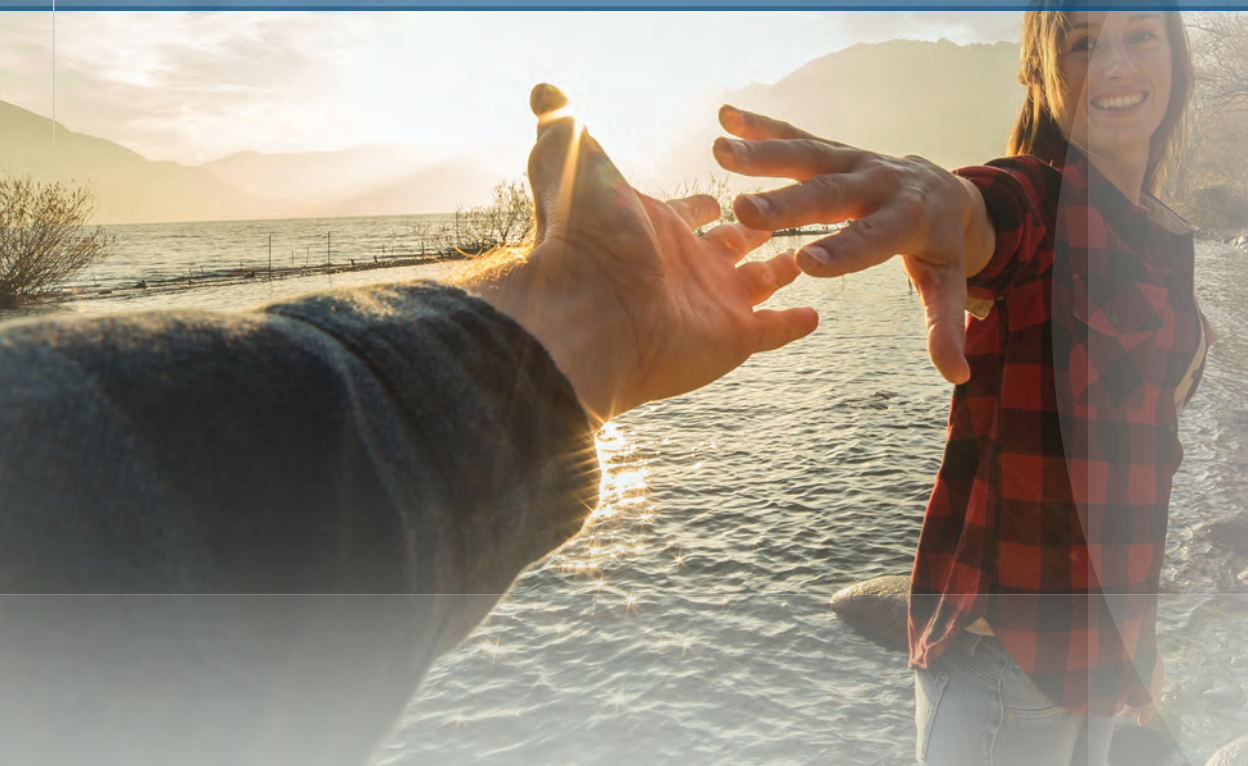


# steward your sexuality

John Greenall on celebrating sexuality whether married or single



Sex... despite our studies covering the topic, despite the fact it is all around us, many of us feel uncomfortable talking about it.

How do we respond to the hypersexualised culture around us? How as a single person can I honour God despite (or even through) the powerful sexual urges I feel? Is the Christian view of sex good news to those around us?

## culture on sexuality

Our culture screams loud and clear: '*you are your sexuality*'. Your sexual identity (the act of 'labelling' oneself based on one's sexual attractions or orientation eg straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual) is seen as the 'core' of who you are. And of course, this must be affirmed - to fail to do so is our culture's 'unforgivable sin' because it means a fundamental rejection of you as a person. Because it is so intrinsic to our identity, sexual fulfilment is

key, and a life without sexual satisfaction is portrayed as a life not worth living.

This is the sexual revolution in a nutshell. More sex, better sex, more varied sex, freedom from the prudish constraints of our religious heritage. But as we see in Alex Bunn's article in this edition of *Nucleus*,<sup>1</sup> the sexual revolution is not delivering on its promises. Instead it's leaving a trail of destruction in its wake, including broken families and confused children.

On this backdrop, I believe the Christian message is good news for a confused and rudderless society. God has a positive view of sexuality. After all, it is he who made us as sexual beings,<sup>2</sup> and he pronounces us as 'very good'.<sup>3</sup> My body is as much 'me' as my soul or my 'inner self'. It is not dirty, but created to glorify God.

## but what is our sexuality for?

It's only when we know what our sexuality is for



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time, finances. But what about human sexuality and behaviour?

Mark Yarhouse says: *'What you do with your sexuality (including singleness) is one of the most important testimonies you give to an unbelieving world... When Christians bring clean water to a remote village in Africa... When Christians provide shelter to those... who do not have adequate housing, people appreciate what we are doing. But when Christians live out our faith in the decisions we make about our sexuality and sexual behaviour, it is truly countercultural. The choices we make are a witness to a culture that is increasingly unfamiliar with why Christians choose to live as they do.'*<sup>8</sup>

The message isn't 'steward your sexuality until you get married'. It's not promising heterosexuality, or promising you will all be married. Instead we are to honour God with our sexuality, recognising that it is not ours to begin with, but rather one of many aspects in the human experience that is ultimately God's. We are to see its part in the greater story, pointing to God himself and his purposes for the world.

Are we ready to be countercultural and bear witness to the good news of Jesus *in and through our bodies*? To show that our culture's relentless desire for perfection, beauty and intimacy through sexual identity are all met in Christ? There is good news - the trail of destruction wrought by our culture's sexual revolution can be healed and the church can be a countercultural place of healing, freedom and truth to know who we are and what we are here for. The goal of our lives isn't necessarily to be 'happy' but instead to love God and to become like Jesus.

### a difficult message?

Of course, this last statement goes against the grain of what we hear in our culture. We need confidence to know that that no one loves us more than he does, therefore we can trust what he says, even though it can be difficult. Indeed, when I am

that we can understand how it's supposed to work. The Bible tells us that ultimately our sexuality points us towards Jesus. He teaches us through his life that sex and romantic fulfilment are not the key to making us complete; it comes instead by discovering him, the 'bread of life',<sup>4</sup> and finding purpose, freedom and satisfaction in him alone.<sup>5</sup> Our longing for joining, to know and be known, foreshadows the intense and passionate longing of God to be united with his people.<sup>6</sup>

This really is wonderful news: we don't have to define ourselves, or find our fulfilment in satisfying our sexual urges. Becoming the 'real me' happens as we walk with God, fulfilling the unique calling God has placed on each of our lives.

### steward your sexuality

The concept of biblical stewardship<sup>7</sup> is familiar to many of us - take stewarding our environment,

striving to be holy and Christ-like I am not going against the grain, but with it. I am being most 'me' when I am pursuing holiness, not sin.<sup>9</sup>

For some of us, we feel uncomfortable at this point. We know we have been created 'very good', but we feel 'not so good' - or worse. We've made mistakes. What hope is there for us?

Some who speak to me feel more uncomfortable than others. How about the same-sex attracted fourth year student who feels she has it harder? What about the porn-addicted first year who is despairing at his addiction, feeling powerless to change? Are they any worse off than you? Well... no. We are all sexually broken and Jesus calls each of us to 'take up your cross and follow me'.<sup>10</sup> The gospel isn't unfair to same-sex attracted people, or those with particular struggles. Its call is the same to each one of us - to steward our sexuality - and if we count the cost in our own lives, it won't be easy.

So yes, this is a difficult message to grasp. But I would argue, it's still amazing news. But how? And what does all this look like? Let's consider marriage and singleness.

### what is marriage for?

As a married person, my view is that marriage is an amazing (albeit at times confusing) invention! I'm also discovering that the Bible's view on marriage is profound and relevant, not only to me but, as it claims, to the whole of mankind.

In fact, the Bible begins and ends with a marriage. The joining of Adam and Eve as husband and wife is a picture of how heaven and earth will one day be joined together through the union of Jesus and his people, the church. All through the Bible we see clear descriptions of God's intimate love for his people - Israel is often depicted as an adulteress cheating on a faithful husband (the Lord).<sup>11</sup> Song of Songs images the delight of Christ in his church through graphic descriptions of the intimacy of a husband and wife. Jesus refers to himself as 'the bridegroom'.<sup>12</sup> Paul speaks of the mystery behind human marriage, which is Christ's intimate relationship to the church.<sup>13</sup>

When sex happens in the context of a lifelong marriage commitment, we enjoy an amazing God-given gift. But instead of idolising this and seeing marriage as something meant to fulfill us, it instead points to the thing that does.

Marriage is also portrayed as between one man and one woman; in fact, to picture Christ and the church it has to be between like and unlike, male and female (see Jesus' words on this in Matthew 19:4-5). It is our very 'genderedness' that points towards this greater and more permanent union. Any change sees a distortion of the spiritual reality to which it points - the gospel itself.<sup>14</sup>

### but what if I am single?

Let's be honest - there are many more Christian women than men in the church.<sup>15</sup> If you stick to your ideal of marrying a Christian, it is likely that many of you will remain single. How do we deal with that?

Our environment doesn't help. Often the implication is that singleness is an incomplete state for the Christian. 'Have you met anyone yet?' says a well-meaning relative. 'She's so lovely, I can't believe she hasn't found anyone yet' says another. All this talk can make those of us who are celibate feel we are wasting our sexuality by not giving expression to our sexual desires.

So, what does 'hope' look like for you as a single person, or someone experiencing same-sex attraction? Is it marriage? Is it 'orientation change'? I would argue no! Instead what we need is a positive vision of singleness and a way of valuing it as highly as marriage - whether a person is attracted to the same or opposite sex. Because sex isn't what defines you, and neither is marriage.

Perhaps 'hope' can look something more like this: in a culture obsessed by sexual identity, you can demonstrate that God is your everything. That your identity and community is found in Jesus and his church, and that you have meaning and purpose in stewarding your sexuality.

*'...single Christians who abstain from sex outside marriage bond bear witness to the faithful nature of*

*God's love with the same authority as those who have sex inside the marriage bond. Both paint pictures of God's faithfulness, but in different ways. Denying yourself can be just as potent a picture of a thing's goodness as helping yourself to it.'*<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, singleness testifies to the gospel just as much as marriage does, albeit in a different way.

*'In refusing to have sex outside marriage, the single person witnesses to the unbreakable link between passion and faithfulness. And in refusing to commit adultery, the married person bears witness to the same truth.'*<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the most complete human being to walk the planet, Jesus himself, was celibate. He showed that celibacy isn't a waste of our sexuality. As Sam Allberry says:

*'If marriage shows us the shape of the gospel, singleness shows us its sufficiency. It's a way of declaring to a world obsessed with sexual and romantic intimacy that these things are not ultimate, and that in Christ we possess what is. Our sexual feelings point us to the reality of the gospel.'*<sup>18</sup>

So singleness can be not only your *identity*, but also your *vocation* (for a time, or for your lifetime), to bear witness to God's faithful love. But let's be honest here – this sounds demanding. What does it mean in practice? Saying 'no' to a particular relationship perhaps? It may well do. But be assured. Jesus recognised that the costliest things we are called to leave to follow him are relational. Peter said to Jesus 'we have left everything to follow you'.<sup>19</sup> Jesus responded to him with a promise: 'everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life'.<sup>20</sup>

Many single and same-sex attracted Christians feel on the fringes of the Christian community. You crave friendship, relationship, intimacy and may feel you are being called to leave all these things. But Jesus promised you all of this through a family – *his* family – the church.

Can you see that singleness isn't a waste of your sexuality but instead a wonderful way of fulfilling it?

That your gifts, passions and training can shape a world to give you the sense of calling, purpose and joy whether married or single? That you can develop meaningful friendships and communities that will support your celibacy? We will need to help each other with this, both in CMF and in our churches, for example by placing as much focus on celebrating singleness as others do marriage.<sup>21</sup>

## the future

Marriage and singleness can be glorious. But both can be, at times, gruelling, which is why as Christians we need to grasp and rejoice in the glorious future that awaits us. A future where our unwanted temptations are gone and the marriage we've always dreamed of is finally fulfilled. A time when what our sexuality points towards will become present reality as we are presented perfect to Christ.

*'For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.'*<sup>22</sup>

For a more in-depth but compelling treatment of the sexual revolution and the call for Christians to tell a better story of 'God, Sex and Human Flourishing', I highly recommend Glynn Harrison's *A Better Story* (review on page 39).

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