email:

I am taking Human Sexuality at a state university. I knew going into this class that it would have a worldly spin on it, but I was not ready for this icebreaker! On the first day of class, we were asked to get up and ask people if they would say yes to any of the things listed on a sheet of paper and, if so, to sign the paper. It was heartbreaking because it was such a big joke and everyone was just feeding off of this bragging of sexual experiences. I knew that society is broken sexually, but Tuesday morning I saw it in an entirely different perspective. I truly wanted to weep at the brokenness.

Here are some of the questions from the icebreaker:

- I would give up sex for a year for \$15,000.

- I know what the term “golden shower” means.
- I have masturbated within the last week.
- I know what the term “cis-gender” means.
- I have faked an orgasm.
- I have an LGBTQ relative or friend.
- I have used a vibrator, cock ring, or other sex toy.
- I have watched porn/erotica without shame.

While Christians strongly disagree with the philosophy behind the culture’s approach to sexuality, we can learn from the effectiveness of its strategy. The culture has a clear belief system that is integrated into daily life and passed on through influential relationships. Consequently, the past thirty years have resulted in dramatic shifts in the average American’s view of everything from premarital sex to gay marriage.

Adopting this strategy is the shift we need to make as members of the body of Christ. It’s not enough to know what to think; we must be trained in *how to think* and *how following Christ* translates into the real-life decisions and struggles we face. When we approach sexuality from a discipleship framework, we teach and model a lifestyle of God’s truth applied to sexuality.

For example, today’s Christian teens might know at some level that God wants them to save sex for marriage. But they don’t understand why purity matters, what to do if they’ve made mistakes already, and what magic line they are not supposed to cross. They have no idea that purity will be a lifelong struggle, even after marriage. But if the church were using a discipleship model to teach about sexuality, these young people would understand the underlying spiritual importance and implications of their sexuality (we will get to these in part 2). They would also know how to apply the broader message of the gospel (Jesus’s love and redemption, the power of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling) to their lives in all circumstances.

To turn the tide and stand its ground, the church needs to sexually disciple others so that their view of sexuality is firmly rooted in the biblical narrative, integrated into their daily lives, and passed on to others. That is sexual discipleship in a nutshell.

SEXUALITY AND THE BIG PICTURE

Why does God care about sex? Why does it matter what you believe about issues such as cohabitation, porn, and divorce? Aren't these arbitrary lifestyle preferences in which God gives us freedom? A primary problem of our current approach to teaching about sexuality is that we don't understand why our sexual worldview is a critical aspect of following Jesus. Sex and sexual questions seem to be random, disconnected problems rather than integral to our Christian life. We don't think of sexuality as representing Christian maturity, nor do we understand how it is an essential part of our faith. Sexual discipleship will occur only when we see how sexuality dovetails with the larger picture of what it means to be a Christ follower.

Jesus gave His disciples (including modern-day followers) a clear commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20). Our primary work is to preach the good news of Jesus's death and resurrection and make disciples of those who trust in Him. Everything we teach, including how to honor God with our sexuality, must be an extension of those two overarching goals: evangelism and discipleship. Our conversations about sex must be rooted in a deep desire to see people know the love of Jesus and follow Him as disciples. We don't talk about sex simply to condemn people or to prove a point. Nor do we adopt the cultural view that sexual choices and opinions don't matter. We engage with sexual issues because they overlap with what Jesus has commanded us to do: share His truth and make disciples.

We have a mission. It's not to convince people that sex outside of marriage is sinful. After all, Jesus didn't say, "Go into all the world and make virgins and heterosexuals." He told us to make disciples. Our mission is to exalt Jesus as Lord, Creator, and Savior of every aspect of our lives, including sexuality.

WHY WE HAVE TO TALK ABOUT SEXUALITY

I believe that the sexual pain and confusion in our world present extraordinary opportunities for Christians to both preach the love of Jesus *and* winsomely make disciples of all nations. The model of sexual discipleship integrates sexual issues and the Great Commission. It's founded on the premise that in order to fulfill the Great Commission, we have to be equipped to talk about sexuality. Here's why.

Reason One: Hurting People Want Hope

John Piper wrote, "The quickest way to the heart is through a wound."¹ He wrote this in reference to Jesus's rather intrusive statements to the Samaritan woman at the well as recorded in John 4. Jesus loved this woman and wanted to give her the living water of eternal life. While she steered the conversation toward theology, He went after her sex life. Why? Was He trying to humiliate her or expose her? I don't think so. I agree with John Piper. Jesus knew how to get to this woman's heart. Endless hours of discussing the Jewish law and the theology of worship would have done nothing to change her life. But when the conversation turned personal, her need for healing and love became front and center.

You and I have this same opportunity to make the gospel relevant and personal to those who are silently suffering around us. Good luck talking to your coworkers about what the Bible says about their sexual choices or inviting them to church to hear a sermon about the sovereignty of God. People couldn't care less about our theology, but they are desperate for truth that can address their pain.

People are looking for help for their addictions and hope for their broken hearts. They want living water. If we run away or become judgmental or uncomfortable any time we see sexual pain, we will miss the greatest opportunities to enter the pain of their sexual brokenness and share the love of Jesus Christ.

True confession here: I'm an introvert. When I fly on airplanes, I'm one of those antisocial people who put on noise-canceling headphones and work from takeoff to touchdown. But every now and then, God makes it clear that my work for that day is to talk to someone.

I recently had one such opportunity. I was in the window seat, and a young man in his midtwenties was in the middle seat. He was friendly and quickly struck up a conversation with me. His girlfriend also had a middle seat in the row across from us. She kept glaring at us as her boyfriend and I chatted. Eventually, he said, “That’s my girlfriend. She keeps staring at me because she’s probably really jealous that I’m talking to you.”

“Hmm. That’s interesting,” I said. “Why do you think that would make her upset?”

“Well, we are flying to meet her parents. I’ve never met them, and this is going to be a terrible trip because she is flippin’ mad at me. She found out last week that I’ve been sleeping with her friend. She almost moved out, but I convinced her to stay.”

I began asking questions about why he cheated on her and whether he thought it was reasonable that she was mad. Over the next two hours, this young man told me about his fear of commitment, the tremendous shame he’s learned to cover with bravado, and his father’s unfaithfulness and abandonment. I had the chance to share with him about God, the Father who doesn’t leave us. We talked about forgiveness, how God forgives us and how we can be free to forgive others. I encouraged him to ask his girlfriend for forgiveness and gave him the name of a church where they live so they could learn more about God and building a healthy relationship. Then I asked whether I could pray for him.

I don’t know whether he followed up and took the next step in his relationship with God, but I pray that he did. Because I was willing to engage him and listen to his pain, I was able to share the gospel with this hurting young man. We didn’t talk about how God says sex before marriage is wrong. This hurting kid needed living water and a loving Father. When people are in pain, they are willing to listen to anyone who cares enough to offer them hope.

Russell Moore wrote, “The sexual revolution, if we’re right about the universe, cannot keep its promises. Unhinged sexual utopianism can only go so far before it leaves the ground around it burned over, like every other utopianism. We need to be ready, after all that, to point a light toward older paths, toward water that can satisfy.”² As people pursue sexual “freedom,”

there will be a devastation of broken lives. This creates the opportunity to offer living water, just as Jesus did to the hurting woman He met at the well.

How many of us sought God when we too were in desperate circumstances? An abortion, an addiction, a divorce, betrayal, shame that wouldn't go away—these are the things that drove many of us to faith in Christ. When life no longer worked for us, we became open to a gospel that was once offensive and irrelevant to us.

We must be equipped and willing to enter into the pain of broken sexuality. Only then can we be positioned to share the hope of Jesus with people who are desperate for the truth that can make a difference in their lives.

Reason Two: The Church Needs to Grow Up

In the Great Commission, Jesus didn't tell us to "make converts." He told us to "make disciples." He then described what that meant: "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Discipleship means teaching people what it looks like to be a Christ follower. How do we submit every area of our lives to the will of God and the teaching of Jesus?

When we address sexuality from a discipleship model, we intentionally use the influential relationships we have so we can train others and model how to surrender sexuality to God. We rely not primarily on our own experiences and thoughts but on the unchanging truth of God. We sexually disciple so that followers of Christ can know what it means to yield every area of life to the lordship of Christ Jesus, including every area of sexuality. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). "You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies" (6:20).

Because the body of Christ has often not taught Christians to think biblically about sexuality, the average believer is immature in his or her understanding of God's heart for this area of life. Most have personal opinions, but few know how to form those opinions based on God's truth as revealed in creation and Scripture.

In his letter to the Ephesian church, Paul wrote about the importance of becoming mature in our faith. He listed several of the spiritual gifts and said

that God has given us these gifts for this purpose:

[Equipping and building up the church] will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. (Ephesians 4:13–15, NLT)

Essentially, Paul is saying that we should be so rooted and mature in our faith that we are not swayed by culture. But because we are not rooted in God's truth on sexuality, that is exactly what is happening. The sexual behaviors and beliefs of many Christians are virtually indistinguishable from the world's:

- The Barna Group found that 41 percent of practicing Christians believe cohabitation is a good idea.³
- More than 60 percent of Christians on a Christian dating site said “they would have sex before marriage.” Fifty-six percent said they thought it was “appropriate to move in with someone.”⁴
- Thirty-two percent of Christian men ages eighteen to thirty admit to having an addiction to porn.⁵
- Pew Research Center found that 54 percent of Christians believe that “homosexuality should be accepted, rather than discouraged.”⁶

Yet we are called to be “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that [we] may declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

It's time for us as God's people to, as Paul said, grow up with knowledge, wisdom, mercy, and discernment related to sexuality. Every

spiritual resource within the Christian body was given for this purpose. While most churches put an emphasis on discipleship, virtually none extend this discipleship to sexuality.

ADDRESSING OUR FEAR

This challenge to step into sexual conversations may give you pause. There is a reason most Christians tend to avoid these topics. Beneath our silence about sexuality lurks a deep fear. What if our questions somehow prove that our traditional beliefs about marriage are wrong? What if a woman's horrific testimony of abuse somehow disproves our assurance of God's sovereignty and love? What if being honest about the level of sexual addiction in the church proves the lack of power of the Holy Spirit to transform lives? What if God asks you to confront your own sexual shame or brokenness?

I used to be afraid of these things. My fears made me nervous about being asked a question I wasn't certain God could answer or about stepping into waves of pain that might be too great for me to calm. Shortly before God called me into this ministry, He confronted me about my fear. If God is who He claims to be, there is no evidence, no question, no experience, no secret in my own life that can dismantle His absolute power, love, and sovereignty. Honoring the Lord means, by faith, pressing into all that He is with great confidence. With that assurance, we can ask any question, turn over every rock, and expose every mess without fear.

My friend, sexuality is a spiritual battle we have been losing. We have been losing it personally, we have been losing it within the church, and we have been losing it within our culture. Yet the Bible tells us that we are more than conquerors through Christ Jesus.⁷ God has promised us victory over both the world and sin. Why are we losing? Because we don't know how to fight. The people and ministries that are addressing Christian sexuality typically feel isolated and disconnected from the whole body of Christ. Their efforts seem insignificant compared with the massive, orchestrated efforts of the culture. As a result, it seems as if we have

conceded the area of sexuality to the world's persuasive arguments and seductive philosophy.

What would happen if Christian leaders and the Christian community were committed to defining, living, and passing on a godly sexual worldview? What if several times a day Christ followers were given positive messages and examples of God's beautiful design? What if the Christian community became known as the place to voice sexual questions, struggles, and failures?

Sexual discipleship begins with what we believe, translates to how we live, and results in what we pass on to the next generation. This discipleship model is rooted in Scripture. Moses challenged the Israelites with this model as he sent them into the pagan land of Canaan:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

As you look at this passage, you will see in Moses's call to discipleship three practical elements that still apply thousands of years later:

1. clearly understanding what we believe based on God's authority
2. integrating those beliefs into our lives daily
3. teaching and modeling what it looks like to walk according to God's commands

The rest of this book will unpack this model of sexual discipleship, presenting a road map to equip every church and every Christian with the unifying message of God's truth and healing.

It's time to rethink sexuality.

It's time to stand on God's power and His truth.

It's time to reclaim sexuality as a holy expression of God's goodness and love.

It's time for sexual discipleship.

We should not be ashamed to discuss what God was not ashamed to create.

—Dr. Howard Hendricks

PART 2

LOOKING UPWARD

Knowing What We Believe

It has dawned on me that much of what I do is relational apologetics: teaching and defending a biblical perspective on sexuality. Christian apologists have spent their lives training Christians to defend their faith. How interesting that many of them are shifting toward a Christian understanding of God's design for marriage and sexuality. Josh McDowell has warned that pornography use is "probably the greatest problem or threat to the Christian faith in the history of the world."¹ Sanj Kalra, a representative of Ravi Zacharias's ministry, recently told me that the majority of questions the ministry faces across the world revolve around sexuality.² If we don't have responses to sexual questions, no one wants to hear why the Bible might be true on other issues. Now more than ever, Christians need to have thorough, articulate responses to why God created sexuality, how to define

and respond to sexual brokenness, and how God heals and redeems our sexuality.

In this section, we are going to focus on five building blocks for a biblical view of sexuality. You might feel anxious to get to the practical application of sexual discipleship or want me to answer some burning question you have been wrestling with. Hang in there. These building blocks are essential to your being able to sort through the questions and struggles related to sexuality. You may even find that these truths represent a paradigm shift, challenging your basic assumptions. Here are the five we will explore in the following chapters:

The Premise: What you think about sex begins with what you believe about God.

The Purpose: The gospel is written within your sexuality.

The Problem: Someone wants to destroy holy sexuality.

The Pandemic: We are *all* sexually broken.

The Promise: Jesus came to redeem broken sexuality.

The Premise

What You Think About Sex Begins with What You Believe About God

I was flying home from visiting family in northeastern Ohio in June of 2016. I happened to be there for one of the greatest moments in Cleveland sports history. After a more than fifty-year championship drought, the Cleveland Cavaliers beat the Golden State Warriors in game seven of the NBA championship. (If you're not a sports fan, hang in there. I have a point). I was sitting on the plane with a Cavs hat and T-shirt, silently celebrating my vicarious victory as an Ohio girl. The series had all the drama of a Hollywood movie, and the good guys won against all odds. Sitting beside me was a man who strongly disagreed with my assessment of the series. A sportswriter from Oakland, he griped about unfair calls and claimed that the Cavs had no right winning. I wonder why we had such different opinions about the same event. Could it be because I grew up under the gray skies of Akron, Ohio, while he was raised in sunny California?

This man and I could have bantered endlessly about the players, the officiating, and the drama of the games, and we would never agree on our

conclusion about the series. We were two strangers with opposite geographical affections and loyalties.

Through my ministry, I've had countless exchanges with people about sexual issues. You name it and I've discussed it. Here's what I've learned: I will never agree with someone about sexual issues if we have differing worldviews. How could I possibly convince an atheist that cohabitation is an immoral lifestyle? Immoral based on what? Likewise, a fellow Christian and I will disagree on such issues if we have different beliefs about God's character and the authority of Scripture. The sexual confusion we see in our culture is rooted in spiritual confusion.

A. W. Tozer wrote, "The question before us, and the question that really matters, is simply, what do you think of Christ? And what are you going to do with Christ? Every question we might ever have can be boiled down to the subject of Jesus Christ."¹ If this is true, and I believe it is, then every sexual question begins and ends with questions about God. For example, if you ask me whether you should march in an LGBTQ parade, we would first need to talk about God's design for sexuality and the nature of God's love for all people. Only then could we draw some practical conclusions about whether to march in the parade.

So, before we discuss what we believe about sex, we must begin with what we believe about God. This is how Moses began his discipleship speech in Deuteronomy 6: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (verses 4–5). Moses is saying that discipleship must begin with an agreement of who is the authority. It's not Moses; it's the Lord. He is supreme, and we are called to surrender our hearts, our souls, and our strength in adoration to Him.

The same is true when it comes to sexual discipleship. Our beliefs about everything, including sexuality, must be rooted in the truth that there is one God, one source of authority. I believe this is where we fall short in our understanding of sexuality in today's postmodern culture. We no longer trust God as the source of truth and morality.

Although this is a modern problem, it is not a new problem. The Bible tells us that even thousands of years ago, people thought they knew better than God. One ancient example is the condition of Israel during the time of

the judges. The theme of Judges is “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (17:6, ESV). This Old Testament book describes a crazy period in Israel’s history, a time of sexual confusion much like our own. The nation of Israel had a spiritual heritage and spiritual leaders, but their love for God was mixed with pagan worship and secular thinking. We see a similar description of first-century Rome in Paul’s letter to the early church. In Romans 1, Paul portrayed the culture as rejecting the natural purpose and design of sexuality. The sexual chaos described in both Judges and Romans began with a rejection of God as Creator and Lord. As Paul noted, rather than worshipping the Creator, the Romans worshipped the creation.² Both of these ancient people groups had a form of worship and spirituality that might have even included God. Yet their worship of God was “God plus something.”

This is what is happening in modern Christianity. While we may worship God, we worship something else right along with God. While we don’t tend to worship birds, stars, or reptiles, we do worship humanity. We elevate our own reasoning and experience as equal to or greater than God’s wisdom. We look inward for truth instead of looking upward. While we sing of God’s power and majesty in church, we suspend His rule over how we approach sexuality. We pretend He will look the other way while we form our sexual opinions based on a need to “be true to myself” and to accommodate cultural shifts. Remember, before God ever told us to love others, He commanded us to surrender completely and totally to Him.

While much can be said about who God is, three beliefs about Him are of particular importance when it comes to having a biblical view of sexuality.

1. GOD CREATED OUR SEXUALITY

Sexuality is understood through one of two possible lenses. Either it represents a personal expression of identity and feelings, or it is an intentional aspect of God’s design for humanity. Either we are free to define sexuality as we choose, or we defer to God in our understanding of male and female, sexual expression, and sexual morality. This choice ultimately

boils down to whether we acknowledge that God created our sexuality. If He is the Creator, He defines the purpose and parameters of its expression.

The Bible clearly states, “So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27, NLT). The writer of Genesis further explained, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (2:24). Our gender and our sexuality are all part of God’s work in creating human beings in His own image. God intentionally designed us as male and female with sexual hormones and drives, leading to sexual expression in the covenant of marriage. His design for our sexuality is written both on our anatomy and within His Word. Yet our rebellious spirits reject the Creator’s design because we have a greater god: human autonomy and happiness.

Most consider a biblical view of sexuality as old school and no longer relevant for today’s progressive perspective. This is because sexuality is primarily viewed as a form of human expression and individual identity rather than the work of our Creator. If your sexual choices don’t hurt someone else, why should they be considered immoral?

Our changing attitudes about premarital sex is one example of this. “According to data from the General Social Survey (GSS), 57 percent of... respondents (ages 65–89) to the survey in the early-to-mid-1970s said premarital sex was ‘always wrong.’ That figure has dropped to 39 percent in the same age group in 2002. It’s now a minority opinion even among the oldest Americans.”³ In 2017, the Gallup organization found that 69 percent of Americans believe it is morally acceptable to have sex outside of marriage.⁴ In fact, “Waiting until marriage for a fulfilling sex life is considered not just quaint and outdated but quite possibly foolish.”⁵

For Christians, morality isn’t simply based on not hurting someone else, but our reverence for the Creator’s design and intentions. Our choices are first and foremost moral as they yield to God’s wisdom and purpose. As Christians, we often change how we interpret the Bible based on our surroundings, but as the psalmist wrote,

Your word, LORD, is eternal;

it stands firm in the heavens.
Your faithfulness continues through all generations....
Your laws endure to this day,
for all things serve you. (119:89–91)

Trusting God as the Creator means that we hold to His unchanging design for our sexuality. If God created our sexuality, His intentions as expressed in the Bible have not evolved over time.⁶ If God is *not* the Creator, then we are free to define our sexuality as we see fit. The problem is that many Christians want it both ways: to profess a faith in God but reject the design of His creation. In his book *True Sexual Morality*, Daniel Heimbach, professor of Christian ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, identified shifts in the church's thinking about God and sexuality as a result of humanistic influences. Here are a few examples:

There is a shift from making sure that sexual experience is consistent with the character of God, to making sure the character of God is consistent with sexual experience....

There is a shift from interpreting sex according to the Bible, to interpreting the Bible according to sex....

There is a shift from thinking sexual desires need to be disciplined because human nature is fallen, to thinking sexual desires should be unrestrained because there is nothing wrong with human nature....

There is a shift from worshiping a God who became flesh, to worshiping flesh that becomes God.⁷

These shifts in thinking have caused even Christians to ignore how the Bible defines God's design for sex and embrace a common "wisdom" that

encourages people to experiment sexually, live together before (or instead of) getting married, and leave marriages that are not personally fulfilling.

One current example of these cultural shifts is our approach to gender. Every aspect of our humanity, including gender, has the capacity to be affected by the Fall. Some people, because of both biological and environmental factors, experience confusion related to their biological gender. This has always been the case; what has changed is how we understand gender dysphoria and what we believe redemption and health should look like. Instead of recognizing gender confusion as a heart-wrenching distortion of God's design for male and female, our culture has begun celebrating gender fluidity, even encouraging children and teens to explore different gender identities.

Front and center in this debate is sex-reassignment surgery. While some view this as a compassionate and helpful solution to gender confusion, others see harm in it. Dr. Paul McHugh, professor of psychiatry at John Hopkins, is one of those voices. He has expressed serious concern about encouraging transgenderism as normal rather than identifying it as a mental disorder. He is particularly apprehensive about "misguided doctors" who will "administer 'puberty-delaying hormones'" to young children "even though the drugs stunt the children's growth and risk causing sterility." Dr. McHugh said that these actions come "close to child abuse," given that about 80 percent of those children will outgrow their gender confusion and develop to accept their biological gender. He concluded, "'Sex change' is biologically impossible....People who undergo sex-reassignment surgery do not change from men to women or vice versa. Rather, they become feminized men or masculinized women. Claiming that this is civil-rights matter and encouraging surgical intervention is in reality to collaborate with and promote a mental disorder."⁸

The pain of a transgender person is indeed real, and there are no easy solutions to helping someone who feels trapped in the wrong gender. However, wholeness isn't found in walking further away from God's design, as a culture or as individuals. A Swedish study of the long-term effect of sex reassignment concludes that transgendered individuals who completed the surgery may actually experience an increase in mental difficulties and suicidal thoughts ten years later.⁹ A news source notes that

“the review of more than 100 international medical studies of post-operative transsexuals by the University of Birmingham’s aggressive research intelligence facility...found no robust scientific evidence that gender reassignment surgery is clinically effective.”¹⁰

Another example of rejecting God’s design for sex is the growing acceptance of cohabitation within the Christian community. Whether they are young adults trying each other out before “buying” or older couples living together to avoid the financial complications of marriage, Christians are increasingly embracing cohabitation as a healthy alternative to marriage.¹¹ Regardless of what is accepted as general wisdom, cohabitation is actually a really bad idea. Study after study concludes that it is a poor replacement and preparation for marriage. Specifically, cohabitation promotes a consumer mentality between two people. The pressure to continually measure up undermines the stability of a couple even if they end up getting married.¹²

Here is the beauty of God’s design for sexuality: it works! The vast body of sociological and psychological findings shows us that getting married and keeping sex within marriage is good for us. As a clinical psychologist, I love seeing how an honest approach to research actually validates biblical sexual morality. For example, having sex within a committed relationship releases in our bodies chemicals such as oxytocin (a bonding hormone), dopamine (a neurotransmitter that makes us feel good), and endorphins (natural painkillers and stress reducers). A man’s semen acts as an antidepressant for his sexual partner when absorbed in the vagina.¹³ However, engaging in the same sexual activity apart from a committed relationship has the opposite impact, particularly for women. Having more sexual partners is associated with poor emotional health in women, and “even getting married...doesn’t erase the emotional challenges for women who’ve had numerous sex partners in their lifetime.”¹⁴

When we live within God’s design for sex, it is a gift and a blessing. However, when we live outside God’s design for sexuality, we experience consequences. As Solomon wrote,

Can a man scoop fire into his lap

without his clothes being burned?
Can a man walk on hot coals
without his feet being scorched? (Proverbs 6:27–28)

Christopher West said it in modern language: “We *are* ‘free’ in a sense to ‘do whatever we want with our bodies.’ However, we’re not free to determine whether what we do with our bodies is good or evil....Therefore, human freedom—‘choice’—is fully realized not by inventing good and evil, but by choosing properly between them.”¹⁵

While God has made His design plain to us, we have become futile and foolish in our thinking. Although we claim to be wise with all our enlightened moral advances, we have become fools.¹⁶ We embrace the freedom to do whatever we want, while we run headlong into our own destruction.

Normalizing sin and brokenness will only make us sicker. Our thoughts and beliefs about sexuality must be firmly rooted in the affirmation that God is the Creator and that His design is good.

2. GOD’S LOVE DOESN’T MEAN HE IGNORES OUR SIN; HE SAVES US FROM IT

Throughout church history, Christians have understood that God’s love doesn’t mean that He blindly accepts or overlooks our sin. However, the modern church speaks of God’s love in a humanistic, self-serving light that gives us liberty to live exactly how we want and still claim a right relationship with a holy God.

A mischaracterization of God’s love will inevitably taint our understanding of biblical sexuality. Much of the confusion we see related to sexual issues among Christians is rooted in how we misrepresent God’s love. Some believe God’s love must be earned, disqualifying people who have committed the “big sins” from ever going to heaven. The more modern interpretation of God’s love, “God wants me to feel happy, complete, and fully accepted as I am,” eliminates the concept of sin from

our vocabulary. We give ourselves license to pursue whatever we feel is right, with the cushion of God's love to affirm and accept us.

While God loves us just as we are, He does not accept us just as we are. Our sin (sexual or otherwise) is offensive to a holy God.¹⁷ He expressed His love not by easing His standard of holiness or by "holding His nose" as He accepts us. He "demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). If we have received this gift of love, God sees us through the perfection of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ Even so, the Bible tells us to take our sin seriously, not in an attempt to earn God's love but so that we don't take advantage of His grace and mercy.¹⁹

God's greatest demonstration of love is not to overlook our sin but to save us from it. This He did at great expense. To believe that Jesus's love compels us to redefine human brokenness as healthy or human sin as a moral option is nothing short of heresy. If our sin were as benign as we make it sound, then Jesus Christ didn't have to suffer and die. Jesus ministered to every kind of sinner during His time on earth. He loved sinners, but He never affirmed or marginalized their sin. Instead, He loved them by providing a way to be pure and holy. Even as He loved and forgave, He said, "Go and sin no more" (John 8:11, NLT).

In His love, God does not overlook porn use because a person's needs are unfulfilled. He doesn't excuse a divorce because of incompatibility. He doesn't approve of gay marriage because He wants us to be true to ourselves. He doesn't allow us to be bitter and angry because we were wronged or to be judgmental because our sin doesn't seem as bad as someone else's. God's love provides a way for us to be holy, forgiven, redeemed, and restored to a right relationship with Him.

God is love, yet His love is wholly different from our modern understanding of a deity who winks at His wayward children. God, as a loving Father, is trustworthy. He doesn't change His mind. He doesn't grade on a curve. He isn't swayed by cultural thought. He is holy and righteous, and He sent His Son to deal with every aspect of our sin. Jesus told us that the message of the gospel would be offensive—and it is! He said that it would be divisive—and it is! He said that few would accept it—and few do. It's not our job to make Jesus or the Bible more attractive to modern minds.

It's our job to bow before a holy God, desperately accepting His amazing gift of salvation from our sin.

3. JESUS IS NOT BOSS; HE IS LORD

Finally, we must be rooted in the belief that Jesus is truly Lord. I think the word *lord* gets lost in our modern culture. The closest most of us have experienced to a "lord" may be a demanding parent or employer. In those cases, there are limits to the person's authority. Parents can dictate their young children's lives but for only a set period of time. Bosses can tell you how to act and even how to dress but only when you are on the clock. If Jesus is our Lord, it means that we have given Him our very lives in response to the fact that He has given us His. We wake up each day with the attitude of surrender, as Jesus Himself demonstrated. "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

If we are honest, we would admit that we typically treat Jesus more as if He is our boss than our Lord. We choose certain areas in which He is allowed to be the authority but reserve other aspects of life that represent our time and personal choices. This is especially true for our sexuality.

Kenny Luck, pastor and founder of Every Man Ministries, coined the term *sexual atheism* to describe the trend he is seeing among Christians. He stated,

Nearly nine out of 10 self-proclaimed single Christians are, in *practice*, sexual atheists. In other words, God has nothing to say to them on that subject of any consequence or, at least, anything meaningful enough to dissuade them from following their own course of conduct. It is the ultimate oxymoron. A person who at once believes in a wise, sovereign and loving God who created them and all things, can *also believe simultaneously* He should not, cannot or will not inform their thinking or living sexually. It reminds me of those famous red letters in Luke's Gospel where Jesus says, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not

do what I say?” (Luke 6:46, NIV). There is a disconnect between identity and activity.²⁰

What if, even for one week, you surrendered every sexual thought, feeling, and behavior to the absolute lordship of Christ? What if everything you said, watched, and thought was filtered through the WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) grid? How would your attitude toward your spouse, your smartphone, and your coworkers change? As radical as that may sound, that is the Christian life. “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

No one will force us to call Jesus “Lord” today. We are promised that someday every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is *Lord*.²¹ For today we can choose to be our own moral compass. However, if we claim Jesus as Lord, we must accept all that He commands and trust all that He says as truth.

Jesus never sugarcoated the cost of His lordship in our lives. He flat-out told us that it would require the very death of self. Something cannot be resurrected until it is first dead. We have a multitude of Christians who will never experience the resurrection power of Jesus because they refuse to embrace the mortality of the cross. Paul wasn’t just trying to be inspirational when he wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Calling Jesus “Lord” means making a daily choice to acknowledge “I’ve given up the right to my own life, including sexual longings that are outside God’s design for them.” This difficult teaching about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus often comes up in conversations about the longings of those who are same-sex attracted. Why would God ask someone to deny such desires for a lifetime? Some think this perspective hypocritical and unfair, saying we haven’t challenged all believers (including ourselves) to the same standard of self-denial. They have a great point. As Russell Moore noted, “If we’re going to preach that sort of gospel, we must make it clear that this cross-bearing self-denial isn’t just for homosexually-tempted Christians. It is for all of us, because that’s what the gospel is. If your

church has been preaching the American Dream, with eternal life at the end and Jesus as the means you use to get all that, you don't have a gospel that can reach your gay and lesbian neighbors—or anyone else for that matter.”²² In other words, resisting temptation and denying strong desires should be a normal experience in the life of a Christ follower. Many Christians endure long seasons (some lifelong) of celibacy. Married couples remain faithful when sex isn't possible or pleasurable.

Surrendering to Jesus as Lord means that we value His truth over our personal opinions and experiences. This is a hard reality. Can I just admit that there are biblical teachings in this chapter that are difficult for me to write? There are times I wonder why God does what He does and allows what He allows. But here is what I've learned: when God and I disagree, He's always right. Because Jesus is my Lord and Savior, my thoughts, my beliefs, my opinions, and my choices must be surrendered to His authority. I trust that His knowledge, wisdom, and love are greater than mine.

Sexuality presents practical, undeniable challenges to what we believe about God—not just what we profess to believe but what we truly believe. Will we worship Him alone as our Creator, will we respond to His love as He has revealed it in the Bible, and will we bow to Him as Lord of our lives?

We want to die on the cross, but at the last minute, we always seem to find a way to rescue ourselves.

Nothing is easier to talk about than dying on the cross and surrendering ourselves, but nothing is harder than actually doing it. Talk is cheap, but the walk is what really matters.

—A. W. Tozer, *The Crucified Life*

The Purpose

The Gospel Is Written Within Your Sexuality

A few years ago, I was explaining the ministry of Authentic Intimacy to the director of a foundation. Before I got too far into my description of what we do, she interrupted me, “I think what you’re doing is great, but I’m just not interested in helping people have better sex lives.” I wanted to jump up and down and tell her that redeeming sexuality is about reclaiming the gospel, yet I knew that this statement would take a lot of explaining. Over the past few years, it has become more apparent to me that this is a critical paradigm shift needed in our conversations about sex. If Christians understood that the gospel is written within our sexuality, it would radically change how we think about singleness, sexuality in marriage, and every distortion of God’s design for sexuality.

As my conversation with the woman from the foundation revealed, I know I have a lot of explaining to do in order to show you the practical relationship between sexuality and the gospel. Don Schrader, a secular humorist, observed, “To hear many religious people talk, one would think God created the torso, head, legs and arms, but the devil slapped on the genitals.”¹ That’s a rather crude way of stating what many of us at some level believe about sexuality. Although we acknowledge that God created

us in His image, we're not quite comfortable extending His intentional design to our sexuality.

Before we go any further, let's define what I mean by *gospel*. The gospel is the good news of God's passionate and sacrificial love for His people, and it is the greatest and overarching message of the entire Bible. The books of Old Testament law prepared us for this good news, the Old Testament prophets foretold it, and the New Testament fulfilled it through Jesus. The gospel is the life-changing truth that God so loved the world that He sent His only Son, Jesus, to redeem His covenant people.² Because of His love, God not only saves us, but He also calls us His own and has prepared a place for each one of us to love and serve Him eternally.

Our sexuality, including its place within marriage, is a profound physical picture of this great spiritual truth. Pastor and author David Platt wrote, "When God made man, then woman, and then brought them together in a relationship called marriage, he wasn't simply rolling the dice, drawing straws, or flipping a coin. He was painting a picture. His intent from the start was to illustrate his love for his people....For God created the marriage relationship to point to a greater reality. From the moment marriage was instituted, God aimed to give the world an illustration of the Gospel."³

THE LINK BETWEEN SEXUALITY AND GOD'S COVENANT LOVE

In Ephesians 5:21–33 Paul linked sexuality with the gospel. Take a look at this passage:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by

the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

When we typically read these verses, we focus on the respective roles of men and women in marriage. While that’s important, we have to grasp the bigger picture of what Paul was teaching: the covenant of marriage and its consummation of sexual one-flesh union mysteriously point to Christ’s love for His bride, the church. Jesus also quoted Genesis in reminding us, “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:6–9). The implication of this teaching is that gender, sexuality, and marriage have mattered from the beginning of creation. God intentionally created our sexuality to tell the story of His covenant love. If the apostle Paul could not fully explain it or understand it (he called it a “mystery”), I sure can’t. However, I believe God has given us enough of a glimpse of this picture that it should transform our approach to sexuality.

We will never grasp the spiritual significance of sexuality until we understand its link to covenant love.⁴ Karol Józef Wojtyła, who became Pope John Paul II, spent much of his prepapal ministry studying and teaching what has become known as the “Theology of the Body.” He believed that the message of God’s love and faithfulness is written on our bodies, specifically in our sexuality. As we study sexual wholeness and

brokenness, we see the testimony of our greatest spiritual needs: intimate knowing, passionate love, and fidelity.⁵

God understands that as physical creatures we have a difficult time understanding spiritual truths, like the nature of His love. Because of this, He intentionally created the world as He did for the purpose of displaying His character and intentions.⁶ When Jesus taught, He pointed to the physical creation to teach spiritual truths. He taught by referring to sheep and shepherds, vineyards, fathers and children, wolves, the seasons, and our need for food and water.

The most important spiritual truth Jesus came to teach is the gospel—God’s passionate love, His offer to redeem us from our sin, and the invitation of an eternal covenant relationship with God Himself. What could God create to help us understand this great truth? He created the covenant of marriage and its expression through sexuality.

What do I mean by *covenant love*? Practically all our human relationships are contractual, meaning we promise to stay as long as that person keeps up his or her end of the bargain. Romantic relationships begin with this type of love based on an implicit promise of mutual happiness. God’s love is altogether different. He chose us before the foundations of the earth and has pledged His love to us regardless of our behavior. His loyalty and commitment to us is not based on fleeting affections but rather on a promise. As Paul wrote, nothing “will be able separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.”⁷

God created Christian marriage to mirror covenant love, which asks that we commit to loyal love, “in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, for better or worse, until death.” This kind of love is not a feeling but a promise. When you make a covenant with your spouse, you are committing to continue to choose love, even when it costs. In losing yourself, you find yourself. In giving your life, you build a new one. Pastor Matt Chandler described the significance of this covenant love in a Christian marriage when he said, “The couple make vows to each other because God has not just called them to profess romantic love to one another but to profess a particular *kind* of love, the kind that endures, that sticks, that commits.”⁸ Can you see the connection here between the marital covenant of a husband and wife and the spiritual covenant between God and

His people? He chose us before the foundation of the earth.⁹ He gave His very life to demonstrate His love for us.¹⁰ He promises to never leave us or forsake us and asks us to do the same.¹¹

Of all the things God has created on earth to teach us about His character, none is more powerful in creation or pervasive in Scripture than the marital covenant and the place of sexuality within it.

Why is sexuality important to God? Why does the Bible speak so strongly against sexual immorality and divorce? Because sexuality is a holy metaphor of a God who invites us into covenant with Himself. God created you as a sexual person in order to unlock the mystery of knowing an invisible God. John Piper alludes to this in his assessment that “the *ultimate* reason (not the only one) why we are sexual is to make God more deeply knowable.”¹² Your sexuality tells the story of God’s intention to draw you into His covenant love, the celebration of intimacy with Him, and the devastation of betraying Him. Written within your sexuality are echoes of an eternal, invisible truth.

So how does all this theology relate to our sexual questions, experiences, and frustrations? Keep reading...

SEXUAL DESIRE DRAWS US TO COVENANT

Can you imagine a world in which sexual desire simply didn’t exist? As often as sexual desire has resulted in destructive behavior, we must remember that it was created to draw our attention to the all-important truth that we were made for love.

In the midst of raising three boys, I’ve sometimes lamented that kids reach puberty at thirteen but are not mature enough to even consider marriage until almost a decade later. While I wish that this gap was far shorter, I thank God that He designed our hearts and bodies to be sexually awakened. Our sexual desire (including all the emotions and dreams it encompasses) can become so strong and persistent that a young man or woman can hardly concentrate. I believe this is God’s reminder that we were created for covenant. Because of sexual desire, a young man will suspend his pursuit of the perfect job to pursue a woman. The chemicals of

falling in love may compel them both to put everything else aside as secondary. Their bodies invite them to love.

I was recently talking with a college student who shared with me some of the joys and frustrations of being a young single adult. He talked about all the organizations, social groups, and intramural sports teams he was involved in. His social life made me wonder whether the guy ever had time to sleep. Then this young man told me, “As busy as I am, when I go to bed at night and it’s quiet, I feel lonely. I have lots of friends but no one who really knows me. I want a best friend.” I knew from a previous conversation that he was thinking about someday finding a wife, a best friend who knows him, who shares his heart and his bed. This busy, active young man is not content with studies, career ambition, and a social life. He was made for love, for covenant. By God’s design, his body, his heart, and his mind remind him of this truth.

Matt Chandler wrote, “Sometimes I meet young men who despair of their sexual appetites and say things like, ‘I just want God to take this away from me!’ And I always say, ‘You really don’t.’ What they should want God to do is empower their discipline and strength to be obedient, because sexual desire is a gift. We shouldn’t ask God to take one of his gifts away from us. Rather, we should ask him to help us steward it well, and lead us into the covenant relationship where we can enjoy it according to his design.”¹³

Unfortunately, the average young man and woman in today’s culture seek other outlets for their sexual and romantic desires. Rather than pursuing and committing to a woman, a young man will use pornography and masturbation to relieve sexual desire. Instead of entering a marriage covenant, men and women sleep together. This was never God’s intention. We are seeing the destructive consequences of these trends as men objectify women and women trade sex for attention. Sexual addiction, casual sex, and seeking a partner primarily for sexual compatibility are now the norm.

We have a society that may never experience the tangible beauty of a covenant promise. Our cultural acceptance of sex with no strings attached is reinforcing the conclusion that love is primarily about what we can get. Even when we marry, we typically do so in the pursuit of personal

fulfillment rather than the noble desire to give ourselves in covenant to another.

While God created sexual desire to awaken our longing for love, even marriage is not the *ultimate* fulfillment of that desire. Marriage is the shadow, the foretaste, the metaphor of the true longing to be known, embraced, accepted, and celebrated by our Creator. This means our sexuality is infused with a significant spiritual purpose, regardless of our marital status.

This gives great spiritual significance not only to marriage but also to celibacy. “Celibacy for the kingdom is *not a rejection of sexuality*. It’s a call to embrace *the ultimate meaning and purpose of sexuality*. The ‘one flesh’ union is only a foreshadowing of something infinitely more grand and glorious.”¹⁴ Single Christians know the ache and longing for a covenant love that hasn’t come. Even those of us who are married feel this longing because the “shadow” will never fully satisfy our true longing for intimacy. A good marriage may give us a glimpse of oneness, love, and intimacy, but we still want more. Jesus alluded to this longing when He said that a time would come for mourning and fasting when the “bridegroom” was taken away.¹⁵ Spiritually, we are now in a season of longing, anticipation, searching, and seeking for our Bridegroom. He has promised to come for us. While we find hope in the promise, we live with the nagging (and sometimes overwhelming) tension that we can’t enter into the love our hearts were created for.

Isn’t this what the psalmist lamented?

My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God. (84:2)

Our sexual desires and unmet cravings can propel us toward marriage, but ultimately they should propel us to the greater truth that we were made for eternal covenant.

SEXUAL INTIMACY CELEBRATES COVENANT

Two of the greatest challenges surrounding sexuality are convincing single Christians to abstain from sex and convincing married Christians to enjoy sex. Sex within many marriages gets relegated to the back burner or becomes a huge source of conflict. How many men and women can genuinely say that they enjoy sexual intimacy within their marriage? Some couples deal with vast differences in sexual desire. Others battle guilt and shame from past sexual experiences. Still others can't figure out how (or why) to make sex a priority in the midst of work and family demands. When you add health problems and poor communication, it's no wonder sexual problems are often at the top of the list of conflicts within marriage.

Why is sexual intimacy so important to marriage? Why would God care whether a married man and woman have enjoyable sex? There are many answers to this question, but the most important lies in understanding sexual intimacy as the celebration of the covenant promise. In a sermon entitled "Love and Lust," Timothy Keller described it this way:

When you use sex inside a covenant, it becomes a vehicle for engaging the whole person in an act of self-giving and self-commitment. When I, in marriage, make myself physically naked and vulnerable, it's a sign of what I've done with my whole life....

Sex is supposed to be a sign of what you [have] done with your whole life, and that's the reason why sex outside of marriage, according to the Bible, lacks integrity. You're asking someone to do with your body what you're not doing with your life. You're saying, "Let's be physically vulnerable to each other, let's do physical display, disclosure but not whole-life vulnerability."

If you have sex inside a covenant, then the sex becomes a covenant renewal ceremony. It becomes a commitment apparatus.... You're getting married all over again; you're giving yourself all over again. It's incredibly deepening and

solidifying and nurturing....In marriage when you're having sex, you're really saying, "I belong completely and exclusively to you and I'm acting it out....I'm giving you my body as a token of how I've given you my life. I'm opening to you physically as a token of the fact that I've opened to you in every other way."¹⁶

God created male and female—our bodies, emotions, and desires—to teach us about His covenant love. By His design, a man's body enters a woman. God created this vulnerable, pleasurable, and powerful act to be a regular celebration of the covenant promise a man and woman make to each other.

Just as unfulfilled sexual desire teaches us about our longing for God, sexual intimacy in marriage is a mysterious metaphor for the celebration of God's love for us. Because we don't often talk about this, it can seem a little creepy (even sacrilegious) to equate sexuality in any way with our relationship with God. Let me remind you that this was not my idea. God is the one who created this metaphor as a mystery. While our relationship with Him isn't sexual, He created sexual intimacy in marriage to teach us about our covenant love with Him.

In particular, sexual intimacy in marriage teaches us two things: (1) covenant love should be passionate and (2) it will always involve sacrifice.

1. Passion in Covenant

Several years ago, the Lord took me through a time of deeply seeking Him. It began with an exercise program called P90X. For ninety days, I got up early in the morning to improve my body with sit-ups, push-ups, and a variety of other exercises. About halfway into the ninety days, I started asking myself, *What would happen if I took my walk with God this seriously? What would it look like to do a spiritual P90X?* These prompting questions became so persistent that I started getting up early to pursue a "spiritual P90X."

I clearly remember God's answer when I asked Him what He wanted me to learn. He said, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and*

*strength.*¹⁷ How many times had I heard this verse? Yet this time, I got stuck on the word *heart*. I began to wonder, *Do I love God with my heart? What does that even mean?*

If you had looked at my life, you would have seen that I dutifully love God. I served Him, obeyed Him, and revered Him. Yet I would never have characterized my love for Him as passionate. Interestingly, I would probably have made a similar assessment of my marriage. I was a faithful and dutiful wife; I was a good friend to my husband, but I always had difficulty giving my heart. True sexual intimacy in marriage is not just about making your body available. It's about giving your whole self to your spouse. It requires enough trust to enter into passion.

Many couples who have sex have never together experienced sexual intimacy. A man and woman can share their bodies without being fully present with each other emotionally and spiritually. They may check out mentally or bring to mind fantasies or images of another person while being physically one with their spouse. I know a couple, Steve and Barbara, who have been married for fifty years. Much of their married lives, they settled for a cheap imitation of intimacy, him busying himself with work and sexual fantasies, and her hiding behind walls because of abuse and rejection. Steve shared, "We never developed a healthy, mutually satisfying intimacy."¹⁸ Through counseling and the work of the Holy Spirit, Steve and Barbara learned how to communicate and make their marriage bed a safe place to become one in every aspect. Barbara recalled saying to Steve one day, "Now that I feel highly valued and safe to talk to you about anything, you are incredibly attractive to me."¹⁹ Steve can light up a room as he talks about his bride and unlocking the mystery of true sexual intimacy—so much more than only physical intimacy—which he calls a "soul-orgasm."

Just as passionate intimacy is a key ingredient of great marriages, it is also an important expression of our love relationship with the Lord. God is not a distant God. His love for you is not simply a sterile call to obedience. He invites us to enter into the passionate celebration of covenant love with Him. Psalms is a book of worship and celebration. King David loved God and was also in love with God. His celebration of love often included singing, dancing, writing songs, and pouring out laments to his Lord. When David's wife criticized him for his public display of worship, David replied,

“I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes” (2 Samuel 6:22). David, through his writing and his life, showed us how to enter in and love God, not just with our minds and wills but also passionately with our hearts. There are many Christians who “appreciate” God’s covenant love but who have never celebrated (and don’t even know how to celebrate) covenant love. Bob Sorge observed, “[God’s] mandate is to establish our primary identity as lovers of God. *By the time He is finished in our lives, we will be lovers who work rather than workers who love.*”²⁰

2. Sacrifice in Covenant

The second way sexual intimacy unfolds the mystery of covenant celebration is sacrifice. I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about why sexual intimacy can become, frankly, such a pain. My Christian heritage taught me that sex within marriage is a gift from God. In the early years of my marriage, I wasn’t quite so convinced. Sex seemed to create more conflict than unity and more pain than pleasure. If this were a gift, why didn’t God make my husband and me more compatible?

Over the years I have learned that long-term sexual fulfillment between two people is impossible without sacrifice. For a man and woman to still be in love and experience sexual passion over decades of marriage absolutely requires that they learn how to love unconditionally and sacrificially. Sexual intimacy is not only the celebration of the covenant between a husband and wife. It is also a tangible learning lab of covenant love, at times asking you to deny your own desires out of love for your spouse.

God’s love for us required a great sacrifice. God the Father sent His Son to suffer and give Himself for us. If marriage is a picture of God’s covenant love for us, why would marriage not also require unselfishness and sacrifice as part of that picture? This truth has transformed my thinking about sexuality within marriage. The barriers and differences my husband and I experience are not simply problems I need to accept. They each represent an invitation for us to love each other. In stretching to love each other, we catch a glimpse of how passionate and steadfast Jesus’s love is.

For example, Ephesians 5:25–27 says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” We usually focus only on a husband’s general call to love his wife “as Christ loved the church,” yet these verses are a tangible way that a man can be like Christ in his self-sacrificing love for his wife (or future wife). Instead of pushing sexual boundaries or bringing porn into a dating or marriage relationship, a godly man will deny himself and passionately protect the purity of his bride. When he sees his wife walk down the aisle in a white dress on their wedding day, this should be not just a statement of *her purity* but, even more, a statement of how *he has protected* (and will continue to protect) her purity.

THE TRAGEDY OF BROKEN COVENANT

For every great love story, there are dozens of romances that haven’t ended well. Statistics based on self-report surveys suggest that 22 percent of men and 14 percent of women have cheated on their spouses. These numbers are even higher with less difference between genders in younger generations.²¹

Sexual infidelity is the great tragedy of a broken covenant promise. Similar to every other form of sexual immorality, infidelity in marriage is no longer viewed as a big deal in today’s permissive sexual landscape. J. Allan Petersen noted, “What was once labeled adultery and carried a stigma of guilt and embarrassment now is an affair—a nice-sounding, almost inviting word wrapped in mystery, fascination, and excitement.”²² Even professing Christ followers justify adultery by convincing themselves they have fallen out of love or that “God wants me to be happy and understands how unfulfilling my marriage is.” Infidelity is an egregious sin not only because of the devastation it brings to the betrayed spouse but also because it defiles the promise made in covenant.

Throughout the Old Testament, God draws a direct parallel between a broken spiritual covenant and a broken sexual covenant. For instance, when

the Jewish people broke their covenant with God by worshipping other gods, the Lord called them prostitutes and adulterers.²³

Probably the most vivid description of this connection is found in Ezekiel 16. In this prophetic book, God describes the nation of Israel as a helpless infant on the side of the road whom God rescued. Then God made a covenant with Israel and lavished her with good things. “You became very beautiful and rose to be a queen. And your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect” (verses 13–14). Instead of loving God in return, Israel broke her covenant with Him. God said to His people in response, “You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband!” (verse 32).

The metaphor of marriage, sexuality, and covenant not only helps us understand God’s love for us but also shows us tangibly how destructive it is to walk away from God. If you have experienced the betrayal of sexual infidelity, abandonment, or divorce, you know firsthand the deep pain of a “till death do us part” promise that has been broken. Divorce is sometimes referred to as a “living death.” You can’t just go on with life and pretend it never happened. Just as with a marriage covenant, someone who follows Christ is bound to be faithful to Him. Neglecting our covenant with God by putting money, success, or relationships as a higher priority is a serious offense to God.

BEING TRUE TO THE METAPHOR OF COVENANT

Through this chapter, I hoped to convince you that sexuality is mysteriously linked, by God’s design, to the message of God’s unfailing love for His people. Our bodies tell the story of God’s covenant love—the longing for it, the celebration of it, and the devastation of broken covenant. Here is the great promise of the gospel. While we have broken our covenant with God, He will never break His with us.

Let that sink in for a moment. Your sexuality is a living metaphor of God’s covenant love. This means that your sexual decisions are not simply a matter of doing what is right or wrong. Stewarding your sexuality is about being true to the metaphor of covenant. As a single person, does your

longing for intimacy remind you that you were created for more? The answer isn't to have sex but to pursue the God who created you with those deep longings. If you're married, do you view sexual intimacy as a physical expression of your covenant promise, or is it all about pursuing your own desires? Even in the grief of broken promises and hard hearts, we can be reminded of why God is a jealous God who asks for our faithfulness to worship Him alone. Once we grasp this, our approach to sexuality, whether male or female, single, married, or divorced, will change. Our sexual choices and experiences have true spiritual significance because the gospel is written within our sexuality.

The man's desire for a bride exists to show us that God in Christ desired a people. At a wedding we celebrate that a woman's affections were won by this man. Similarly, we are celebrating that Christ wooed his people away from their idols, away from their self-reliance, and into his tender and loving care.

—Matt Chandler, *The Mingling of Souls*

The Problem

Someone Wants to Destroy Holy Sexuality

Human sexuality is a holy masterpiece infused with spiritual significance, a masterpiece that is constantly under attack in the spiritual realms. What God created as a sacred expression of covenant love has been cheapened, warped, abused, and twisted. All around us (and within us) is the evidence of this devastation. Sexual abuse and rape, sex trafficking, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted children, abortion, sexual addiction...What was created to bless us has become a great curse.

Remember, this battle isn't just "out there" in the world but is waged in our own choices and relationships. While prostitution may be an obvious form of vandalizing sexuality, selfishly using (or withholding) sex within marriage is also a distortion of God's design. Addressing the true spiritual battle around sexuality requires that we soberly assess the war around us and arm ourselves appropriately.

Sexuality represents more than a philosophical clash or the evolution of social ethics. It is part of the invisible spiritual battle around us. In fact, it may just be the bull's-eye of that battle.

I have a friend who was sexually exploited and trafficked throughout her childhood and teen years. If you heard the stories of what she endured,

you would have no doubt that her wounds were inflicted in a spiritual battle. If you heard her incredible story of healing and redemption, you wouldn't question that it was God's work. But how about you? Is there a spiritual battle around the conflict in your marriage? Do you believe there is a spiritual aspect to teen sexual experimentation, the porn culture, the confusion around gender and sexual orientation, and in trends such as cohabitation and starter marriages? Perhaps the most dangerous battle is the one we are not sure exists. The deadliest enemy may be the one we think is after someone else.

It's not enough to be vaguely aware of some spiritual battle in the "heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). How can we fight against what we haven't acknowledged? How can we stand against an enemy if we don't recognize his impact in our lives?

UNDERSTANDING SATAN'S STRATEGY

Think for a moment of the Holocaust of World War II. All of us to some extent have heard the accounts of the evil committed in concentration camps. We have read books such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *The Hiding Place*. We have seen movies like *Schindler's List* and maybe even visited museums displaying the great horrors of Kristallnacht and Auschwitz, and we ask ourselves how human beings could possibly be so evil and cruel to one another. For the Christian, answering that question should bring awareness of the power and destruction of Satan. The Allied powers put an end to Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring, but they did not defeat the devil. The same spiritual power that imprisoned, starved, and exterminated millions of people is still the "prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2, ESV). He continues to be a "roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8, ESV). While his work today is not as evident as it was in the Holocaust, he hasn't stopped killing, stealing, and destroying.¹

I have no desire to wake up every morning and think about Satan. I'd much rather focus on the character of God. However, both Jesus's and the apostles' teaching show us that we should be aware of the Enemy's schemes so that we will be vigilant in standing against him.

While God is infinite in power and presence, Satan is a created being with limitations. This is why the Bible tells us that he is “crafty” (Genesis 3:1, ESV). As if he is playing a cosmic game of Risk, Satan must choose where and against whom he can most effectively wage war. I believe there is no sphere that appears to be under greater attack than sexuality. I am not alone. Christopher West wrote,

If the body and sex are meant to proclaim our union with God, and if there’s an enemy who wants to separate us from God, what do you think he’s going to attack? If we want to know what’s most sacred in this world, all we need do is look for what is most violently profaned.

The enemy is no dummy. He knows that the body and sex are meant to proclaim the divine mystery. And from his perspective, *this proclamation must be stifled*. Men and women *must be kept from recognizing the mystery of God in their bodies.*²

Satan has convinced us that sex can be separated from its inherent spiritual and relational significance. We buy his lies when we say “Sex is just sex.” We are deceived by him when we believe that we can read erotica or look at porn or share our bodies sexually without any relational or spiritual impact.

A contemporary example of how society has bought into this lie is the hookup culture promoted in universities around the United States and beyond. *Hooking up* is a term that refers to having sex with someone with the expressed intent of no relationship. College professor and sociologist Dr. Lisa Wade spent five years studying the sexual culture on college campuses. She found that while not all students are hooking up, the hookup culture and how it presents sexuality affects everyone. “It’s more than just a behavior; it’s the climate. It can’t be wished away any more than we can wish away a foggy day.”³ She continued, “The rule is to be less close after a hookup than before, at least for a time. If students were good friends, they should act like acquaintances. If they were acquaintances, they should act

like strangers. And if they were strangers, they shouldn't acknowledge each other's existence at all."⁴

The hookup culture is a direct assault on how our bodies were designed to function. Even Dr. Wade, a secular sociologist who champions sexual liberation, can see that what is happening on college campuses is not safe or humane.⁵ God created sexuality to draw us into relationship and affirm our commitment to our spouses. Satan is mocking and vandalizing this design by creating a stigma against those who desire sex to be attached to relationship. As Dr. Wade explained, "The most stigmatizing label on college campuses today is no longer one that references sexual behavior like 'slut,' or even the more hookup culture-consistent 'prude'; it's 'desperate,' "⁶ as in "desperate for a meaningful relationship."

While you and I may not have experienced anything this extreme in our adult sexual culture, we are bombarded daily with the message that sexuality can be separated from any spiritual or relational commitment we might make. We are told that having sex is morally neutral, just as what we choose to have for lunch or where we go on vacation. It's a personal choice that no one has the right to speak into because it's all about you. This, my friend, is a distortion of God's design for sexuality.

Satan also engages in spiritual warfare when he tempts us to doubt God's goodness. Satan's goal isn't simply for us to do something wrong; he wants to convince us that God is not trustworthy. The temptation to look at porn or cheat on our spouse isn't ultimately about sex. These choices demonstrate whether we trust God's plan for our lives.

We get a glimpse of how Satan makes us doubt God's goodness in Genesis 3 in the account of the first sin. Satan tempted Eve to rebel by convincing her that God's rules were meant for her harm rather than for her good. He is still using this strategy today, telling us that God is a cosmic spoilsport who wants to prevent us from expressing the sexual love we feel, finding our true sexual identity, and being romantically fulfilled. The God of the Bible is presented as a tyrant who wants people to stay in unhappy marriages and endure decades of suppressing the sexual urges that He supposedly gave us. As a result, we think, *How could God possibly be loving in light of these restrictions? Certainly, I'm a better judge of what's good for me than He is.* We can see the success of Satan's strategy in the

many who have either walked away from God or re-created an image of God to make Him appear more loving and accepting.

Another strategy of our enemy is convincing us that our sexual sins are beyond the atoning blood of Jesus. I've met men and women who earnestly tell other people about the freedom of being forgiven by God, yet they can't claim this truth in their own lives. Somehow their sin just feels different—more shameful, more personal, and less forgivable. Russell Moore explained why this is: “The devil works in two ways: by deception, ‘You will not surely die’ (Gen. 3:4), and by accusation, ‘who accuses them day and night before our God’ (Rev. 12:10)...No one is more pro-choice than the devil on the way into the abortion clinic, and no one is more pro-life than the devil on the way out of the abortion clinic.”⁷ As a result of believing Satan's lies, we hide in our shame and struggles. While outwardly we appear righteous and confident, inwardly we are terrified of being found out and condemned. One man sent me an email describing how Satan's lies kept him from honesty and healing, even while sitting in a church every week:

The first half of my life I didn't think God wanted me. Though I grew up in a deeply Christian home, attended church regularly, read the Bible and prayed daily, I had a secret. I had gone through nine years of sexual abuse as a boy, but I believed what happened was my fault. I did not feel abused; I felt like a very dirty boy whom no one would love if they knew who I really was. And it got worse from there. I became obsessed with sex by age eleven and by age thirteen had starting abusing younger boys.

I remember hearing testimonies at church of people who had been alcoholics on the street, but when they accepted Christ, they said they never took another drink and their lives miraculously changed. Instead of feeling encouraged, I wondered why God didn't help me when I begged Him to change me. By age fifteen I decided either my sin was too great even for God to fix, or I was so sinful He no longer wanted to. This is the lie Satan convinced me of. I was unforgivable and

unlovable. Quite frankly, most people would have said the same about me would they have known what I had done.

Why are so many Christian leaders exposed with tabloid-worthy sexual sins? Perhaps because they believed they couldn't confess and seek help when the struggle was in its infancy. Maybe even as you read this book, you have a secret burning in your gut. Please know that the Enemy works by isolating you and convincing you to stay hidden. (More on this in chapter 9.)

UNDERSTANDING THE WAR ZONE

The overlap between Satan's strategy and our daily lives is embedded in what the Bible refers to as *kosmos*, or the "world." John 3:16 tells us that "God loved the world" (NLT), but we are also told, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15–16, ESV). In the first passage, John was referring to God's love for people. In the second passage, he referred to the system of this fallen world, which is in opposition to God's authority on earth.

As followers of Jesus living on earth, we live between two worlds. While we acknowledge God's claim on our lives, we live in a physical space that is heavily influenced by Satan, "the prince of this world" (John 12:31). Through the world system, Satan works to take people "captive to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:26). This isn't a far-fetched idea. It is the reality of which the Bible continually reminds us.

The Old Testament book of Daniel helps us understand three ways that the world can take us captive. Daniel was a young Israelite who was captured by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar knew how to transform God's faithful people into his own personal servants. Within the first three years of Daniel's captivity, the king targeted his worldview, his appetites, and his identity. These are the same war zones in the spiritual battle around sexuality.⁸

Our Worldview

When Daniel and the other young Hebrews were taken captive by the Babylonians, the king instructed a court official to teach them the literature and language of the culture.⁹ We've already looked at how the world system targets our thinking about sexuality. What we think matters! The massive shifts in how people view sexual issues isn't just a cultural trend. It is evidence of a spiritual battle, one in which the world's system is succeeding in shaping our reasoning. For example, more than half of American parents would now support their teenager's request to transition to another gender.¹⁰ This is because they've become convinced that it is more loving to affirm a child's internal reality than to direct them toward objective truth. In Romans 12:1–2, Paul implored us not to be conformed to the thinking of this world but to be transformed by returning again and again to the truth of God's Word.

Our Appetites

King Nebuchadnezzar was no dummy. He knew how to win the affections of teenage boys: food. He let his prize captives eat whatever they wanted from his own table, which no doubt included a regular feast. In those days, the king's table provided food and drink that Israelites were not supposed to consume. What the world system offers about sexuality parallels the feasts offered to the young Israelites. We are told to do what feels good and engage in whatever our hearts desire. Even more subtly, we begin to believe that we can indulge our sexual appetites without offending a holy God.

Our Identity

Part of the Babylonian indoctrination was to change the names of Daniel and the other Hebrew captives. *Daniel* means "God is my judge." The Babylonians changed his name to *Belteshazzar*, which means "Bel...has protected the king."¹¹

The world system is after your identity as a Christ follower. The most obvious overlap between identity and sexuality is the conversation around LGBTQ issues. To be gay or lesbian or transgender has become an identity, not simply a sexual choice or struggle. But there are other ways in which

the world system assaults our identity. Young adults are told that there is something wrong with them if they are not sexually active. Remember the movie *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, a comedy about a nerd who is ridiculed endlessly by his friends until he's "done the deed"? Those who hold to a biblical view of marriage and sexuality are considered prudes or bigots.

We also take on false identities whenever we believe the Enemy's lies and define ourselves by our sexual sin, shame, and trauma. Paul wrote, "Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you *were*. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9–11, emphasis added). This means that the world can never change our identity.

Thousands of years ago, most of the Hebrew captives being assimilated to the Babylonian culture ate the king's food and accepted their new identities. Only a few, like Daniel, resolved to maintain their commitment to God. Daniel was respectful of his new culture yet unwavering in his resistance to the Enemy's influence.

The story of Daniel seems to have little practical application because we are not likely to be physically taken captive by a king from another country. However, we constantly face a spiritual enemy who would like us to be lured into comfortable captivity. Satan targets our thinking, our appetites, and our identity without us even noticing. Perhaps those most in peril from the spiritual war around sexuality are those who are perfectly comfortable with the world's messages. This includes God's people who are eager to make compromises with the sexual revolution.

WHY WE FIGHT

While most Christians acknowledge that we are in a spiritual battle, many misunderstand the nature of it. This is key: the battle over sexuality is not ultimately about reinstating what we consider to be sexual morality. Our enemies in the battle are not the men and women who create erotica and

porn or who lobby for gay rights. Our efforts will be seriously misguided if we don't understand the nature of the war.

In 2012, *Fifty Shades of Grey* took the world by storm. This salacious romance novel became the fastest-selling paperback in history, reaching the illustrious mark of more than one hundred million copies sold. Because I write and speak about sexuality, I was pulled into the conversation and coauthored a book with Dannah Gresh called *Pulling Back the Shades*.¹² Initially, I took the typical Christian conservative stance of telling people how bad *Fifty Shades of Grey* was and tried to convince them not to read it. God began to show me that there was a more important goal than bashing mommy porn. The battle of *Fifty Shades* wasn't about a book; it was about people. Even if we burned and banished every copy, we still would not have addressed the problem of why women wanted to read it in the first place.

I began to wonder, *What if we could use every conversation about erotica and pornography to get to the heart of people? What if instead of focusing so much on prostitution, pornography, and premarital sex, we used these counterfeits as an on-ramp to explore how we all long for true intimacy and fulfillment?*

I recently met a man who told me how sexual addiction brought him to Christ. He shared how, as an atheist, he had seen no reason to deny his sexual desires and had pursued every pleasure he could find. He fell in love and married but insisted he and his wife maintain an open marriage. Eleven years and two children later, this successful businessman was enslaved by sexual addiction. His life, his marriage, and his business were all falling apart. One Sunday when things couldn't get any worse, he went to a local church and heard the message of Jesus's love. Intrigued by hope, he met with a pastor who showed him God's love and redemption. This man is now in full-time Christian ministry, his marriage has been restored, and his passion is to see people know Jesus.

What struck me about his story is this: had someone preached to him about the evils of pornography and extramarital sex, he probably would have scoffed at such prudish thinking. But this man had a longing for true intimacy that had been disastrously misdirected, and the love of God compelled him to change direction with his life. The spiritual battle in his life wasn't ultimately about his sexual addiction but about masking his need

for a relationship with God. What originally separated him from God (his sin and brokenness) became the vehicle that brought him to trusting Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord.

We fight the spiritual battle around sexuality because we care about God and about people. We are fighting *for* people, not against them. Unrepentant sin and unrecognized brokenness are two of the greatest barriers keeping people from knowing God intimately. When we get to the essence of the battle around sexuality, we realize it's not a war of ideas, political parties, or cultural interest groups. It's a battle for God to be lifted high and win the hearts of people for whom He died.

Sexuality in our world is just plain messed up. We can see this all around us, and it didn't happen randomly. Similarly, revival and healing will come only as a result of God's people praying and fighting for them. God has indeed created a masterpiece called sexuality, and His enemy is determined to vandalize it. Yet the destruction of holy sexuality always requires human consent. As you will learn in the next chapter, each one of us can be part of the solution only once we realize how significantly we are contributing to the problem.

If we see the universe as the Bible sees it, we will not try to "reclaim" some lost golden age. We will see an invisible conflict of the kingdoms, a satanic horror show being invaded by the reign of Christ. This will drive us to see who our real enemies are, and they are not the cultural and sexual prisoners-of-war all around us. If we seek the kingdom, we will see the devil.

—Russell Moore, *Onward*

The Pandemic

We Are All Sexually Broken

One of the inside jokes in the Slattery home is “Dad’s nuggets.” Our three sons know that when my husband, Mike, pulls them into his office for a conversation, they are likely to get a pearl of fatherly wisdom. “Andrew, write the date down because I’m going to give you a nugget you can use in life.” Then Mike will tell Andrew about the value of hard work or the importance of taking personal responsibility. As our boys have grown into young men, they’ve begun to joke, “Oh, that’s nugget number fourteen. I’ve gotten that one a few times.”

I have no doubt that our three sons will grow to appreciate their dad’s nuggets of wisdom as they walk through the challenges of adulthood. I think of how often I refer to the nuggets my own father has passed down to me through the years. But here’s the thing about nuggets. No matter how often a parent teaches and repeats them, most children and teenagers don’t embrace or understand them. “I got that one, Dad. Just finish your speech so I can go do what I want to do.”

It was no different with Jesus and His disciples. He taught some of the same nuggets over and over again, but the Twelve never seemed to grasp them. How many times did He tell them of His coming death, yet they were

still shocked when it happened? He performed countless miracles before them, but they continually lacked faith. One of the nuggets He repeated the most is one they stubbornly refused. Over and over again, through story and direct teaching, Jesus told them to humble themselves, to be like servants, and to recognize their weakness.¹ The disciples heard Jesus rebuke the religious leaders for their spiritual pride and highlight the importance of childlike faith. Even so, they displayed bravado, confident that none of them would ever deny or betray Him. On the eve of His crucifixion, as Jesus told them once more that He would soon be killed, they argued about who among them was the greatest.²

The disciples, for all their devotion, believed there are two kinds of people: the sick and the well. They failed to understand that all of us are broken and in need of the Great Physician; their claims to be well were a barrier to their ability to know and trust Jesus.

Jesus taught the truth that we are all broken not only to His disciples but also to those in religious and spiritual leadership. Just as it did with the disciples, His wisdom bounced right off their stubborn hearts. It's tempting to criticize those in Jesus's day who rejected His teaching, yet I suspect Jesus is trying to teach us this same truth, particularly as it relates to sexual brokenness.

WHY EVERYONE IS SEXUALLY BROKEN

You may have been clicking right along with me until you got to this chapter. *Everyone* is sexually broken? This might be a difficult statement to swallow primarily because we typically define sexual brokenness as the presence of symptoms such as porn use, same-sex attraction, or triggers from sexual trauma. In my experience, most Christians don't think they need help in the area of sexuality.

The church often defines sexual "health" as the absence of symptoms. We send men and women to get "fixed" in their respective groups of brokenness instead of together grieving how drastically Satan has vandalized our collective understanding of holy sexuality. But sexual brokenness is not simply the presence of symptoms. *It is anything that*

keeps us from experiencing sexuality as the gift and metaphor of covenant love. For example, the woman who thinks of sex as dirty and shameful and the man who views women as objects to possess are both sexually broken.

Each of us experiences some degree of sexual brokenness for at least one of three reasons.

1. We Are Sexually Broken Because We Live in a Fallen World

Are people born gay? Why did God make hermaphrodites if gender is so important to Him? Why is sexual intercourse painful for some women? These questions fail to take into account that the Fall has marred every aspect of our humanity. Around us are people with mental and physical disabilities. Our bodies and brains don't always function as they should. Why do we think our sexuality would be spared from disease? Because of the Fall, hormones can be out of balance, genitals can be deformed, and the brain's sexual response can be faulty from birth. Because of the Fall, some people are born prone to sexual addiction, and others will never biologically be able to experience intercourse.

2. We All Have Been Sexually Harmed by Sin

While some of us have not experienced anything as horrific as rape or sexual abuse, we have all been broken by the world's consistent vandalism of sexuality. I remember lewd comments made to me, times I've seen pornographic images, and stories I've heard of what fathers do to their innocent daughters. Because of these experiences, I have to work to grasp the beautiful picture of what God created sexuality to be. I have to fight to keep harmful images and thoughts out of my mind. Every one of us has experienced similar harm as a result of living in a sinful world.

3. We All Have Sinned Sexually

Jesus told the story of two people who went to church to pray. One was a religious leader who stood by himself and prayed something like this: "Lord, thank You so much that I'm not like the sinners around me. My life is pretty clean. I do lots of things to please You, such as pray, read the Scriptures, and give to the poor." As this man prayed, he looked (perhaps

even with pity) at a poor spiritual soul who was clearly in need of divine intervention. The man on his knees could barely speak. Through sobs, he cried out, “Lord, have mercy on me! I’m a great sinner!”³

With our simplistic understanding of sexual health and morality, it’s easy for Christians to fall into the same trap as the religious leader. For example, well-intentioned purity advocates encourage virgin teenagers to respond to their peers with statements such as “I can be like you any day, but you can never again be like me.” While God cares about sexual purity, I can’t imagine Jesus ever encouraging this type of response in defense of purity. Not only is it self-righteous, but it also fails to take into account the larger picture of God’s design for sexuality. Many of these “virgins” are struggling with lust, are watching porn, and have an unhealthy concept of dating and marriage. Most importantly, kids that make comments like this have missed the basic message of Jesus. He came to save sinners like us.

None of us is pure before God, except under the cleansing blood of Christ. Each of us has “sinned and [fallen] short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). While some have saved intercourse for marriage and others haven’t, we have all engaged in lustful thinking and behaviors that don’t represent God’s design for our sexuality. God doesn’t see us in categories of our sexuality. He sees His beloved creation, deceived by sin and rebellious in nature. He sees each of us in light of His love and redemption. He sees the potential of every human being to bring glory to Him by His grace and mercy.

Jesus’s interactions and stories often highlighted two approaches to sin and weakness. The prodigal and his older brother. Lazarus and the rich man. The woman caught in adultery and her accusers. His intention wasn’t to categorize us according to our sin or brokenness but to bring to light how we ourselves categorize people.

I’ve been there. My roles as a clinical psychologist, author, radio host, and ministry leader position me as the healthy, spiritually sound person having compassion and mercy on the broken person in front of me. At times my heart has whispered, “I’m not like her. I came from a good Christian home. I’ve known the Lord since I was three. I haven’t been abused. I don’t have sexual sin and trauma in my past. Thank You, God, that I’m so ‘together’ that I can help this other person!” I too am tempted to divide

people into categories—the broken and the healers, the sinners and the saints—and always manage to find myself in the latter categories. I vividly remember walking through a time in which I felt very broken. One of my greatest fears was finding myself with that label, identifying with the people I am typically drawn to help.

Although I wasn't abused as a child, don't look at porn, and was a virgin on my wedding night, I am sexually broken. The more I embrace the mystery of sexuality and the gospel metaphor, I see how far short I've fallen from God's design for sexuality, fully integrating it with His covenant love. Even knowing what I now know, I struggle to live out this truth with integrity of heart, soul, mind, and actions.

With every sexual choice, thought, action, or belief, each of us is either working to restore the holy metaphor of sexuality or participating in Satan's schemes to vandalize it. We may hate sex trafficking yet find ourselves contributing to the demonic view that sex is a commodity for our own selfish pleasure. We have all found ourselves double-minded people, both hating and embracing the Enemy's distortion of sex. As pristine as our heritage may be, not one of us has escaped the fallout of Satan's schemes.

As David Platt wrote, "I and every reader of [my] book are guilty at multiple levels of sexual thought, desire, speech, and deed outside of marriage between a husband and a wife. None of us are innocent of sexual immorality, and none of us are immune to it."⁴

THE BEAUTY OF BROKEN

When I say "Everyone is broken," I do not mean to minimize the agony of our brothers and sisters who have experienced horrific pain through sexual trauma or other substantial distortions of God's design for sexuality. Some more than others bear the scars of Satan's work. Why was Tamar the object of her brother Amnon's desire and violence?⁵ She did nothing to deserve sexual assault, yet she lived in seclusion and grief throughout her life. I have met countless men and women who, like Tamar, are victims of rape, sexual abuse, and sexual or gender brokenness from childhood. While God sees their pain and ministers to their broken hearts, He doesn't view them in

a different moral or spiritual category from those who have escaped such tragedies. In fact, God offers to redeem the lives of men and women who have deep brokenness so that He can show His power, mercy, and love.⁶

As you read the Gospels, how much do you learn about God from the disciples or the religious leaders? Although Jesus kept trying to teach them, the nuggets didn't sink into their hearts. Jesus most profoundly demonstrated the power and love of God when He ministered to hurting people: when He healed a blind man, when He gave living water to an immoral Samaritan woman, when He wept with a grieving sister, and when He raised a man from the dead. I have learned as much about God through the lives of "broken" men and women I know as I have from reading books and listening to sermons. Their lives have *shown* me the truth of what I've read and heard.

Sometimes a person will say to me, "Your job is so difficult! I don't know how you do what God has called you to." These words bring to mind my heroes, men and women who every day wake up to confront the wounds of the past and the lies of the Enemy. They are engaged in the most difficult work. These brave brothers and sisters refuse to allow the Enemy to forever tarnish their experience of holy sexuality. Through years of counseling and determination, they have worked to restore God's design of the holy metaphor in their marriages or in their singleness. If you are among them, I am so sorry for your pain, and I respect your tenacity to reclaim holy sexuality!

The deep pain and brokenness around us should cause us to be humble rather than proud. I'm not talking about the false humility of the praying Pharisee: "Thank You, God, that You saved me from being like those other people." I'm referring to the realization that those with deep scars have something profound to teach us, something that can be learned only through the fires of intense brokenness.

With time, I'm seeing that there is sacredness in brokenness. When we stop hiding from the gospel truth that "we all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way" (Isaiah 53:6), we find a hallowed ground, preparing the way for dependence on Jesus with lives that show other people how great God is.

A young woman asked me about the wisdom of marrying a man she was dating who had been addicted to pornography. I asked her about her boyfriend's honesty, level of accountability, and spiritual walk. He had willingly disclosed his struggle, was regularly meeting with a few older men who had permission to ask him any question, had shown respect and leadership in the physical boundaries of their dating relationship, and demonstrated deep remorse and conviction regarding his past failings. Did this mean he would never again struggle or fall into temptation? No. But his actions indicated that he had been humbled. Instead of hiding, he willingly submitted himself to God and others. While a porn struggle is never a good thing, I have seen God use it to form great character, humility, and mercy in those who have surrendered their brokenness. I would rather this young woman marry a broken man who walks in grace than a "perfect" man who is spiritually proud and independent.

Perhaps there are, indeed, two kinds of people: those who are so broken they believe they can't be whole and those who believe they are so whole they will never be broken. The paradox of Jesus and His call on our lives is this. Our picture of wholeness was "pierced for our transgressions... crushed for our iniquities...and with his wounds we are healed." The Lord placed upon the perfect One "the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:5-6, ESV). In the act of taking communion, we remember His body that was broken and His blood that was spilled. How can we share in Him if we deny the fellowship of brokenness and minimize our part in His crucifixion?

WHO ARE YOU IN THIS DRAMA?

Andrew Murray wrote, "There is no pride so dangerous, because none so subtle and insidious, as the pride of holiness. It is not that a man ever says, or even thinks, 'Stand by; I am holier than thou.' No, indeed: the thought would be regarded with abhorrence. But there grows up, all unconsciously, a hidden habit of soul, which feels complacency in its attainments, and cannot help seeing how far it is in advance of others."⁷

Spiritual pride in Christian leadership may be the greatest barrier to sexual revival in our families, our churches, and our communities. While

the world may have gay pride parades, Christians take just as much pride in having it all figured out. Both those on the left and those on the right of the issue stand in judgment of those who disagree with them. At best, we have pity on the broken while we smugly congratulate ourselves. We will not see the power of Christ bring sexual revival until we change our prayer from *Thank You, God, that I'm not like them* to *Oh, God, forgive me and my family for the ways we have contributed to the destruction of sexuality. We bear the guilt of so much of the pain around us. My God, have mercy on me, a sinner!*

God has often spoken to me through an event recorded in Luke 7. The scene was a party, and Jesus was the guest of honor. He had been invited to the home of a Pharisee named Simon to have dinner with a group of religious leaders. During their gathering, a woman sneaked in and fell behind Jesus's feet, weeping and worshipping. Clearly, she didn't belong.

Although Simon didn't say anything, he looked in judgment on both the woman and Jesus. "He said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner'" (verse 39). The great irony is that Simon didn't know himself—that he was a sinner! This story shows me three spiritual positions I can find myself in:

1. I am the woman before she crashes the party. My sin and shame remind me that I'm not worthy to be around holy people and the Messiah Himself. I hide and perhaps pretend, but I lack the courage to run to the One who can set me free from my sexual scars and sin. I am too broken to be healed.
2. I am Simon. I've invited Jesus to my house and hosted Him for dinner. I am in the same room as Jesus, but my heart is far from Him as I relish my relative purity and wholeness. I arrogantly believe that I deserve to be near Him because I can't see myself in light of who He is: the Lord of the universe. I am too whole to recognize how broken I am.
3. I am the woman now at Jesus's feet. Weeping and worshipping. Praising the Lord that He has the power to forgive my sin and heal my brokenness.

I have been at Jesus's feet before. What a sweet place to be, completely enveloped in His beauty and grace. At Jesus's feet I'm aware of neither shame nor pride. So enraptured by redemption, I am oblivious to how others may judge me (for good or bad). All I want to do at His feet is bring others there with me. I picture myself with my arms around my husband, my sons, my brothers and sister, my neighbors, and even my enemies. This is the position of worship, the place that prepares me for true ministry. Yet somehow I can't seem to stay there. Every now and then, I'm the woman barred from the party, paralyzed by shame and doubt. But most often I'm standing there like Simon. I've written books, I've spoken at conferences, I've invited Jesus to my party, yet my heart is far from His. As spiritual as my words sound, I am judging. I'm judging the broken with pity. I'm judging the "sinner" with pride. I'm judging even my Savior with my pretensions of wisdom. *Oh, Lord. Have mercy on me, a great sinner!*

Where are you in this drama? Do you most identify with the woman excluded from the party or the self-righteous spiritual leader, or are you at His feet in holy brokenness?

Truly, God's power is "made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). To the extent that we disguise our weakness and justify our sin, we will neither experience nor display God's might and majesty for a watching world. He gives rest to the weary, strength to the weak, healing to the broken, redemption to the sinner. If we admit no weariness, no weakness, no brokenness, and no sin, we say "No, thank You" to God's power, forgiveness, healing, and redemption.

My God, help us destroy our categories of brokenness and sliding scales of sin! I beg You to teach us to live at Your feet so that we may become Your hands and feet. May Christian leaders get down from our pulpits and admit that we need help as much as anyone else. May counselors embrace that we can only ever be healers who ourselves walk with a limp.

In shattered places, with broken people, we are most near the broken heart of Christ, and find our whole

selves through the mystery of death and resurrection,
through the mystery of brokenness and
abundance....

The miracle of intimate union, of communion,
comes through brokenness—through broken places
and broken people and the brokenness of Christ and
being broken and given.

—Ann Voskamp, *The Broken Way*

The Promise

Jesus Came to Redeem Broken Sexuality

As I write this book, I'm in my late forties, staring down the big five-oh. It's a new stage of life. Instead of buying gifts for baby showers and weddings, I'm buying flowers for hospital visits and funerals. One thing I'm learning as I watch friends and loved ones wrestle through cancer, heart disease, and other illnesses: we cling to life. We pursue health when it is taken from us. We will go to any length to add a few years to our lives or to improve the quality of our days. I have friends who have given up all animal products (meat, fish, dairy, eggs), others who take forty vitamins and supplements a day, and still others who exercise endlessly in the pursuit of health.

As Christians, we naturally integrate our faith into our response to a dreadful health diagnosis. We pray, fast, and ask the elders of our church to anoint us with oil. We study the biblical passages referencing healing with the hope and prayer that God will take away disease and restore health. We stir up the faith to believe that God will heal us and are devastated at the suggestion that perhaps the cancer is here to stay, that our days are truly numbered.

So here is my question: Why don't we pursue spiritual and sexual healing with the same tenacity? As Christians, why don't we pray and fast, believing that God can mend the wounds inflicted by sexual abuse, rescue us from sexual addiction, heal brokenness in the marriage bed, and free us from the shame of the past? Why don't we plead for God to give us a full understanding of the beautiful metaphor of covenant love in sexuality? As I interact with thousands of sexually broken men and women, I find that most people's approach to healing is passive and resigned. We are desperate to keep our bodies alive but seem apathetic about pursuing sexual and emotional health.

Within the last few weeks, I've spoken to three women in their sixties who, for different reasons, have hated sex for their entire marriages! They assumed it was normal to feel pain during intercourse or to dread intimacy. Their husbands may have complained about a lack of sex, but none of them ever suggested that perhaps they should seek healing as a couple. These same Christians would certainly have explored every medical and spiritual remedy had they suffered through forty years of diabetes, Parkinson's disease, or even allergies.

Most Christians have never heard in a sermon that God can and does heal sexual wounds. Yet as I read the Scriptures, I see that the Great Physician came not primarily to heal our bodies but "to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives" (Isaiah 61:1) and "recovery of sight for the [spiritually] blind, to set the oppressed free" (Luke 4:18).

The Bible flat out tells us that we will each die a physical death but that Jesus came to redeem the eternal. In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul distinguished between our physical health and our sexual choices. One is temporary, but the other involves the spiritual and eternal. I believe that God is just as concerned with our sexual brokenness as He is with our cancer. Yet we are hesitant, even ashamed, to seek Him for healing and redemption.

It's a lot easier to do something when you know how to do something. If you want to get in shape, fight the cancer growing in your body, lower your blood pressure, or reduce the wrinkles on your face, plenty of people want to show you how. The pursuit of physical health and healing may not ultimately be effective, but at least there are clear steps to take. You eat

what they tell you to eat. You take the drugs they give you and submit your body to whatever treatment the experts recommend. But how do you heal sexually? What pill can you take to erase the impact of infidelity or get rid of unwanted temptations? What treatment can erase years of childhood trauma? What exercise can you do to grasp the beauty and holiness of sexuality when your entire sexual history has been filled with guilt and shame?

While God's work is supernatural, it also involves the help of people He has given us here on earth. I believe that there are four critical elements of sexual healing and redemption, but most of us truly recognize only one or two. I believe we don't experience redemption in our sexuality because we minimize or altogether eliminate essential aspects of the healing journey. The four elements are the truth of Scripture, the wisdom of Creation, healing relationships, and Jesus Christ Himself.

PURSUING GOD'S TRUTH

"Open your Bibles and turn to..." These are words I heard every week, growing up in church. They are also words that today's Christians rarely hear, even in church. Instead of teaching God's Word, many pastors and Bible teachers create their own outlines with some selected Scripture sprinkled in. I'll admit that I used to do this. When asked to speak at a women's conference or other event, I created my messages and supported my thoughts with Bible verses. While there was nothing wrong with what I taught, it lacked power.

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It

corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. (2 Timothy 3:16, NLT)

[My word] will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:11)

Slow down and read the above verses again. Do you believe them? Take a minute and replace the references to the Word of God with a reference to the word of someone else (your favorite Christian author, your pastor, your friend). Do you believe those statements about any other source of truth? I hope you are with me shouting a resounding “No!” So let me ask you: Why do we consistently substitute devotionals, Christian books, a friend’s advice, or a pastor’s wisdom for God’s holy Word? While these other teachings may supplement the Bible, they should never become our go-to sources of truth.

Why is God’s Word so powerful and essential for our healing and redemption? Because it contains timeless truth inspired by God Himself.

Jesus called Satan “the father of lies” (John 8:44), and Paul said Satan “masquerades as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). Wherever Satan vandalizes our sexuality, he leaves his calling card of lies. We begin to believe the lie that God can never fully forgive our sexual sin or heal our sexual wounds. We doubt that God has our best interests at heart with all the rules and regulations around sexuality. We believe that we deserve sexual fulfillment on our own terms. Perhaps the lies we believe are more personal, such as “I can never trust a man to protect me,” “It is God who created me to be attracted to the same sex,” or “No one could ever truly love me.”

These lies feel true! In fact, they can feel truer than the truth! The only way to be set free from lies is to know the truth.¹ The question is, Where do we find truth? I know of only one place: God’s Word. You can find a pastor, therapist, or friend to tell you anything you want to hear. You can find plenty of authors, old and new, to support whatever you want to believe about your sexuality, but only God’s inspired Word is a trustworthy

foundation of truth. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35). I have seen it literally transform lives and experienced its power in my own life and marriage. I would throw out every book I studied on psychology, I would forsake my degrees, and I would burn my library of A. W. Tozer, C. S. Lewis, and every other beloved author before I would abandon the Bible. No book contains more healing truth and power than the one that so often sits collecting dust on our coffee tables.

APPLYING GOD’S WISDOM

While I believe that God’s Word is more powerful for healing than any book on psychology, I also firmly believe that God has provided wisdom and knowledge about humanity that we must study and apply as we pursue sexual healing and redemption.

It breaks my heart that Christians in some churches and denominations will never read this book because a psychologist wrote it. But I understand their hesitation. The field of psychology is rooted in humanistic philosophy and has been one of the most powerful forces prompting the overthrow of biblical sexual morality. However, Sigmund Freud and B. F. Skinner did not invent psychology any more than Mozart and Elvis invented music.

God created the human mind with all its complicated wonder. He crafted us with emotion, memory, longings, and the capacity for relational depth. He created our vulnerability to rejection, abandonment, and betrayal, and He gave us the capacity to choose right and wrong. Just as God created the world with natural laws, like those of gravity and thermodynamics, He also created humanity with unchanging moral and relational patterns that govern our interpersonal and private lives. Psychology rooted in biblical truth is the study and application of how God designed us to function and is the pursuit of health in the places where we experience emotional and relational brokenness.

Ironically, Christians who shun psychology use it every day. For example, we reward our children with something fun after they finish a hard day’s work; we give them dessert after finishing a healthy meal. Behavioral

psychologists call this “instrumental conditioning.” Why are we comfortable using psychology for help with how to parent more effectively but not when it comes to help in our brokenness? Why is the latter somehow a sign of not trusting God?

Can I suggest to you that the book of Proverbs is one of the oldest books of psychology? In Proverbs 8, Solomon takes on the voice of Wisdom, asserting that Wisdom was with God while He created the fabric of the earth and the nature of humankind:

The LORD formed me from the beginning,
before he created anything else.
I was appointed in ages past,
at the very first, before the earth began....

And when he marked off the earth’s foundations,
I was the architect at his side.
I was his constant delight,
rejoicing always in his presence.
And how happy I was with the world he created;
how I rejoiced with the human family!
(Proverbs 8:22–23, 29–31, NLT)

God’s wisdom is embedded in all that He created. All around us are principles to be discovered and applied. We can study natural science, the arts, and mathematics, and discover aspects of God’s character and wisdom in each of them. In the same way, we can apply ourselves to psychology and discover that God has created humans with observable laws of wisdom. Much of Proverbs contains Solomon’s observations of how God created us to function and the application of those principles to daily life. Although Solomon lived thousands of years ago, his observations about humanity are still true today:

A gentle answer turns away wrath,

but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15:1)

Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall. (16:18)

Better is open rebuke
than hidden love.

Wounds from a friend can be trusted,
but an enemy multiplies kisses. (27:5–6)

The book of Proverbs is not only an example of psychology but also a charge for us to study and apply principles of wisdom in our understanding of people and relationships. Solomon studied the world around him, and so should we. This certainly applies to our pursuit of sexual healing.

Thanks to modern science and technology, we are always learning more about how God created us to function. For example, we understand far more about how the brain responds to early childhood trauma. Through study, we know the restorative impact of processing traumatic memories in a safe environment and the power of reframing tragic life events. We can see what happens to the neurotransmitters in the brain when a person experiences clinical depression or chronic anxiety. Should we ignore this knowledge because it is considered part of the secular fields of psychology and psychiatry? When we see someone suffering from panic attacks and intrusive memories, we owe it to that person to understand how God created the brain to respond to and heal from trauma. If we are mentoring someone who is addicted to porn and masturbation, we can't ignore the impact of dopamine and adrenaline as the brain responds to sexual stimulation. Yes, this person needs prayer and accountability, but his or her restoration may also include a greater understanding of how God designed the brain and body to respond in sexual wholeness.

One man described how important the wisdom of a trained therapist was in helping him overcome a sexual addiction:

I was sexually abused as a child and ended up acting out in all kinds of destructive ways during my childhood and teen years. I assumed that marriage would fix all of this. Both my wife and I ended up starting therapy three years later when she discovered my sexual behavior was still out of control. The hard part for me was stopping destructive behaviors. Our counselor had us abstain from any form of sex for forty-five days. We both had to learn to have intimacy without sex first. By the end of the forty-five days I felt cleaner than I'd ever remembered feeling. I was a new man.

Then came the time we were supposed to resume sexual intimacy. I was surprised to discover that I was the one who wasn't interested in sex. Sex had always been dirty and perverted, and it still felt that way, even though I was no longer doing anything wrong. I avoided sex. My therapist gave me assignments to initiate sex with my wife. I could learn only through experience that marital sex was not dirty.

It was emotionally difficult to initiate sex, even though I knew my wife was willing. I had to invite God into the bedroom, which did not feel safe. I started praying about sex and talking to my heavenly Father about it. That felt very strange at the time, but after a couple of years, I finally began to enter into sexual union with the holy pleasure God intended from the beginning.

While Solomon charges us to study and apply the wisdom of Creation, six times he tells us to cling to “the fear of the LORD” or to “fear the LORD” as the beginning and safeguard of our search for wisdom (Proverbs 1:7, 29; 2:5; 3:7; 9:10; 15:33). The man seeking counsel needed the expertise of a psychologist, someone who understood how to intervene in a complicated situation, but he also needed guidance from someone who feared God. He found both in this therapist, whose recommendations integrated insight learned from the field of psychology with biblical principles.

Christians should be the greatest psychologists on the planet. Our study of psychology and every other endeavor must be rooted in Scripture,

led by the Spirit, and surrendered to God's authority. We should wholeheartedly commit ourselves to understanding and integrating as much as we can about how God created humanity, how the Fall has resulted in brokenness, and how God brings healing to broken minds, souls, and relationships.

ENGAGING IN HEALING RELATIONSHIPS

I have never met a person whose sexual brokenness was healed or redeemed through reading a book. Sure, I know people whose healing journeys were greatly influenced by books such as Dan Allender's *The Wounded Heart* or Cliff and Joyce Penner's *Restoring the Pleasure*. However, healing requires relationship. Why? Because our brokenness happened in our interactions with people. In our relationships we have experienced rejection, abuse, abandonment, selfishness, bitterness, judgment. We have been treated like sexual objects and treated others the same way. How can we begin to believe there is another way if we don't experience that hope through relationship? We can't experience love, find or give forgiveness, or learn to trust simply by reading. These lessons require the presence of another person.

There are few more sacred moments than a confession from one person to another. A confession of sin. A confession of hidden shame. A confession of fear. A confession of brokenness. It is as if time stands still as one human being waits for the response of another. Will my confession be met with judgment and scorn or with grace and acceptance? Will I be rejected or embraced? What happens in that sacred moment can either propel a transformative journey of healing or reinforce a lifelong pattern of pretending.

Christian psychologist Dr. Larry Crabb described why he devoted his life to equipping the church to help people heal:

In my 10 years of private practice, I became persuaded that the community of God's people was meant to be the place where the deepest healing takes place. I came to the conclusion that

real healing has less to do with *technical intervention* and more to do with *profound relational engagement*. I realized that the context for this engagement needs to be in the community of God's people—and that's the church. I thought that if healing belongs in church, then I'd like to be involved in somehow strengthening churches.²

One of the most powerful ministries of the body of Christ is the sacred work of inviting one another into restorative relationship. We never heal in isolation.

While Christian counseling should create a safe relationship for healing, we need more than a caring counselor. It's not enough to meet with a pastor or psychologist for an hour once a week. We also need people in our everyday lives who love us, laugh with us, and tell us the truth about what they see. We need those who would weep with us, rejoice with us, and carry burdens that are far too heavy for our own shoulders alone. We need husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, mentors and counselors committed to hearing our stories and walking with us on our messy journey.

PERSONALLY KNOWING JESUS

God's Word, the wisdom of Creation, and healing relationship—they are transformational only inasmuch as they lead to an authentic encounter with Jesus Christ. Psychology can't make you whole, a friend can't redeem your life, and even God's Word lacks the power in itself to bring freedom. The Holy Spirit uses these avenues to invite us to encounter the Healer Himself.

Secondhand knowledge of God isn't enough. I don't need to hear you say that God loves me. I need to hear Him say it. I don't need you to explain why a loving God allows bad things to happen; I need to experience His peace in my brokenness. At our very best, we can represent God's wisdom and love and truth. However, we must never be a substitute for knowing and encountering Jesus.

There was a time when John the Baptist turned to his disciples and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, ESV). He was saying, “It’s time to stop following me and start following Him. I was just the warm-up act. He’s the real deal! I must decrease and He must increase.”³ In every healing or discipleship relationship, our goal must be to direct people to Christ Jesus.

There comes a time when we need to stop answering people’s questions and start challenging them to ask God Himself:

- Where were You when I was abused?
- Have You truly forgiven me for what I did?
- If You love me, why don’t You take away my constant sexual temptation?
- Why would You give me sexual desire but not bring a spouse?

What if the Enemy’s entire purpose in all this sexual brokenness is ultimately about separating us from really knowing Jesus Christ? What if the point of pornography, sexual abuse, and sexual shame isn’t just to cause pain and confusion but to keep us from trusting God and receiving the love of Jesus Christ?

Paul wrote, “Though we live in the flesh, we do not wage war according to the flesh. The weapons of our warfare are not the weapons of the world. Instead, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We tear down arguments, and *every presumption set up against the knowledge of God*” (2 Corinthians 10:3–5, BSB, emphasis added). Satan’s ultimate agenda isn’t simply to distort sexuality. He wants to sabotage the gospel. He’s interested not just in keeping us from the truth as a concept but in keeping us from the Truth in the person of Jesus Christ.

Healing, therefore, has to mean more than the absence of symptoms. It means that we are free, fully alive, and connected with the God who created us for relationship with Him. When I say “encountering Jesus,” I’m referring to knowing Him even beyond trusting in Him for salvation. Paul over and over again in his letters urged Christians to increase in their knowledge of Jesus.⁴ Paul was referring to “experiential knowledge,” knowing God beyond just knowing about Him. It’s the difference between

your knowledge of a celebrity and how you *know* a best friend, parent, or spouse. You've experienced life with the person.

Oh, friend, there is no healing like encountering the Healer Himself. You can read about Him and see glimpses of Him in a trusted friend or counselor, but don't stop there. "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).

My friend Ginger has experienced the healing power of intimacy with Christ. The abuse she suffered as a child and teenager is beyond horrific. For many years, Ginger acted out of her pain, abusing drugs and engaging in a variety of sexually destructive behaviors. Counseling, studying the Bible, and healthy relationships have been a huge part of her healing, but these have all led to a hunger to know the Healer Himself:

Over the years I made some progress in my emotional and spiritual growth, but it seemed as if something were missing.

I had a hard time believing God could really love me after all I had done, and so I began to ask Him to show me. "God, please prove to me that You love me! I can tell others that You love them, but I have such a hard time believing it for myself." I decided to spend the next forty days in two-hour intimate times with Him. I spent that time reading the Bible, praying, reading other Christian books, and journaling with Him every day. It got to the point where I was so excited to get up early to go spend time with Him! God answered my prayer concerning His love for me through these verses which I had read sometime within the first week of my spiritual journey.

"While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?'

"On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.' " (Matthew 9:10-13)

In this passage, I saw that Jesus was standing up for the sinners, and that was me! He came to heal those who are spiritually sick! Again, that was me! I experienced so much freedom reading those scriptures. I imagined prostitutes and thieves among those sinners. I had been both. If Jesus ate with them, that meant He sat with them and carried on conversations. I imagined myself being in the room while Jesus was there, and I imagined Him not feeling repulsed by me but actually talking to me. He knew who needed His loving eyes and healing touch. It was true; Jesus loves me with an unconditional love! I am the one who needs a doctor, and He is the doctor who has my cure!

Every one of us is broken. Every one of us needs a Redeemer and Healer. Jesus died to give us eternal life but also so that we might be set free from sin, shame, and brokenness. Maybe you began reading this book because you want to help others find healing. But Jesus has not passed you by; will you invite Him to bring healing to every aspect of your life, including your sexuality?

Mental pain is less dramatic than physical pain, but it is more common and also more hard to bear. The frequent attempt to conceal mental pain increases the burden: it is easier to say “My tooth is aching” than to say “My heart is broken.”

—C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

PART 3

LOOKING INWARD

Living What We Believe

According to sociologists David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, authors of *unChristian*, Christianity has an image problem. The pair conducted extensive interviews with teens and young adults, asking them what they think about Christianity, and observed,

Outsiders consider us hypocritical—saying one thing and doing another—and they are skeptical of our morally superior attitudes. They say Christians pretend to be something unreal, conveying a polished image that is not accurate....

Outsiders say that Christians are bigoted and show disdain for gays and lesbians. They say Christians are fixated on curing homosexuals and on leveraging political solutions against them....

Outsiders think of Christians as quick to judge others. They say we are not honest about our

attitudes and perspectives about other people. They doubt that we really love people as we say we do.¹

This represents more than a public-relations problem. It suggests a spiritual crisis. While genuine Christ followers will always be misunderstood and maligned by the world, the perception that we are judgmental hypocrites has to get our attention. None of us sets out to be a hypocrite, yet we so often find ourselves professing one thing and doing another.

As I work with churches, pastors, and leaders, I am convinced that the *primary* problem with Christians and sexuality isn't simply a lack of biblical knowledge; it's the lack of integration of that knowledge. I've met countless women and men who know the Bible but have not been changed by it. Their knowledge has not transformed the way they live. The life-changing Christian message of holy sexuality lies locked within the leather bindings of their Bibles.

I often use the word *integration* to describe what must happen in sexual discipleship. This word has the same root as *integrity*. We usually think of *integrity* as something that describes character, but *integrity* means more than this. It communicates the sense of being whole, consistent throughout the object. For example, we might talk about the integrity of an airplane or of a novel. *Integrity* means that the structure is sound and trustworthy, the opposite of hypocrisy.

When applied to sexuality, *integrity* means that everything we believe about sexuality is completely consistent with how we live.

Sexual integrity is such a struggle because we are naturally conflicted as human beings living in a fallen world. We believe, yet we lack faith. We affirm truth but live in shades of it. Our conflicted nature makes us two faced or splintered. Part of us wants to please God, and part of us simply wants to enjoy life. We have seasons of devotion and seasons of rebellion. We are driven both to seek healing and to stay comfortably stuck in our brokenness.

As I examine my own heart and as I work with many others toward sexual discipleship, I have identified three primary conflicts that keep us from integrity:

1. Our natural selves versus our spiritual selves: We want to honor God, yet we are drawn toward selfish pursuits.
2. Our public selves versus our private selves: We believe that revealing our secrets will ruin our testimony.
3. Love versus truth: We feel as if we must choose between biblical truth and Jesus's love.

In the following three chapters, we will take a look at these conflicts and together pursue integrity.

Jesus's life demonstrates a complete integration of God's will through wholehearted surrender. God calls us to do the same. We are to live by the Holy Spirit instead of our natural desires, be consistent with our public reputation and our private choices, and live with both truth and love.

Our Natural Selves Versus Our Spiritual Selves

When our boys were little, my husband taught them some basic things about the Bible, such as the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. One day when Mike was going over the Ten Commandments with six-year-old Michael and four-year-old Andrew, one of them asked, "Daddy, what does *adultery* mean?" On the fly, Mike tried to explain adultery in words that a young child could understand. "Well, adultery is when God puts you in one family but you leave that family to be part of another family."

The next day Andrew and Michael were playing at the neighbor's house when I called them in for dinner. Andrew ran into the kitchen out of breath and said, "Michael is breaking one of the commandments!" We asked Andrew what Michael had done, assuming that he had lied or stolen something. "Michael broke the adultery commandment!" This got our attention. Then Andrew explained that when I had called Michael for dinner, he said he wanted to eat dinner with the neighbor's family instead!

Applying biblical truth to real life can be tricky even for us as adults. Sometimes, like Andrew, we struggle to understand what a particular passage or principle means. Far more often, we don't make the connection between what the Bible teaches and our everyday choices.

Rachel Sussman, a Christian counselor and relationship expert, described what she hears in the counseling room from Christians when discussing sexual choices. “Oftentimes couples find this as something personal between the two of them...Even if the church frowns on this behavior, they take it upon themselves to make an educated decision between the two of them.” Essentially, she said, most couples conclude, “I practice what the church teaches me, but this is something personal between me and my partner.”¹ To put it bluntly, they believe that their sexual decisions are personal, so personal that God and His Word are not invited into them.

Why is truth so difficult to integrate into our lives? Because we all have conflicts between our natural selves and our spiritual selves. There is a part of us that wants to trust and love God, but another part of us wants to live life on our own terms. As a result, we find ourselves doing the very things we promised never to do. If it’s any comfort, the apostle Paul had this same experience. In Romans 7, he described an internal war between his sinful desires (his natural self) and God’s call on his life (his spiritual self). Paul’s words are incredibly strong, indicating that he felt like a slave and a prisoner to his sinful desires. “Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me” (verse 21).

It’s important to understand that the enemy is not your body. God has given us physical desires for food, water, physical touch, and sexual expression. These desires are not evil in themselves. Within the right context, physical desires for food, fun, rest, laughter, and sex are all wonderful gifts. But the natural part of us responds differently to these desires than the spiritual part of us. For example, let’s say you see or experience something that leads to sexual temptation. The natural part of you says, “If I need sex, then I should have it. I should find someone to be with or at least give myself a sexual release.” The part of you that is led by God’s Spirit would have a different response to the same physical sensation. “Just because I want this right now doesn’t mean it’s necessarily good for me. *God, please help me to direct this desire in a way that honors You and honors my body. I’m trusting You to meet my deeper needs for intimacy and connection.*” Because of the work of God, we are no longer in bondage to giving the body whatever it demands. Sometimes we say no to food, to

sleep, or to sexual expression because we invite God's Spirit to help us steward our bodies according to what pleases Him.

Instead of recognizing this conflict, humanistic thought tells us that we can trust our natural desires and reasoning. When Christians blend what the Bible says with humanism, they start believing that God wants us to seek truth by "trusting our hearts" or "being true to ourselves." Christian blogger John Shore is widely known for his advocacy of Christian gay marriage. In defense of his argument, he wrote, "God would not ask or expect Christians to ever choose between their heart and their faith."² Statements like this go largely unchallenged in Christian conversations about sex in spite of how clearly they fly in the face of biblical truth.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked:
who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9, KJV)

Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths. (Proverbs 3:5–6, ESV)

The struggle you feel between your natural desires and your spiritual aspirations is real! Most of the New Testament is *not* a treatise on what to do and what not to do but rather addresses the conflict Paul so honestly expressed: "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (Romans 7:18). God is passionately invested in invading your life with the power of the Holy Spirit. When you reach the peak of frustration between what you know is right and how you find yourself living, you just might be ready to accept that only through God can you hope to live a life of integrity.

How I wish there were three simple steps to getting rid of our sinful natures. While there is no such formula, the Bible does give us principles we can pursue. As I've sought to help myself and others bridge the gap between what we believe and how we live, I've found it helpful to ask three practical questions based on these principles:

1. Am I coachable?
2. *How* am I trying?
3. Am I taking small steps of obedience?

Let's explore each of these.

1. AM I COACHABLE?

When I was a teenager, my dad would sometimes invite me into his office for a chat. Before giving me his nuggets of wisdom, he would ask me, "Juli, are you coachable?" That usually meant he was going to give me some difficult advice or feedback. The brilliance of my dad prepping me for hard truths is that he first asked me to assess the willingness of my heart to embrace instruction.

Solomon wrote that one of the key distinctions between a wise and a foolish person is the willingness to embrace correction. "Do not rebuke mockers or they will hate you; rebuke the wise and they will love you" (Proverbs 9:8). "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but whoever hates correction is stupid" (12:1). "Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise" (19:20). Jesus taught this same principle with different words. He said that the same truth can fall on different kinds of "soil." Some people have hard hearts that reject truth; others have soft hearts that embrace it, producing spiritual fruit.³

Our human nature is stubborn. We think that we understand, that we know better, and that we have very little to learn. Our spiritual nature is eager to learn and hungry for truth, even if that truth is painful. As you look at various Bible passages or consider the truth claims we have explored in this book, ask yourself, "Am I coachable? Do I really want God to point out the areas of my life in which I need His help and instruction? Like David, will I say these words?"

Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,

and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23–24)

When my dad used to ask me “Are you coachable?” I learned to respond with yes for two reasons. First, I trusted my dad. I believed that his words, even if they might sting in the moment, were spoken with love. He had a vision for my future and my character, and I trusted his guidance. Second, I wanted to please him. If he saw a character flaw or a blind spot, I wanted to know how I could grow into the woman he knew I could become. Over time I’ve learned to apply this same truth to my heavenly Father. Oh, sometimes I feel the two-edged blade of His Word pierce me with such conviction. But I trust my Father and I want to please Him.

King David’s example challenges us to take this even further. He actively asked for painful feedback. “Let a righteous man strike me—that is a kindness; let him rebuke me—that is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it” (Psalm 141:5). Having a teachable heart means that we invite the Holy Spirit and other people to ask us the hard questions about the choices we are making. If we don’t do this, it’s easy to assume we are following Jesus because we show up for church every week and have a basic knowledge of the Bible. Even if you’re sitting in church and feeling really spiritual, your natural self can be making all the decisions.

Let me tell you about one woman who loved God dearly. She trusted Christ as Savior as a young child and pursued Him as a teenager and a young adult. In fact, she worked in ministry. When this woman married and had a couple of children, her attitude toward sex became very negative. She resented that her husband’s sexual pleasure required something from her. At the end of a long day, she just wanted to be left alone. She held an attitude of superiority in her marriage because she valued prayer and reading the Bible as much more spiritual than having sex with her husband.

In time, the Holy Spirit began to reveal the pride and selfishness in this woman’s heart. She had surrendered much of her life to God but not her sexuality. She wasn’t cheating on her man, but she had given herself permission to harbor a self-righteous and resentful attitude.

I am that woman. I’m humbled to admit that this was the state of my heart and my marriage even *after* I had written books on marriage and sexuality. I was actively teaching and counseling other women in these

areas, but I was oblivious to my hypocrisy. One evening during my time with God, I prayed a prayer of surrender. *Lord, I just want You to use my life. Show me how I can be surrendered to You!* I expected that God would respond to that prayer by sending me on a short-term mission trip or maybe asking me to give a large sum of money. I was blindsided by the Holy Spirit's conviction: *Juli, if you truly want to love Me, love the one I've given you.* At that time, I would have been afraid to ask my husband how he felt about our sexual relationship. My natural self didn't want to hear that truth.

Becoming people of integrity requires that we foster honesty and accountability in our relationships. It means that we tell one another the truth in love. We have to start asking our Christian friends questions such as

- What are your boundaries with your girlfriend?
- How are you holding up to the world's changing opinions on sexuality?
- When was the last time you looked at porn?
- Are you making sexual intimacy a priority in your marriage?
- How are you protecting your marriage from an affair?
- Have you forgiven your husband?
- In what ways do you identify with Samson's or David's sexual sin?
- How are you pursuing healing from the trauma you experienced?

2. HOW AM I TRYING?

Comedian Bob Newhart's most famous television skit is one in which he portrays a psychiatrist trying to help a young woman. Newhart's character claims to be able to help her in less than five minutes of therapy. The composed psychiatrist listens to the woman explain her issues—fear of being buried alive in box, bulimia, self-destructive relationships with men, washing her hands a lot—and after each admission, he just yells, “STOP IT!!!”⁴

This humorous skit sadly represents how so many Christians try to deal with the complicated tension between the desires of their natural selves and their spiritual selves. *Just stop looking at porn. Stop hating your*

husband. Stop it with those same-sex desires. Stop thinking sexually about your coworker. If only it were that simple! The Bible would be a very short book if we could just stop doing what's wrong.

We like to think that every problem can be solved through grit and human effort. When we see our sinful nature popping up, we double down on willpower, Bible memorization, and determination to defeat our “bad selves.” Unfortunately, while we might muscle our way out of having wrong sexual thoughts, our pride often pops up, and we start feeling smug and judgmental toward the people who we know are still struggling with lust.

Sin never disappears because of how hard we try. We've talked about how frustrated Paul was with his sin in Romans 7. His solution was not to try harder. He learned to try differently. While Romans 7 is one of the most frustrating passages of the Bible, Romans 8 is one of the most encouraging. It contains classic victory verses that make perfect Christian bumper stickers or wall plaques. Here are a few:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (verse 1)

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba, Father.*” (verse 15)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (verse 28)

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (verses 31–32)

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the

future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (verses 37–39)

What happened to Paul between Romans 7 and 8? He recognized that Jesus had saved him not only from his sin *at* the cross but also from his sinful nature *after* the cross. So often we believe that it is faith that saves us but hard work that makes us into true Christ followers. With that strategy, we will inevitably end up either as judgmental Pharisees or hating ourselves for our constant failure.

The writer of Hebrews makes this same point. The only way to get rid of the sin that entangles us and all those things that hinder us is “looking unto Jesus, the author and *finisher* of our faith” (12:2, NKJV, emphasis added). How many of us let Jesus be the author but then take it on ourselves to be the finisher?

Throughout this book, I’ve shared snippets of the story of how God called me into this ministry. I told of how God asked me to spend more intentional time with Him and how He began to convict and burden my heart. In January of 2011, I had an unusual encounter with the Holy Spirit. I was at a prayer and fasting retreat and felt compelled to stay up all night and beg God for more of Himself. By the next morning, I knew He had met me. I went home from the retreat with a voracious appetite for God’s presence. For eight months, I couldn’t sit through a movie or television show or read a magazine. I had to be seeking God. During this time, I had manifestations of the Holy Spirit that I didn’t know how to make sense of. My church heritage hadn’t talked much about the Holy Spirit. I began reading books written by influential Christian leaders, including D. L. Moody, A. W. Tozer, Andrew Murray, Watchman Nee, and R. A. Torrey to help me make biblical sense of what was happening to me. Each of these men and many other spiritual heroes of our faith described unique but similar journeys of being set apart by the Holy Spirit. They also showed me from Scripture a truth I’d never really embraced: the Holy Spirit is the power of God in our lives. This truth radically changed *how* I try.

The ability to live the Christian life is impossible outside of the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus knew this when He told His disciples, “Be glad I’m

going away because the Holy Spirit is coming!”⁵ His words mean that we are more equipped to live the Christian life by the power of the Holy Spirit than we would be if we could follow Jesus around everywhere. What a profound statement! Jim Cymbala drove the point home: “*No outward teaching can compare to the inward power of the Holy Spirit.*”⁶

While everyone who is saved by Jesus has received the deposit of the Holy Spirit,⁷ not every Christian is living by the power of the Holy Spirit. I spent many years trying to please God by studying the Bible and diligently trying to do what was right. Now I know that my greatest work is to surrender my life each day to the work of God’s power in my life. It’s not a matter of how much of the Holy Spirit I have but how much the Spirit has of me.

When I am led by the power of the Holy Spirit, He doesn’t simply change my actions; He influences my affections. People who walk away from porn or give grace to a difficult spouse do so not out of self-discipline but rather because they have experienced a fundamental change in what they love. Spiritual maturity is not primarily what we are able to say no to but the passion and conviction with which we pursue Jesus. Only the Holy Spirit can transform us like this. So, instead of trying to be good Christians, we learn that our greatest work is to know God, asking Him to overwhelm us with His presence and power.

Sexual integrity will never result from Christians trying to discipline themselves out of sinful desires. Ultimate integrity comes when we are thoroughly surrendered to the work and presence of God in our lives, fundamentally changing our desires and affections. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is not a gift just for the “superspiritual” among us but a gift that the Father offers everyone who asks, who seeks, and who knocks.⁸ In Luke 11, Jesus compared the heavenly Father with an earthly father. “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the *Holy Spirit* to those who ask him!” (verse 13, emphasis added).

3. AM I TAKING SMALL STEPS OF OBEDIENCE?

When we think of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we sometimes imagine grand changes He might make. Maybe He will lead you to start a ministry or revive a dead marriage or give you amazing courage to share Jesus's love. The Holy Spirit can do all those things, but they usually happen very simply, one step of obedience after another. The Holy Spirit will not ask you to change the world; He will ask you to change the channel. He will not give you a vision for the next ten years; He will give you direction for the next ten minutes. We invite the Spirit by responding to His prompts in the moment; we quench Him by continually ignoring that direction.

Don't look at the whole Bible and hope to ingest it all at once. Rather, ask the Holy Spirit to show you how to be faithful to one passage, for one day. This is how the Spirit takes a teachable heart and translates God's truth into real-life changes. By the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit, we start actually living and loving what we are learning.

My natural self is happy to read the Bible, feeling adequately spiritual without letting it penetrate my heart. When guided by my human nature, I will agree with and follow Jesus until it costs me something. My spiritual self responds very differently to God's instruction. It's not enough just to hear or even to study or memorize. I have to invite the Holy Spirit to use the Bible to change me. I don't simply agree with God; I actually do something tangible in response. Francis Chan tells a story that hits home for each one of us:

When my daughter comes to me and I say "Go clean your room," she knows better. She's not going to come back a couple of hours later and say, "Hey, Dad. I memorized what you said to me. You said 'Go clean your room.'" What am I going say? "Good job! That's what I wanted!" No. And she's not going to come to me and say, "Dad, I can say 'Go clean your room' in Greek." Listen. That's not going to fly. And what if she said, "My friends and I are going to gather together, and every week we're going to study, and we're gonna figure out what it would look like if I cleaned my room." No, none of that's going to fly. Just go and clean it. She knows that. So why do we think that

this type of thinking or this type of talk is going to work with Jesus? Jesus was as black and white as you get. He would look at people and He'd say, "Why do you call Me 'Lord' when you don't do what I say?"⁹

Chan's illustration makes us chuckle, but isn't this what we so often do? We hear sermons about confronting lust in our lives, and we might even confess our sins to God. But we never take that next step of being trained in righteousness.¹⁰ Our phones remain in our pockets when we know God has told us to get rid of them, we refuse to unfriend old flames on Facebook, we won't stop having sex with those we are dating, and God's Word has failed to be integrated into our lives.

As you surrender your natural self to the power of the Holy Spirit, God may invade your life in dramatic ways, as He did with mine in 2011. But He is certain to arrest your attention in small ways, in small moments, with small applications of truth. When we respond to the power and prompting of the Holy Spirit, we will become people of sexual integrity.

The powerful truths of God's design for sexuality will not reach the world until we begin to live according to them. Most people will not read the Bible to find Jesus, but they will observe those who claim to represent Him. If our marriages are joyless, if we put off commitment and sleep around like the rest of the world, if our wounded hearts never pursue healing, and if we flip-flop on a biblical standard of holy sexuality, what do we have to offer the hurting people around us? Why would they be attracted to a gospel message that doesn't change lives and a Jesus who can't seem to make up His mind about sexual morality?

The conflict between our commitment to please God and the pull of our natural desires is enough to make us want to give up. It can feel like such a constant, impossible struggle! Left to our own resources, we will always be conflicted, fragmented people, capable only of being half-hearted disciples. Yet through the power of the Holy Spirit, God offers to transform us into people who live as Jesus lived, perfectly integrating truth into every corner of our lives.

My friend, stop trying to be a good Christian in your own strength. Instead, fall on your face and continually surrender yourself to the Father, to Jesus, and to the Holy Spirit. Stop asking God to help you, and invite Him to take over. “The cause of the weakness of your Christian life is that you want to work it out *partly*, and to let God *help* you. And that cannot be. You must come to be utterly helpless, to let God work, and God will work gloriously.”¹¹

The world is in desperate need of this kind of Christian, fully surrendered to the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. Will you be one of them?

The prayer of the feeblest saint who lives in the Spirit and keeps right with God is a terror to Satan.

—Oswald Chambers, *Still Higher for His Highest*

Our Public Selves Versus Our Private Selves

A few years ago, the rug was pulled out from under me. A pastor I regularly listened to and had gleaned from was dismissed from his church for multiple sexual indiscretions. This man was a dynamic preacher of God's Word, so much so that I frequently recommended his podcast feed to friends and family members, including my children. While it's nothing new to learn that a spiritual leader has had a moral compromise, I was caught way off guard when I heard what this pastor had done. I wondered, *How could a man preach God's Word so powerfully and faithfully while engaging in sexual sin?* I remembered his preaching on sexual immorality, calling those who were living together outside of marriage to come forward for repentance and help. The front of the church was filled with hundreds of couples under the conviction of his words. At the same time, he was privately engaging in porn and multiple affairs.

This man's life represents an extreme example of a struggle to which each of us can relate. We have a public testimony, representing ourselves as Christ followers, and we have private struggles that keep us entangled in sin, doubt, fear, and secrecy. Hiding is part of being human in a sinful world. As children we learned that there was an "acceptable me" that people would embrace and there was an "unlovable me" that would be

rejected and shamed. We learned not to pick our nose in public or tell people what we really thought about them.

Our drive to achieve, to maintain control, to avoid conflict, to defend ourselves—doesn't each of these find its origin in this negotiation of our real selves versus the selves we allow others to see?

While this tension plays out in many areas of our lives, it thrives in our sexuality. Why? Because sexuality often represents our deepest shame, our unspoken fears, our most private wounds and passions. Even the topic of our sexuality has been deemed inappropriate, private, and perhaps shameful. From the earliest ages, we were taught to view sexuality and nakedness furtively. Our parents called our genitals “private parts” and told us not to touch them. This sets the stage for sexuality to thrive in secrecy and hiding.

Our hiding becomes particularly acute when sexual feelings, experiences, and trauma overwhelm us. Jonathan Daugherty, founder of the ministry Be Broken, tells how he learned to hide as a boy exposed to pornography:

I don't know any twelve-year-old who can adequately process an encounter with pornography. It is traumatic, confusing, exhilarating, and overwhelming. It subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, plants seeds of darkness in the soul. This is not an easy encounter for a child. Most adults can't even manage their sexual feelings very well, so how can a kid be expected to? All I knew to do with my newfound sexual feelings was to hide them. The act of hiding became the diseased root of my relational paradigm. I would mask my sexual feelings and questions and hope that nobody could tell that they were swirling about, madly, inside my hormone-laced mind....

The truth be told, hiding wasn't even really a decision. It was more like just doing what felt natural to do, and isn't that the way it always is with sin?¹

Hiding is what we do with sin, with shame, and with overwhelming pain. We compartmentalize to survive. We learn to present well to be accepted. No one had to teach us to hide. The problem is that hiding takes on a life of its own, preventing the integration of what we believe into who we are.

While Christ died to bring us into truth and set us free from hiding, traditional Christian communities seem to do the opposite. It's fine to be honest about the sins Christ saved you from, but once you've joined the church and identified yourself as a Christian, it can feel as though you're not allowed to struggle. So we live with this conflict. There are some problems that are acceptable to confess to (such as occasional road rage or binge-watching a television series), but others you just know you could never publicly admit (such as cheating on your spouse or dealing with same-sex attraction). So with one part of your heart, you affirm biblical sexuality, but with another part, a secret part, you reject it.

Sexual discipleship often gets derailed because we sense this tremendous tension between our public selves and our private selves. How can we talk about God's design for sexuality when we are secretly battling our own sexual issues?

A brave pastor's wife who is now a champion of sexual healing wanted nothing to do with it just a few years ago:

The first time I heard of the ministry Authentic Intimacy, I was not a fan. I was meeting with the other pastors' wives when this young woman, Hannah, came to tell us about a ministry that reclaims God's design for sexuality. As she was sharing about this new Bible study, *Passion Pursuit*, I could feel myself start to panic. Literally. I was thinking, *What?! A sex ministry?! And this falls under my husband's ministry?!* I was visibly worked up and agitated. One of the other women asked me my opinion, and all of my nonsensical babbling came out. Then the room went a little quiet.

Soon after that meeting, I panicked and went around to cover my bases and cleaned up my mess. I apologized to Hannah for reacting so sharply and told her that I support her

and the ministry. And I did. Well, about 5 percent of me did. I literally could only think of the negative that could come from it all. I was terrified. I felt so threatened by it all. Why in the world would anybody talk about sex in church? I thought, *Great, now my husband is going to have to deal with all of these women's sex issues!* I hate to admit it, but at some point, I was so angry that I threw the book in the garbage. I was so scared of it and mad, and I didn't fully know why.

A few months later, our church hosted an Authentic Intimacy event. By this point, I was just trying to let myself buy into all the excitement and to hype the event. I was able to, to a certain degree. Once the conference was underway, I was feeling so much pain. My heart was racing, and I was trying so hard not to burst into ugly tears. There was so much confusion and noise inside my mind that I couldn't even receive a majority of what Linda and Juli were teaching. So I hid. I hid behind my friendly pastor's wife face and my big smile. I just wanted to make it through the evening. I was secretly hoping that the *Passion Pursuit* groups that were being started would just kind of fizzle out. Maybe there wouldn't be enough leaders? Possibly not enough women willing to go through the groups? Neither was the case. So many eager, brave, amazing women rose up to both lead and participate in these groups! And I just watched on in my secret confusion and pain.

What no one knew was that the topic of sexuality represented horrible things from my past, things I felt needed to stay hidden, things I didn't know how to speak out loud.

Maybe you too feel the uncomfortable tension of wanting to promote God's truth about sexuality but knowing that you have your own secret pain and questions. Perhaps this conflict is so great that you discourage conversations about sexuality or engage in them with an unhealthy or judgmental perspective. We simply don't know how to resolve the tension between our aspirations to affirm God's truth and the secret stream of lies that keeps us in bondage.

Because of the belief that Christians are supposed to look whole and holy, we expend a great amount of effort trying to live better lives. As we saw in the last chapter, our “spiritual selves” scold our “carnal selves” for falling into the same sin again and again. Or our “together selves” shame our “broken selves” into staying silent. We vow not to go down the road of temptation or give voice to our struggles. The problem is that our vows don’t work. Our self-control gives out; we get tired and overwhelmed and can’t fight the secrets lurking in our souls. We protect our private selves because of fear. We fear rejection and abandonment. We fear that we will lose the love and approval of people we care about (and even of people we hardly know!). We may fear disappointing God and losing His love. Ironically, God knows all our secrets. He longs for us to be honest before Him, no pretending. He continuously invites us to live with integrity, to walk in the light as He is in the light.²

Integration happens when we stop hiding, when we no longer have our private selves and our public selves. Just us chasing after God’s healing and redemption. When we ask the Lord to tear down the wall between who we truly are and who we want people to think we are, we give up a reputation and instead live a testimony. Your reputation is what people think of *you*; your testimony is how they see *God working in you*.

I spent many years of early adulthood concerned about what people thought about me, even what they thought about my spiritual walk and ministry. This was a burden! I would sometimes stay up all night, worried about how I might have offended someone or concerned that another person thought ill of me. I’d beat myself up for days because of a misspoken word or a perceived failure. When I let go of my reputation and started being honest with others about the unflattering parts of my story and my heart, I experienced profound freedom. More importantly, my relationships, my family, and my ministry became less about me and more focused on the work of God through me.

THE POWER OF THE TRUE YOU

The apostle Paul wrote a profound truth that not many of us take seriously. He said that God's power was more evident in his (Paul's) weaknesses than in his strength.³ In other words, God would be more glorified in Paul's life because Paul was the chief of sinners, a frail man who struggled with loneliness, temptations, and physical weakness.⁴ We don't really believe that God's power is more evident in our struggles, at least by the way most of us live. We try to hide our frailty and faults, thinking that God can use only the strong and healthy parts of us.

What is the weakness or sexual struggle you try so hard to hide? Maybe you sincerely believe that if others knew, it would hurt the name of Jesus Christ. What Paul is saying is that if you really want God's presence and power in your life, don't hide. Admit and surrender your weakness so that other people can witness God's work and love in you. Sexual sin isn't unforgivable; it simply has such a foothold in us because it is the sin we feel compelled to keep hidden, out of the healing light of God's truth.

Something profound happens when our stories intersect with Jesus's forgiveness and redemption. It's not enough for us just to be "authentic" for the sake of authenticity. If reality television has taught us anything, it's that raw humanity is pretty ugly! We are free to be honest about our private selves only as we surrender our sin, our brokenness, and our weakness to the saving power of Jesus Christ. The "ugly me" becomes beautiful when it brings me to repentance and dependence on the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells us that this is how we overcome the Enemy:

They triumphed over him [Satan]
by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony;
they did not love their lives so much
as to shrink from death. (Revelation 12:11)

The problem is that we don't like the last part of that verse about not shying away from death. If God is to redeem our stories, we cannot hang on to our own lives; we must be willing to die. I'm not just talking about a

physical death. I'm referring to the death of the public self, that portrayal of us that we want everyone to see and to believe is the true us.

When Jesus told us to die daily, He wasn't just talking to those who face physical persecution and death.⁵ He meant it for everyone who calls Him "Lord." Our lives, our reputations, our pride, our rights—all have to die in order for His power to live within us. This is precisely what happened to Jonathan Daugherty, whose story I shared earlier in this chapter. The man who tried so hard to hide his sexual addiction became consumed by it. In the wake of a broken marriage and a broken life, he finally allowed his public self to die and got real with the Lord:

During all my years of addiction, whenever the shame of my sin or the pain of its consequences would arise, I would ultimately try to find a solution on my own. Sure, I prayed and went to church and even occasionally asked for some help, but it was all with the mindset of "fixing" my problem. I never once considered living a new life, a different life, a Christ-led life. Rather, I just wanted my struggle with lust to disappear so I could go on living my life as I saw fit. God, however, had a different plan—a better plan, the best plan—even if it would cost me my life.⁶

This man who lived to keep a secret now lives to tell his story, a story of sin, weakness, brokenness, and redemption. A story of the power of God. I have met so many men and women like Jonathan. Once they are willing to admit the struggle between their public selves and their private selves, God gives them the power and blessing of a redeemed story. It's not just a story of "I've been pretending, but I'm a mess." It's a story proclaiming that Jesus really is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6, NLT). He's binding up their broken hearts. He's setting them free from their shame. He is so gracious to them, loving them, despite knowing every hidden part of them.

The world doesn't need to see flawless Christians who keep God's sexual standards perfectly. What they most need to see is broken people who are no longer ashamed of their weakness but live to brag about a God

who loves them. The culture will be most greatly affected when it witnesses the testimonies of limited, fallen people who have a miraculous power to love, extend grace, and pursue purity. They don't need to see you and me; they need to see God living *through* you and me. The world needs to know your redeemed story.

SURRENDERING YOUR STORY TO GOD

Psychologist Dr. Dan Allender has spent the better part of his life ministering to men and women who have experienced sexual trauma. In his countless hours with these precious souls, Dan discovered the healing power of story. Our stories have the capacity to reframe why we struggle, fail, and suffer. He wrote,

You are a story. You are not merely the professor and teller of a number of stories; you are a well-written, intentional story that is authored by the greatest Writer of all time, and even before time and after time. The weight of those words, if you believe them even for brief snippets of time, can change the trajectory of your life. In fact, those words will call you to a level of coauthorship that is staggering in its scope and meaning.⁷

Dr. Allender is right. Seeing my life as a sacred story means that everything that has happened to me, that I'm currently experiencing, and that lies in my future has purpose. God *never* wastes our pain, our temptation, our struggle. It's all part of the story.

While the public ministry of the pastor I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter ended in disgrace, that doesn't have to be the final chapter of his life. What he did was no more egregious than David's sin with Bathsheba. Yet God restored David, even blessing him and Bathsheba with a son named Solomon, whom God loved from birth.⁸ The question for that pastor and for each one of us is, How will we live today? Defensive, justifying our sin, afraid of the truth, angry at those who confront us? Or,

like David, will we desire nothing more than to be honest about our failures and be cleansed by God?

The cure for our two faces is to realize that we cannot be writing multiple stories. As complicated as we may be, our lives tell one story. It isn't meant to be a story of hiding, pretending, or even performing for the Lord. God created you and me to tell the story of His great love intersecting with our great brokenness. It's a story of healing and redemption. Each of us tells the story with unique flair and circumstances, but ultimately we were all created to tell the story of God's love and power in our individual lives.

What does it look like practically to surrender your integrated story to God? Here are three questions that can help guide you in that process.

Question 1: Is the Story You Tell Fact or Fiction?

Most likely, your story is a combination of the two. But here's the deal. God can work only through the factual part, through what is actually true. We have an uncanny ability to shade the truth in a way that favors ourselves. I notice this by the way my husband and I talk about the exact same situation from significantly different perspectives. Sometimes Mike will hear me tell a story about our marriage on the *Java with Juli* podcast. Often he will say something such as "I liked the podcast, but that's not really how it happened." As he recounts his memory of the events, I usually notice that his recollection favors him while mine favors me. Go figure!

Recalling marriage stories can lead to some great dinner table conversations, but padding my story with fiction, taking out the unflattering parts, and touching up the rough edges of my public self means I haven't fully surrendered my story.

Am I suggesting that you run out and blog about every sexual wound and temptation? No, I'm saying it's time to stop hiding and pretending. Integrity means this: *while people do not know everything that's true about you, everything they know should be consistent with the truth.* To live with integrity doesn't mean that you share every struggle you've ever had, but what you present to even a stranger should be completely consistent with the overarching story of your life.

Living an integrated life also means there should be at least some people who know the whole truth about you. Yes, we confess our sins to God, but you believe a lie if you think that no other human needs to know what you've done or how you're struggling. Often women will tell me something like "I had an affair many years ago. Do I need to tell my husband about it? It will only hurt him if I do." Secrets keep us from freedom and intimacy. Like black mold, shame grows where there is no light. James 5:16 says, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." I think James is referring not just to physical healing but also to spiritual and emotional healing. We need one another. We need to experience the embrace of someone who understands, who accepts, who won't judge, and who will walk with us toward healing.

Question 2: Who Is the Star of Your Story?

In 2002, pastor Rick Warren wrote the best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life*. While the book was wildly popular, the first sentence of day 1 must have felt like a slap in the face to most people: "It's not about you."⁹ After all, we just naturally assume that we are the stars of our own stories. Your story began when you were born, it will end when you die, and you're the star, right? Everyone else in your life (including God) is just one of the supporting cast. What matters is how you think, how you feel, and how you want to live your life.

Guess what? The story of your life is not about you. It didn't begin with you, and it won't end with you. And oh, by the way, you're not the star.

Grasping this truth is what will give us the power to say goodbye to our public selves. If God is the star of my story, I don't want anything to mask what He has done, is doing, and will do in my life. My pretending not only keeps people from seeing the true me; it also keeps people from seeing the Star.

It's easy to say "Yes, God is the star of my story," but real-life choices have a way of testing that affirmation. We become two faced primarily because we are writing a story to protect and highlight ourselves as the star of the story. When I'm the star, I have to ensure that I survive and emerge as

the one everyone loves and respects. Once I finally accept that God Himself is the star, I am free to tell the truth about it all.

I recently had lunch with a friend who is going through a divorce. Her marriage had been significantly strained for the past decade, but hardly anyone knew this. She and her husband appeared to be a happy, thriving couple to their friends and neighbors. She told me that one of the most difficult things about the breakup was letting go of their reputation as the happy Christian family. At the same time, she shared about how much more equipped she feels to encourage others who are going through hard times. “I have an empathy and mercy for the same people that I used to look down on. I now understand at a new level what it means to be desperate for God.” My friend used to be the star of her story; now God is.

Question 3: Who Holds the Pen Today?

I have the privilege of knowing many people who have incredible God stories of recovery from addictions, of marriages saved after multiple affairs, and of supernatural healing from abuse. But let me tell you a little secret. These people still struggle. Even though God has brought amazing healing and freedom to their lives, they still battle temptation, doubt, and shame.

Sometimes we feel comfortable letting God redeem the stories of our past, but we are unwilling to let people see the messy stories that are being written today. When we hear incredible stories of redeemed marriages, freedom from sexual addiction, and healing from trauma, we often think of them as nicely wrapped up with a pretty bow, as if God just waved a magic wand and took the problems away. I’m always skeptical of this type of presentation.

While God is greater than any magic wand, He typically doesn’t erase every struggle and scar from our past. Author Debra Hirsch said it so well: “The gospel doesn’t involve God simply obliterating our history. God is a redeemer not an eraser.”¹⁰ The couple that overcame an affair is still learning to rebuild trust. That woman who got set free from porn still has seasons of struggle and even relapse. That man who is healing from abuse may still have things that trigger fear and painful memories. Let’s be honest

with the fact that we didn't just need God twelve years ago; we desperately need Him to get through today.

Again, being open about current struggles doesn't mean we share without discernment. It would likely be destructive for a pastor, parent, or leader to confess marriage problems or sexual temptation to anyone who would listen. I don't believe we should share details about our struggles publicly while they are still raw. What I'm suggesting is that we are honest with God and open with our accountability relationships and good friends. If they don't already exist, pursue relationships that allow for and even expect honesty about what's really happening in your life.

There is a difference between trying to live a perfect life and striving to live in perfect surrender. What is it in your "today" that God is asking you to lay down?

Your true, surrendered story is perhaps the most powerful tool you have to influence the world for the Lord Jesus Christ. Those around us have endless examples of how to live according to the world's sexual morality. But how few role models do we have of men and women whose sexual choices have been publicly redeemed so that people can see the power of God?

My friend, don't allow a mask, some version of your public self, to mute your story. As Dan Allender wrote, "It is our responsibility to know our story so we can live it out more intentionally and boldly for the Great Story, the gospel. God writes our story not just for our own enlightenment and insight, but to enlighten others and to reveal his own story through our story."¹¹

Jesus came to earth to heal you, set you free, and restore you for a purpose: so that you will display His splendor. You live to show forth His glory; you are called to this. This defines you. God's appointment in you is that people see, feel, and respond to the weight and strength of your life, as you live in the splendor, strength, and weight of the glory of Jesus.

This is the true meaning of your life.

—Sylvia Gunter

Love Versus Truth

While the first two conflicts address what fragments us in approaching our own issues, this one is more about how we interact with people around us. The tension between standing on truth and extending love is one of the greatest challenges of the Christian life and perhaps the greatest puzzle in addressing sexual issues.

Lori Wildenberg knows this well. Her adult daughter, Courtney, is same-sex attracted, unsure about her gender identity, and preparing to marry another woman. Courtney was open about her sexual and identity questions in her early teen years and began making life decisions based on them a few years later. Lori felt as though she were standing at a crossroads of truth and love. If she affirmed her daughter's sexual and identity choices, she would be ignoring what she believed the Bible teaches about sexuality and gender. But if she stood on God's truth, she would be rejecting her daughter.

LGBTQ issues aren't the only ones causing Christians to feel as though they must choose between love and truth. What should a family, Christian school, or church do in response to unwed pregnancy or young couples living together? Should they embrace the individuals involved or demonstrate disapproval toward the sexual sin? And what about divorce? How does God's family show love and care for those affected while not compromising the lifelong covenant of marriage? Church leaders often disregard the pain of divorced men and women (and their children) because

they believe that showing compassion undermines the sacredness of marriage. The tension between grace and truth is not a new problem. Across cultures, generations, and denominations, God's people have seen the pendulum swing from legalism (all truth) to license (all grace).

Part of my job at Authentic Intimacy is to write and speak on the controversial sexual questions of our day. What often breaks my heart is to read the blog comments or Facebook posts in response to what I have written. They typically display the polarization of love and truth. Here are a few examples of how people responded to a blog post I wrote several years ago about Bruce Jenner's impending sex-reassignment surgery:

- I'm so nauseated by this demonic topic.
- Let him live his life the way he wants. He's a wonderful man and deserves to be happy.
- He's really ugly. Sorry.
- I'm sick of being told not to pass judgment. It's human to pass judgment. If you say you don't judge, you're a liar.
- I think it's perfectly normal to be disgusted by transgenders.
- God loves all of us and wants us to find our own happiness.

While you might not react with such strong words, you likely tend toward either rejecting people and affirming truth or else loving people and ignoring truth. When we believe love wins without also holding firmly to the truth of the Bible, we compromise God's holiness and fail to be distinctive as Christ followers. On the other hand, clinging to biblical truth without also showing love and grace is just plain offensive. Francis Schaeffer got it right when he said, "There is nothing more ugly than a Christian orthodoxy without understanding or without compassion."¹

The debate about love and truth is particularly poignant today because our culture says that to love others, we must embrace and accept everything about them. Many church traditions add fuel to the fire by teaching that in order to stand on truth, we should reject the world—not just the world system but also the people of the world.

Jesus was fully love and fully truth. He ate with sinners but never partook of their sin. Those who believe that He somehow embodied a love that discounted God's holy standard haven't taken to heart what Jesus

Himself claimed: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17–18). Jesus’s life and ministry were completely consistent with and were the fulfillment of everything written in the Old Testament. His deep love for people never compromised truth, and His standard of holiness never made Him cruel or hard hearted.

Not only did Jesus perfectly embody both truth and grace, but He also knew exactly how to administer each in unique situations. Why did He respond in John 4 to the woman at the well by pointing to her sexual indiscretions, while telling the woman caught in adultery, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (John 8:11, NKJV)? Jesus perfectly exemplified what Paul wrote: “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6). The problem is that we are not Jesus.

This seemingly impossible integration of love and truth is imperative as we tackle real-life questions and interact with hurting people. How do you counsel a friend who is in an unhappy marriage but has no biblical grounds for divorce? Should your church be LGBTQ friendly in order to reach more people? How do you respond when your adult son wants to visit you with his live-in girlfriend? What if your pastor admits to a struggle with pornography? In each of these scenarios, we may individually tend to pull more toward truth or love. How can we be like Jesus, perfectly integrated in His response to each situation He faced? Jesus lived on earth as God in the flesh, so how can we hope to be like Him?

The good news is that through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is able to make us like Himself. He can help us live both truth and love through our very human lives. As I have gotten to know Lori Wildenberg, I see this reality in her relationship with her daughter, Courtney. Each day Lori and Courtney are navigating real-life issues in their mother-daughter relationship. Will Lori call Courtney by a chosen male name as she once asked her to? Can Courtney have her fiancée over for a family dinner? Will Lori and her husband celebrate their daughter’s upcoming gay wedding?

Lori told me, “Living in the tension of grace and truth is the most difficult journey to navigate. I have realized grace and truth belong together. We cannot have one without the other. Grace is best shown and truth is best spoken. When we demonstrate grace, truth is better received. If we have no truth, there is no reason for grace. Every day I pray the Lord will show me what to do and what to say.”²

I asked Courtney what would have happened if her mom had chosen a side—either all truth or all grace.

If my mom had rejected me as her daughter (this is one of the thoughts that haunted me), I would have left my family for good. If my mom had turned her back on her convictions in order to accept me, in the beginning this would have made me happy. But there is so much love and respect that now it would break my heart if she did. I would never say to my mom and dad, “Drop what you believe and jump on the bandwagon.” I would never want them to contradict their beliefs to please me. What my mom says about my journey is true. I know that she speaks out of love and is respectful.³

The character quality I see in Lori as she navigates the perplexing road of truth and grace with her daughter is humility. This is the essence of Jesus’s nature on earth. His humility rooted Him in both grace and truth. Even throughout His final night on earth, Jesus demonstrated this humility. Washing His disciples’ feet, He set an example of servanthood and love.⁴ Surrendering to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, He declared, “Not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Andrew Murray wrote, “Humility is the only soil in which the graces root; the lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure. Humility is not so much a grace or virtue along with others; it is the root of all, because it alone takes the right attitude before God, and allows him as God to do all.”⁵

Our inability to effectively integrate God’s truth and love is ultimately rooted in our lack of humility. Pride is at the center of both our rejection of God’s holy standard and our judgmental application of that truth. In

Philippians 2:3–8, Paul tells us to pursue the humility of Christ. He defines *humility* as doing nothing out of selfish ambition but valuing other people above ourselves. He tells us not to look out for our own interests but to consider the well-being and perspective of other people. Like Jesus, we are to surrender our reputations and plans to the will of the Father.

Testimonies such as Lori’s give me hope that I don’t have to feel fragmented between being a person of love and a person of conviction. Learning about humility gives me a practical way to pursue that integration. It’s impossible to be humble toward God and ignore His truth. It’s equally impossible to be humble toward other people yet unloving.

HUMILITY TOWARD GOD: GOD KNOWS BEST

A. W. Tozer noted, “When truth has been revealed in the Word of God, our business is to find out what that truth is, and in all of our teaching conform to that truth. We are not to edit or change it, but to let it stand just as it is.” He continued with an analysis of what we do instead: “Men are not willing to let God be what He says He is. They attempt to change, correct, alter and apologize for God, in an attempt to make Him be other than what He is. God is, and we had better accept Him as He is.”⁶

Tozer’s words are a needed reminder to Western Christians. With all our sophisticated theology, our kind hearts, and our desire to make God more marketable, we have given ourselves permission to edit God Almighty. We water down the significance of male and female, warnings of eternal damnation, and God’s clear call for us to live with sexual integrity. But we worship a God who indeed calls some sexual acts immoral⁷ and warns us to be ready for a day of judgment when there is “nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open” (Luke 8:17). These biblical teachings don’t make God seem very nice, so we work around them. We embrace books that erase the reality of hell, focus on the Bible’s love passages, and give ourselves permission to live however we feel is right.

Even with good motives (such as not wanting the Bible to be offensive), we can pridefully try to alter God’s plan. This is exactly what

Peter did on several occasions. He was a good guy and loved Jesus. Sometimes he must have thought Jesus was being dramatic or zealous, and he tried to correct Him. In one of those situations, Jesus told the disciples that He was going to suffer and die. This offended Peter, who “took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man’ ” (Matthew 16:22–23, ESV). Jesus rebuked Peter because He saw past his good intentions. He perceived Peter’s pride and needed to show him the danger of trying to change God’s ways.

Like Peter, we may think that we are helping God with our adaptations, revisions, and reinterpretations. We might feel justified and even spiritual as we translate God in a way that is more acceptable to the world around us. This is evident in what I call sins of compassion.

Instead of worshipping a God of compassion, we have made compassion a god unto itself, ignoring God’s call to righteousness and holiness. I can be moved by compassion to excuse and condone almost any sin. My compassion for someone in chronic pain can justify taking a life. My compassion for a pregnant teenager who has her life ahead of her can cause me to excuse abortion. My compassion for a woman in a loveless marriage can move me to understand an affair. My compassion for a gay man or lesbian can lead me to explain away or ignore God’s standard for sexual love. God’s love is limitless, but it does have boundaries. God’s compassion never cancels out His truth and holiness.

One day Jesus met a rich young man who asked Him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus addressed his idolization of wealth and told him to give away his possessions and follow Him. When the young man walked away from Jesus, our Savior was grieved, but He did not change the standard of righteousness.⁸ God is compassionate and loving, but He is also holy and will bring judgment on those who reject His authority.

In all our edits, reframes, and reinterpretations, we are really saying that we know better than God. His Word has stood for generations, yet in our current age we have the audacity to believe that we have some new revelation.

You don't have to fully understand or even appreciate all that the Bible teaches about sexuality. But humility before God means acknowledging that He knows best. At times it means suspending our own judgment and deferring to the unchanging truths found in God's Word. It means remembering what God said to His servant Job:

Who is this that obscures my plans
with words without knowledge? (Job 38:2)

In humility, we need to accept that God created sexuality. He has been clear in expressing through His Word His design for sexuality and the consequences of our misuse of this great gift. Come. Let us bow before the Lord.⁹ Let us worship Him, affirming that all He says is right and true.

HUMILITY TOWARD OTHERS: PUTTING OTHERS FIRST

For the past several months, I've been studying Jesus's most well-known speech, the Sermon on the Mount. This teaching found in Matthew 5–7 is essentially a SparkNotes of everything Jesus taught. Within this one sermon, Jesus hit on prayer, adultery, anger, divorce, judging others, worry, materialism, and many other important topics. Yet before Jesus ever taught us what to believe about various subjects, He addressed the condition of our hearts. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the beatitudes: blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the merciful, the peacemakers. Jesus goes on to tell us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We will be different from the world not primarily because of what we believe but because of how we live. Specifically, because of how we love.

It's not enough to hold on to and even live by biblical sexual morality. We are also called to the morality of loving others, even those who might consider us their enemies.

Pastor and author Caleb Kaltenbach wrote, "Christians don't have the best track record in loving people who are different from us. We have issues with people who have different political ideologies, different theologies, or

different preferences in sexuality than we do. Sometimes we do a better job of wounding others over our differences than we do in building them up.”¹⁰

Caleb should know. He was raised by two lesbians and a gay father. He remembers marching in gay rights parades and detesting Christians because of how hateful they were toward his parents. Caleb, now in the position of pastoring a Christian church, has a unique perspective, having lived with and loved those affiliated with the sexual revolution. He noted that Christians often don't feel permission to love those who believe differently. “We think that we are not supposed to love people who live in a way that is contrary to what God says....Paul said that *while we were still sinners*, God extended an offer of relationship toward us! We need to express that same kind of love—a love that doesn't wait for people to be perfect or get everything in order before beginning a friendship with us.”¹¹

Again, humility is a bridge to practice the kind of love Jesus demonstrated. What does it mean to pursue love through humility in our relationships? Some people confuse humility with being spineless or insecure. True humility, as Jesus modeled, requires great strength and confidence. We can strive to humble ourselves by remembering four things right out of Philippians 2.

1. You and Me...We're the Same

(Humbly consider others more important than yourself.¹²)

The world often views Christians as unloving and judgmental partly because we are. We believe we have truth that other people lack. According to Scripture, following Jesus is a narrow road and few find it.¹³ When we think, *I am one of the few*, that can lead to arrogance instead of a life of love. Spiritual pride is born out of the belief that I somehow deserve God's love more than someone else does or that I am able to live a holier life partly in my own strength. Applied to the sexual arena, I become proud when I feel morally or spiritually superior to others.

It's easy to adopt an us-versus-them mind-set. We are on one side of the argument or battle, and “they” are on the other side, “they” being atheists, abortionists, alcoholics, convicts, pornographers, homosexuals, and gossips, among others. In truth, there is no distinction between “us” and

“them” apart from Jesus Christ. We are broken and sinful, and we need grace. We are foolish, weak, and desperate. We are all loved by God and lost without salvation through Jesus Christ.

Humility and love can result only when we remember that it is 100 percent by God’s grace that we even have a relationship with Him. Salvation and the ability to live by God’s standard are only by faith in Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have no right to judge, condemn, or look down on anyone. As Paul wrote, “Who makes you so superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?” (1 Corinthians 4:7, BSB).

While we may be nodding our heads, agreeing that we are not better than anyone else, how often do we subtly allow ourselves to cling to our own superiority? When we meet a woman who has been married three times or a man who smells of alcohol, how likely are we to respond with secret pride? It is this quiet arrogance that prevents a response of love. The truth is, we are all in need of grace.

Jesus told us, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” (Matthew 7:1). Right after this statement, He explained that we must first take the log out of our own eye before we can see clearly to take the speck of dust out of our brother’s eye.¹⁴ In other words, we aren’t ready to make a proper judgment until we have asked God to search our own hearts. This is where we often fall into judging other people. We look at their “wickedness” as far more serious than our own rationalized “blunders.” Biblical statements that tell us not to judge are not suggesting that we throw away God’s standard of right and wrong. The purpose of these passages is to remind us that we are in need of God’s grace as much as anyone. We are subject to the same standard of holiness and need to walk with great humility as we share God’s love with others.

2. Let Go of Your Agenda

(Look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others.¹⁵)

Do you recognize that we have an agenda in every relationship and personal encounter? We approach relationships driven by our own needs and desires. Most of the time we are not even aware of our self-centered

perspective, even as it dictates how we feel and interferes with how we love.

A mom discovers that her teenage daughter is sending sexual pictures to her boyfriend. Mom is flooded with a torrent of emotions. She is grieved at her daughter's lost innocence. She is angry at the boyfriend. She is embarrassed at the thought of other people knowing this about her daughter. She is ashamed of her failures as a parent. Even though she deeply loves her daughter, her response to her daughter's actions will most likely be rooted in these powerful emotions that are ultimately about her, not her daughter's well-being.

Our personal agendas will almost always keep us from loving others well. We get aggravated and impatient when the other person doesn't give us what we expect. Instead of having the goal of loving and knowing a person, we approach people as projects. Even a righteous agenda such as converting someone to Christianity or convincing someone of God's design for sex can get in the way of loving the person.

I asked Lori what she would say to Christians who, like her, feel they are at a crossroads of truth and love. She said, "Keep building your relationship bridge and never give up. The issue isn't really about sexual choices; rather, it's about one's relationship with the Lord and past wounding. As a general guideline, I would say show love always and ask God to whom and when He would have you speak truth. Specifically, if there is a situation where you are asked to compromise your convictions or conscience, that is the time to speak truth."

If your coworker constantly talks about his weekend sexual exploits, you might think that God wants you to ignore him, judge him, or try to convict him of his sin. Humility requires that you do none of these, rather that you simply treat him as a fellow human being who needs grace just as much as you do. Humility reminds us to put aside our agenda and ask the Lord for His. Only the Lord can give the right words to communicate truth and grace in each moment.

God never asked you to prove anything or convince anyone of truth. Only the Holy Spirit can change a heart. Let your agenda be to truly know someone, to connect with him or her as a fellow human being, always

prepared to point to Jesus Christ as the reason for the hope within you.¹⁶ Allow the Holy Spirit to guide you in both truth and love.

3. Don't Defend Your Reputation

(Jesus made Himself nothing.¹⁷)

From 2008 to 2012, I worked for a large nonprofit ministry in a fairly high-profile role. One of my first days there, I was filming in front of an audience of women. When I arrived on set, the staff had lunch prepared for me and a woman waiting to do my makeup and hair. Everyone referred to me as “Dr. Slattery.” This was pretty heady, considering that I had just come from being a stay-at-home mom in sweatpants, eating leftover grilled cheese. I prayed in that moment, *Lord, please keep me humble!* and I meant it. I was afraid of the pride often associated with public ministry.

The Lord was not slow in answering my prayer. During one of the bathroom breaks, I forgot to turn off my portable mic. Yes, I was humbled. Although this was humiliating, I “winked” at God and thanked Him for His creativity in answering my prayer. However, the real humility was to come later in the evening. I received an email that someone in the audience was offended by something I had said during the filming. This complaint came not from the woman herself but through one of the producers who wanted to make me aware that this woman was angry at me. I paced around my bedroom, plotting how I would defend myself. I felt humiliated, particularly knowing that the woman’s complaint had been shared with many of my new coworkers. Then the Lord reminded me of my prayer for humility. *Juli, this is an opportunity to respond with pride or humility. Which will you choose?* While I had prayed for humility, embracing it would be my choice. Would I defend my reputation or show love by genuinely caring about why this woman had been offended? Would I humble myself and ask for her forgiveness? That situation and many others since have provided me with opportunities to either be humble or defend myself.

It’s impossible to be defensive and loving at the same time. We become mean spirited not because we passionately want to defend God but because we ourselves feel threatened. Instead of loving the world, we want the world to love and accept us. We think we can present a theology and lifestyle that reasonable people will admire and embrace. We hope that if

we perfectly integrate truth and grace, people will appreciate us. Nothing in the Bible suggests this as a goal or even a possibility.

It strikes me that the last of Jesus's beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount is this one: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness....Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matthew 5:10–11). We can be humble, be meek, be peacemakers, live righteous lives, and still encounter rejection and persecution. While biblical morality and the cultural understanding of right and wrong overlap in our endeavors to treat people with love and kindness, we will always part ways in matters that pertain to obeying God and recognizing Him as the ultimate authority.

Affirming God's truth about sexuality will pit us against the world, despite our efforts to be humble and loving. The values of the sexual revolution and of the Christian faith are and will always be in opposition to each other. We should anticipate conflict and be prepared to be rejected, insulted, and persecuted simply for affirming a biblical view of sexuality. It's okay if someone thinks we are prudish and out of touch because we believe sex was designed for marriage. The true test of our love and humility will be in how we respond when this conflict inevitably happens.

Ironically, once you stop caring what people think about you, you will actually begin caring about people.

4. Be a Servant

(Jesus became a servant and became obedient, even to death.¹⁸)

A few weeks ago, I was (again) flying on a plane and sat by a young gay man. I wanted to show him love and spent time talking to him and asking questions about his life. He shared about his job as a flight attendant and his upcoming vacation with his husband. Eventually, he put on his headphones and I put on mine. About an hour later, his full can of beer spilled all over the seat between us and splattered on my shoes and backpack. I was annoyed. I gave him my pitiful cocktail napkin and then moved out of the way for him to get more napkins and rags. While he was gone, I found an empty seat across the aisle and settled in there. Later that evening, it dawned on me how I had failed to love this young man. I went

out of my way to make conversation with him, thinking I was extending love to a stranger. Then God gave me the opportunity to serve him, and I refused.

There is no way Jesus would have responded in this situation the way I did. I failed to love this man because I didn't want to be inconvenienced in serving him. Russell Moore challenged us with how we should be servants, loving those who seem to oppose us in the sexual revolution:

The loudest voices against...the hounding and intimidation of gay and lesbian persons around the world should be from the wing of the church most committed to a biblical Christian sexual ethic. The people most concerned about working to end gay and lesbian homelessness, for kids who've been thrown out of their homes by parents who've rejected them, ought to be those who believe the full counsel of God on these matters. The people most willing to love and receive strippers and porn stars and prostitutes who need to be seen for more than the use of their parts, ought to be the church of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

Imagine if we took Moore's advice to heart. What if people knew Christians as the greatest servants and the people most willing to sacrifice for others? You will never meet a humble person who is not also loving. As we let go of self, the character of Jesus will fill that vacuum.

The feeling of standing at the fork in the road, with love going one way and truth going the other, actually presents an artificial choice. God doesn't want you to choose between standing on His truth and being a gracious person. As people, as families, and as churches, we should never become divided by this false dichotomy. The world will see the gospel when we are people with both a high view of truth and tender hearts toward all people. God is both truth and love. Jesus displayed both as He ministered on earth. The Holy Spirit is able to work both of them fully into our lives and character.

God is calling us to so greatly love others that we do not desire for them anything that might separate them from God.

—Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered*

PART 4

LOOKING OUTWARD

Passing On What We Believe

I'm guessing that you didn't pick up this book because *you* have a problem. You were drawn to rethink sexuality because you see pain around you. You've met with people who have questions and who carry great burdens. You want to know how to help and how to winsomely share God's truth about sexuality.

The main portion of this book was written to challenge your beliefs and personal choices. Why? Because you can't take anyone further than you have gone in your own journey. You can't pass on truths you don't possess, and only through the integrity of your life will others be drawn to imitate you.

Parents often ask me, "How do I teach my kids about sexuality?" While there are some excellent books and programs to help parents, nothing can compensate for our own lack of maturity. This is why God's truth must be on our hearts before we can impress it on our children. The

same is true as we teach, lead, preach, or counsel. Discipleship isn't found in a book; it overflows from a life.

Paul wrote to his spiritual son Timothy, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2). When I read these words, I think about the spiritual mothers and fathers God has brought into my life to teach me. Then I think about the spiritual brothers and sisters, sons and daughters God has given me the honor to teach. Although you and I probably have never met, my heart is to pass on what I've been taught so that you can pass on what you've been taught. The ultimate goal is multiplication through discipleship. When one person is changed, a family is affected. When one leader takes up the mantle of sexual discipleship, a community can change.

Here are some thoughts from a marriage and family pastor with whom Authentic Intimacy has partnered. He paints a picture of how sexual discipleship can happen in a community that is willing to talk about sexual issues from a biblical perspective:

Over the past few years, through honest and relevant weekend conversations from the stage, transparent discussion in small groups, supporting care ministries, and our church's partnership with Authentic Intimacy and other relational ministry leaders, I have seen the church's spiritual and relational health improve. Our married people are encouraged to have honest conversations about sex and intimacy and are dealing with the obstacles that tend to stay hidden in most marriages. Our young adults are learning about why God created sex and

why He cares about their sexuality. We have small groups that offer women a safe environment to study how God's Word speaks openly about sexual intimacy and passion. And, we have hosted events that have served as a catalyst for healthy conversation amongst couples and an encouragement to go deeper with additional resources as they pursue holiness and healing.

You don't have to be a pastor to be a catalyst for change. One woman recently emailed me with a real-life example of how God is using her to bring sexual discipleship into her community:

Last week my husband, who is leading a marriage Bible study, didn't make it home from a work conference on time. All day long, I texted every couple I thought might lead, and no one would lead our discussion because the topic was sexuality. I had heard Juli on the radio in the past and started listening to her podcast a few months ago. I had read several intimacy books to help heal my own hurts and better understand how to talk with my high school students who have questions. After some desperate prayers and a few notes, I went to lead the discussion. It was an eye-opening time. I didn't realize how much knowledge I had accumulated. I am sure the walls of our church have never heard some of those words! Thank you for preparing me to share the truth about the unspoken. I know our marriages will be better as we become more intimate with Christ and our spouses.

You can be part of the work God wants to do, offering hope to hurting people and truth to those who have been deceived by the humanistic messages of our world. This book offers you an invitation to take what you've learned and to pass it on through words, through actions, through prayer.

In this final section, we will look at two practical ways that you can be part of sexually discipling others: through your unique relationships and as you participate as a member of the body of Christ.

Start with Who You Know

If you had the choice between access to the greatest library in the world or the opportunity to regularly meet with a very wise person, which would you choose? Which do you think would have the greater impact on you?

The most profound vehicle for passing on truth is relationship. Modern technology has given us access to a vast number of books, yet we are thirsty for relationships that will challenge, teach, and encourage us.

Discipleship = truth + relationship.

Have you ever considered that God has arranged your relational world for a purpose? Everyone from the person who cuts your hair to your best friend is part of your life for a reason.

When He gave His disciples the Great Commission, Jesus intended that each disciple reach people who would then reach others. His disciples had specific relationships to which they were called. Philip ministered to an Ethiopian eunuch,¹ Peter discipled the Jewish church in Jerusalem,² and John was given a special ministry to Jesus's mother.³

God uses us to evangelize and disciple within the specific relationships and populations in which He has put us. Sometimes those relationships are one-time meetings, such as sitting next to someone at a soccer game. Other times God connects us with people with whom we have shared life for many years. God may also send us to reach out to people beyond those we

naturally meet in the paths of our lives, with whom we wouldn't normally interact. Jesus modeled this by spending time with those who would never show up at a religious meeting or social gathering.

Unfortunately, we often don't think of our relationships as having a missional purpose. Even with our own children, we can be so busy caring for their physical needs and controlling the chaos that we forget to invest in their spiritual growth.

WHAT IS A MISSIONAL RELATIONSHIP?

As Christians, we don't have secular relationships that are completely isolated from our spiritual purpose and calling. All our relationships are divinely appointed and have the potential to be missional. A missional relationship is a relationship that God uses to do His work in one or both people. We strive to fulfill the Great Commission within our relationships when we share Jesus's love and challenge one another to follow Him.

Missional relationships are not defined by how often we meet or how well we know the other person. What makes them missional is our intentionality to be used by God to demonstrate His love and truth. Our lives are filled with many different types of missional relationships. My friend Kim Vollendorf has worked in a college discipleship ministry for many years. She described her various missional relationships this way:

A mentor once told me, "Jesus loved the masses, helped many, but disciplined a few." This advice was tremendously helpful for me in sorting out my role and responsibility as I interacted intentionally with those individuals around me. As we embrace this lifestyle of incorporating sexual discipleship in our influence and interactions with others, we have a role and responsibility to all of these groups. While our motive and message might be the same, how we walk them out will look different.

When I write a book or speak onstage, I'm sharing with "the masses" what God has taught me about sexuality. As part of "helping the many," I'll have coffee with a friend to talk through a difficult situation. But I am also called to "disciple a few." These are the close relationships God has given me, such as parenting my children or meeting regularly and intentionally with someone for the purpose of spiritual growth and encouragement.

Passing on biblical truths about sexuality can happen within any of these types of relationships. In fact, a sexual discipleship model requires the Christian community to be teaching and reinforcing these truths in all three of these settings.

For example, you attend a conference and learn something that profoundly affects you as part of the crowd (the masses). For those truths to sink deep into your heart, you will need to process your thoughts, maybe with a friend over coffee or within your small group (the many). You will also need a good friend or mentor to challenge you to continue to live that truth out in your life (the few).

Remember that even as we address sexual issues, the mission of our relationships is not to convince people about God's design for sex. Rather, our conversations about sexuality are an outgrowth of the greater purpose: to tell people about Jesus and equip Christians to obey what Jesus taught. This means that sexual discipleship isn't ultimately about sex. It is about exalting Jesus as Lord and winsomely compelling others to follow Him.

How do you become more intentional in sharing God's truth about sexuality with the people you know? Here are four things to keep in mind.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Several years ago, a woman who had been referred by a friend came to our house to help me pick out drapes and paint colors. Because of our mutual friend, she knew I was in public ministry. As we walked through our family room, she saw our DVD collection of popular movies, such as *Star Wars* and *Avatar*, and challenged me about having this kind of entertainment in my home as a Christian leader. Even if her concerns were valid, we didn't have the kind of relationship that invited such a conversation. This woman

knew nothing about me, my husband, my marriage, or my children. She didn't ask questions. She just confronted me. Although she thought she was helping me by sharing her convictions, she had not earned the right to give me advice on anything other than the color of my walls. I was hurt and offended, feeling judged by her words.

We can be so eager to share our convictions and tell people what we believe that we fail to build a bridge to the person's heart. Listening is serving with our ears. It is how we earn the right to speak, and it informs how and what we say. Paul told us that our speech should always be filled with grace and seasoned with salt.⁴ How can you know how to winsomely craft the truth if you haven't first taken the time to listen?

We build bridges by communicating in a hundred different ways that "I want to know what it's like to be you." By listening and caring, we become a safe place for people to talk honestly about their marriage, their loneliness, their disappointments in love, and their perspective on cultural issues. Instead of shutting down these discussions with awkwardness or brash opinions, we ask questions, lean in, and earn the right to share what God has taught us.

Kayla, a woman who went through the pilot study for this book, wrote me this email:

As I am going through this *Rethinking Sexuality* study, a young woman I knew from years past reached out to me just to talk. She has walked away from her Christian faith the last three years, pursuing "love" from an unhealthy relationship, drugs, alcohol, and abandoning all she ever thought she knew about God. She came to her wits' end this year and decided to stop it all. She was raw and open, at times vulgar, and extremely honest about her sexual exploits. I was able to listen and sympathize with her for the pain she felt and still feels. I was able to hear the terrible things she had done. All I could think of was how she needed Jesus's love and the truth to replace the lies she had been believing. At the end of our two-hour conversation, she told me she has been testing Christians getting together with us here and there to share her story and

examine their responses to her. She told me I was the only one who responded with grace, mercy, and understanding, and didn't ask her to pray in that moment to turn her life around. Essentially, I think I just met her where she was. This was our first meeting, hopefully one of many, and I was able to put aside so much of my own thoughts and feelings to love her in that moment.

Take another look at this email. What was it that most affected Kayla's friend? What Kayla said or what she did? When we think of sharing God's truth on any subject, including sexuality, we typically think of what we should say, yet our words will be heard only if we begin by listening. As the saying goes, no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.

Dr. Mark Yarhouse has devoted his professional life to working with people who have experienced gender dysphoria. He asked transgender Christians, "What kind of support would you have liked from the church?" One responded, "Someone to cry with me, rather than just denounce me."⁵

The hurting people around us can't simply be known by what's wrong with them: their psychological diagnoses or particular sins. Each is an individual who longs for someone to care enough to ask about his or her life, pain, and dreams. Here's the key: you don't have a platform to sexually disciple until you've become intentional about knowing the other person. You have no platform to speak into someone's sexual choices or beliefs if you've not chosen to first understand that person's world.

Building bridges means more than being in the same space. We can share a dinner table, a bed, or a church row and never accept the challenge to step into the other person's pain and struggles. It takes intentionality and patience to know my children and husband, even as I'm living with them. In every relationship, we miss the opportunity to minister if we are too busy, dogmatic, or self-absorbed to truly care about people's pain.

Even if you're in a position of influencing large numbers of people through a blog, social media, or any other public forum, it's wise to begin by listening. You might wonder, *How can I listen to someone I have never*

met? You listen by thinking and praying about your intended audience. I've spent a lot of time "listening" to you in the process of writing this book. I've thought about what your life may be like and what challenges you may be facing. I've asked God to give me wisdom because He knows each person reading these words. A pilot study, a wonderful editor, and a handful of trusted friends have helped me tailor the message so it could be most effective for you, the reader.

GETTING REAL

Passing on God's truth is much more than what we say. That truth must be authenticated by how we live it in front of our children, our spouse, our friends, our neighbors, and our coworkers. How do our lives practically demonstrate the link between sexuality and covenant love? What is the spiritual battle around our own sexual choices? What are we doing with our own sexual brokenness? How has Jesus's death on the cross collided with that sin and brokenness?

One of my biggest challenges whenever I write, speak, or meet with people is knowing how much of my personal journey to share. There is a legitimate tension between asking God to use my story and living with discretion. I want to have a testimony, not a reputation. In that respect, you can have all my secrets. I don't have anything to hide from you. But I also realize that some things I might share with you could be destructive to you and others. We must also remember that Jesus told us not to "throw [our] pearls to pigs" (Matthew 7:6). Our stories are tender and sacred, and not everyone will treat them as such. Whatever your roles of leadership and influence, you have to struggle with the same tension, particularly as related to sexual discipleship.

The two words that demonstrate this tension for me are *authenticity* and *discernment*. We touched on this in chapter 9, "Our Public Selves Versus Our Private Selves," but we are here again because discipleship relationships require both authenticity and discernment. We need discernment from God to know how much to share and how much to invest in the people around us. Jesus was 100 percent authentic, but He also taught

and modeled discernment. He carefully determined what He would share with whom and didn't invest time in everyone.⁶ Jesus knew to whom the Father had called Him. He spent an entire night praying before identifying from among all His disciples those twelve whom He also called apostles.⁷

Like Jesus, we should have different levels of discipleship relationships. While we interact with many people from a distance, we enter into the lives of a few and invite those people into ours. In these special relationships, we encourage questions and “pull back the curtains” so others can see the realities of ministry, marriage, and daily life. Why is this so powerful? Because discipleship of any kind (including sexual discipleship) is about much more than giving someone a script to read or a program to follow. It's about who you are becoming as a person, how you think, how you love, and how you deal with real-life challenges.

While some discipleship relationships have time and space boundaries (you meet for coffee every Monday morning at nine or your small group meets every Thursday night), discipleship is most powerful when someone gets to follow you around. In essence, we want to be able to say to people, “Follow me as I follow Christ. I might be a couple of steps ahead of you in my journey, but I don't have all the answers. I just know to keep taking steps toward God and trusting Him with all my life. Let's pursue Him together.”

At times Mike and I have invited people to live with us—not because we are perfect but because we are a family striving to seek God in the midst of ordinary struggles. Sometimes we just have a couple come over for dinner. I might invite a woman to go with me to a conference or sit in on a meeting. Why? Because people learn best by watching real life. Those you are discipling need to know some of your challenges and your victories right there in real time.

Jesus invited only twelve of His disciples to this level of intimacy. (I have a hunch that if He were here today, He wouldn't broadcast His personal life on social media.) Many people saw Him from a distance and learned from His teaching, but a few got to know Him in a variety of life situations. They learned by watching Him and asking follow-up questions. They saw Him when He was tired, frustrated, and sad. The disciples got to see that Jesus was the same man on the public stage as He was with them in

private. They watched Him minister and eventually ministered with Him. He taught them and then sent them out to heal, teach, and influence their world.

I'm sure there are a few reasons that Jesus's twelve disciples were all men; one of them was maintaining boundaries as they slept together, traveled together, ate together, ministered together, and no doubt discussed sensitive issues. I believe we should follow His example. While you interact with and influence men and women, be very careful about engaging in intimate discipleship relationships with people of the opposite gender (apart from family members). Discipleship relationships, particularly related to sexuality, are vulnerable and should be treated as such. Don't be deceived into thinking you can handle intimate or sexual conversations with someone of the opposite sex (or same gender if you are same-sex attracted) without a high level of accountability and firm boundaries. Men and women far more committed to Christ than we are have fallen into that trap.

Consideration for another's privacy should also inform the boundaries of what you share. Your sexual choices and experiences usually involve other people, so you may not have the right to tell about much of your journey. Even if you have the motivation of helping another person, God doesn't want you to publicly share about your spouse's porn use or your child's rebellion without that person's permission.

We also need to recognize that some things are still too raw to talk about with more than one or two trusted confidants. Emotional trauma, intense family conflict, a struggle with an addiction, deep seasons of personal healing—such experiences can cause us to lose a sense of true north. When I've been in such intense emotional seasons, I've said things that were impulsive, emotionally driven, and unwise. I've learned to be very careful with a microphone and even in one-on-one relationships during such times. Authenticity does not mean that I share whatever is on my heart in any given moment. I can be fully authentic while also asking "set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips."⁸

Be honest if you are in a season of vulnerability and personal healing. Even if you are in a leadership role, you may have more need to be disciplined than to be intimately discipling others. Too many Christian leaders hide their pain and personal struggles, pressing on to help other people

without first pursuing their own wholeness. If this describes you, please reach out for help!

TALKING TRUTH

Sexual discipleship will always involve purposeful teaching about what the Bible says about sex. This teaching happens in three primary ways: passing on what God has taught us, using teachable moments, and responding to specific personal questions.

Biblical knowledge doesn't magically fill our minds when we become Christians. An important part of sexual discipleship is teaching what the Bible says about sexuality. Pastors and teachers do this by intentionally covering Scripture passages that address sexuality.⁹ We can share insights informally over coffee or pancakes in the course of everyday life. Are you in the habit of talking with others about what you learned through a podcast or what God showed you in a Bible passage you recently read? Jesus modeled a pattern of sharing with His disciples what the Father had taught Him.¹⁰ As God teaches you, be intentional about passing on those truths. It doesn't have to sound as stuffy as "When I was doing my quiet time this morning, the Lord impressed on me..." You might say something casually, such as "I'm learning about how remarkable it is that God's wisdom for relationships is stamped on our bodies. Did you know that research about things like pornography and hooking up actually reinforces God's design for sex?"

We also share God's truth by taking advantage of teachable moments. OxfordDictionaries.com defines *teachable moment* as "an event or experience that presents a good opportunity for learning something about a particular aspect of life."¹¹ We usually think about teachable moments within the context of parenting, but they can also be applied in ministry settings such as small groups and one-on-one discipleship, and in friendships. Every day you do life with people—eating meals together, riding in a car, and sharing the same space at home or work. When appropriate, you can steer conversations toward discussing truth about sexuality.

While we can't plan teachable moments, we can take advantage of what's happening around us. Fortunately, there are lots of opportunities for teachable moments related to sexuality. Here are some examples of teachable moments, along with some talking points that can help you teach and pass on a biblical perspective about sexuality.

Current Events

- A high-profile Hollywood breakup. (Why do you think these beautiful, rich people who seem so in love can't stay together? Why do you think people are so fascinated with the love lives of movie stars?)
- A high-profile sexual abuse or harassment case. (What is sexual abuse/harassment? What does *sexual consent* mean? What is the long-term impact of sexual abuse? Why do people in power sometimes use their position for sexual coercion? Does the Bible say anything about sexual abuse or harassment?)
- News about changing laws and policies regarding sexual and gender identity. (Why are we seeing these changes in culture? Does the Bible say anything about these issues? What is the difference between biblical morality and moral standards mandated by the government?)

Life Stages or Developmental Changes

- A child going through puberty. (This is an obvious opportunity to talk about why the body is changing, why God gives us sexual hormones, how to react to and steward sexual desire, and how to interact with the opposite sex.)
- Weddings. (What is the difference between marriage and living together? Considering that there are so many unhappy married couples, is marriage really worth it? What are realistic expectations for sex in marriage?)
- Singleness. (Why do you think God gives people sexual desire and doesn't bring a marriage partner? What does the Bible teach about

masturbation? Is it okay to long for marriage? Is it okay to not desire marriage?)

Family (or Church Family) Circumstances

- Divorce of a family member. (Is this a good thing or bad thing? What does the Bible say about marriage and divorce? How can we show love to everyone involved? Should people be afraid to get married?)
- An invite to a gay wedding from a relative. (Is it right to go to the wedding? Why or why not? How do we display love while also holding on to a biblical view of marriage?)
- A moral failure of a church leader. (Christian leaders should ask one another, What small decisions might lead up to something like this? What warning should we personally take in our own lives? What does the Bible say about repentance and forgiveness?)

Shared Experiences

- Watching a movie or television show with sexual themes. (What is the underlying sexual message of the movie or show? What do you think the writers want us to believe about sexuality? How might watching this movie or show affect my view of sex?)
- Hearing a sermon on the Song of Songs. (Why do you think this book was included in the Bible? What can a married couple learn about sex from the Song? Do you think single Christians should study this book?)
- Interacting with a transgender person at a restaurant. (Did you treat or view this person any differently because this person was transgender? Does God view this person differently? How could I show love to this person?)

At Authentic Intimacy, we use our podcast and blog platforms to take advantage of these types of teachable moments. In my personal relationships, I try to do the same. These situations present natural avenues

to ask good questions, challenge thinking, and integrate biblical truth into real life.

While teachable moments involve reacting to external events, maybe the greatest opportunity to teach in relationship is by responding to personal questions. If you have built a trusting relationship and given the other person (or group) permission to be open, you're going to get real-life questions. When people see that the Bible is actually practical, they learn to apply biblical truth to daily life.

For this reason, we have a live question and answer session at all our Authentic Intimacy events, asking people to anonymously text in questions. Here are some of the text messages we got from a recent event:

- What do you do in a destructive relationship when it is not safe to open your heart?
- What if you're married and your spouse has no desire for sex? Is masturbation okay?
- I'm a trans woman. Are you suggesting I need to change back?
- I was very promiscuous as a teen and twentysomething. How do I break old patterns and bad habits, such as not being comfortable having sex unless I've had alcohol?
- I worked really hard not to awaken love too soon and thought my obedience would give me a great sex life in marriage. I've been married four years, and while my husband is *amazing*, I don't enjoy sex. It hurts and it's stressful. I'm so disappointed. What now?
- I'm in a relationship with a believer, including sex, which I never thought I'd do. I always thought we'd get married. Now, I'm not sure I want to because I like being single. Where do we go from here?
- Can we as a Christian and God-honoring couple have intimacy that includes spicing up our sex life with toys and new positions?

There are biblical truths that can provide guidance for each of these questions. Take, for example, the question asked about sex toys and "spicy" sexual positions. While the Bible doesn't overtly address this topic, you can share biblical principles that give direction and wisdom. First, you might talk about the Song of Songs and the "spicy" things that are alluded to and

blessed by God within the pages of that biblical book. Then you could encourage this couple to read and pray through 1 Corinthians 10:23–24: “ ‘Everything is permissible,’ but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible,’ but not everything is edifying. No one should seek his own good, but the good of others” (BSB). This passage isn’t addressing sex toys and sexual positions, but it gives wisdom to apply when tackling issues that aren’t directly addressed in Scripture. Might engaging in this act be a stumbling block for either spouse? A married couple has great freedom to enjoy each other in the bedroom, but not everything they are free to do will be a positive sexual experience that builds intimacy and love.

You may feel intimidated at the thought of being asked these kinds of questions. Remember that you don’t need to have an answer ready in the moment. Discipleship is a journey. It’s okay to say something like “That’s a great question! I’ll need some time to look into it and get back to you.”¹²

Whatever influence or platform God has given you, pray for ways to teach biblical sexuality. Within our leadership roles, sexual discipleship means that we boldly model how to have God-honoring conversations about every sexual issue, taking a biblical stand even on controversial and offensive topics. Rod Dreher in *The Benedict Option* challenged church leaders, “Watering down or burying biblical truth on sexuality for the sake of keeping Millennials won’t work....Even making traditional teaching on sexual integrity an optional matter—either explicitly or implicitly, by not talking about it, or by turning a blind eye—is a mistake. It is impossible to bracket out Christianity’s clear instruction on how to live a life of sexual integrity and separating it from the rest of the Christian life. It’s hypocritical.”¹³

STAYING IN THE MESS

One of the main reasons we avoid true sexual discipleship is that we are afraid of the mess. There is no formula for walking someone through sexual abuse recovery or the devastation of an unfaithful spouse. When you bring up sexual topics in your small group or in your family, you will hear questions you can’t answer and problems you can’t solve. If you share

biblical truth about sex or any other topic, some people (including fellow Christians) will criticize you. When you step into another person's pain, you may get the brunt of that person's anger or have very unrealistic expectations thrust on you. People who are hurting can become demanding, needy, illogical, and unreasonable at times.

Linda Dillow, the cofounder of Authentic Intimacy, knows how difficult sexual discipleship can be. She recently shared with me:

There are so many times when working with wounded women that I've felt like just giving up. How can I trust God, give so much, and it be so messy and blow up in my face? One of the hardest things is setting and keeping boundaries. I'll explain to a woman that there have to be boundaries in our relationship. She'll agree, but then when I follow through with a boundary, WHAMO! She'll say, "You hate me, you never loved me, and you will leave me just like everyone else." After all the hours, all the prayer, all the tears...that's when I feel like giving up.

And this is why we tiptoe around pain and avoid people who are obviously hurting. We don't want the mess. It feels far safer to stick with fill-in-the-blank Bible studies and church softball games.

But here's a sobering question. Can you remember times *you* were the mess? When you were vulnerable, hurting, desperate, and angry? Was someone willing to step into your mess? Have you ever experienced the love of someone who might have felt overwhelmed but stayed anyway? Maybe he or she didn't have any answers for you but just committed to being there, comforting you in grief, bringing joy to the darkest days, and lending you hope when you had none.

When you disciple people in the deepest areas of their pain, it will get messy. You will need to set boundaries and reach out to those who have greater expertise, but will you run away or will you stay? Your efforts at sexual discipleship are most profound when you simply commit to staying with someone as a consistent and trusted presence in that person's life.

While writing this book, I've blocked off times to get into the writing zone. During these times, I feel anxious to focus and block out every distraction. Yet when I'm in the "writing zone," I might also schedule a few lunch dates and phone appointments with women I'm discipling. I feel a tension. When I write, I can see the words on a page; I know I'm accomplishing something. This seems much more important than celebrating a birthday or taking a desperate phone call. But I know that the real work of sexual discipleship isn't filling an empty page; it is walking with a real person who is hurting or confused.

Sexual discipleship is impossible without purposeful, intentional, missional relationships. God has brought people into your life for a reason, and He can equip you with the wisdom and compassion to be part of His work through those relationships. You have been invited to influence the world with God's truth, one relationship at a time.

Our greatest impact in life will be made not among the masses but in the few people we pour our life into.

—Dann Spader, *Walking as Jesus Walked*

We Need the Body of Christ

I remember a game we played in junior high youth group. We were learning about the importance of the body of Christ and how we need one another to accomplish the mission God has given us. The youth leader chose four of us to be part of the game. One was the mouth, two of us were the hands, and one the eyes. The goal was for the hands to feed the mouth a cup of pudding. Everyone except for the eyes was blindfolded, so the arms and mouth had to listen clearly to the instructions of the eyes. As you might imagine, it got pretty messy.

If there were a youth group in Corinth around AD 70, Paul might have used this same game to teach what he desperately wanted the early church to know. You are all part of one body, with one mission, united by one Spirit. You need one another, and each part is important to the whole body.

While this sounds like an inspirational, team-building concept, we rarely live like this. We long to do something big for God as lone rangers. We pray for His specific call on our lives without realizing that God doesn't just call individuals. He raises up many to do His work. You might remember the great victories of King David, but do you know about all the people God brought to help him? There is an entire section of Scripture listing David's "mighty warriors."¹ And what about Paul? Everyone knows

his name, but Paul needed Barnabas, Peter, James, Silas, Timothy, Priscilla, and Aquila, just to name a few.²

Rarely do we see such cooperation within the body of Christ. As a result, rarely do we see God orchestrating big things. Even ministries and missions that employ hundreds of people often fail to operate as one body, under the submission and direction of the Holy Spirit. Instead, they rely on their organizational charts and job descriptions. Planning, conferences, and team building may be important, but these tools can't accomplish the unity God calls His people to pursue.

True unity among followers of Jesus is a supernatural grace from God Himself. Paul encouraged it and prayed for it because he knew that people couldn't achieve true unity without God's intervention. If we are going to see God's design for sex and His power to heal take root in people's lives, we have to work together as the body of Christ. We can't reach hurting people or equip Christians to live according to God's design all by ourselves. As a parent, I'm acutely aware of this. I pray for godly mentors, role models, friends, and teachers to influence my sons. What my husband and I have to offer them is important, but it's not enough all by itself.

This truth also applies to churches and other ministries. We can't stand alone. As word gets out about what we are doing at Authentic Intimacy, I have crossed paths with other Christians who are also working to address sexual pain and questions. Sometimes our interaction might just be a phone conversation or email of encouragement, but in other situations God shows us how we can work together to affect more people. In these situations no one is arguing about who gets more stage time, who owns the email lists, or who is liable if something goes wrong. We just get on our knees and then roll up our sleeves. We have a lot of work to do, and we can't accomplish it by ourselves.

THE GIFTS IN ACTION

Sexual discipleship cannot be accomplished in your family, your church, or your community just by your efforts. We worship an amazing God who is able to bring together an army of people with different gifts and

personalities to get His work done. Our Authentic Intimacy ministry is pretty small, but we coordinate with fellow Christians around the world to reach hurting people who want to understand God's design for sexuality and intimacy. Anytime you see God moving, you will likely find many people behind the scenes who are working, praying, and giving.

Let me share with you about a weekend I recently had in San Antonio, Texas. A brave woman named Brenda McCord was a new women's ministry director. Of all the things she could have introduced to her church, Brenda sensed God asking her to address biblical sexuality. She got in touch with our ministry, and we began to pray and talk about a potential women's conference at Wayside Chapel. Brenda spent much time in prayer and conversation, casting this vision to the pastoral staff and elders of her church. Eventually, the date was planned and we began preparing.

Fast-forward a year. The weekend of the conference, I walked into the body of Christ in action. An amazing connector, Carl Caton, had gathered a handful of area leaders for a special dinner Thursday night to talk and pray about what God is doing in San Antonio to restore marriages and bring healing. The following day, I shared the message of sexual discipleship with more than a hundred pastors, counselors, and lay leaders in the city. Saturday morning, the day of the conference, I arrived at the church at seven thirty. There were more than fifty smiling women setting up food tables, brewing coffee, praying, and eagerly waiting to greet those on their way into the conference. Brenda told me that her women's leadership team had spent many hours together over the previous month, specifically praying for us and for the women who would come to the conference.

The event started at eight thirty with gifted musicians gathering us for soulful worship. Then my dynamic coworker, Hannah, made everyone feel welcome from the stage with her humor, enthusiasm, and flat-out fun. This set the stage for me to teach. At lunch, we ate food donated by the WinShape Foundation, Chick-fil-A's marriage initiative. When the conference wrapped up at four thirty, many women came forward for prayer and encouragement in response to what they'd heard. But the ministry didn't end there. Brenda had prepared and coordinated several follow-up groups and studies including *Passion Pursuit*, *Surprised by the Healer*, *Sex and the Single Girl*, and *Pulling Back the Shades*³ so that women could take

their next step in sexual discipleship. Right now, more than a hundred women are continuing in those studies.

When I think of all the gifts represented in this effort, it's mind blowing. Gifts of service, food, intercession, teaching, hospitality, finances, administration, worship, leadership, and wisdom. Beyond that are unseen acts of women inviting their neighbors and comforting those beside them at the conference. I will never know in this life all the lives changed because of this effort, but for certain the city of San Antonio was greatly affected by Christians working together. This is just a small picture of what the body of Christ is capable of when we are united by the Spirit for the purpose of bringing God's truth and love to the issue of sexuality.

You might not be part of a ministry or big conference, but God has given you gifts that are needed in His work around you. Here is my paraphrase of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:7–11:

There is a great work to be done, a work commissioned by God and accomplished through His Spirit. God has invited each of us to be part of that work and has strategically given each of us different gifts for that purpose. One gift isn't more valuable than another, for we all depend on one another. Look around you and see what God is doing. Find the prayer warriors, those filled with mercy for hurting people, the organized administrators, those with a prophetic message for our times, the teachers, and those with the wisdom to lead. This is your team. And where do you fit? God has not left you out but has gifted you with an important piece of the puzzle.

Sexual discipleship requires that pastors and teachers proclaim God's design for sexuality. It requires that people with gifts of mercy minister to the brokenhearted, that men and women with wisdom give counsel and guidance, that those with gifts of hospitality provide meals and friendship, and that administrators and leaders organize the efforts of churches to reach their communities. All this, under the lordship of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit. As Paul wrote,

We will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:14–16)

A CHORUS OF TESTIMONIES

I recently received the following email and have gotten many like it. I share it with you to show how God is actively raising up people around the world to reclaim His design for sexuality.

Dear Juli,

My name is Stephanie and I live in Canada. I'm twenty-eight years old and very involved in my church. I'd like to share my testimony with you and ask for your help.

When I was a young girl, I had an inappropriate experience at a doctor's office, and the door for Satan's lies was blown wide open in my heart. I grew up knowing I would have premarital sex. Though I grew up in the church and loved God, the church always just said, "Sex is bad; don't do it," and my parents were silent on the issue. In the lack of narrative, I absorbed messages from the media and lies from the devil that were spoken into me from a young age. I went down the road of sexual sin when I was fourteen.

When I got engaged to my now husband, we both agreed we needed to stop having sex, and for the ten months until we married, we abstained. On our wedding night I discovered that at some point in those ten months I developed vaginismus. This is an involuntary muscle spasm that happens during sex and makes intercourse incredibly painful and/or impossible. For the

last nearly two years, this has been a struggle and quite the journey. God is using this to help me bring hurts out of the dark; He is helping me to get set free from generational sin, anxiety, negative associations to sex, so many things. It is actually incredible. I believe He is preparing me to do His work in the area of sexual sin in the church; I know one day I will be healed and will enjoy a sexually fulfilling and blessed union with my husband.

I have a deep desire to help girls recognize the true consequences of sexual sin. It is not just pregnancy and STDs. I believe God is calling the church to more, to holiness and purity. The church needs to stop being silent. The church needs to be louder than the media. There needs to be truth spoken consistently, not just one awkward sermon per year where we tell people to “just don’t do it.”

Girls are asking, “What are the real spiritual consequences, and what are the real rewards for waiting? How can I face sexual temptation?” This is what I’m hoping to do with my life. I want to explain the Enemy’s games and tactics and to show that there is redemption and healing. I just wish I had the tools and information when I was younger, the support from peers and older women in my life to help walk through this stuff *with* me.

I think the church in Canada is in serious need of people speaking truth in this area, and I hope to be able to do some small work to help. It’s been weighing heavily on my heart to reach out to women like you and hopefully find a mentor who can help me with this ministry idea. I don’t know where to start but felt as though I needed to send this email.

Stephanie’s spiritual gifts are different from mine. She also is a different age, lives in a different country, and has a different story of God’s redemption in her life. The world needs Stephanie. No other person on earth can tell her story with her unique style.

Working within the body of Christ is about more than using our spiritual gifts; it also involves telling our stories. We sing a chorus of truth and healing because we each have a unique story to tell. People both inside and outside the church need these testimonies! We should present a multitude of role models who can display God's intervention in every form of sexual pain and brokenness so that people can see thriving marriages, restored relationships, grace amid pain, and victory over sexual temptations. We need to hear stories that are not yet completely written—stories of fellow Christians trusting God for what He *is yet to do* in their lives. In the messiness of our journeys, we need to show people what it looks like to walk in the truth. I love that Stephanie wants to minister as a twenty-eight-year-old who is still struggling to experience the fullness of sexuality in marriage. She has much to share in the middle of her journey. I respect that she wants to be discipled even as she discipled others.

This reminds me of people in the Bible who had just encountered Jesus but were already telling their stories:

- The woman at the well started a revival in her city the day she met Jesus. “Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I ever did’ ” (John 4:39).
- Jesus cast many demons out of a man who was rightfully grateful. The man wanted to follow Jesus, but “Jesus did not let him, but said, ‘Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.’ So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed” (Mark 5:19–20).
- Jesus gave sight to a man who was born blind. When the religious leaders questioned the man about Jesus, he said, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!” (John 9:25).

None of these people had been discipled or commissioned by the church. They simply felt compelled to share “This is what Jesus has done for me!”

God has given you a unique story of redemption and grace that I cannot tell. People need more than a sermon or a book on biblical sexuality.

They need stories to validate God’s truth and offer hope for a different future. Stories tell us what’s normal and help us picture a future we want to live out. Sociologists Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker pointed out, “People pay attention to—and live out—compelling and attractive stories....What happens when someone lacks access to alternative stories about sex? Simple: they don’t easily envision alternatives to what they know.”⁴ When we don’t tell our stories, people won’t know that there is an alternative to the world’s narrative of sex.

While not everyone is called and equipped to teach in formal settings, every follower of Jesus has a story to tell. Not only should we tell our own stories, but we also need to be the champions of what God is doing and has done in other people’s lives. The Christian church contains an enormous library of God’s work in individual lives—not only in believers from the past but also in those living around us. We all may be writing and telling our own stories, but we also are called to invest in the stories of those around us. We can encourage these people, affirm them, and give them a platform to proclaim what God is doing. When I meet a man who is struggling in his marriage, I give him hope by introducing him to someone who has a similar story. When I hear of a woman who has been sexually abused, I connect her with another woman who knows the path toward healing. As I meet parents of children with same-sex attraction, I point them to relevant ministries and people who are walking that road too.

Whether you know it or not, you are surrounded by people who have stories worthy of your time, your prayers, and your support. Every church is filled with silent testimonies of a great God who redeems our sin and pain. It’s time we gave them a voice.

WHEN WE DISAGREE

In the body of Christ, having unity related to topics of sexuality may seem like a pipe dream. How we view sexuality has become a dividing line for many churches, denominations, and Christian families. Recently, Mike and I watched a TED talk of two Episcopal ministers making the case for why God approves of gay marriage and changing gender.⁵ They claimed that we

shouldn't cling to ancient writings when we have come so far as a society to seek equality for all people. Using the Bible to support their case, they quoted Paul in Galatians 3:28 ("There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus") to say that God doesn't care about gender and that we should be able to choose whatever gender suits us.

How should we respond when other Christians have such different views on important sexual topics? How can we possibly work together and be unified if we can't agree on God's design for sexuality?

Unity within the body of Christ is very important to God. Jesus repeatedly emphasized this point. During the Last Supper, He stressed the importance of unity, even stating that the disciples' unity would be the testimony of His divinity.⁶ But here's the catch. Jesus didn't want us just to be united with one another but to be united *in Him*. A Christian isn't just someone who claims the label but one who embraces the Savior. This means that we can't ignore theology and how people live for the sake of getting along. Hence the tension to integrate two essential truths: we are called to be united with our spiritual brothers and sisters, yet we are also called to be distinct from the world.

I love the way John Dickerson addressed this tension. "We need the humility and the perspective to see that our movement is under spiritual attack, and we need each other. I'm not arguing for community worship gatherings or any one specific model. I'm arguing—from Scripture—for the biblical value of unity."⁷ He later emphasized that unity without distinctiveness can't be unity at all. "Without clear boundaries, we have no true power or unity. Without clear boundaries, we have no movement."⁸

Our testimony of Jesus Christ is a testimony only if the world sees us as a cohesive group that has a different belief system and lifestyle from the rest of the world. So what should you do when a fellow Christian holds a very different perspective about sexual issues? When we disagree, we can do three things: identify the real issue, seek to understand, and pursue truth together. Let's look at each of these.

1. Identify the Real Issue

It's often the case that disagreements about sexual ethics go far deeper than beliefs about sex. As you learned in chapter 3, sexual questions begin with questions about how we view God, sin, human nature, and the authority of the Bible. Our lack of Christian unity throughout the sexual revolution may actually have little to do with the sexual questions of our time. Differing views on gay marriage, cohabitation, pornography, and divorce aren't primarily what divide us. These are just the external issues that have exposed what we really believe about God and His Word. Do we believe the Bible is authoritative, divinely inspired, and relevant without cultural revision? Do we believe that human nature is at heart rebellious and damned without God's intervention? And what do we really believe about Jesus? Do we believe He was a nice teacher who made people feel good or that He is the Son of God, deserving of our worship?

If we disagree on the answers to these questions, we have far greater problems than whether to perform a gay wedding. Tozer wrote, "One hundred religious persons knit into a unity by careful organization do not constitute a church any more than eleven dead men make a football team. The first requisite is life, always."⁹ There are people who are "alive" who are not in a formal church and plenty of people in church who have no spiritual pulse.

It's not enough to say we love Jesus and to call ourselves Christians. There are many people who go to church but believe that Jesus would have rejoiced at the sexual revolution. Were He living today, they believe Jesus would have a Coexist bumper sticker on His car and celebrate the fact that we now have sixty genders to choose from. Likewise, in the name of Jesus, the Crusaders killed thousands who would not convert to Christianity, and—more recently—"Christian" protesters sprayed urine on those marching in gay pride parades.¹⁰ All of these claimed to represent Jesus, so who actually does?

We must make a distinction between religious people and those who sincerely aim to follow Jesus Christ by doing what He Himself said: those who love Him will obey what He taught.¹¹ We know how to be united in Christ when we all study and apply the Bible. John Dickerson listed what unites us and concluded, "Of all of these important essentials, none is more practically important today than *the essential doctrine of the authority of*

scripture”¹² because our affirmation of the Bible’s authority guides our resolution in every other issue. He went on to say, “God is the judge of souls, motives, and destinies (Romans 14:10–12), but we can rightly judge if individuals and ministries are honoring God’s Word (Acts 17:11). Indeed, it is ‘noble’ for us to do this with ‘eagerness.’ The Bereans judged whether Paul’s teaching was truth or error by measuring his words against the objective standard of Scripture. We can and must do the same today.”¹³

If we fail to do this, we will have nothing to say to the world. Yes, the church is filled with sinners, but those who represent Jesus are called to be repentant sinners who have turned from immorality as defined by Scripture and who are pursuing godly lives.

2. Seek to Understand

So, if we all agree to study the same Bible and surrender to Jesus as Lord and if we are indwelled by the same Holy Spirit, we should never disagree on sexual issues, right? I wish it were that simple. We know from history that sincere men and women of God have sharply disagreed on many interpretations and applications of the Bible. I’ve had disagreements with fellow Christians on questions around masturbation, remarriage, transgender issues, and roles in marriage. I also find that even when I see eye to eye with someone on the biblical view of sexual issues, we have very different opinions on how to live out that truth.

Fortunately, God has given us His Word to help us sort through these types of situations. In fact, the men who wrote the New Testament themselves experienced disagreements. It seems from his letters that Paul was a pretty opinionated guy with a strong personality. He clashed with James, Peter, and even Barnabas, who seemed exceptionally easy to get along with. Paul often wrote to the early churches about how to seek unity amid disagreement. Apparently, he had quite a bit of practice. Paul encouraged us to work hard at being unified by the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ We do this by being gracious and humble as we seek truth together.

I have met with many Christians who have a sincere faith and belief in God’s Word but who are confident that God would be okay with committed same-sex relationships. The first thing I want to do is to understand their

perspective. I might say “Why is this important to you?” or “Tell me about how you came to that conclusion.” Sometimes this leads to a theological discussion, but most often there is a personal reason. The person has a good friend or relative who is same-sex attracted and can’t reconcile God not approving of a loving sexual relationship. Or there is a story of Christian bigotry and hatred toward the LGBTQ community. Without asking questions, I might accurately quote Bible verses about God’s design for sexuality but never understand the roadblocks to my friend embracing that truth.

3. Pursue Truth Together

Even though I don’t always agree with a fellow Christian’s theology of marriage and sexuality, I may have something to learn about the tension of knowing God’s love in light of difficult truths. One heartbroken mom approached me after she heard me address a question about transgender issues. “You have no idea what it is like to watch your child sob every day because he doesn’t want to be a boy. This isn’t a passing phase. I’ve been down the counseling road and finally accepted that loving my child means letting him adopt the identity of a girl.” That moment was not the time for me to teach; I had already done that. It was time for me to learn how painful it may be for family members to walk in biblical truth. That interaction didn’t change my view on transgender issues, but it softened my heart for the people who are affected by them.

For generations, the Christian church has upheld a God-honoring theology of marriage but has often failed to demonstrate humility and grace. How much of the current sexual revolution is backlash against Christian dogmatism, hypocrisy, and judgment against those in sexual sin and brokenness? If we cut off the conversation at the point of disagreement, we have no room to learn, challenge one another according to Scripture, and pursue Christian unity. Without dialogue, we have no opportunity to sexually disciple. I’m suggesting not that we solve these important issues through compromise but that we strive together to know the mind and heart of Christ. Of the seven things that God hates listed in Proverbs 6, none of them is sexually oriented, but included in the list are arrogance and causing division among God’s people.¹⁵ When we stand before God one day, we

will be accountable not only for how we held to His truth but also for how we extended His love to one another.

We need one another. Beyond just those in our own denominations and demographics, we need the entire body of Christ. We need to know why twentysomethings see the LGBTQ movement as a civil rights issue. We need to hear from older sages who can teach us church history and reflections of wisdom from many years of following Jesus. We need to embrace fellow Christians who have very different experiences and who read the Bible through a different cultural lens. In her study on the book of Acts, Erica Wiggernhorn commented,

One of the things I believe we as the church will need to do more and more in the days ahead is to stop being afraid to wrestle with difficult issues. We need to learn to be more comfortable with disagreeing and debating with one another in a respectful and productive atmosphere—not to prove one another wrong, but to sharpen one another. If our thinking is challenged and yet still stands, would we not feel more confident in our conclusions? We must be driven to the Scripture in an endless pursuit to solidify and clarify our thinking so we are always ready to defend our position with gentleness and respect.¹⁶

While the Bible doesn't change, our world is continually shifting, presenting new information and challenges in how we articulate a biblical perspective on sexuality. None of us, including me, has this completely figured out. I'm constantly learning from people who have different experiences and viewpoints. Their input doesn't make me question the Bible but helps me refine how I live it out with sensitivity and conviction. The conversations we now need to have around sexuality are far different from what was needed twenty years ago, and they must continue to evolve for the future. This can't happen if we insulate ourselves with only people who think like us and live like us.

Even though we are one, unity among Christians will never just happen. We have to work at it, value it, pray for it, and pursue it. Christians

are to be different from the world not simply in our belief system but also in how we treat one another. More disturbing than the vast theological divides around sexuality are the vitriol, arrogance, and name-calling among Christians. As Paul told young Timothy, even when people oppose what we believe, we should “gently” instruct, “be kind,” and avoid “foolish... arguments” (2 Timothy 2:23–25). What if God uses us to reach the world, not because we get theology 100 percent correct but because we are able to humble ourselves and be gracious to people with whom we may sharply disagree? What if the world marvels not at our brilliant explanations but at our unexplainable ability to pursue truth across denominations and generations?

God’s most powerful tool to change the world is the body of Christ, the universal church of those who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit. Consider for a moment that you are part of this great body. What are your gifts? What is your story? And how might you be part of something far bigger than your limited life?

God is preparing His heroes. When the opportunity comes He can fit them into their places in a moment, and the world will wonder where they came from.

—A. B. Simpson, *Days of Heaven on Earth*

Conclusion

Nothing Short of Revival

Several years ago, I couldn't stop thinking about the women and children who wake up every morning as sex slaves, some of them sold by their own family members. For weeks on my knees, I pleaded with God, *Lord, why don't You do something?* One day I heard the Lord's gentle reply. *Juli, why don't you do something?*

Imagine in this moment if you could feel the pain of every human being's sexual brokenness. What if you were acutely aware of every rape, assault, and sexual violation? What if you could hear the prayers and cries of those in bondage and addiction around the world? What if you could feel the desperation of those betrayed, alone, and hopeless? God hears them, and He sees each person's desperation. I don't know how He holds it all. If this pain represents an ocean, I can barely handle a drop.

We've grown so accustomed to seeing broken lives that we barely bat an eye at atrocities such as human trafficking. In order to survive, we numb ourselves to the onslaught of tragedies served up in the daily news. Our calloused hearts have lost the ability to grieve at the torment around us. Yet change can't come if we look away from hurting people.

The year before God called me to start *Authentic Intimacy*, He prompted me to pursue Him in ways that I never had. Through that journey, I began to feel a physical pain in my chest. The more I prayed and sought Him, the greater the pain. This ache in my chest was so persistent that my

husband asked me to see a cardiologist. Although I had never experienced anything like it, I knew that the pain was spiritual. Over months the Lord began to show me the tremendous heartache of sexual brokenness. God shared a piece of His heart with me and invited me into His work.

Revival is a churchy word we don't often use in real life. It refers to God breathing new life into a person, a church, a family, a city, and even a nation. We don't talk about revival, frankly, because it sounds too big to ask for. As our culture becomes more pagan and humanistic, fewer people love God. It's hard to imagine an America where it is normal to worship on Sundays and where sexual purity before and within marriage is commonplace. This can happen only with revival, asking God to take the ground back.

I began this book by suggesting that reclaiming sexuality is part of the Great Commission. Let's look at this passage one more time: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18–20). Park for a moment on the first thing Jesus said: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." What does this mean? It means that He has authority and power in every realm of heaven and earth, including sexuality. He sends us into the world to reclaim what is already His. Not only does Jesus have authority, but He also promises to be with us always as we reclaim this world for Him.

We are His body, and His authority on earth will be realized only as we carry it. If revival is to come, it must begin with people like you and me. Revival won't happen when your pastor "catches" the Holy Spirit or the Supreme Court upholds a biblical view of sexuality. Don't look around, waiting for God to call someone else. He's calling you.

Revival will come not through outrage and self-righteousness but by the genuine response of grief over pain and destruction. It will come when we begin to say "Lord, send me."¹

NO PRESSURE, BUT IT ALL STARTS WITH YOU

We can never be part of the solution until we accept that we've been part of the problem.

So let me ask you, What would sexual revival look like in your own life? What is the work God wants to do in your heart? If you don't know, take time to ask the Lord. Pray and fast, asking God to let you hear His heart. God doesn't choose men or women because they are full of energy and ideas. He uses men and women who are emptied of self. His desire is to make you a pure vessel, ready and willing to do His work.

God may be calling you to take a bold step in your church, your marriage, your workplace, and your relationships. Maybe He is asking you to make some difficult changes or start some challenging conversations. You know what? It's okay to be afraid. Think of all the times God said to His servants, "Don't be afraid. Be of good courage. Be strong and courageous, because I am with you."²

The sexual shifts and changing assumptions around us make us feel as though every few years we have to adjust to a new normal. *Rethinking Sexuality* presents the challenge for the church to also create a new normal.

- I can envision a time when Christians are known by the world for their sexual integrity, their compassion, and the hope they offer.
- I imagine a time when, while we may be seen as strange and even be persecuted for our commitment to biblical sexuality, we will be known as people full of humility and grace.
- I imagine a time when it is normal for Christians to talk and pray and teach about all aspects of sexuality.
- I imagine stories of redemption and healing as being commonplace among those who carry the name of Christ. He has *all* authority in heaven and on earth. It's time that we started acting on that authority.

God is inviting you to this kind of life, in pursuit of revival for His glory. Will you say yes? If enough of us do, we just might see our great God turn the world upside down.

We do not want, as the newspapers say, a church that will move with the world. We want a church that will move the world.

—G. K. Chesterton

Acknowledgments

Hannah Nitz, my cousin, my coworker, my “Barnabas.” You were the first one to tell me this should be a book, and you never stopped nagging me about writing it. Every time I felt discouraged or tired, I’d get a text from you, saying, “This book is going to change the world!” So many times you gave me the energy to keep writing. Now let’s watch God change the world together!

Linda Dillow, my mentor, ministry cofounder, and teacher. You’ve walked down this road before me, paving the way for difficult conversations in the church. You are a pioneer and have served the Lord so bravely and faithfully in your generation. The Lord connected us so I could learn from you and be equipped to translate timeless truths for my generation. I can’t read 2 Timothy without hearing your voice reminding me to be faithful to this calling, to be true to God’s Word, and to endure hardship with humility and worship.

Liz Heaney. When I first considered writing this book, I thought about what a gift it would be if you could be the editor. I knew you would push me to make it practical. Indeed, I’ve never had to work so hard revising a book, but it was worth it! Thank you for making this a far better book than what I originally sent you.

Susan Tjaden, Helen Macdonald, and the Multnomah team. I’m so thrilled to be partnering with you on this project. Thank you for investing in it, believing in it, and giving voice to the message. You are true professionals and a joy to work with!

Thank you to the *Sexual Discipleship* pilot study for all the input you gave me going through an early version of this book. Special thanks to Heather Misja, Kim Vollendorf, Terry Behimer, Jonathan Daugherty, pastor

Dan Hooker, Drew Boa, Jerusah Clark, and Anne Kerr for going the extra mile with your input. Writing a book like this is a spiritual battle. I'm so grateful for the women who committed to pray for me, my family, and this project: Ginger Taddeo, Abby Harrough, Carrie Hilton, Bonnie Burns, Jessa Crisp, Yvette Maher, Christine Rogers, Kim Bush, Heather Misja (again!), Allison Peterson, Janae Peyton, Michele Cushatt, and Brenda McCord.

Tiffany Butler, you did a fantastic job helping me with details. Thank you! I am also grateful for Jacci Roberts, Steve Reiter, Chris and Karen Dorsett, Doyle and Nanci McAllister, Steve and Barbara Uhlmann, and Jacki Kintz and Kristi Miller, who do so much behind the scenes to keep Authentic Intimacy going.

Finally, my "fantastic four." Michael, Andrew, and Christian, I'm sorry, but I did it again. Another book on sex. My prayer is that these truths someday become yours. I can write them on a page, but the Holy Spirit must burn them on your hearts. I'll never stop loving you or praying for you. My Swoo, what a joy to journey with you, love you, and together watch God work. You've been with me with every lesson I've learned and every word I've written. Thank you for loving me as Jesus loves.

Appendix: Scripture Passages Addressing Sexual Issues

Genesis 2:20–25 (Naked and unashamed. See also Genesis 3, the Fall and its effects.)

Genesis 18–19 (Sodom and Gomorrah. See also Amos 4:11; Matthew 10:15; Luke 17:29; 2 Peter 2:6–9.)

Genesis 34 (Dinah)

Genesis 38 (Judah and Tamar)

Genesis 39 (Joseph and Potiphar’s wife)

Leviticus 18 (Laws regarding sexual conduct. See also Romans and Galatians in understanding how Jesus’s death changed our relationship to the Old Testament law.)

Judges 13–16 (Samson)

Judges 19 (A Levite and his concubine)

Ruth (Courtship)

2 Samuel 11–12 (David commits adultery and a cover-up. See also Psalms 32; 51)

2 Samuel 13 (Amnon and Tamar)

Proverbs 5–7 (A father’s wisdom about sexual immorality)

Song of Songs (Pursue passionate sex in marriage only)

Isaiah 61:1–3 (Jesus came to set us free and heal our wounds)

Ezekiel 16 (Allegory of unfaithful Israel)

Hosea (Allegory of unfaithful Israel and God’s unfailing love)

Matthew 5:27–30 (Jesus’s teaching on adultery)

Mark 10:6–9 (Jesus’s teaching on marriage and divorce)

John 4 (Jesus and the woman at the well)

John 8:1–11 (Jesus and the woman caught in adultery)

Romans 1:18–32 (Worship and sexual immorality)

1 Corinthians 6:9–7:7 (Paul's teaching on sexual integrity)

2 Corinthians 12:21 (Paul's grief over the church's sexual sin)

Galatians 5:19–25 (The acts of the flesh versus the fruit of the Spirit)

Ephesians 5 (Sex and marriage are holy metaphors)

1 Thessalonians 4:3–5 (God's will: avoid sexual immorality)

Hebrews 12:14–17 (Avoid sexual immorality; live for an eternal blessing)

Hebrews 13:4 (Keep the marriage bed pure)

Revelation 2:18–29 (Sexual immorality of the church of Thyatira)

Revelation 22:12–17 (Christ is coming for His pure bride)

Discussion Questions

Chapter 1—Why We Have to Rethink Sexuality

1. How would you describe the current state of sexuality in Western culture?
2. Why do you think many Christians have a difficult time responding to cultural shifts in sexuality? Why do you think sexual issues have caused division within the Christian church?
3. On a scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high), how grounded do you think the average Christian is in his or her understanding of biblical sexuality?
4. Share what you have learned about sexuality from Christian sources. What has been helpful? What has been harmful or ineffective?
5. The author states that “the danger of an educational model is that it reduces complex issues to a five-week course” ([this page](#)). How might limited teaching on biblical sexuality cause harm or confusion? Share an example.
6. Do you agree that confusion about sexual issues can lead to confusion about our relationship with God? Why or why not?
7. What do you most hope to gain from reading *Rethinking Sexuality*?
8. Read Proverbs 3:5–6. What would change if you applied these verses to your approach to sexuality?

Chapter 2—What Is Sexual Discipleship?

1. You took a pop quiz at the beginning of this chapter. Which was more difficult for you, answering from a cultural perspective or a biblical perspective?

2. Do you agree with the author's statement that "we have been sexually disciplined by the world" ([this page](#))? Why or why not?
3. Read Matthew 28:18–20. How would you summarize the Great Commission?
4. How might we be limiting our effectiveness in evangelism and discipleship by failing to address sexual topics and questions from a biblical perspective?
5. Can you think of any accounts from Jesus's ministry that integrated sexuality with evangelism or discipleship?
6. What do you think is the difference between an evangelistic interaction (a conversation with a non-Christian) and a discipleship interaction (a conversation with a fellow believer) about sexual issues?
7. Read Deuteronomy 6:5–9. What do you learn about discipleship from this passage? How might these discipleship principles be applied to equip Christians for "rethinking sexuality"?

Chapter 3—The Premise

1. The author writes, "Every sexual question begins and ends with questions about God" ([this page](#)). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
2. Why is our belief that God created our sexuality the foundation of how we view sexuality?
3. Read Romans 1:18–23. How is the modern church worshipping "God plus something"? What is the something, and how does it taint our worship of God as the Creator of our sexuality?
4. Do you believe that God's design for sexuality as expressed in the Bible "works"? Explain your answer.
5. Read Romans 5:6–8. What do you think it means that God's love doesn't ignore our sin but saves us from it? How is this different from the way many people view God's love?
6. How does our understanding of God's love affect how we view sexual struggles and temptations? Give an example.
7. What do you think of the term *sexual atheist*?

8. How do sexual issues test practically the lordship of Jesus Christ in our lives?

Chapter 4—The Purpose

1. What is your reaction to the statement “The gospel is written within your sexuality” ([this page](#))?
2. How would you define *covenant love*? How is it different from romantic love?
3. How do sexual urges and longings draw people toward covenant love?
4. What do unmet sexual urges and longings potentially teach us about our relationship with God? (See Psalm 84:1–3 and Matthew 9:15.)
5. How does sexual intimacy in marriage celebrate covenant love?
6. What can sexual intimacy in marriage potentially teach us about God’s love?
7. What does sexual betrayal potentially teach us about covenant love and God’s faithfulness?
8. What do you think would change if every Christian understood the connection between the gospel and sexuality?

Chapter 5—The Problem

1. What evidence do you see in the world that Satan wants to destroy the masterpiece of holy sexuality?
2. How do pornography and the hookup culture vandalize sexuality?
3. How does Satan use sexuality to cause us to doubt God’s goodness? Share an example of this.
4. In his assault on sexuality, how does Satan target our worldview? Our appetites? Our identity?
5. The battle over sexuality is not ultimately about reinstating sexual morality. Why is this a critical shift in our approach to this spiritual battle?
6. How do you think Satan uses sexuality to keep people from a relationship with God?

7. Read Ephesians 6:12–18 and 1 Peter 5:8. What do these passages tell us about how to fight against Satan’s strategies?

Chapter 6—The Pandemic

1. What is the nugget the disciples kept missing? How do we keep missing it too?
2. Why do we tend to define people as being in two camps: broken and whole? How have these categories influenced the ways the average Christian approaches sexuality?
3. Read Luke 18:9–14. If Jesus were teaching in a modern-day church, how would He tell this story?
4. Do you believe we are all sexually broken and sinful? Why or why not?
5. How does spiritual pride keep the church from experiencing sexual revival?
6. What needs to change in our Christian communities and churches so we can be more open about our sexual brokenness?
7. How might your church change if the leaders were truly convinced that “we are all sexually broken” ([this page](#))? How would it affect our conversations about issues such as same-sex attraction and transgenderism?

Chapter 7—The Promise

1. Why do you think we are more intentional about restoring our physical health than we are about our emotional and sexual health?
2. Do you believe Jesus cares about our sexual health? Why or why not?
3. Read Isaiah 61:1–3. How might we understand this prophecy in light of sexual brokenness?
4. Why is the Bible important in finding wholeness and redemption?
5. What do you think it means to “apply God’s wisdom” to our healing journeys?
6. Why are relationships such a critical part of our healing?
7. What do you think it means to know Jesus personally? Why is this the most critical element of our healing?

8. How would you convince someone you are discipling that Jesus came to heal and redeem sexual brokenness?

Chapter 8—Our Natural Selves Versus Our Spiritual Selves

1. Why is integrity so important to sexual discipleship?
2. What does it mean to be coachable?
3. How can we develop small groups, families, and friendships that foster telling one another the truth in love?
4. Why is “trying harder” not an effective solution for getting rid of sin?
5. Read Romans 7:14–25. What does this passage tell us about the frustration of trying to please God in our own strength? What is the solution?
6. What do you think it means to surrender to the work of the Holy Spirit? Can you share an example of this from your own faith journey?
7. Read Luke 16:10. Why is it so important to be responsive and obedient to the Holy Spirit in the small things?
8. What is one small thing the Holy Spirit is asking you to do or change as a result of this study?

Chapter 9—Our Public Selves Versus Our Private Selves

1. How would you describe the conflict between our private selves and our public selves?
2. How does having a public self and private self get in the way of sexual discipleship?
3. If Christ died to set us free, why does believing in Him sometimes result in even more pressure to hide the truth about what we are struggling with?
4. How would accepting that we are truly all sexually broken influence this struggle between our public selves and our private selves?
5. Read Revelation 12:11. Why is the combination of the “blood of the Lamb” and the “word of [our] testimony” so powerful in defeating Satan? What does this look like in real life?

6. Do you believe it is possible for you and God to be costars in the story of your life? Why or why not?
7. What does it mean to make God the star of your story?

Chapter 10—Love Versus Truth

1. Describe the tension between truth and love related to sexual issues and personal relationships. Share a time you felt this tension.
2. Read John 4:1–26. How did Jesus speak truth in this encounter? How did He show love?
3. Read Proverbs 22:4. How does humility keep us grounded in truth?
4. Why is changing or softening God’s Word a sign of pride?
5. Read Philippians 2:1–8. How does humility keep us grounded in love?
6. Why does having an agenda keep us from loving others well? Give an example of “good agendas” related to sexual topics that can keep us from loving the people around us.
7. How does defending ourselves keep us from loving others well? How does this mind-set play out in cultural conversations about sexual issues?
8. What is your biggest takeaway from this chapter?

Chapter 11—Start with Who You Know

1. “Discipleship = truth + relationship” ([this page](#)). What do you think of this definition of *discipleship*? How would you describe sexual discipleship in your own words?
2. How does a relationship become missional? What do you think is the difference between being missional in our relationships and having an agenda? Share an example.
3. Why is building bridges so important to sexual discipleship? What is likely to happen if we don’t build bridges before sharing truth?
4. How can you be more intentional about sharing God’s truth about sexuality with people in your life?
5. How do you struggle to balance authenticity and discernment? Why are both important? Which is more difficult for you: being real or setting appropriate boundaries?

6. What are some things happening in the culture or in your community that present opportunities for teachable moments and sharing truth about sexuality?
7. Why is it important to stay in the mess as we sexually disciple?
8. How does the fear of messiness related to sexual brokenness keep you from wanting to help people? How can you address these fears?

Chapter 12—We Need the Body of Christ

1. Why is it essential that sexual discipleship happen within the body of Christ? Why could it be dangerous to carry out this mission by yourself?
2. God has gifted every believer with spiritual gifts to be used within the body. What spiritual gifts has He given you? How can these gifts be applied to the mission of sexual discipleship?
3. Why is a chorus of testimonies such an important part of sexual discipleship?
4. How might God use your testimony in this chorus? Why is your story important?
5. How might God be calling you to help others surrender and proclaim their stories?
6. Describe the challenge of being united with the larger body of Christ but holding to a solid biblical doctrine of sexuality.
7. Paul wrote a letter to Timothy in light of some significant challenges for the early church. Read 2 Timothy 2:14–4:5. What advice does Paul give Timothy that can help us in dealing with theological disagreements about sexuality?

Notes

Chapter 1: Why We Have to Rethink Sexuality

1. Philip Yancey, “Holy Sex: How It Ravishes Our Souls,” *Christianity Today*, October 1, 2003, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/october/3.46.html.
2. See 2 Peter 1:3.
3. Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.
4. See the appendix for a list of Bible passages that address sexuality.
5. Samantha Pugsley, “It Happened to Me: I Waited Until My Wedding Night to Lose My Virginity and I Wish I Hadn’t,” xoJane, August 1, 2014, www.xojane.com/sex/true-love-waits-pledge.

Chapter 2: What Is Sexual Discipleship?

1. John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2011), 80.
2. Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015), 184.
3. “Majority of Americans Now Believe in Cohabitation,” Barna, June 24, 2016, www.barna.com/research/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation.
4. Tyler O’Neil, “Christians Are Following Secular Trends in Premarital Sex, Cohabitation Outside of Marriage, Says Dating Site Survey,”

Christian Post, January 27, 2014, www.christianpost.com/news/christians-are-following-secular-trends-in-premarital-sex-cohabitation-outside-of-marriage-says-dating-site-survey-113373.

5. “SurveyShocker: Study Shows Most Christian Men Are into Porn,” *Charisma News*, October 7, 2014, www.charismanews.com/us/45671-shocker-study-shows-most-christian-men-are-into-porn.
6. Caryle Murphy, “Most U.S. Christian Groups Grow More Accepting of Homosexuality,” *Pew Research Center*, December 18, 2015, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/18/most-u-s-christian-groups-grow-more-accepting-of-homosexuality.
7. See Romans 8:31–39.

Part 2: Looking Upward—Knowing What We Believe

1. Billy Hallowell, “His Dire Porn Warning About What’s on the Horizon: ‘The Greatest...Threat to the Christian Faith in the History of the World,’ ” *The Blaze*, January 29, 2016, www.theblaze.com/news/2016/01/29/his-dire-porn-warning-about-whats-on-the-horizon-the-greatest-threat-to-the-christian-faith-in-the-history-of-the-world.
2. Sanj Kalra, *Java with Juli*, episode 197, March 5, 2018, www.javawithjuli.com.

Chapter 3: The Premise

1. A. W. Tozer, *The Crucified Life: How to Live Out a Deeper Christian Experience*, comp. and ed. James L. Snyder (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2011), 25.
2. See Romans 1:18–25.
3. Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 16.
4. “Moral Issues: Ratings of U.S. Moral Values,” *Gallup News*, www.gallup.com/poll/1681/moral-issues.aspx.

5. Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*, 170.
6. Note from the author: People may argue that biblical teaching about sexual sins no longer applies to us because it was based on the Old Testament covenant. They may say, “We eat pork and wear clothes made of two different kinds of fabrics, even though both practices were prohibited in the Old Testament law! So why do we pick some Old Testament laws to keep and others to forget about?” Some of the restrictions in the Old Testament were based on ceremonial law, and others were based on moral law. Paul and other early church leaders went out of their way to show that the ceremonial law had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Much of Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews is devoted to this teaching. Yet Jesus and the apostles repeated and reinforced the moral law. We agree that it’s wrong to murder, steal, and lie because those are moral principles that have not changed since Jesus died on the cross. The same is true of sexual moral standards.
7. Daniel R. Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 42–43.
8. Michael W. Chapman, “Johns Hopkins Psychiatrist: Transgender Is ‘Mental Disorder;’ Sex Change ‘Biologically Impossible,’” *CNS News*, June 2, 2015, www.cnsnews.com/news/article/michael-w-chapman/johns-hopkins-psychiatrist-transgender-mental-disorder-sex-change.
9. Cecilia Dhejne et al., “Long-Term Follow-Up of Transsexual Persons Undergoing Sex Reassignment Surgery: Cohort Study in Sweden,” *Public Library of Science One* 6, no. 2 (February 2011), www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3043071.
10. “Researchers: Sex Changes Are Not Effective,” *The Intelligent Conservative*, May 16, 2016, <http://theintelligentconservative.com/2016/05/researchers-sex-changes-not-effective>.
11. Josephine Mazzuca, “Moving In: Teen Views on Cohabitation,” *Gallup News*, April 8, 2003, www.gallup.com/poll/8128/moving-in-teen-views-cohabitation.aspx; Sheri Stritof, “Cohabiting Seniors:

Reasons Senior Couples Say No to Marriage,” The Spruce, updated October 23, 2017, www.thespruce.com/cohabiting-seniors-not-married-2300508.

12. See Glenn T. Stanton, *The Ring Makes All the Difference: The Hidden Consequences of Cohabitation and the Strong Benefits of Marriage* (Chicago: Moody, 2011); Scott Stanley, “Is Living Together All It’s Cracked Up to Be?,” Sliding vs Deciding: Scott Stanley’s Blog, January 15, 2016, <http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/2016/01/is-living-together-all-its-cracked-up.html>.
13. Michael Castleman, “Attention, Ladies: Semen Is an Antidepressant,” *Psychology Today*, January 31, 2011, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/all-about-sex/201101/attention-ladies-semen-is-antidepressant.
14. Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*, 149.
15. Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners: A Basic Introduction to Pope John Paul II’s Sexual Revolution* (West Chester, PA: Ascension, 2004), 23.
16. See Romans 1:21–22.
17. See Isaiah 1:18; 13:11; 53:6; 59:2; Romans 3:23; 6:23.
18. See 2 Corinthians 5:21.
19. See Romans 6.
20. Kenny Luck, “The Deadly Deception of Sexual Atheism in the Church,” *Charisma Magazine*, October 7, 2014, www.charismamag.com/life/relationships/20385-the-deadly-deception-of-sexual-atheism-in-the-church, italics in the original.
21. See Philippians 2:10–11.
22. Russell Moore, “How Should Same-Sex Marriage Change the Church’s Witness?,” Russell Moore, June 26, 2013, www.russellmoore.com/2013/06/26/how-should-same-sex-marriage-change-the-churchs-witness.

Chapter 4: The Purpose

1. “Don Schrader Quotes,” Quotery.com, www.quotery.com/authors/don-schrader.
2. See John 3:16.
3. David Platt, *Counter Culture: Following Christ in an Anti-Christian Age* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2017), 138.
4. Pope John Paul II did extensive writing and teaching on this concept. His work is referred to as the “Theology of the Body.” Christopher West has translated and adapted his teaching for the modern church in the previously cited *Theology of the Body for Beginners*.
5. A primer of Pope John Paul’s work can be found at John Paul II, *The Redemption of the Body and Sacramentality of Marriage (Theology of the Body)* (Catholic Primer, 2006), www.catholicprimer.org/papal/theology_of_the_body.pdf.
6. See Romans 1:20; Matthew 10:29–30; Psalms 19; 148 for examples.
7. Romans 8:39.
8. Matt Chandler, *The Mingling of Souls: God’s Design for Love, Marriage, Sex, and Redemption* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2015), 99, italics in the original.
9. See Ephesians 1:4.
10. See Romans 5:8.
11. See Deuteronomy 31:6.
12. John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds., *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 26, italics in the original.
13. Chandler, *Mingling of Souls*, 66.
14. Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners: A Basic Introduction to Pope John Paul II’s Sexual Revolution* (West Chester, PA: Ascension, 2004), 30, italics in the original.
15. See Matthew 9:15.

16. Timothy J. Keller, “Love and Lust” (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, May 6, 2012), <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/love-and-lust-6151>.
17. See Deuteronomy 6:5.
18. Steve Uhlmann and Barbara Uhlmann, *Plastic Promises: Discovering What Our Marriage Was Made Of* (Scottsdale, AZ: Love like Jesus, 2016), 102.
19. Uhlmann and Uhlmann, *Plastic Promises*, 106.
20. Bob Sorge, *Secrets of the Secret Place: Keys to Igniting Your Personal Time with God* (Grandview, MO: Oasis, 2001), 180, italics in the original.
21. “Latest Infidelity Statistics of USA,” Divorce Statistics, www.divorcestatistics.info/latest-infidelity-statistics-of-usa.html.
22. J. Allan Petersen, *The Myth of the Greener Grass: A Family Counselor Speaks Frankly About Extramarital Affairs and Offers Both Preventative and Healing Measures* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1983), 14.
23. See 2 Chronicles 21:11; Psalm 106:39; Isaiah 1:21; Jeremiah 13:27; Ezekiel 23:3–19; Hosea 4:12.

Chapter 5: The Problem

1. See John 10:10.
2. Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners: A Basic Introduction to Pope John Paul II’s Sexual Revolution* (West Chester, PA: Ascension, 2004), 12, italics in the original.
3. Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), 20.
4. Wade, *American Hookup*, 47.
5. Jennifer Senior, “Review: ‘American Hookup’ Gives College Sex Culture a Failing Grade,” *New York Times*, January 18, 2017,

www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/books/review-american-hookup-college-sex-culture-lisa-wade.html.

6. Wade, *American Hookup*, 139.
7. Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015), 110.
8. Eric Cartier, “Between Two Worlds” (sermon, Rocky Mountain Calvary, Colorado Springs, CO, August 13, 2017), http://rmcalvary.org/teaching/?enmse=1&enmse_spid=3&enmse_mid=1346.
9. See Daniel 1:4.
10. American Osteopathic Association, “Survey Finds over Half of American Adults Would Support Their Teenager’s Request to Transition to Another Gender,” PR Newswire, August 16, 2017, www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/survey-finds-over-half-of-american-adults-would-support-their-teenagers-request-to-transition-to-another-gender-300505118.html.
11. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 1983), 1344.
12. Dannah Gresh and Juli Slattery, *Pulling Back the Shades: Erotica, Intimacy, and the Longings of a Woman’s Heart* (Chicago: Moody, 2014).

Chapter 6: The Pandemic

1. See Matthew 18:2–4; 20:16; Mark 10:45; Luke 14:7–11; 22:25–26; John 15:5.
2. See Luke 22:24.
3. See Luke 18:9–14.
4. David Platt, *Counter Culture: Following Christ in an Anti-Christian Age* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2017), 168.

5. See 2 Samuel 13.
6. See 1 Corinthians 1:26–28; 1 Peter 1:18–19.
7. Andrew Murray, *Humility and Absolute Surrender* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 34.

Chapter 7: The Promise

1. See John 8:32.
2. Larry Crabb, “Sovereign Stumbling: My Life Journey to Date,” New Way Ministries, www.newwayministries.org/sovstumbling.php, italics in the original.
3. See John 3:30.
4. See 2 Corinthians 8:7; Ephesians 1:17; Philippians 1:9; Colossians 1:10.

Part 3: Looking Inward—Living What We Believe

1. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 29–30.

Chapter 8: Our Natural Selves Versus Our Spiritual Selves

1. Tyler O’Neil, “Christians Are Following Secular Trends in Premarital Sex, Cohabitation Outside of Marriage, Says Dating Site Survey,” *Christian Post*, January 27, 2014, www.christianpost.com/news/christians-are-following-secular-trends-in-premarital-sex-cohabitation-outside-of-marriage-says-dating-site-survey-113373/#XfXt6Sl1X6GzuEDz.99.
2. John Shore, “The Best Case for the Bible Not Condemning Homosexuality,” *Huffington Post*, June 3, 2012, www.huffingtonpost.com/john-shore/the-best-case-for-the-bible-not-condemning-homosexuality_b_1396345.html.

3. See Luke 8:1–15.
4. “Bob Newhart—Stop It,” video, 6:20, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ow0lr63y4Mw.
5. My paraphrase of John 16:7.
6. Jim Cymbala, *Spirit Rising: Tapping into the Power of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 23, italics in the original.
7. See 2 Corinthians 1:21–22.
8. See Matthew 7:8.
9. Francis Chan, “BASIC Follow Jesus. Francis Chan—‘Clean Your Room,’ ” video, 1:35, January 16, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgQ2wiTefmQ.
10. See 2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 12:11.
11. Andrew Murray, *Humility and Absolute Surrender* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 113, italics in the original.

Chapter 9: Our Public Selves Versus Our Private Selves

1. Jonathan Daugherty, *Secrets: A True Story of Addiction, Infidelity, and Second Chances* (Mustang, OK: Tate, 2009), 27–28.
2. See 1 John 1:7.
3. See 2 Corinthians 12:9–10.
4. See 1 Timothy 1:15; 2 Timothy 4:16–17; Romans 7:21–23; 2 Corinthians 12:7.
5. See Matthew 16:24.
6. Daugherty, *Secrets*, 129.
7. Dan B. Allender, *To Be Told: God Invites You to Coauthor Your Future* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2005), 11.
8. See 2 Samuel 12:24–25. *Jedidiah* means “loved by the LORD.”

9. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 23.
10. Debra Hirsch, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations About Sexuality and Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 124.
11. Allender, *To Be Told*, 52.

Chapter 10: Love Versus Truth

1. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, in *Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: The Three Essential Books in One Volume* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 34.
2. Lori Wildenberg and Courtney Wildenberg, “When Your Child Struggles with Gender,” interview by Juli Slattery, *Java with Juli*, episode 159, May 8, 2017, www.authenticintimacy.com/resources/5096/159-when-your-child-struggles-with-gender?source=blog; Lori Wildenberg, email message to author. Lori has written a book about her relationship with Courtney called *Messy Journey: How Grace and Truth Offer the Prodigal a Way Home* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 2017).
3. Wildenberg and Wildenberg, “When Your Child Struggles with Gender”; Courtney Wildenberg, email message to author.
4. See John 13:1–17.
5. Andrew Murray, *Humility and Absolute Surrender* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 7.
6. A. W. Tozer, *The Dangers of a Shallow Faith: Awakening from Spiritual Lethargy*, comp. and ed. James L. Snyder (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2012), 40–41.
7. See Leviticus 18:22; 20:13.
8. See Matthew 19:16–30.
9. See Psalm 95:6.

10. Caleb Kaltenbach, *Messy Grace: How a Pastor with Gay Parents Learned to Love Others Without Sacrificing Conviction* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2015), 30.
11. Kaltenbach, *Messy Grace*, 31, italics in the original.
12. See Philippians 2:3.
13. See Matthew 7:13–14.
14. See Matthew 7:3–5.
15. See Philippians 2:4.
16. See 1 Peter 3:15.
17. See Philippians 2:7.
18. See Philippians 2:7–8.
19. Russell Moore, *Onward: Engaging the Culture Without Losing the Gospel* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015), 183.

Chapter 11: Start with Who You Know

1. See Acts 8:26–40.
2. See Galatians 2:7–9.
3. See John 19:25–27.
4. See Colossians 4:6.
5. Mark A. Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 56.
6. See John 2:23–24.
7. See Luke 6:12–16.
8. Psalm 141:3.
9. See the appendix for a list of Bible passages addressing sexuality.
10. See, for example, John 7:16–17.

11. *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “teachable moment,” https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/teachable_moment.
12. My book *25 Questions You’re Afraid to Ask About Love, Sex, and Intimacy* (Chicago: Moody, 2015) gives practical and biblical responses to commonly asked questions.
13. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 204.

Chapter 12: We Need the Body of Christ

1. See 2 Samuel 23:8–39.
2. See Acts 13:2; 15:7–11, 13–21, 40; 16:1–3; 18:18.
3. Linda Dillow and Juli Slattery, *Passion Pursuit: What Kind of Love Are You Making?* (Chicago: Moody, 2013); Linda Dillow and Juli Slattery, *Surprised by the Healer: Embracing Hope for Your Broken Story* (Chicago: Moody, 2016); Juli Slattery, *Sex and the Single Girl* (Chicago: Moody, 2017); Dannah Gresh and Juli Slattery, *Pulling Back the Shades: Erotica, Intimacy, and the Longings of a Woman’s Heart* (Chicago: Moody, 2014).
4. Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 237–38.
5. Kristin Saylor and Jim O’Hanlon, “What the Bible Says About Homosexuality,” TEDx Talks, video, 18:14, August 4, 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGNZQ64xiqo.
6. See John 17:23.
7. John S. Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession: 6 Factors That Will Crash the American Church...and How to Prepare* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013), 154.
8. Dickerson, *Great Evangelical Recession*, 156.

9. A. W. Tozer, *Man: The Dwelling Place of God* (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder, 2009), 48.
10. Caleb Kaltenbach, *Messy Grace: How a Pastor with Gay Parents Learned to Love Others Without Sacrificing Conviction* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2015), 36–39.
11. See John 14:23.
12. Dickerson, *Great Evangelical Recession*, 156, italics in the original.
13. Dickerson, *Great Evangelical Recession*, 159.
14. See Ephesians 4:3.
15. See Proverbs 6:16–19.
16. Erica Wiggernhorn, *The Unexplainable Church: Reigniting the Mission of the Early Believers* (Chicago: Moody, 2017), 165–66.

Conclusion: Nothing Short of Revival

1. See Isaiah 6:8.
2. See, for example, Genesis 15:1; Deuteronomy 1:21; Joshua 1:9; Judges 6:23; Isaiah 41:14; Jeremiah 1:8; Matthew 8:26; Mark 6:50; John 14:27; Acts 18:9; Hebrews 13:5–6.