

SEX AND THE GOSPEL

PORTRAYING OUR UNION WITH THE DIVINE NATURE

“[Christ is] united to you by a spiritual union, so close as to be fitly represented by the union of the wife to the husband.”

—Jonathan Edwards

“... Adam, ... a type of Him who was to come.”

—The Apostle Paul (NASB)

We are a people fascinated with sex.

Men and women, young and old. Christians, atheists, and everyone in between. In all cultures, throughout all of history, sexual desire has been one of the greatest motivators of the human will. Men and women throw away their families, houses, money, and land in order to be sexually satisfied. Some are addicted to it. Wars have been fought over it. We compose songs about it, make movies about it, and write stories about it. And this preoccupation with sex is not simply a facet of our fallen nature. Even one whole book of the Bible is dedicated to celebrating the sexual relationship between the husband and wife.

But have you ever wondered why all the fuss? Why did God create us as sexual people in the first place? I remember learning in science class about the asexual reproduction of single-celled organisms and being grateful that God had chosen a different method of reproduction for humans. The thought of mitosis didn't (and still doesn't) sound as appealing as the method of reproduction that God

gave us. But why did God choose to create us as sexual beings? He was obviously not tied to a need for sexual reproduction in order to propagate the species. He just as easily could have created humans as asexual creatures that reproduced like amoebas.

Until we understand why God created sex, we will never sufficiently make sense of his commands regarding sexual purity, for his commands always relate to his purposes. So to establish a biblical understanding of sexual purity, this chapter is dedicated to capturing a biblical understanding of sex itself.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION: UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE OF SEX

The primary reason that many of us do not adequately understand sex is because we do not adequately understand how sex relates to the gospel. As we will see, sex and the gospel are intrinsically linked. To understand one is to make sense of the other.

Shocking though this may seem, Scripture expressly states that God created sex to serve as a living witness of the life-changing

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union that believers have with God through Christ. Understanding how sex serves this function is absolutely essential for understanding not only why God created us as sexual beings but

also why God commands what he does regarding sexual purity. Ultimately, we will discover that God created the physical oneness of sex to serve as a visible image, or type, of the spiritual union that exists between Christ and the church. Though it may seem at first that we are diverging far from the primary topic of sexual purity, you will quickly see the significance of our discussion.

“TYPES” IN THE BIBLE

Two of history’s greatest theologians, Jonathan Edwards and Augustine, built much of their theology upon the idea that the image of God and his purposes can be seen in all facets of human existence. Both theologians believed that God created all of life to serve as visible portraits of invisible realities. To see the love between a father

and his son, for example, is to see a reflection of the love between God the Father and God the Son. To see the destruction caused by fire is to see a picture of the wrath of God. To see the creativity of an artist is to see a reflection of the creativity of God.¹

Seeing earthly entities as pictures of divine realities is readily affirmed in much of Scripture. Romans 5:14 (NASB), for example, describes Adam as a “type” of Christ. The word “type” comes from the Greek word *tupos*, which literally means “blow” or “impression” and refers to the indentation a hammer creates after it strikes wood or metal. Often translated in the New Testament as “example,” a *tupos* is a model or image of something.

Sex within marriage is a living picture of the gospel.

Just as an indentation represents that which made it, so too a *tupos* points to, or represents, something other than itself. Adam, then, is a shadow, or an image of Christ. Adam’s existence points us toward that which he represents—namely Christ.

Scripture is replete with such analogies. Hebrews 11:19 refers to Isaac as a type of Christ, for just as Abraham received him back from certain death, so too we have received Christ back from the dead. The atoning death of a lamb in the Old Testament foreshadowed the atoning death of the Lamb of God in the New Testament. Melchizedek’s mysterious priesthood was a picture of the eternal Priesthood of Christ. In Galatians Paul used Isaac and Ishmael as representatives of two contrasting covenants (the New and the Old). As we will see from Scripture, just as Adam served as a living *tupos*, or image, of Christ, so too sex has been created by God to serve as a living image of the gospel. In other words, when we think of sex, we should ultimately think of the gospel.

FOR THIS REASON

Ephesians 5:28–32 pointedly describes the sexual relationship within marriage as an image of the spiritual relationship between Christ and the church. As you read the passage, note carefully the significance of the last sentence (verse 32) within its context.²

Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man

ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife [i.e., sexual intercourse], and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church [RSV].

In this passage Paul is talking about Christ’s relationship with the church, stating that Christ cares for us because we are members of his body, just as a wife’s body is the body of her husband. Paul then inserts a passage from Genesis 2, beginning with the phrase “For this reason.” He includes this phrase to demonstrate that the sexual relationship within marriage exists for the sake of the “heavenly marriage.” Don’t miss this! Essentially Paul is saying, “Because of the spiritual relationship that exists between Christ and his church, . . . for this reason a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and the two become one flesh” (RSV).³ In other words, sexual oneness within marriage exists as an image of the spiritual oneness between Christ and the church.

Paul makes this even clearer in verse 32, where he specifically states that the mystery of a man and a woman becoming one flesh refers to Christ and the church. From this passage we can see that the physical union that results from sexual intercourse is akin to the spiritual union between Christ and the church.

The apostle Paul states that when a man and a woman come together sexually, in some mysterious way they “become one” in their flesh (Ephesians 5:31; 1 Corinthians 6:16). Something profound occurs through sexual intercourse. The union is not simply a legal union but rather a union of bodies, a sharing of physical life. Two people are joined together in the deepest and most wonderful way. This union is then to be lived out through the course of a permanent marriage relationship and explains why a husband is to lovingly care for his wife: because she has become one flesh with him. To care for her is to care for himself (Ephesians 5:28). A marriage relationship is the “living out” of the

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flesh (Ephesians 5:31; 1 Corinthians 6:16). Something profound occurs through sexual intercourse. The union is not simply a legal union but rather a union of bodies, a sharing of physical life. Two people are joined together

union that is established by the oneness of sexual intercourse. (This is why a sexual relationship that occurs outside the context of a marriage relationship is so destructive. The act of sex, which is meant to initiate a permanent union, is broken apart.)

But herein lies the significance of sex—not what it accomplishes on an earthly plane but what it images forth on a divine plane. It is not an end in itself; it is a type of something higher, pointing to the deeper reality of the gospel. Just as sex establishes a new union between a man and a woman and explains the shared life that follows, so too the indwelling of the Holy

Spirit marks a new union between Christ and the Christian and accounts for the life-change that follows. Just as a husband and wife “become one” physically, Christ

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and the Christian “become one” spiritually. The New Testament’s many references to the church as the “bride” of Christ and to Christ as the “bridegroom” support this parallel between earthly and heavenly union. Further, many of Christ’s parables use the wedding motif as an illustration of his return and consummate union with the church. And Revelation explicitly refers to the wedding of the Lamb and the church as inaugurating the dawn of the eternal age (Matthew 25:1–13; Revelation 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17).⁴

When we think of sexual oneness between a man and a woman as an image, or type, of our spiritual oneness with Christ, it is important to remember which came first in God’s mind. God did not pattern the divine marriage after human marriage, but rather human marriage is a picture of the divine marriage. The fact that the oneness of sex images the oneness of our spiritual relationship with Christ is not merely a happy coincidence. Just as God ordained the Passover lamb of the Old Covenant to prophetically witness to the coming sacrifice of Christ, so too God ordained human marriage to testify to the coming wedding supper of the Lamb.

REMEMBERING THE GOSPEL

Our spiritual union with Christ is an essential yet often overlooked aspect of the gospel. That lapse is, I believe, the primary reason the church has largely failed to see the illustrative relationship

between sex and salvation. A brief restatement of the gospel is in order. The good news of salvation is not simply that God has forgiven us, but rather that through our union with Christ we are born again into his very life—we have become sharers of his nature (2 Peter 1:4). Forgiveness is indeed a significant aspect of our salvation, but we must not reduce the saving work of God to simple bookkeeping in the divine registry, cleaning out our account of sins but otherwise leaving us untouched.⁵ Forgiveness cleans the slate, but forgiveness alone is not sufficient for entering the kingdom of Heaven.

That last sentence is worth repeating. Forgiveness alone is not sufficient for entering the kingdom of Heaven. When we understand that our chief culpability before God is not bound up in our sinful actions but even more fundamentally in our sinful nature—the source of our sinful actions—we can begin to understand why we need more than forgiveness.

Not surprisingly, the main requirement for entering into eternal life is that one actually be alive. Jesus himself said, “No one can see

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[enter into] the kingdom of God unless he is born again’ ” (John 3:3). The essence of our New Testament salvation, therefore, is our connection to the very life

of God, through Jesus Christ by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. It is when we “become one” spiritually with Christ himself that we enter into both forgiveness and life. Just as a husband and wife become one in their physical life, so too Christ and the Christian, through the indwelling of the Spirit, become one in their spiritual life. Through our union with him, his life has become our own. We are born again precisely because we have been united to the One who is Life itself.

The ability to live a God-pleasing life, indeed to inherit eternal life, does not stem from our dedication to God or vows of our will; rather it flows from the divine life granted to us through our supernatural union with Christ. The very life of God through Christ via the Holy Spirit has taken up residence inside us. We are irrevocably wed to the divine nature, and human marriage is yet another powerful picture, or symbol, of this union.

In the end, our final hope of salvation is that we have been “married” to Christ. When we come to God for salvation, he makes us one

with Christ—just as a man and a woman become one in marriage. This union with Christ is the very thing that provides eternal life. Indeed, the eternal life that we have now begun to live is the eternal life that Christ lives. The sap of the vine is the sap of the branch. Through our union with him, we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3). He has become our head, and his job is to present us “to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:27). And he will do it. Marriage and sex are powerful illustrations of this union that exists between Christ and the Christian, and they were created specifically for that purpose.

THE “WHY” AND THE “HOW” OF SEXUAL PURITY

Now that we understand why God created sex, we can begin to understand the reasons behind his commands regarding sexual purity. Ultimately, God’s commands always relate to his image.

We tend to believe that God’s commands are given to us merely for our own sake. But this is not true. As those created in the image of God, our very nature as image-bearers explains the reason behind God’s commands. Not only is sex a divine type of the gospel, man himself is a type of God (Genesis 1:26, 27; Romans 8:29–31; 1 Corinthians 11:7; 15:49). Since God created us to be images, or types, of himself, revealing his invisible glory to the visible world, it is essential that all we do be aligned with all that God does, for we glorify God by manifesting his goodness through our own goodness. Our glory is his glory, for the glory and goodness we possess is not inherent within us but comes first from him, testifying to his infinite goodness.

Every action to which we are called relates to God’s actions and nature.

Therefore, the ways in which God acts, loves, thinks, and feels all provide the basis for how we are to act, love, think, and feel. We are called to act mercifully because he is merciful (Luke 6:36); we are called to be perfect because he is perfect (Mathew 5:48); we are called to do good to our enemies because he does good to his (Mathew 5:44, 45); and we are called to be holy because he is holy (1 Peter 1:15, 16). Ultimately, every action to which we are called, every

function that he created us to fulfill, relates to God's actions and nature. This is no less true regarding sex and God's commands for sexual purity.

God's major intent in creating sex was that it serve as a living witness of the spiritual reality of Christ's oneness with the church. Knowledge of this higher reality then helps us understand how we should behave within the realm of the earthly reality. In other words, our sex lives should be patterned after the way in which Christ and the church relate spiritually. Viewing sexuality from this framework not only explains how we should act but also why we should act a certain way.

For example, in 1 Corinthians 6:15-17, the commands that Paul

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gives regarding sexual activity are based on the "one spirit" relationship between Christ and the church. We must not unite ourselves sexually to a prostitute,

Paul argues, because we have become united spiritually to Christ. But the prohibition in this passage is not against sex in general but against sex with a prostitute. Our spiritual oneness with Christ does not prevent us from having sex with our spouse. In fact, Paul commands this in 1 Corinthians 7:5. But why is sex with our spouse righteous and sex with a prostitute sinful? How is it that our spiritual oneness with Christ does not stand in the way of all sexual relationships?

When talking to your children about the importance of sexual purity, it is tempting to answer their questions on a strictly human level. We might list the myriad of sexually transmitted diseases that can be caught. We could list documented adverse psychological effects of promiscuity. We could talk further about the negative effects of sexual licentiousness on one's future spouse or the possibility of an unwanted pregnancy. But all of these issues only reinforce the idea that sex is all about us, as though God's commands have only to do with what works best for humanity. Even apart from such side effects promiscuous sex would still be forbidden. None of these matters, however true, get to the root of why God has forbidden sex with a prostitute. The issue must first be addressed on a divine plane before it can be addressed on a human plane.

As we saw, God's commands relate to the image of the heavenly realities that he intends our lives to bear. Sex with a prostitute then

is forbidden because it breaks the picture of Christ's single-minded connection and devotion to his Bride. Just as Christ reserves himself spiritually for his spouse (the church), so too we are called to reserve ourselves sexually for our

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Our image belongs to Christ.*

husband or wife. The way we behave sexually must conform to that which God has created sex to illustrate: the life-changing nature of the gospel. Monogamy and permanency are vital aspects of this image. Christ is united to the church alone, thus a man must be united to his wife alone. Christ does not divorce his Bride. We must not divorce our spouse.

The young man who uses his sexuality in a promiscuous way does not act consistently with the image of Christ's monogamous wait for his Bride. Christ has purposed to become one with only the church. So too must young people reserve their sexuality for their future spouses as an expression of Christ's single-minded devotion to his own. God calls us to reserve our sexuality for the marriage relationship, because it is only in marriage that the image of Christ's relationship to the church can be lived out.

It is fundamentally important that we teach our children to act out their sexually in a manner consistent with the image that it was created to portray. We will explore the full implications of this in chapters to come, particularly as it relates to establishing an objective definition of sexual purity.⁶

CONCLUSION

We were made to be like God, existing as living portraits of his divine goodness. Every task that God gives us is centered on his own purposes and nature. Human government, marriage, sex, parents, and Christians themselves (to name just a few) all relate to God's purposes and actions, serving as images of higher heavenly realities. God is about glorifying himself, and the way he has chosen to do so in our lives is through our existence in his glorious image. Like an earthly father who is glorified through the glory of his children, so too God is

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glorified through our glorification (Romans 8:30). But such glory cannot be achieved apart from our living out the image of God, for only in God himself is true glory found.

This is why our lives are not about ourselves alone. We are not our own. We bear the image of another, and the ownership of that image belongs to him. And since we bear the image of another, we are not free to decide for ourselves what is best for us. We must not act in ways that are inconsistent with the character of the One we portray. It is important that we live every facet of our lives as a correct witness to the image of God. Everything that he asks of us, he asks so we might be conformed to his image.

As we study sexual purity, we must remember that every part of us, including our sexuality, has a higher purpose than merely our own pleasure, for every part of us was created primarily to image forth the glory of God. When we learn to view the world as a mirror of God's own divine nature and purposes, we are saved from the dead end of self-absorption; life has a higher purpose than our own autonomous satisfaction.

As we have seen, God has ordained sex that through it we might see a living illustration of the gospel, our union with the divine nature. Though our children may not be old enough to understand this truth on a cognitive level, we can begin to teach it to them on a subjective level by how we live out our own sexuality. We must teach our children, through word and example, that they are not their own, that they have been bought with a price, and, therefore, must honor God with their bodies. He desires their best. He desires their sexual satisfaction more than they ever will, for through the proper expression of their sexuality, both they and the world will have a lens through which to see the heart of the gospel. If they grow to believe the lie that sex is about their own happiness alone, they will be robbed of the joy that God intends it to bring. For it is only when we live out the image of God that we will find the happiness of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is a “type”? What are some examples of types in the Bible?

According to Ephesians 5:28–32, how does sex serve as a type, or image, of the gospel?

What happens when a man and woman come together sexually? How is this like Christ’s relationship to the church?

How does knowing that God created sex to serve as a living image of our union with Christ help us understand the reason behind God’s commands regarding sexual purity?

What applications can be drawn from the fact that God created sex to serve as a type of Christ and the church, particularly in the realm of sexual satisfaction and sexual purity? (See Appendix B.)
