

## Biblical Sexuality: The Bible and Marriage

I just want to remind you that this is a PG-13 kind of series on Biblical Sexuality.

I have conducted many premarital counselling over the course of forty years in ministry and “Sexual Intimacy” is one of the sessions. Couples who have gone through that session loved it ... NOT! In fact they usually give others a heads-up about Pastor Andrew’s fifth session.

Sex/sexuality talk makes people feel uncomfortable; the topic is usually avoided by most. And it’s a taboo topic in many churches and Christian circles.

But many young children are now exposed to age inappropriate sex-ed. materials in schools. People’s ideas, ideals, and beliefs about romantic relationships, sexuality, and marriage are shaped by progressive influencers in the academia, tabloids and magazines, television and movies, celebrities, and pornographic materials online and on papers, Christians not exempted.<sup>1</sup>

In our hyper-sexualized, politically charged, and predominantly individualistic society, many either maintain a politically correct posture or stay silent because they don’t want to be accused of uttering hate-speech, being intolerant, or being “cancelled” or ostracized.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.barna.com/trends/over-half-of-practicing-christians-admit-they-use-pornography/>

Others spew harsh criticism and hateful comments which reveal more of their own self-righteous and judgmental posture, provoke antagonism and hostility, burn every relational bridge and build walls of separation.

Christ-followers are called to “speak the truth in love”<sup>2</sup> and “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Most of us were never taught about biblical, wholesome sexuality and marriage. But the Bible talks about a grand, unifying story of marital love:

In Genesis the marriage of Adam and Eve is a signpost of God’s presence and His passion to cultivate an intimate relationship with humankind (Gen. 1:27-28; 2:20-25).

The last book of the bible, Revelation, ends with the marriage celebration of Christ and the Church (the people of God) proclaiming the good news that God has made all things right at the arrival of the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 19:6-9; 21:1-9; 22:17).

The biblical story begins and ends with the unity of heaven and earth and the eternal dwelling of the triune God with

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<sup>2</sup> Eph. 4:14-15.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor. 10:5.

His people. These bookends “provide the key for understanding all that lies between.”<sup>4</sup>

Pastor Sam Allberry says, “Marriage shows **the shape of the gospel** in that it models the covenant promises that God has made to us in Christ. Singleness shows us **the sufficiency of the gospel** because it shows us the reality of what marriage points to—which is our own relationship with Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

Pastor Jeremy will look at “Singleness” next week and now let’s begin with a working definition of marriage:

**Marriage is the union between two God-image bearers, a man and a woman, whose exclusive and intimate relationship mirrors the self-giving love of Jesus for human flourishing.**

In the remaining of our time we will focus on three key components of this definition:

1. God-image bearers: The essence of self-identity
2. The marriage union: The dimensions of intimacy
3. The goal of self-giving love: The signs of human flourishing

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<sup>4</sup> Christopher West, *Our Bodies Tell God’s Story*, p. 14. See also N.T. Wright, “What Is Marriage For? Tracing God’s Plan from Genesis to Revelation”

<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/marriage/what-is-marriage-for>.

<sup>5</sup> Sam Allberry, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/how-both-singleness-and-marriage-testify-to-the-gospel/#:~:text=Marriage%20shows%20us%20the%20shape,our%20own%20relationship%20with%20Jesus>. *Emphasis ours.*

## **God-image bearers: The essence of self-identity**

### **Marriage is the union between two God-image bearers ...**

“God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Gen. 1:27 NIV)

In Gen. 1-2 we learn that Adam and Eve (humans) are the apex of God’s creative work distinct from all other creatures; humankind is His embodied “**representational presence**”<sup>6</sup> with the capacity to relate to God, others, and all of creation.

Every image-bearer is “fearfully and wonderfully made,” a wholesome and unique individual of physical, intellectual, volitional, emotional, relational and spiritual unity. Every person, therefore, has inherent dignity, equality, and worth.

The image of God is our human identity; and this identity should shape all-of-life spirituality.

But this biblical view of human identity has become, at best, a faint echo in the deafening clamour of sexual

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<sup>6</sup> “We need to view the *imago Dei* as a declaration that God intended to create human persons to be the physical means through which he would manifest his own divine presence in the world.” (Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ*, pp.110-111.) Cited by Carmen joy Imes, *Being God’s Image*, p. 31.

identity politics and, at worst, considered by cultural influencers to be an archaic and irrelevant religious relic.<sup>7</sup>

Prof. Carl Truman has identified, in broad strokes, three significant cultural shifts that have shaped our understanding of human identity:<sup>8</sup>

***Self was psychologised***



***Psychology was sexualized***



***Sexuality was politicized***

***Self was psychologised*** – since the 16<sup>th</sup> century the self has turned inward; decisive authority is granted to inner feelings over external, physical realities, e.g. our bodies. The inner you is the real you!

***Psychology was sexualized*** – with the influence of Sigmund Freud (and others) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the individual's inner space is sexualized and the core

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<sup>7</sup> For a fairly clear analysis of the dominant cultural ideas, see Katie J McCoy, *To Be A Woman*, pp. 1-55.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/obsession-with-self-identity-sexuality-and-rewriting-history-where-we-are/>. See also *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Crossway, 2020) and the shortened and easier to read *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution* (Crossway, 2022).

of being human is defined by one's sexual desires. "Psychology trumps biology"<sup>9</sup>; pursuing one's sexual impulses brings health and happiness - feelings and desires are decisive for human identity.<sup>10</sup>

***Sexuality was politicized*** – if inner space is primarily sexual and defines identity, sexual expressions have become the very centre of what it means to be a human being. Anything traditions, any rules and regulations, any persons or institutions, any religious or political authority that restricts an individual's rights to express oneself is considered oppressive and must be "cancelled." The issue is no longer about tolerating a person's sexual identity – society must affirm one's sexual identity and personal rights.

Truman has pointed out that these three shifts have not only expanded the amount of sexual activities, the nature and significance of sexual activity is changed:

What determines a sexual act moral or immoral is the consent of all the people involved.

The core of what it means to be a human being - human identity - is now shrunk to one's inner sexual desires and

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<sup>9</sup> Carl Truman, *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*, p. 141.

<sup>10</sup> Jenell Williams Paris writes in *The End of Sexual Identity*, "Sexual desire is now considered central to human identity, and self-expression is seen by many to be essential for healthy personhood ... the fact that sex is so important, and that sexual desire is seen as a central element of human identity, is new." (p. 10)

feelings while other important dimensions of personhood are overlooked.

An authentic self is a self-fulfilled self; a self-fulfilled self is a happy self; a happy self is a sexually expressive self; a sexually expressive self is the ultimate authority and source of truth.

Now inner desires and happy feelings become the God-substitute – humankind is not made in God’s image; God is made into our image – sex then becomes an idol.

Anything that stands against this view of human identity must be deconstructed or demolished.

We learn about from Gen. 3 that **the God-intended life was disrupted** - Adam and Eve have fallen into temptation and failed to live well as image bearers. Satan twisted their understanding of God and their own identity.

Satan is the ultimate identity thief.

Gen. 3 is the most devastating account of identity theft; Satan deceived them into believing there was something more they needed to do, doubting the goodness of God is enough for them. They were seduced to forfeit their identity and enticed to serve their desires.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Alain Emerson and Adam Cox, *The God Story*, pp. 23-25.

Every domain of life is affected by sin, our own sexual development included. Our human desires are fickle and only God knows us better than we know ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

[Cf. this could be a place to recall Libby’s comments: “You should practice what you teach in premarital counselling.”]

We must remain **humble and kind**; practice **grace and truth**, instead of evaluating and labelling people with “**a hierarchy of persons.**”

Same-sex attracted people are not any more broken than the straight folks or heterosexual married couples who are greedy, liars, slanderers, drunkards, as well as singles who are addicted to porn.

We all have strong sexual feelings but **comparisons and labels perpetuate personal pride and prejudice as well as failure to see how “sexual others are at risk for cruelty, discrimination and violence.”**<sup>13</sup>

While each person can describe and identify a mixture of his/her inner feelings and desires,<sup>14</sup> they are not reliable and should not define the person’s identity but call for proper responses that reflect the image of God.

The Apostle Paul agonizes about the conflicting push and pull of God-honouring and sinful desires, wanting things he

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<sup>12</sup> Jer. 17:9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jenell Williams Paris writes in *The End of Sexual Identity*, pp. 40, 71.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. 1 Pe. 2:11; Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:16-24; Col. 3:5; 1Tim. 6:9-11.

doesn't want to want and doings things he doesn't want to do (Rom. 7:18-25).

What we want is not about who we are because our identity links directly to the Creator.<sup>15</sup>

The question is not what we intended ourselves to be, but what He [God] intended us to be when He made us.

C.S. Lewis

We must make space for Jesus to shape people together in God's love; we are called to embody His forgiveness, healing, power of life transformation, and discipline in all cases of sexual brokenness and disobedience.

The practical takeaway for marital relationship here is simple but challenging:

We must show respect and honour our spouses because they are pinnacles of God's creation, not a means to fulfilling our self-serving desires and sexual fantasies.

This leads us to our next essential component of biblical marriage.

## The marriage union: The dimensions of intimacy

Marriage is the union between two God-image bearers, a man and a woman ...

<sup>15</sup>The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it ... <sup>18</sup>The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" ... <sup>22</sup>Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man ... <sup>24</sup>That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. <sup>25</sup>Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. (Gen. 2:15-25 NIV)

The first reference to marriage clearly indicates that God designs marriage and it is depicted as the exclusive bond between one man and one woman, uniting the two bodies and souls together. The Bible refers to this new union as "one flesh":

The unity of husband and wife is the foundation of a lifelong commitment in this journey of love.

God states that it is not good to have Adam alone to manage the task assigned to him; Eve is created as a helpmate.

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<sup>15</sup> Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 13: "Our self-identity is the window through which we perceive and engage the world; it determines all that we do."

The Hebrew term (אָדָם), “suitable for him,” means “opposite to him” – a counterpart who is like Adam but also be opposite.

God’s creative work is not a single human but a couple; they are complementary and sexual beings with clearly identifiable gender-specific bodies of physical and biological characteristics that distinguish male from female.<sup>16</sup>

As man and woman, Adam and Eve, have their own respective embodied distinctive features that express individual self identity; they serve as like-opposites or counterparts to provide companionship (kinship) and to steward their respective abilities to fulfill their calling/vocation as God’s “representational presence” (kingship).<sup>17</sup>

The complementarity of the marital union points to the unity of the new heaven and new earth and the wedding banquet of Jesus the Bridegroom and the reconciled people of God, the Church.

We read in Gen. 1-2 how God creates many like-opposites joining together in unity as signposts of His design for

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher West says in *Our Bodies Tell God’s Story*, “A man’s body is complete in all of its systems but one. A woman’s body is complete in all of its systems but one. And those respective systems – the reproductive systems – function only in union with the other ... Man and woman are meant to complete each other ...” (p. 39.)

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Gen. 1:28. See further Carmen joy Imes, *Being God’s Image*, pp. 11-74.

marriage: heaven and earth, night and day, land and sea, and man and woman.

Jesus is the ultimate like-opposite of humankind who unites the new heaven and earth together: He is like us a human, but opposite from us in that the perfect high-priest “who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”<sup>18</sup>

Jesus is the new Adam and only mediator who bridges the chasm between God and humanity.<sup>19</sup> We are united “in Christ” (ἐν Χριστῷ)<sup>20</sup> when we believe in Jesus.

Believers are “distinct individuals with their own mental and physical characteristics, distinct personal histories and abilities, and so much more.” But our identity is not just a matter of becoming better versions of ourselves, whatever gender we might be; it is participating in the life of Christ and under His authority so that what we do embody heaven—his reign—on earth.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Heb. 4:15.

<sup>19</sup> Rom. 5:18ff; 1 Tim. 2:6. “God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins.” (2 Cor. 5:19 *The Message*)

<sup>20</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer clarifies: “To be sure: believers are not in Christ spatially the way coins are in a piggy bank, but rather spherically, that is, “in the sphere of Christ’s control.” ... and in a participative sense inasmuch as what we do is enact heaven—his reign—on earth.” (“From ‘blessed in Christ’ to ‘being in Christ,’” in *In Christ in Paul*, ed. Michael J. Thate, et al., p. 11. [Cited by John B. MacDonald <https://www.johnbmacdonald.com/blog/what-does-in-christ-mean.>]

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Gal. 2:20.

Every God-image bearing human is created for relationships and community; everyone yearns to love and be loved, to know and be known.

Of course, people of the same gender can cultivate loving relationships through friendship, family, community, and service in a non-sexual way, maybe like the God-honouring relationship between David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:1-4; 20). But sexual partnership outside of this, whether same sex or opposite sex people, are outside the biblical view of marriage.

In the Old Testament God's relationship with the Israelites is described as husband and wife (cf. Is. 54:4-6; 61:1-10; Jer. 2:2; Ezek. 16:8-16); in the New Testament Jesus is spoken of as the Bridegroom of the Bride (the Church) [cf. Jn. 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27].

Male/female union reflects the profound marriage between Christ and His Church.

"Sex difference in marriage is tethered to the story that marriage is designed to tell. Erasing this crucial aspect would end up telling a rather different canonical story that would require a different creation narrative." (Preston Sprinkle)

Scripture is clear about sexual boundaries:

Sex in any context or relationship outside the boundaries of marriage is a violation of the Creator's design and intent.

Like what Scripture teaches, God is the husband of his people (the Israelites) and sin is spiritual adultery when they worship other gods (e.g. the book Hosea).

Marriage is the only rightful context for sexual intercourse. The nature of this marital bond is exclusive and intimate – there is an undeniable sense of "holy possessiveness."

<sup>4</sup> "Haven't you read," [Jesus] replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'<sup>5</sup> and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matt. 19:4-6 NIV)

<sup>4</sup> Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. (Heb. 13:4 NIV)

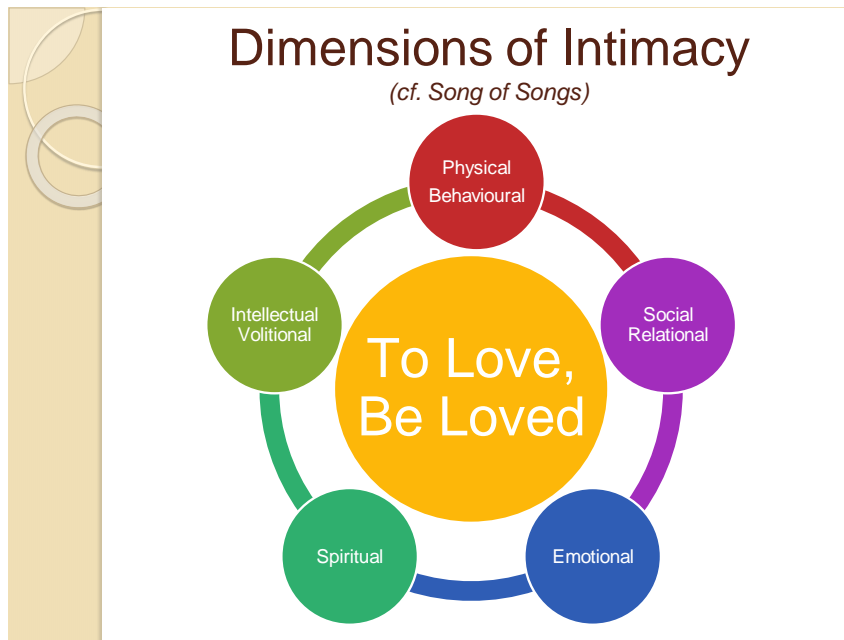
Moreover, the complete openness and security between husband and wife is captured in the joy of "one flesh" sexual intimacy.

Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame ... Adam made love to his wife Eve (Gen. 2:15-25; 4:1 NIV; Now the man knew his wife Eve [NRSVA])

The notions of nakedness and shamelessness between the two accentuate their complete freedom, vulnerability, and moral innocence before each other as wholesome image-bearers.

To know (יָדָע – “yada”) means to know and discern by experience, so their physical, sexual oneness epitomizes the depth of their knowledge of each other.

This is what I share in my premarital counselling:



Based on what is taught in Scriptures and Jesus’ teaching against the Greco-Roman background of a morally lax and promiscuous environment, Paul gives four sound counsel about God-honouring sexual intimacy 1 Cor. 7:2-5:

**Mutual Responsibility:** “each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. <sup>3</sup>The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.”

**Mutual Respect:** “<sup>4</sup>The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.”

**Mutual Self-control:** “<sup>5</sup>Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time ... Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

**Mutual Spiritual Alertness:** “so that you may devote yourselves to prayer ...”

Here is the practical takeaway:

Evaluate the state of your (marital) union as a couple; strengthened it by a daily “Not ME but WE” commitment.

And this leads us to the third essential component of biblical marriage:

**The goal of self-giving love: The signs of human flourishing**

**Marriage is the union between two God-image bearers, a man and a woman, whose exclusive and intimate**



**relationship mirrors the self-giving love of Jesus for human flourishing.**

Far beyond personal happiness marriage finds its ultimate purpose outside of itself and deepens its eternal values in the role it plays in showing God's self-giving love for human flourishing.

<sup>31</sup> "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." <sup>32</sup> This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. <sup>33</sup> However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (Eph. 5:31-33 NIV)

Paul harks back to the creation story and uses the intimate union of the husband and wife to signify how God's love for His people is completely fulfilled in Christ's love for the Church.

This profound mystery signals God's redemptive purpose for all creation since eternity past and magnifies "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ"<sup>22</sup> who gave Himself up for the church in purifying and "to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" at "the wedding supper of the Lamb" (Eph. 5:25-26; cf. Rev. 19:9 NIV).

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<sup>22</sup> Eph. 3:18.

Sex is not just about sex; sex is not just about marriage. Sexual union and intimacy in marriage is a picture God's people becoming one with Jesus.

Wholesome and holy sexuality is integral to all-of-life spirituality. The life-giving vitality and enduring faithfulness to one another in marriage tells the very gospel of Jesus Christ.

So the first sign of human flourishing is this,

Giving up personal rights for the flourishing of one's spouse.

Just as Christ submits Himself to the will of the Father,<sup>23</sup> the wife submits to her husband and the husband loves his wife as Christ loves the Church – both then grow in self-denial for the good of the other.

Yes, marriage provides partnership, spiritual intimacy and the ability to pursue God together. But it is "an other-centered union for a me-centered world."

Gary Thomas has written a book entitled, *Sacred Marriage: What if God designed marriage to make you holy instead of happy?*

Marriage calls us to an extremely new and selfless life. And no matter what the situation, what the feelings, they do so out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21 NIV).

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<sup>23</sup> Lk. 22:42 - "Not my will, but yours be done."

Marriages are not perfect on this side of eternity; sometimes marriages are not respectful or safe and therefore require help or extra resources.

This leads us to the second sign of human flourishing:

Participate in a vibrant faith community.

With the accountability and encouragement of God's people, married couples can grow in "speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything" (Eph. 5:19 NIV).

When the couple "close themselves off to the Holy Spirit, sexual union quickly degenerates into an act of selfishness and lust, an act of mutual exploitation."<sup>24</sup>

Instead of having a self-absorbed, inward-focused marriage, the marital union becomes a signpost of a Spirit-led life, exercising the gift of the Spirit and bearing fruit of the Spirit (Eph. 4:11-13; cf. Gal. 5:22 NIV).

Here is the practical takeaway:

Remind each other that our marital journey is not done yet; every married couple plays a part in God's love story.

Christ is still preparing His bride for the wedding banquet to come – every person is in the process of conforming to the

image of Christ, being shaped "along the same lines as the life of his Son."<sup>25</sup>

Bring out the best in each other for each other; spur each other to "walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:2 NIV).

Let me close with this simple word:

Every marriage on this side of eternity is a signpost and foretaste of the wedding banquet of the Lamb and His bride.

Every marital union anticipates the coming new heaven and new earth joining together, when all things will be made right and the presence of Christ brings lasting joy, peace, and love.

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher West, *Our Bodies Tell God's Story*, p. 155f.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Rom. 8:28-29.