

DIVINE DESIGN FOR SEXUALITY
A Seminar on Sexuality From a Biblical Perspective

by
Karen & Ron Flowers
*Directors, Department of Family
Ministries, General Conference
1995*

Theme: This seminar presents human sexuality as an integral part of human nature, created by God and redeemed by Him through His salvation act in Christ. Through our acceptance of His plan for our sexuality and the ministry of the Holy Spirit within us, we glorify God. The intent of this seminar is to discover how to bring God that glory and how a Christian understanding of sexuality can serve to enrich our lives and our marriages.

Setting: The program is designed specifically for Christian couples in a marriage enrichment setting. Though not limited to a certain age group, the specific target audience would be those married some ten years or more, who may be experiencing the disillusionment stage of marriage (Augsburger, 1988; Family Ministries Planbook, 1994) and could benefit from an enhanced understanding of sexuality and from communication together about sexual issues in marriage. The parts of the program may be spread over a series of evenings or, preferably, linked together in a weekend retreat.

Objectives: The program is intended to 1) impart information regarding the biblical teaching about sexuality and 2) stimulate attitudinal change in participants, preparing the way for long-term behavioral change as participants act upon the insights received and incorporate them into their lives.

Format: Each part of the seminar is designed to include lecture modules and a participatory exercise, either involving the group, the individuals themselves, or the participants as married couples. What follows throughout this paper is an outline of the core elements of the seminar. A synopsis of each part is followed by a brief description of key thoughts, specific strategies, and/or exercises that may be used.

Introduction

The Bible never uses the terms sex, sexual, or sexuality. However, throughout Scripture there are many references to this aspect of human life. Early in the sacred text we read that "Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she conceived . . ." (Gen. 4:1), obviously a reference to their sexual experience. Elsewhere husbands are counseled, "Rejoice in the wife of your youth May her breasts

satisfy always, may you ever be captivated by her love . . ." (Prov. 5:18, 19). At times the biblical references are shaped negatively as in Exodus 20:14, where God etches in stone the commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." To Christian believers Paul writes, "It is God's will that you should be holy; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen . . ." (1 Thess. 4:3-5).

Were we to state the positive principle that lies behind these references, it would be, "You shall live in harmony with the divine design for your sexuality." Some may find the phrase divine design for sexuality a curious one, yet as the various Scripture references on the topic are considered, a mosaic can be seen, a design, God's plan for this prominent feature of our lives.

Part I — The Bible's Wholesome View of Sexuality

Synopsis. The Bible's attitude toward sexuality is a wholesome one. Acceptance of the biblical view opens the way for a healthier understanding of ourselves, our marital relationships, and our overall spiritual experience with God.

Confusing views of sexuality within Christianity. "If any institution has a bad record of teaching with regard to sex, it is the Christian church" (Achteimer, 1976, p. 154). Some think that the apostle Paul had a somewhat ambivalent view of sexuality:

Paul's view of sexuality and women was rather ambivalent, deriving both from the immorality of much Greco-Roman culture and from the expectation he shared with most early Christians that Jesus would return soon, bringing the world to an end. (Hyde, 1990, p. 587)

However, Paul actually had a very positive and affirming view of women and sexuality that stemmed from his great understanding of the redemptive activity of Christ (cf. Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor 6:18-20). What is more likely is that later Christian theologians tended to understand the "sins of the flesh" (Col. 2:11, KJV) primarily in sexual terms and thus gave Christianity a bias against sexuality.

Increasingly tainted by dualistic philosophies, leaders such as Origen, Augustine, and Jerome treated the sexual function of the body with suspicion, even disdain. Quipped Jerome, "Marriage populates the earth, virginity populates heaven" (Grenz, 1990, xiv). Celibacy was promoted as preferable to marriage and was perpetuated through the centuries until the Reformation. Even today, things spiritual are often valued more highly than things physical. Sex and sin are often synonymous in our minds (Achteimer, 1976).

Group activity. In the following four clusters of references from the Law, the Prophets, the Writings, and the New Testament, how is sexuality portrayed? What is the biblical attitude toward the human body?

1) Gen. 1:27, 31; 2:7, 23-25; 39:6b-9; Ex. 20:14; 20:17; Lev. 18:6-23.

2) Isa. 54:5; 62:4, 5; Jer. 3:14; Eze. 16:18.

3) Ps. 63:1; 84:1, 2; 139:13-16; Prov. 5:15-19; Song 7:1-10.

4) 1 Thess. 4:3-5; 5:23; 1 Cor. 3:16, 17; 6:18-20; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-29; Heb. 13:4; Rev. 21:2.

Summary of key points from the Bible study. 1) Sexuality is "very good" at creation. 2)

Notwithstanding the Fall, God does not change His mind about the role of sexuality, but rather regulates sexual conduct to preserve its meaning to the human community. 3) The prophets' use of the marriage metaphor to describe the divine-human relationship exalts human sexuality. 4) The Bible does not blush to speak openly of the body, its sexual attractiveness, and the delight to be found in the sexual communion of husband and wife. 5) The New Testament confirms a holistic view of human nature; the body has been redeemed by Christ and is a means for glorifying God. 6) As in the Old Testament, the use of the sexual/marriage analogy for the divine-human covenant is instructive in two ways: a) it suggests that from human marital intimacy we can learn something precious about God's love for us and b) from the objective revelation in Scripture of Christ's union with the Church we can find a relationship model for husbands and wives (Grenz, 1990).

Key quotation: In the Biblical view, human beings are always considered as psychophysical wholes. . . . The life of sex can never be separated, for the Christian, from the life of spirituality. It is fully as possible to violate or to fulfill our relation to God through sexual activity as through prayer or service. (Achtemeier, 1976, pp. 157, 159)

Part II — Human Pair Bonding: Science Conforms With Scripture

Synopsis. Scientific studies indicate that a common pattern of male-female pair bonding appears to be universally present among humans. Stages in pair bonding correspond to the biblical progressive experiences of leaving, cleaving, and one-flesh (Gen. 2:24, KJV).

Bible study of bonding. The Scripture's word for bonding is unite (cleave—KJV; join—NKJV), such as in marriage (Gen. 2:24), in friendship (Prov. 18:24), between individuals and God (Deut. 10:20), and between objects (2 Sam. 23:10). The Bible, particularly the Song of Songs, describes the involvement of the five senses in male-female pair bonding: sight (Job 31:1; Song 4:9); hearing/voice (Judges 16:16; Song 2:14); touch (Prov. 5:20; Song 1:2; 2:6; 7:8); scent (Song 1:3, 12; 2:13; 7:8, 13); taste (Song 2:3; 5:1; 8:2).

Stages of pair bonding. While there is obviously much social influence in the development of sexual scenarios or "scripts" which tell us "who, what, when, where, and why we do what we do sexually" (Hyde, 1990, p. 36), zoologist/anthropologist Desmond Morris has mapped twelve observable sequential behaviors in pair bonding that tend to be present in all human cultures (Joy, 1985; Morris, 1971). The universality and predictability of these behaviors suggest a more primal, innate "script" derived from a common source in Creation.

These twelve steps (see handout) are: 1) eye to body—discovery and arousal of interest; 2) eye to eye—return of the look of interest; 3) voice to voice—verbal communication and emotional appeal; 4) hand to hand—physical contact, casual touch; 5) arm to shoulder—belonging, protection of the relationship; 6) arm to waist—growing closeness and emotional investment; 7) face to face—increasing openness, self-disclosure; 8) hand to head—deepening trust; 9) hand to body—respect, knowledge, acceptance of the other; 10) mouth to breast—dependency, giving oneself to the other; 11) hand to genital—stimulation, desire to pleasure the other; 12) genital to genital—complete physical union.

Implications of the pair bonding sequence. Joy (1985, p. 43) suggests that the steps in Morris's observed scheme "correspond, overall, to the sequence laid down in the Judeo-Christian blueprint. In Genesis 2, which is quoted both by Jesus and Paul, there are three distinct movements:

1. *Leave* father and mother/Morris, steps 1-3.
2. *Cleave*: cling/hug spouse/Morris, steps 4-9.
3. *Union*, one flesh, naked, unashamed/Morris 10-12."

What transpires throughout the development of a relationship between a man and a woman before marriage can provide a solid foundation for their commitment to each other in the marriage itself. Further, marriages are enhanced as a couple repeatedly reenact the behaviors and experience again the feelings of their first bonding sequence, or ensure that all the steps are traversed to a bonding sequence in which parts of the sequence may have been initially by-passed or hurried over.

An additional advantage to understanding this apparently inborn sexual script is that alien bonding, the formation of a pair bond with one other than one's spouse, can be detected and aborted (compare the warning against alien bonding in Proverbs 5).

Couple activity. Couples will first write down their thoughts, then dialogue together on the following:

- 1) Things that are very good about our bonding and sexual experiences.
- 2) Things about our bonding and sexual experiences which are pretty good, but which could be improved.
- 3) Things I can do to help make our bonding and sexual experiences even better.

Part III — The Song of Songs: A Mini-Handbook on Sexuality

Synopsis. The Song of Songs is one whole Bible book devoted to the sexual experience between a man and a woman. Male-female intimacy as it develops in romance, friendship, and marital commitment is portrayed. Male-female sexual response differences are also described.

Building romance into marriage. The Song shows the importance of compliments that make one's lover feel appreciated (2:2, 3; 4:2-5; 7:4), of care for one's personal appearance (4:7; 5:10), of creating a romantic setting for lovemaking (1:16, 17; 2:10), and of giving each other the gift of time and undivided attention (2:17; 5:2).

Married friends. Shulamith, the woman in the Song (Delitzsch, 1950), declares, "This is my friend (rea)" (5:16). Solomon uses the same Hebrew word in its feminine form *rayah* as an affectionate name for his wife (1:9, 15, etc.). *Rayati* ("my love"—NKJV; "my darling"—NIV) may be literally translated as "my friend" (Carr, 1984).

Commitment. "Christian marriage is committed marriage. That is its basic characteristic" (Achtemeier, 1976, p. 41). Grenz (1990) suggests that inward commitment to marriage must be demonstrated in at least two foundational outward expressions, the declaration of the covenant in the presence of witnesses and the repeated reenactment of the covenant through the experience of sexual intercourse. Both these outward expressions are present in the Song. Additionally, the statement, "My lover is mine, and I am his" (2:16) constitutes a miniature marriage covenant statement spoken by the woman. This she repeats in a slightly different form in Song 6:3. The testimony of the man to commitment, while he highly praises the qualities of the woman and declares "my dove, my perfect one, is unique" (6:9) is less effusive than hers. Perhaps this is why she seems to plead for an assurance that she is set as a seal upon his heart (8:6, 7).

Couple exercise. Couples first take a few moments to think about and write down their responses to the following unfinished statements and then discuss them with each other.

- 1) "I feel loved when . . ."
- 2) "My spouse feels loved when . . ."

Differences in loving for him and her. Men can quickly become aroused romantically through visual stimuli and by touching their mates. Note Solomon's many references to seeing her face (2:14), delighting in her beauty (4:1ff; 6:4ff; 7:1ff), being captured by her hair (7:5), holding the branches (7:8), and embracing her (2:6; 8:3). Romantically, women respond best in an atmosphere that is unhurried, with time for words of love and affirmation accompanied by closeness and caressing. Shulamith yearns to be with him (1:7), desires his companionship and friendship (2:3, 10; 5:16; 7:11ff), fears separation from him (3:1; 5:6) and calls for his committed love (8:6, 7). She enjoys having him kiss, hold, and caress her (1:2; 2:6; 8:3) (Flowers, 1992).

Key quotation: Our marriage bed is a holy place in the sight of God. We must be careful to maintain this viewpoint concerning sex in marriage, for it is God's. Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled. . . ." Sex apart from marriage is spelled out as obviously wrong. Sex in marriage is wonderfully right. Let us never forget it! (Wheat, 1977, p. 23)

Closing

Couple exercise. Couples first write their responses to the following statements, then dialog together.

- 1) New insights I have gained from our seminar experience.
- 2) Ways in which our love, romance, and commitment are very good.
- 3) Aspects of our love, romance, and commitment that are pretty good, but where some improvement is needed.
- 4) Things I can do to improve our love, romance, and commitment.

Symbolic gift. As a closing exercise, distribute a sheet of paper to each participant. With this paper each couple will create a symbolic gift, either by writing on the paper, folding it, or tearing and shaping it. Each then will give this gift to the other, expressing its symbolism.

References

- Achtemeier, E. (1976). *The committed marriage*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.
- Augsburger, D. (1988). *Sustaining love: healing & growth in the passages of marriage*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books.
- Carr, G. L. (1984). *The Song of Solomon, an introduction and commentary*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press.
- Delitzsch, F. (1950). *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Flowers, K. & R. (1992). *Love aflame*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association.
- _____. (1993). *Empowering families for growth & change*. Lincoln, NE: NAD Distribution Center.
- Grenz, S. (1990). *Sexual ethics*. Dallas: Word Publishing.
- Hyde, J. S. (1990). *Understanding human sexuality*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.
- Joy, D. (1985). *Bonding: relationships in the image of God*. Waco, TX: Word Books.
- Morris, D. (1971). *Intimate behavior*. New York: Random House.
- Wheat, E., M.D., & Wheat, G. (1977). *Intended for pleasure*. Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company.