

A full-page photograph of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a shiny black jacket, laughing joyfully with her mouth wide open. She is surrounded by a dense shower of multi-colored confetti (yellow, blue, red, green, white). Other people's faces and arms are visible in the background, also amidst the confetti, suggesting a festive party or celebration. The lighting is warm and vibrant, with a strong orange-red glow in the lower half of the image.

SEXUALITY: good news for some?

the sexual agenda

Alex Bunn asks how we can find good news in sex and gender



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A gay war hero from World War II is chemically castrated, leading to his suicide (*The Imitation Game*). A convent schoolgirl falls pregnant so the nuns have her child adopted, which breaks her heart (*Philomena*). Gay activists against social injustice are further victimised by straight society (*Milk, Pride*). Journalists reveal a child abuse scandal covered up by the church to save face (*Spotlight*). All true stories.

According to these narratives, shame has been used to enforce a repressive Christian sexual ethic that denies diversity and full human flourishing. But now it's Christians who are likely to feel ashamed and foolish. Do you blush when asked to defend a Christian view of sexuality? How can we persuade our friends that Jesus is good news even here?

Let's follow Paul's example in Acts 17. He was prepared to sound foolish,¹ as we need to be in the current climate. But he was wise in the way he built bridges, challenged misconceptions, and then introduced Jesus persuasively.

building bridges

There are many points on which we should agree with our detractors. Much of society's objection to same-sex relationships wasn't based on love of others and deep reflection on God's purposes, but often on gut reaction and thinly veiled prejudice. Good riddance to that!

Christians should have strong convictions about child protection,² compassion for the marginalised,³ injustice and hypocrisy.⁴ Are we as passionate as Jesus on these issues today? It's hard to blame Jesus for behaviour that falls short of his teaching, but it's a good opportunity to explain why his followers are in need of grace.

But what does the Bible actually say about sexuality? Let's surprise our friends by our lack of prudery. After all, sex was God's idea. Point them to Proverbs 5:18-19 and Song of Songs to show that

the Bible celebrates a good gift from God, albeit in the right context.

Ultimately though, we don't want to celebrate the gifts but the giver, we want to talk about Jesus. A few years ago, a bank robber was asked why he robbed banks, and he gave a surprisingly frank answer: 'because that's where the money is!' We want to take our friends to where the gold is, and introduce them to Jesus. But we may need to clear some ground first.

challenging misconceptions

MYTH 1:

only Christians are moralistic about sex

Secularists sometimes talk as if only people of faith make moral judgments. But the question is not *whether* we put down boundaries but *where*. Is it OK to date a teacher or patient? Send a 'sext'? Have plastic surgery? Use pornography? Promote gender-neutral toilets? Have sex with animals or robots? Society has changed its boundaries massively, and will continue to do so:⁵ what makes a secularist think we have got it right and not our parents or children?

MYTH 2:

the sexual revolution has been good for us

The sexual revolution is often touted as a great success. This was the liberalisation of attitudes to sex, especially in the 1960s, promoting increased access to contraception and sexual equality. Christians may applaud parts of it, such as opportunities for women, but there have been many losers too. The hypersexualisation of society has led to pornography addictions, unwanted pressures on teenagers and women, body shaming, spiralling sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies and abortions. Even on its own terms, despite promising more and better sex,

we are having less sex than ever before,⁶ and rates of sexual satisfaction are down.⁷ More people are living alone than ever before.

Arguably, the most troubling is the fallout for the most vulnerable of all: children. The compelling evidence is that children raised by two biological parents in a stable marriage do better, on average, than children raised in other family structures. They enjoy 'better physical, cognitive, and emotional outcomes than children who are raised in other circumstances'.⁸ For instance, the Millennial Cohort Study showed that 18.1% of children in stepfamilies had significant mental health problems, compared with 15% living with single parents and 6.6% living with both biological parents.⁹

Whilst cohabitation may be a happy arrangement for couples, consider the implications of these stats for children: of those who never married, 69% had broken up by the child's 15th birthday, compared with 54% who married after their first child, and 24% who were married before.¹⁰ And the irony is that whilst liberal elites have foisted progressive agendas on the poorest and least educated in society, they have kept the benefits to themselves. As one journalist observed 'marriage has become a preserve of the rich' after a study showed that the wealthiest are 48% more likely to marry than the poorest.¹¹ Perhaps the privileged recognise the rewards of family values that puts education, work, marriage and childbearing in that order. But the thought leaders of society are not exactly helping others to do the same. You could call it hypocrisy, and a justice issue.

MYTH 3: the church has been universally harmful to women

As always, we want to recommend Jesus as our role model, not the Victorian archetypes that usually get wheeled out in debates. He had a unique relationship with women. The author Dorothy L Sayers was impressed by his countercultural values for any age:

*'Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the cradle and last at the cross. They had never known a man like this man - there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; and who took their questions and arguments seriously.'*¹²

We need to retell the story of the first and best sexual revolution that Jesus unleashed. It's no accident that the West offers the best opportunities for women today. It follows a long tradition created by the church 2,000 years ago. Women flocked to the church in the early centuries, because they were not forced into early marriages, abortions, infanticide, and were given property rights for the first time.¹³ Ever since, the church has been working out the implications of the Bible's revolutionary teaching that in Christ 'there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female'.¹⁴

But immediately there'll be questions, such as:

- **marriage:** why is the church so anti-sex unless within marriage?
- **homosexuality:** why would God condemn loving same-sex couples?
- **transgender:** why is the Bible so binary about sexual identity?

It's hard to tackle all of these succinctly, and there are many good resources on each of these. But as with other thorny issues like suffering, they drive us back to scripture to a God we wouldn't have invented, who surprises and delights the seeker. Because behind these trap door questions is one helpful theological question: why does God seem so fanatical about marriage between male and female? That takes us right into the heart of God, and his invitation to us.



introducing Jesus

The Bible opens with a marriage between two people, and ends with a marriage between himself and his people, the church. And inbetween 'the pages rustle with images of love, betrothal, sex and marriage'.

Perhaps there are four aspects of biblical marriage that we should communicate to friends. God's pattern for marriage reflects his own nature in being passionate, faithful, diverse and fruitful.

passionate

It may sound a bit icky to mix the erotic and religious – God and gonads in the same sentence. But the Bible describes a God who is the great romantic, because he is a God of passionate love before he even created people to love. There

are countless references to God's desire for his people's affections, romantic love is the most common metaphor.¹⁵ He doesn't merely want our dutiful obedience, but our passionate love. He is courting us:

*'As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.'*¹⁶

But what's the connection with our earthly passions? Ed Shaw makes this connection: *'as film directors put romantic scenes in their trailers to make us want to go to their movies, God has put sex on this planet to make us want to go to heaven'*.¹⁷ So sexuality is so much more than a physical 'urge to merge'. It's a homing instinct, a compass pointing

to our need for intimacy with our creator. Our most intense fizzing romantic desires are just teasers, anticipating a more lasting union. But in the meantime, we will be frustrated if we look for our passions to be satisfied in anything other than Christ, because we were made for each other. As Augustine said: 'you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you'.¹⁸ Any other desire will need to be rightly ordered, so as not to disappoint, until they bring us home:

*'These things - the beauty, the memory of our own past - are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.'*¹⁹

Therefore, whilst the Bible is very positive about marriage, we are encouraged to put it in perspective as a temporary state, as Jesus encouraged us that a better one is coming.²⁰

faithful

*'Happy are those who have been invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.'*²¹

What's the best wedding invite you've ever had? Who doesn't love the combination of glamour, top nosh, and the cheerful launch of a new family? Although it sounds strange, the most important and attractive personality in the universe offers us the best wedding invite ever.²² Not of course as a guest but as the bride, the object of his attention.

But there is one aspect of weddings and marriage that we cannot ignore. We were made for faithful committed relationship. There are few sadder things than a short-lived marriage.²³ Marriage on earth is a foreshadowing of the union to come between Christ and the church,²⁴ and therefore profoundly symbolic of God's covenantal love, and what is to come. Therefore there is

something holy about sex, even when we don't treat it so ourselves.²⁵

*'What a person desires is unfailing love.'*²⁶

Let's also tell our friends our stories, and why we personally trust the boundaries given by God. For all the facts we can spar with as medics, you can't 'outfact' a story. I was pleasantly cheered by a conversation with my registrar when I was a junior doctor. He was a gruff biker who bragged about kicking out the lights of a car that cut him up, and was a bit of a player with the nurses. He once asked me how my love life compared. I was tempted to change the subject, but I had a stab at explaining the Christian view on marriage. He paused and, to my amazement, grunted 'respect that'. We should have confidence that others have God-given conscience,²⁷ and the same God-given desire for faithful relationship.

diverse

So our sexuality is not a trivial or accidental aspect of our human nature, because it points beyond itself to the source of all love and intimacy in eternity. It is such a fundamental dimension of how we are created, how we reflect the unity in diversity that is present within God himself:

*'So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'*²⁸

This high theology is not an easy sell in our culture, where our internal experiences and impulses are king. But if the self-giving, other regarding, passionate, faithful God of unity in diversity is the primary reality behind the universe, this may go some way to explaining the Bible's assertion that unity in diversity is central to marriage that honours the creation order. When we love someone who is 'other', we are aligning ourselves with the most basic reality of the universe, we are 'going with the grain' of creation.

That raises challenges for those who are same-sex attracted. But Sam Allberry points out that all of us have a problem with our orientation, fundamentally towards our creator. Our loves need reordering, whatever our sexuality.

fruitful

*'God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth."'*²⁹

A few years ago a celebrity suggested that everyone should wear a condom for sex because 'the future of humanity depends on it'. Of course that would cause mass extinction! Perhaps it's easy to forget in our technological age that in the created order there is an intended link between sex and reproduction. Now we can have sex without babies (due to contraception) and babies without sex (due to assisted conception). But we were intended to be fruitful, literally by procreating in the context of loving committed relationship, reflecting God's creation in the context of his eternal loving committed relationship within the trinity. And it is in the context of marriage that new life erupts, and is most successfully nurtured into maturity.

conclusion

Our sexuality is a reflection of the passionate, faithful God of abundant diversity in whose image we are made. Christians are likely to look out of step with our culture for a while. So we will need to learn to listen better to people who are different. But also re-emerge to tell the variety of stories of how Jesus has been known as good news for family life for centuries past, and for us personally today. In a world that is increasingly restless, we will need to live by example: that whether single or married, whatever our orientation or identity or past, that we live in delighted anticipation of the great union to come. Come Lord Jesus. ■

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