

Why sexual abstinence before marriage is important: a pastoral response in light of the Gospel by Doug Brown, Lead Pastor Greenwood Community Church

“I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.”
Isaiah 47:17

“Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your forefathers.” Proverbs 22:28

“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”
Matthew 7:24

“Christians have no right to be embarrassed when it comes to talking about sex and sexuality. An unhealthy reticence or embarrassment in dealing with these issues is a form of disrespect to God’s creation. Whatever God made is good, and every good thing God made has an intended purpose that ultimately reveals His own glory. When conservative Christians respond to sex with ambivalence or embarrassment, we slander the goodness of God and hide God’s glory which is intended to be revealed in the right use of creation gifts.” – Al Mohler

“In the Christian grammar, marriage is not only for the married couple. Insofar as marriage tells the Christian community a particular story, marriage is also for the community. Marriage presupposes fidelity, and married people are a sign to the Church of God’s own radical fidelity toward all of us.” – Lauren Winner, *Real Sex*

When asked to abstain from sex before marriage, many people in our culture would respond as follows: “You have to be joking! You want me to do what? I knew it. All the church is interested in is a list of rules and making sure that nobody has any fun. How am I supposed to be my authentic self without sex?”

We live in a society that is both conflicted and consumed by the idea of sex.ⁱ On the one hand, we view sex as a casual act with little significance. This attitude was expressed in the sitcom *Friends* when Monica asked her paramour, “So, we can still be friends and have sex?” “Sure,” he replied, “it’ll just be something we do together, like racquetball.”ⁱⁱ As revealing as this was back in the nineties, today we have phone apps specifically for hooking up sexually. We act as if great, otherworldly sex is readily available with no commitment. You just need great technique. Our culture seeks to convince us that the only way to be really fulfilled or free is to be in a sexual relationship.ⁱⁱⁱ

Cultural critic Mary Eberstadt thinks the sexual revolution may have been the most powerful revolution of the 20th Century. She writes: “The sexual revolution was the destigmatization of non-marital sex and the reduction of sexual relations in general to a kind of hygienic recreation in which anything goes as long as those involved are consenting adults.”^{iv}

Pastor John Mark Comer highlights what he calls the “tectonic shifts in sexuality in Western culture” noting the following changes: sex has been disconnected from family and childbearing; sex has been disconnected from marriage; sex has been disconnected from male-female relationships; sex has been disconnected from love, emotion, or relational commitment of any kind; and sex has been disconnected even from people with the rise of sexual robots and “2D love.” He also reflects on our pastoral experience of hearing so many stories of deep pain related to our misuse of sex.^v

Once a virtue and discipline taught by many faiths, sexual abstinence (chastity) has become more the subject of jokes than serious consideration by thinking people.^{vi} As Lauren Winner as stated in her book *Real Sex*, “chastity is one of the many Christian practices that are at odds with the dictates of our surrounding, secular culture...It strikes most secular folk as curious (at best), strange, backwards, repressed. Chastity is also something that many of us Christians have to learn.”^{vii}

We are wise to reflect seriously on the way our culture is forming us as persons. Specifically, how are we being formed by our Western culture’s view of personhood, the body, sex, and marriage? The way we embody our sexuality and manage our sexual desire is very different in the Way of Jesus than our current Western culture. Jesus intends to form us into people of genuine, sacrificial love, which requires that our physical desire for another must be mastered by a greater desire to bless and build up another person in holy love.

So why bring up the topic of sexual abstinence (chastity) before marriage? If one is getting married anyway, does it really matter? To put it simply, we bring it up because God does! God created sex, and God defines good sex! God’s Word speaks often and unashamedly about sex, and we must be willing to consider His Word on the subject.^{viii} In many respects, the Bible is a book about sex and marriage.^{ix} It has been wisely stated that “the gigantic secret of the joy of sex is this: Sex is good because the God who created sex is good. And God is glorified greatly when we receive his gifts with thanksgiving and enjoy it the way he meant for it to be enjoyed.”^x

Sex cannot be rightly understood or properly practiced without seeing how sex relates to God.^{xi} God has unequivocally united sex to marriage. Since you are considering marriage, it is appropriate and wise to consider sex from God’s perspective. Any consideration of a Christian marriage and wedding ceremony should include the significance of chastity. If you have never seriously considered the issue of chastity and Christian marriage, I hope you will do so now.

We know that God’s commands are not arbitrary, capricious or intended to keep us from enjoying life. Rather, they are given to protect and guide us into the path of God’s best life for us. The Lord’s commands for our sexuality are given to us as paths of rich blessing. The gospel always offers us new and real life. Jesus was not reluctant to call us to leave certain habits in order to enter into His abundant life.

While many voices in our culture scream for “sexual freedom,” there are many who are waking up to the reality they have lost something special in their alleged freedom. One counselee asked, “Why didn’t I hear more about the cost of living as if sex has no consequences, no meaning? Where was everybody?”^{xii}

In this response I intend to address the following topics for your prayerful consideration: How should we understand our sexual desires to unite with the opposite sex? What is the appropriate context for sexual passion? Why does the Lord limit our sexual expression only to the covenant of marriage? What does any of this have to do with your wedding service? Finally, what is the appropriate response if one has violated the Lord's commands in this area? Is there any real hope that things could be different?

How should we understand our sexual desires to unite with the opposite sex?

One of the very practical implications of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the conviction that God is inherently relational. God's Word reveals the mystery that God exists in perfect, loving relationship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Made uniquely in God's image, humanity is graced with the capacity and desire for relationships. In fact, God's image is represented by the complimentary nature of men and women together (Genesis 1&2). While this response concerns how we express our sexual desire, it is important to remember that non-sexualized friendships are one of the foundational gifts and means for developing a healthy identity as a man or woman.

It is this close connection between our sexuality and the image of God that gives us clues to understand why distorted sexuality and false spiritualities so often go together. It has been written that "the young man who rings the bell of the brothel is unconsciously looking for God."^{xiii} Noting how sex has become the effective religion of our culture, Peter Kreeft states:

Sex is like religion not only because it is objectively holy in itself but also because it gives us subjectively a foretaste of heaven, of the self-forgetting, self-transcending self-giving that is what our deepest hearts are designed for, long for and will not be satisfied until they have, because we are made in God's own image and this self-giving constitutes the inner life of the Trinity.^{xiv}

Likewise, in her book *Real Sex*, Lauren Winner states:

That people have sex outside marriage is understandable; we fornicate for the same reason we practice idolatry. Idolatry carries in it the seed of a good impulse – the impulse to worship our Maker. Idolatry is that good impulse wrongly directed to disastrous ends. Like idolatry, fornication is a wrong reflection of a right creational impulse. We were made for sex. And so premarital sex tells a partial truth; that's why it resonates with something. But partial truths are destructive. They push us to created goods wrongly lived. ...they are ultimately destructive to our selves, our souls and bodies.^{xv}

Because God created our complimentary genders, we know that sex is God's good gift to us. As C.S. Lewis once said, "pleasure is God's idea, not the devil's." In the appropriate context, sexual desire is to be celebrated, cherished, and protected.

What is the appropriate context for us to express our sexual desire?

Throughout the Bible, we see a consistent sexual ethic. God's Word consistently teaches us that the only appropriate place where sexual expression finds God's sanction is within the framework of the life-long commitment of the marriage covenant between one man and one woman.^{xvi} Marriage is the fireplace for sexual passion. In the bible the

Song of Songs offers us God's endorsement on marital sex – "Eat, O friends and drink your fill; drink your fill, O lovers" (Song of Songs 5:1b).

Much of the Old Testament's concern with sex is the begetting of Godly children.^{xvii} However, the Lord is also eager to teach us that marital sex is also for pleasure, communion, and celebration. Happily tucked in the middle of the Old Testament is the Song of Songs (Song of Solomon), which contains erotic language capable of making anyone blush!^{xviii} This book has been called a picture of "eros without shame" and a commentary on the Genesis 2:25, "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame."

Both Jesus and Paul celebrated marriage as God's gracious provision for our sexual expression. They both followed the Genesis story as God's authoritative guidance for marriage and sexual expression. When asked about marriage, Jesus went back to the creation story and pointed to the fact that the Lord brought the man and woman together as husband and wife, and they were united sexually (Matthew 19:5 quoting Genesis 2:24). Again and again, he taught and acted as if this was the only holy context for sexual union (Mark 7:20-23; Luke 7:36-50; John 4:16-18; 8:1-11; Rev.2; 22:14-15). Likewise, Paul taught that the only appropriate context for sexual expression was marriage.^{xix} In fact he held marriage forth as a holy defense against sexual temptation (1 Corinthians 7:1-7). Both marriage and celibacy require God's grace to be lived faithfully (Matthew 19:1-12).

How are we to think of sexual expression outside of marriage?

In the Bible our sexuality is a major arena affected by sin, and therefore, a major arena to bring under the influence of Jesus' gracious rule. The Bible consistently speaks of sexual expression outside of marriage, whether in reality or fantasy, as "sexual immorality" (Greek *porneia*). Jesus said these immoral thoughts and actions flow from our spiritually sick hearts and therefore require his supernatural grace to cleanse and reorder our desires according to his holy pattern (Mark 7:21-23).

We all need God's grace to learn healthy sexuality under the influence of Jesus. Both Jesus and Paul taught us that our bodies and sexual desire, while a gift from the Lord, are nevertheless to be managed well. Jesus emphatically taught us that our sexual urges can be misplaced with drastic consequences (Matthew 5:27-30). Likewise, Paul taught that unchecked sexual expression was a characteristic of those who would not inherit God's kingdom (Galatians 5:19-21; 6:7-9; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 2 Cor. 12:21).

Despite his culture's celebration of every form of sexual expression, Paul followed Jesus in calling all sexual expression outside of marriage sin. The Greco-Roman culture, like ours, was immersed in every kind of sexual expression. Sexual expression outside of marriage was the celebrated norm. Nevertheless, Paul described this cultural perspective as "futile thinking and darkened understanding" typical of those "separated from the life of God" (Ephesians 4:17-19). He consistently instructed Christians that such behavior resulted from yielding to our sinful nature (Galatians 5:19). He commanded Christians to "flee even the hint" of such behavior as "improper for God's holy people" as it is consistent with the type of rebellion that keeps one from inheriting God's kingdom (Ephesians 5:3-7; Galatians 5:19-21).

Paul's sexual ethic was based on the Old Testament's sexual imagery used to describe God's covenant relationship with His people. We have seen how the Lord gives us sexual pleasure for different reasons. However, we may reason that the *ultimate* purpose the Lord has created us sexual beings is that we might know Him more fully.^{xx} Again and again the Lord described His relationship with His covenant people in terms of a marriage covenant.^{xxi} Our sexuality provides us with the human experience and language to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27). This is why Paul declares that those who engage in sexual immorality live like those "who do not know God" (1 Thessalonians 4:5). All misuses of our sexuality distort God's good gift intended to lead us to a true knowledge of God.

Given this background, Paul argues that a Christian's sexual immorality is like a spiritual adultery. Our salvation has afforded us intimate spiritual union with the Lord. Therefore, any sexual union outside of marriage was an unholy union that exposed Christ to such sin (1 Corinthians 6:13-18).

Moreover, our sexual purity is a matter of good stewardship. Paul called us to remember that our bodies as well as our souls had been purchased by at the high cost of Christ's death on the cross. In fact, our very bodies were now the dwelling places of the Holy Spirit: "Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with at a price. Therefore honor God with your body." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Here, we see our responsibility to manage our bodies and sexual desires as gifts entrusted to us by the Lord.

In addition to managing our own sexuality, we also have the responsibility to love our neighbor by restraining from engaging in sexual immorality with them. Again, writing to Christians in the midst of a sexualized culture like our own, Paul said, "We instructed you how to live in order to please God...It is God's will that you live set apart: 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 ...and that in this manner no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for such sins ...For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8).

Why does the Lord limit our sexual expression only to the covenant of marriage?

Surely many in our culture would consider such commands not only unnecessary and irrelevant, but clearly burdensome, oppressive and even dangerous. Why would God possible set such boundaries?

A young child may consider their parents bold prohibition to stay out of the street as a missed opportunity for some real fun. But every parent knows that this prohibition is a necessary boundary intended for the safety and welfare of the child. Given the rather bold language with which the Lord clearly forbids sex outside of marriage, might we infer a similar motivation? Might wisdom call us to consider that these commands are actually clues to something deeper – to the precious nature of our hearts as well as the beauty and holiness marital sex?

In the Song of Songs, we read of the wife's repeated instruction: "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires." In her excitement she calls for a vow of marriage in

order to protect the precious nature of sex. The Lord is telling us that sex is too powerful to stir up prematurely. The life-long marriage covenant is the only commitment proper to channel such powerful emotions and experiences.^{xxii}

When we engage in sex before marriage, our relationship does not have the opportunity to develop in a healthy way. The sexual aspect of the relationship has a way of clouding our judgment and crowding out other issues that need to be addressed. The foundation of any relationship, especially marriage, is trust. This is what we offer to one another in our wedding vows. But a sexual relationship without these vows clouds the basis of the relationship. In her excellent book *Sex and the Soul of a Woman*, Paula Rinehart wisely observes “vulnerability of the heart is always supposed to precede, by a long shot, vulnerability of the body...”^{xxiii}

It should not surprise us that objective, secular studies have confirmed the wisdom of God’s commands regarding our sexuality. Secular studies have shown that couples who cohabit before marriage are far more likely to divorce than couples who do not.^{xxiv} Cohabitation does not test the most important thing one needs to know about a prospective spouse: whether they can be trusted to be there when things are really tough. Instead, the very nature of cohabitation is in fact a “make – no – lasting – promises” kind of relationship. It is the very opposite of the biblical covenant of marriage, which is intended to provide the ultimate security for the greatest intimacy. Professors Amy and Leon Kass of the University of Chicago teach their students to remain celibate and cultivate an appropriate awe for the depth and breadth of marital love and the fragility of the human heart.^{xxv}

Paula Rinehart wisely states that sexual boundaries convey our value. One’s innocence and purity is a special gift to be given to one person at the right time.^{xxvi} Moreover, God’s boundaries around our sexuality are intended to protect our souls. We are simply not built by God for sex outside the safety of a life-long marriage. Contrary to our cultural myth, sex is not as casual as “two airplanes refueling.” We cannot simply engage our bodies without any attachment.^{xxvii} Our souls are mysteriously touched even as our bodies are connected (Gen. 2:24; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20). This is why a person’s sexual past is always a factor in their current relationship unless these “soul ties” are appropriately broken.^{xxviii}

Men and women alike have a deep, God-given desire to be known and loved for who we really are. But this is absolutely crucial for a woman’s heart. God has placed in a woman’s heart the deep desires to be wanted and pursued. There are some core questions her heart wants answered: “Am I lovely? Will you pursue and delight in *me*? Will you fight for *me*?”^{xxix} She needs these questions answered so that she may genuinely trust that the man wants her heart before her body. A woman needs to know that a man loves and enjoys *her* for who *she is* and not just the physical pleasure she may give. God commands celibacy out of His desire to protect a woman’s heart and life. Celibacy allows appropriate vulnerability of our hearts before our bodies. It allows a healthy and honest demonstration of respect and honor as well as the practice of self-giving without the expected leverage or reward of sex.^{xxx}

Likewise, celibacy is God’s provision for protecting and growing a man’s heart as well. Like a woman, a man needs some core questions answered in his heart as well. Am I really a man? Do I have what it takes to come through when it counts?^{xxxi} God has wired men to offer their strength on behalf of others. In our culture men are tempted to think

that these questions are answered by their sexual relationships with women. Commenting on our sexualized culture, Rinehart notes that the easiest and most sure way to feel like a man is to have sex. But this mistaken quest is born from the illusion that a woman can confer masculine strength on a man when she cannot.^{xxxii} John Eldredge confronts this popular illusion when he says “the masculine journey takes a man away from the woman so that he might return to her. He goes to find his strength; he returns to offer it.”^{xxxiii}

John Eldredge astutely observes that “most men want the maiden without any sort of cost to themselves. They want all the joys of the beauty without any of the woes of the battle.”^{xxxiv} Sexual abstinence is one of God’s ways of calling forth the very answer every man wants to know about himself. Does he have what it takes to be a man? Will he be able to offer his strength on behalf of another? Can he win the battle? Sexual promiscuity allows men to remain stuck emotionally as self-serving adolescents. It allows them to enjoy sexual pleasure without the real costs and commitment of marriage. Sexual promiscuity allows men to remain stuck in their selfishness without ever calling forth the best from their hearts. Rinehart writes “In the best of ways, celibacy...forces a man to deal with himself. He has to do battle with his sexuality...Then he gets the great gift of being able to use his sexuality for a larger purpose.”^{xxxv}

If a marriage is to follow God’s best pattern then it is imperative that the husband learn how to offer his strength on behalf of his wife in a sacrificial way. This sacrificial love is the very essence of his part in the covenant of marriage. This leads us to the next question we must consider.

What does celibacy have to do with your wedding ceremony? If you’re getting married anyway, does it really matter?

This is not the place to articulate a complete Christian theology of marriage. However, we have already noted that a Christian marriage is intended to be a living picture of the Gospel.^{xxxvi} A Christian marriage ceremony is a joyful occasion of *worship*. In this worship service, you both profess your mutual faith in Jesus Christ and publicly vow your life-long, unconditional love to one another before the Lord and witnesses. You ask the Lord’s blessing on their marriage.^{xxxvii} This is the difference between a Christian marriage ceremony and a civil ceremony recognized by the State.

If you are getting married, you might wonder if it really matters if you have made a commitment to sexual abstinence. But have you seriously considered the implications of intentionally disobeying a command of the Lord? Could you really stand before the Lord and your witnesses asking for the Lord’s blessing knowing you have deliberately disobeyed Him?

Time and again the Lord rebuked His people for engaging in worship rituals while deliberately living sinful lives.^{xxxviii} Jesus referred to such people as “hypocrites” and said, “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain...” (Mark 7:6-7 quoting Isaiah 29:13). In order to enter your wedding ceremony with integrity, confidence, and joy, you should be willing to bring your sexuality under Christ’s Lordship. To make no sincere attempt to walk in obedience to God’s commands is to live a dangerously deceptive life (Matthew 7:21-23).

Besides this serious consideration, I offer you two additional reasons to make a vow of chastity before your marriage. First, this vow will enable you to demonstrate that your relationship is not grounded on your sexual relationship. Physical desire for another must always be mastered by the greater desire to bless and build him or her up in holy love. As bearers of God's image, we can choose to engage with others while withholding our bodies until love matures.^{xxix} Second, you will experience in a tangible way the Lord's grace and power now so that you will be ready to trust Him when more difficult trials come in your marriage (Titus 2:11-14). Growth in sexual self-control demonstrates that a Christian is participating in the grace of God in Christ and bearing the fruit of the Spirit.

Can we start over with our sexuality?

Mercifully God is a God of new beginnings! This is the whole point of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus delighted to embody God's mercy and grace to sexual sinners (John 4:1-26; 8:1-11). The Apostle Paul considered himself the worst of all sinners saying: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that reason, I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example of those who would believe on him and receive eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

Writing to many, who had practiced sexual immorality of all kinds, Paul said: "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified (made holy), you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). We can start fresh today asking Jesus to forgive us, turning away from our sexual sin, and seeking to live the Way of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. It may not be easy, but it is possible if we have the Holy Spirit.

I love the ancient Japanese art of fixing broken pottery called *kintsugi*. They use a special tree sap lacquer dusted with powdered gold or silver, which makes the restored cracks visible. They do this because they see the flaws and imperfections of the pottery as part of its story rather than something to be hidden. That is the way Jesus sees our sexual sin and brokenness. It's part of our story, but it is something he is able to restore in a beautiful way.

ⁱ According to one study, over 14,000 sexual references are shown on TV per year, and the average person will view over 100,000 of those references in their lifetime. *Lauren Winner, Real Sex (Brazos Press 2005),p.63.*

ⁱⁱ *Real Sex by Lauren Winner (Brazos Press, 2005),p.78.*

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S Representative Barbara Lee (D-California) has stated that an "abstinence-until-marriage" program is not only irresponsible, but it's inhumane. See *Christianity Today*, "Abolishing Abstinence" (Sep. 2005). One college student expressed the common thought of our culture when he declared "sex shall set us free" and encouraged his fellow students to explore their sexuality. See Campus Crusade for Christ International letter (July 2003). If these claims are true, then how do we explain the fact that Jesus Christ, the most fulfilled man to ever live, was celibate. Likewise, so was the Apostle Paul.

^{iv} Mary Eberstadt, *Adam & Eve After the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution.*

^v John Mark Comer sermon – "God & Sexuality."

^{vi} Think of the movie "The 40 Year old Virgin"

^{vii} *Real Sex,p.9.*

^{viii} Contrary to the claims of many in our culture, we are not simply animals with a sexual instinct. Unlike the animals, we can know the will of God concerning our bodies, and we can do God's will concerning our sexuality.

^{ix} In the beginning of the Bible there is marriage (Gen. 2:23-25). At the very end of the Bible there is marriage (Rev. 19:6-9). The central themes of the Bible are underlined with marriage metaphors (Hosea 2; Ezek. 16; Isa. 62:4-5; Matt. 9:15; 25:1-13; Eph. 5:21-33). Our sexuality is a both part of God's good creation and also the brokenness of the Fall.

^x Ben Patterson, *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, p.55.

^{xi} John Piper contends speaks of the relationship between sex and God in two basic points: (1) Our sexuality is designed by God as a way to know God in Christ more fully; and (2) knowing God in Christ more fully is designed as a way of guarding and guiding our sexuality. See *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, ed. John Piper & Justin Taylor (2005 *Desiring God Ministries*).

^{xii} Paula Rinehart, *Sex and the Soul of a Woman*, p.62.

^{xiii} *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, p.15 (quoting Bruce Marshall).

^{xiv} Peter Kreeft, as quoted in *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, p.15.

^{xv} *Real Sex*, p.121.

^{xvi} See Genesis 2:24; Song of Songs; Matthew 19:5-6; 1 Corinthians 7:2; Ephesians 5:31; Hebrews 13:4.

^{xvii} Genesis 1:28; 18:19; Malachi 2:15.

^{xviii} For a brief explanation of the meaning of the cultural imagery in the Song of Songs see *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, p.50-53.

^{xix} Paul addressed the topic of sexual immorality in eight different letters (1 Thess. 4:2-8; Gal. 5:19-21; 6:7-9; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 6:9-20; 7:19; 2 Cor. 12:21; Rom. 1:24-27; 6:19-22; Col. 3:5-10; Eph. 4:17-24; 5:3-12; 1 Tim. 1:9-11). He uses three different words to describe the immorality of every kind of sexual expression outside of marriage: *porneia* "sexual immorality," *akatharsia* "sexual uncleanness," *aselgeia* "sexual licentiousness."

^{xx} Piper, p.26-30.

^{xxi} See Ezekiel 16 (Ephesians 5:22-33); Hosea 2.

^{xxii} *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*, p.52.

^{xxiii} Rinehart, p. 163.

^{xxiv} See the report made by The Marriage Project at Rutgers University (see USA Today, Feb. 10, 2000). More recently see "Cohabitation is Still Associated with Greater Odds of Divorece" (Oct. 17, 2018) by Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades.

^{xxv} USA Today, Feb. 10, 2000. See also their book, *Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar*.

^{xxvi} Rinehart, p.63.

^{xxvii} Rinehart, p.23.

^{xxviii} Rinehart, ch. 7.

^{xxix} John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, p.182.

^{xxx} Rinehart, p.164.

^{xxxi} Eldredge, p.57.

^{xxxii} Rinehart, p.171-172.

^{xxxiii} Eldredge, p.187.

^{xxxiv} Eldredge, p.187.

^{xxxv} Rinehart, p.175

^{xxxvi} Throughout the Bible, the Lord uses the analogy of a human marriage to illustrate His gracious covenant commitment to His people. The Biblical covenant of salvation is a *life-long covenant of belonging* in which we belong to the Lord unequivocally, and the Lord gives Himself to us. Speaking through the prophet Hosea, the Lord said to His people "I will betroth you to me forever" (Hosea 2:19; see also Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 2:2-3; Malachi 2:10-17).

The Apostle Paul picked up this imagery to describe the marital covenant between a Christian man and woman (Ephesians 5:21-33). He speaks of the husband's primary calling in the marriage to sacrificially

love his wife, and the wife's primary calling as respecting her husband. In this way the honor with which each gives to the other is a picture of the Gospel. Like the covenant of salvation, the marriage is a life-long commitment of unconditional love and belonging between two believers that is sealed in the sexual relationship of becoming "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24).

^{xxxvii} While God ordains marriage for every culture and faith, it is important to understand that a Christian marriage is between two Christ followers. God's Word consistently forbids a believer from marrying a person of another faith or no faith (1 Corinthians 7:39; Ex. 34:16; Deut. 13:6-13; Joshua 23:7-13; Malachi 2:11-12). In order for the best foundation for marriage, both parties must have the same Lord and priorities of life.

^{xxxviii} This is a consistent theme in the Old Testament prophets (See Micah 6:6-8; Hosea 6:6). The writer to the Hebrews warns us that "if we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only the fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Hebrews 10:26-27). There is a consistent teaching throughout the Bible that our desire to obey the Lord is evidence that we have truly been born again according to Jesus (John 3).

^{xxxix} Andy Comiskey, "Overcoming Sexual Immorality," Desert Stream Report, Autumn 2005.