

Sex is an enduring gift for human flourishing. We learn to love in the register of the imagination. Like a massive ski resort, this is rugged terrain, exciting and terrifying in equal measure. The corrosive elements of our culture's hypersexuality and its fatalism about lasting commitments have turned romantic relationships from places of adventure and exhilarating risk into crevasses of death and despair. We have put our confidence in sex but lost faith in marriage. 95% of all Americans have had sex outside of marriage. Online pornography is flooding into mainstream culture.

Tragically, the church has absorbed many of the same perspectives and reflects the surrounding culture rather than transform it. Relational issues were commonly the most difficult and vexing aspects of the lives of the young, single adults attending the church in London where my wife and I pastored. For many, intimate relationships were a major source of confusion, frustration, disappointment, anger, and often despair as they moved through their 30s and into their 40s without any "success" in finding love. This often resulted in a crisis of faith. They seemed to be getting their view of God from the church and their view of sex and relationships from popular culture. Issues relation to sexuality and relationships, for young Christians in particular, appear at the top of lists as the most frequent and severe forces in their everyday experiences.

We are deeply formed within our modern cultural context. These issues, we are told, are "private," to be left to the conscience of each person acting in isolation. There is a temptation in the context of discipleship to make the same mistake, to start with the question, "What is the Christian vision of sexuality and relationships?" Yet this practice avoids the most important aspect of contemporary formation. We must first ask, "What is it about our cultural moment that makes the Christian vision of sexuality seem naïve and unrealistic?" Many Christians have no coherent way of countering the open-ended moral imperative—that the quality of love between 2 people should be the only consideration when taking a relationship into the sexual realm. They either accept it as being self-evident or reject it by proof-texting Scripture.

Many Christians believe they can simply build their self-identity on Scripture over against, and parallel to, secular culture. Secular liturgies depicted in the sex-drenched media and culture present a powerful *misinformation* of the self that undermines the gospel. The result is a significant gap between what evangelicals *believe* and what they *do*.

The common approach of teaching people to live according to Scripture, without giving due attention to the formative influence of our cultural context, unwittingly and ironically succumbs to the modern illusion that we can choose our own reality, largely free from external influences. Our inability to perceive the influence of cultural *misinformation* is undermining the power of the gospel to guide and form people so they can walk in its pathway to sexual maturity.

If Christian vision involves seeing with 2 eyes—one divine and the other human—modern culture covers one eye

so that we begin to see only from the human perspective. Christian leaders, including parents, are to be guardians of the lens. Sustaining faithful relationships and encouraging the ability to live disciplined sexual lives may be one of the most influential missional tasks of the contemporary church as we witness to the kingdom of God in the midst of a sexually confused and relationally fatalistic culture.

Captured by the tantalizing idea that personal integrity calls for freedom and ongoing choice, people see commitment as a barrier to achieving that freedom. Many within the church have also been captivated by romantic myth and its promise of a perfect "soulmate" somewhere out there. Modern authenticity encourages us to create our own beliefs and morality. The only sin we cannot tolerate is intolerance.

The strong tradition of individualism in the Western world has led to placing personal freedom at the core of personal identity. Whereas the traditional Christian conviction is that Scripture is our primary text, so that we seek to interpret and align our lives with its truth, our culture of authenticity has reversed this dynamic. Within the modern mind-set, our lives and personal experiences have become the primary test; we seek to interpret and align Scripture in accordance with *this* truth.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century societal norms shifted. Sex was no longer something we chose to engage in or abstain from but became a natural force that was either embraced or denied, leading to either health/wholeness or a repressed/diseased self. Moral changes took place among young people especially: the resurgence of the idea of sex as a good in itself; the new ideal in which men and women would come together in sex as equal partners free of gender roles; a widespread view of sex as liberation from authority; and a new insistence that sexuality was a core part of individual identity. Our society generally believes that "being true to ourselves," especially in our sexual lives, is critical to living full and happy lives.

Because of our culture's move away from a belief in God as the source of reality, we have come to place the full weight of our personal identity on ordinary life—our material, here-and-now existence. Relationships have no purpose beyond themselves. The burden they bear becomes overwhelming because of the expectation that all of our psychological, emotion, material, and sexual needs will be met by one soul mate; and the very bond we crave is undermined by the inwardly focused nature of the "authentic" SELF. We do not so much give ourselves to a relationship as expect the relationship to give to us. We are divorced from any greater purpose than our own personal happiness and intimacy.

Unfortunately, many modern Christians have been deeply formed within the surrounding culture, so that they have also come to see their relationships and marriages in purely individualistic terms. When we unchain sexual and emotional desire from greater commitments, we find something within ourselves more unstable and complex than we imagine. The main characteristics of romantic love are an intense

craving to be with a particular person, not just sexually, but emotionally—a release of oxytocin, vasopressin, and dopamine. This why there is no such thing as “casual sex.” The final phase of relational attachment is the deep sense of peace, warmth, and security we can feel with a long-term partner. Love, it turns out, is both a feeling and a choice. One of the most important roles pastors have is teaching practical discernment in this area.

The 2 most influential characteristics of the modern self—radical individualism and expressive authenticity—create a perfect storm for relationships. The decision to end a stable relationship for abstract rather than concrete reasons (‘something was missing’), is in keeping with a post-Boomer ideology that values emotional fulfillment above all else. America has a high divorce rate compared with other Western countries because it combines a strong culture of marriage with an equally powerful commitment to individualism.

Most people ultimately measure fulfillment through their closest relationships. It seems that believing in soul mates tends to lead to what researchers call “romantic dysfunction.” Celebrity marriages reveal the inner dynamics of our culture of authenticity and hold a mirror up to our own relationships. The one-dimensional nature of the romantic myth, which sees emotional force as a sufficient engine to carry all other aspects of the relationship, undermines the very things it seeks to build.

From 50-70% of American couples cohabit before or instead of marrying, even though research shows overwhelmingly that cohabiting ultimately undermines relationships. Only 1/5 of cohabiting relationships end in marriage and it significantly increases the likelihood of an eventual divorce. A significant barrier to young adults in their 20s pursuing permanent relationships is the conviction that they will change over time as they discover their authentic personal identity. The modern script of “authenticity” sees personal change as an inherent threat to relationships and vice versa.

Within the church we have tended to supercharge this fantasy of a perfectly complementary person by spiritualizing it, so that “the one” becomes the single human being that God has fashioned into perfect compatibility with all of our needs and longings. This search locks us into a quest for a sanctuary that does not exist. The risk is that, fueled by our culture’s obsession with “soul mates,” we can easily turn the Christian vision of love into a fantasy and unwittingly sanctified culture of authenticity.

Without a Biblical narrative, when a marriage ceases to make us happy or the traveling becomes heavy going, we have no other master story to navigate through the storm. We are called not only to seek deep friendship, intimacy, and companionship but also to give of ourselves in faithful love. By equipping ourselves to understand the contours of modern authenticity, the Christian community can discern right responses. Indeed, redeemed desire lies at the very heart of the Christian self. The most alluring and corrupting element of the modern quest for personal authenticity is that it taps into the

legitimate Christian search for truth and transcendence. But the modern self seeks authenticity via the shortcut of making peace with ourselves rather than with God and allowing him to change us.

The way to the promised land must pass Sinai, where Israel received God’s moral guidelines for the good life. **Idolatry is commonly described as the objectifying of the human will and worshiping it in place of God.** Ironically, beneath the assured culture of authenticity we find a generation of people unsure of their right to exist. This insecurity undermines intimate relationships through a host of compulsive behavioral patterns. **Our culture refuses to take suffering or personal sacrifice seriously.** These are rarely seen as having any positive meaning, and we think that we must seek to avoid suffering at all costs. This helps to explain why relationships have become so brittle. We would rather end a challenging relationship or marriage than enter into the long, costly journey necessary to sustain a long-term partnership. Our culture has chosen as one of its highest priorities the anesthetic prerogative to numb emotional pain. People who don’t pray basically cannot live the Gospel, because the self is not strong enough to contain and reveal our delusions and or fear. **If you do not transform your pain, you will always transmit it.**

The all-conquering narrative of modern freedom has driven a wedge of confusion into the sexual lives of Christians as they find themselves caught between 2 scripts: a cultural one and a Christian one. At the heart of modern culture is the ideal of personal freedom: that we can live well and truly be ourselves only if we are free from outside influences. The Enlightenment split freedom into 2 very different visions of life that eventually morphed into 2 mainstream forms of individualism, *utilitarian* and *expressive*. The *utilitarian* mode sees the world as a great field of competition, within which other people may be used to further our own pleasure and self-interest. Modern *expressivism* reacted against this imbalanced view of personal identity by seeking a more genuine freedom, turning into the voice within, especially emotions and sexuality. These contrasting visions of freedom, caused a head/heart split within modern identity that has created profound rifts in our social and sexual relationships.

The free play of postmodernism has caused confusion, emphasizing the importance of embodiment and sexual experience but at the same time takes away any coherent basis for choosing which experience. Postmodernism has become the dominant way of thinking, not because it makes sense of life, but because it affirms the highest modern priority: unconstrained liberty. Emerging adults are “sovereign individuals lacking conviction or direction.” They value freedom but are confused about what to do with it. They value information but have no coherent lens through which to organize it, and so find themselves overwhelmed by it. They value diversity but have no standard for evaluating differences. They want to keep their options open, but openness easily becomes a void filled by default imperatives: the easy rush of pornography,

consumerism, uncommitted relationships, the next big experience, and so on.

These contemporary visions of freedom are quite different and battle with each other, but are built on a shared foundation. This idea of unrestricted personal choice is encouraged through the ever-expanding options offered by the novelty-machine that is consumerism. The church's first task, then, is to recognize and name the rival gods. The denial of any sort of metanarrative encourages the illusion that we can create our own story and personal identity out of thin air, simply through our personal choices.

**Real intimacy requires giving ourselves faithfully and permanently to another person in vulnerable trust.** It is only in this context of safety that genuine intimacy, as opposed to just a powerful romantic or sexual attraction, can develop. This puts young women, in particular, in a "double bind." Emerging adults today are expected to want to be in traditional committed relationships, but they are also encouraged to want sex "without strings attached." They don't want to be "tied down" to one person for the long run, but they want to enjoy companionship and sex in the meantime.

The sex industry's evangelistic zeal is such that most explicit online content—fully 90%—is consumed free of charge. Pornography is publicly and formatively shaping modern sexuality.

Christian marriage is a covenant entered into sacrificially, within and for the benefit of the church. It is only within a committed community of faith that our intimate relationships can be properly supported and find their ultimate purpose. Today's radical individualism has become cancerous, undermining the very significance we seek by shutting us off from meaningful relationships and broader social commitments.

The Enlightenment created a separation between "public" and "private" spaces, so that public spaces such as universities, legislatures, and courts could become places of reasoned debate, free from the prejudices of religion and the vagaries of emotion. This distinction became known as the "harm principle," meaning that no one has a right to interfere with me for my benefit, but only to prevent direct harm to others.

A consequent of the emergence of this radically free self is "moral miniaturization." As we have abandoned extended families and larger social organizations such as the church as our primary communities, we have replaced them with smaller affinity groups—"lifestyle enclaves." We choose to be with people we like, are comfortable with, who are like us. This is intensified by the transition to "virtual" relationships via social media, chat rooms, and online pornography—that encourage us to further fragment ourselves. It is creating a society made up of individuals who are drowning in their own personas.

In 1950 about 4m American lived alone, less than 10%. Today more 32m do, accounting for 28% of American households. In big cities singletons are close to ½, becoming

the quintessential modern expression of personal freedom. Lying at the heart of this solo trend is the modern desire to be in control of our lives, especially our relationships.

The 18-23 age group include the least religious adults in the US today. This open-ended, freewheeling stage of life is becoming longer and can morph into a prolonged adolescence that lasts well into the forties and beyond. This "Peter Pan" syndrome is most enticing in big cities, where the possibilities appear endless. We can find a kindred group to suit any stage of life and make us feel at home. My wife and I observed among our predominantly young congregation in London, however, that most people did not consciously choose to remain in this stage of life. **Many people found themselves trapped in a cycle that they seemed unable to understand or break out of.** One of our key challenges as pastors of this generation is to help people progress through this stage of life into more mature stages of development.

While the world's bleak vision represents the social fragmentation of Babel, the Christian vision seeks the social reconciliation of Pentecost. The pathway to maturity is a journey in which we need guidance from those who can most deeply affirm our identity. The modern myth is that we can become whole and mature on our own.

Capitalism may be the most formative structural reality within our society. The market economy is marked not by social reconciliation but by competition, and it shapes us in 2 important ways. At the big picture level, it seeks to capture our imagination about what we should be aiming for in lie. It also provides clear pathways and disciplines to help us reach our destination.

**The fallacy at the heart of the modern world is the conviction that we are free to do whatever we want.** We are being formed by "secular liturgies" what give our lives meaning and significance. "Neuromarketing" icons present an image of the perfect life that highlights the gulf between social images and us. The mall exploits these desires by creating a sense of insufficiency in our lives that needs to be filled. As with all idolatries, consumerism is a corruption of something good. As divine image-bearers, we are drawn to beauty. We should not reject beauty but seek to reappropriate it as a window into divine reality.

The biblical model of personal identity describes us as holistic beings who can't compartmentalize ourselves into different selves for different contexts. The more we taste the goodness of God's presence, the more we yearn for it.

Consumerism trains us to acquire, consume, and move on, with novelty as our guiding impulse. **But what we do with things, we inevitable do with people.** The dominant sexual script today, the narrative that rules is *serial monogamy*. Most of the young people surveyed believe that they can swim with the fast-flowing current of this sexual script in their 20s and 30s and then, at the appropriate moment, simply choose to swim in the opposite direct—that is, to enter into a permanent relationship and raise a family. We tend to compartmentalize our lives, especially our sex lives. Rather than being

essential, families are merely additions to the unrestricted individual.

Christian conservatives often focus on the *law* of the family rather than the *life* of the family. We want to have our cake (no sex before marriage) and eat it too (delayed marriage and family formation—the triumph of free market consumer-oriented individualism). We have encouraged this generation to exist in an untenable space by asking them to remain chaste within a prolonged and unrealistic time frame. This tends to breed hypocrisy and shame rather than vision and mature faith.

We are increasingly determined to give human qualities to objects and content to treat each other as objects. **Digital matchmaking looks set to become the most important theme shaping modern relationships**, via the growing influence of dating websites, including Christian providers. This may represent a shift as significant as the sexual revolution of the 1950s in changing our approach to love and romance. Online matchmaking is, at its heart, transactional. Our willingness to commit to a particular relationship depends on our perception of good alternatives.

Online dating is changing people's ideas about whether commitment itself is a life value. The strength of relationship commitment is determined by satisfaction, investment (time and effort, shared experiences, emotions, etc.), and the quality of perceived alternatives. Online dating lures us to explore the world of love as an avatar among other avatars rather than as a person embedded within a community. We learn an enormous amount about a potential partner by engaging with their core communities. Online dating encourages the dislocation of romantic relationship from our natural communities.

Sex outside of marriage is an act of personal disintegration. Our sexuality draws us beyond ourselves to each other because of our God-ordained differences. Sexual intimacy engages our whole selves in a complex way that we cannot fully account for. Women are the sexual gatekeepers within their relationships. Ironically, with the so-called liberation of female desire, expectations have become more tailored to men's sexual interests than to women's. Young women experience most of the emotional fallout of our culture's "relaxed" sexual ethic of serial monogamy with poorer emotional health. For most women, the strings attached are what makes sex good.

The pervasive power of pornography has made it the primary sexual educator of today's adolescents. 1/5 of all rented movies are porn. \$4bn/year is spent on video pornography in the US, more than football, baseball, and basketball. Availability, accessibility and anonymity drive consumption. We can become addicted to behaviors as well as substances. All addiction involves long-term, sometimes permanent "neuroplastic" change in the brain, hijacking our dopamine system, so that substances/behaviors give us pleasure without our having to work for it.

The majority of those struggling with sexual addictions and compulsive online habits are married men. 56% of divorce cases involve one party having an obsessive interest in

online pornography. The most powerful deception of cyberporn is its promise to fulfill desire—while ultimately killing it. Real life cannot compete with fantasy. When people begin to lose confidence in their ability to enjoy sex in any other way than through fantasy, fear of desire arises, and from that fear, the fear of love. This is the deeper, more essential risk posed by pornography—the loss of love.

Consuming pornography reforms male expectations of what is normal, meaning the perception of "what everybody else is doing," the impression that people are generally far more promiscuous than they actually are. It is particularly harmful during the sexual formation of children and early adolescents, who emulate people they perceive as role models. School-based sex education is being replaced as authoritative by uncensored and unchallenged sexual content on the internet. Internet pornography's power lies in its invisibility. It is more hidden than cancer and corrupts the Christian vision of personhood into an idol of sexuality. The mixed messages of our culture have made it more difficult for Christians to bind themselves to the practice of chastity, that is, living faithfully in both singleness and marriage.

When we try to strip God out of creation, we succeed in stripping created things of any higher purpose. Every aspect of our culture is now based on the assumption that our world is purely natural and self-enclosed. Moderns have come to see all of life—including relationships—as transactional. "What will this person offer me and at what cost?" Even though we may believe in God, this secular vision has become the air we breathe. It leads to a sort of "practical atheism" whereby we *believe* in God but find it hard to live *as if* he exists.

A vibrant faith and encounter with God create a context of significance whereby all of life is nourished and given meaning by a continuing relationship to God. Miracles puncture the gnostic dualism that many Christians experience, which drives a wedge between their beliefs (mind/spirit) and their behavior (body). Emerging adults are more likely to have a vibrant faith if they believe in divine miracles and do not believe in having sex before marriage. These twin beliefs help young adults form a worldview that provides a vital narrative of resistance as well as a practical alternative to modern secular assumptions.

Our sexual lives leave us most open to the ensnaring tentacles of self-deception. If we believe that the end of our lives really is the end, we inevitably focus on existential exploration and fulfillment in the here and now. If we view physical reality as "all there is, and all that ever will be," we will emphasize youth because it is in youth that we experience our physical embodiment at its peak and sexual fulfillment at its most intense.

Experiments with the secular path for sexual and relational fulfillment, often with sad or even disastrous results, is a challenge for the church today as a growing number of single Christians move into the later stages of life. We need to reintegrate the different generations within the church. The time spent caring for children, doing the most basic things for them,

lays down a crucial substrate for children to become confident that they are loved not matter what. Although belief in God still persists, we are becoming a generation of “practical atheists,” living as if God does not exist.

A fish does not “feel” wet; likewise, we swim in the world rather than stand outside it as detached observers. To live well as “resident aliens” in this world, we must know our true home. Often living the faithful Christian life seems like squandering the prime of our youth. The “True Love Waits” campaign encouraged girls to make a “deal” with Jesus rather than to follow him, falling into the trap of defining singleness only in terms of marriage. A lot of girls were sold on a deal and not on a Savior. Jesus calls us to follow him as the source of life, not as the giver of the sort of life we think he should want for us—as our helper rather than our goal. We worship Jesus in our sexual lives because we love and trust him, not because we love what he can do for us.

Living faithful Christian lives is impossible unless we are nourished and sustained by a vision of what human flourishing looks like. Christian leaders have often tended to give people rules to live by without articulating a coherent vision for the Christian like that makes sense of it all. Self-denial is seen as a form of self-harm or an unhealthy incursion on our self-identity. That we view sex apart from marriage as “cake” shows that we are deeply suspicious of the Christian way of life.” Why would a good God lead me into this lonely pit?” A comprehensive Christian vision is *eschatological*: it places our sexuality within the bigger context of God’s unfolding plan for creation. It is *metaphysical*: it aligns our sexual lives with the nature of thing as the *really* are. It is *formational*: it shapes *who* we are. It is *missional*: it shapes what we *do*. Our present sexuality is therefore a penultimate reminder of our real destiny to be wedded to Christ, rather than an end in itself.

In New Testament times, the betrothal period ushered in the courting process when the bridegroom went to prepare a new addition to his parents’ home, which would become his marital residence. As we wait for his return, Jesus promises his followers that he will prepare a place for us in his father’s house. The New Testament writers all place sexual fidelity at the heart of discipleship. **Our one-sidedness as either male or female creates a homing instinct that calls us beyond ourselves, to seek relationship with God and others.** Those who demand fulfillment now, as though it were a right or a guarantee, are living in a state of adolescent illusion. Sex and spirituality are intricately interwoven because each reflects and leads us toward the other.

The role of sex both as a bonding agent among lovers and as a sacramental window into the kingdom of heaven makes it a key battleground for Christian formation. The fundamental principle underlying Scripture’s preservation of sex within marriage is that there is no such thing as real sex outside of marriage. Sex is marriage, or else it is self-annihilation. Faithful Christian marriages are some of our most important witnesses to the gospel within our culture. Whereas marriage

reflects the intimate bond within the Godhead, singleness expresses God’s ever-expanding love for his creation. Singleness enables us to form a much broader network of friendships, both within the church and outside it.

Our sexuality, then, is at the heart of our quest for meaning and personal identity. The church (rather than marriage) is the New Testament’s highest form of community in this age, as well as a foretaste of our future life together. Sexuality is the dynamic behind the drive toward bonding in all its forms. The modern worldview has reduced sexuality to sex and thereby marginalized the very essence of human identity. Affective sexuality describes our fundamental need for relational intimacy across a broad range of nurturing friendships. We need a range of deep and diverse relationships—with parents, friends, and elders—to properly affirm our personhood and sexuality.

Upholding fidelity and self-sacrifice as the animating principles of Christian love provides a weapon of resistance against the distorted conceptions of the self that we have inherited from our cultural formation. For our lives to witness the kingdom of God, we must first be deeply formed in the “language” of faithfulness so that we become those who are able to hold fast to the challenges and sacrifices of fidelity and chastity, both within marriage and in singleness. We can live our lives “as pleasure seekers of covenant makers.” Knowledge of God comes from Scriptures proclaimed and obeyed in the community of the people of God. The fruits of the Spirit are also the social dynamics within the community—*love toward*, *joy among*, *peace between*, *self-control with regard to*, and so on.

The Christian vision of sexuality is like marking out the boundaries of a field so that the game of life can be played well and with conviction. Staying within the boundaries is not our primary focus, but it makes to game possible.

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