Resource Guide

Jack Holland

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol16/iss3/12
A theme that becomes relatively apparent in this issue’s articles about sexuality is that, from a Christian perspective that goes beyond mere moralistic treatment of this important aspect of our humanity, there is a deficiency of books and resources. My sense is that the newer rhetoric on the topic of sexuality tends toward a critique of much of what is perceived as a reductionistic tendency in earlier writing and teaching. As author Laura Winner comments “I have, by now, read countless books, heard countless lectures on singleness, chastity, and refraining from premarital sex. Many of these lectures and books seemed out of touch with reality. They seem naive ... They seem theologically vacuous.”

While there may be the perception of a vacuum in the literature on sexuality from a holistic perspective, there is certainly no shortage in the amount of literature on the topic of sexuality. If a student proposed “Christian Writings on Sexuality” as a topic for a master of divinity literature review, my immediate response would be that unless they want to write an encyclopedia they would need to narrow the title tenfold. In this attempt to narrow the topic, I will simply suggest an overview of works, old and new, that I believe will benefit the conversation about sexuality in our congregations.

In Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity, Laura Winner, assistant professor of Christian spirituality at Duke Divinity School, attempts to provide the theological and spiritual basis for understanding human sexuality that she claims was absent in many books about Christian sexual behavior. Winner writes in a personable, honest, vulnerable and very candid style that connects especially well with single adult audiences. Beginning with a description of her personal failures and final discovery of the struggles and blessings of chastity, this book could serve as an excellent curriculum resource for mature high school and college discussions. The book also has value to the wider audience of the entire church as Winner helps to place sexuality into our whole view of ecclesiology and how members of the community live together in faithfulness and accountability.

The more serious student will certainly want to explore more than the current writing on the subject. For an excellent and very readable anthology of classic and contemporary perspectives on love and marriage I recommend Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar by Amy and Leon Kass. This title is borrowed from a sonnet composed by Robert Frost on the occasion of his daughter’s wedding. As the Kasses state, Frost concludes the poem with an “exquisitely simple pair of images, ‘wing to wing’ and ‘oar to oar,’ that capture the togetherness of the married couple, empowered to resist the flux of wind and water.” Drawing on vast sources from across time such as Aristotle, Aquinas, Shakespeare, Tolstoy and even Jane Austen, this compendium of essays thickens the contemporary discussions on topics such as courtship, marriage, sexuality and Eros; giving voice to a wide-range of perspectives that transcend the bounds of current day culture.

Two books, both published in 1976, The Committed Marriage by Elizabeth Achtemeier, and Sex for Christians: The Limits and Liberties of Sexual Living by Lewis B. Smedes, should not be discounted because of their age. Achtemeier wrote in the context of what she perceived as a cultural crisis in marriage in which a generation of young adults who had seen the consequences of divorce in their parents’ lives were either questioning the legitimacy of marriage, or bringing unrealistic expectations into their own relationships. In response the author offered a timeless presentation of a theology of the marital covenant and of how that theology ought to shape the way we treat one another in marriage. This book is practical, theologically sound and easy to read. It would make an excellent reading assignment for premarital counseling, or a resource for a sermon series on marriage. In my opinion The Committed Marriage needs to be on the shelf of every church’s library.

Lewis Smedes’ book Sex for Christians was revised and republished in 1994. Like Achtemeier’s work, Smedes also writes from a strong theological core that is also focused on the practical. Smedes took more of

1. Laura Winner, Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 15.
2. Winner, Real Sex.
3. Amy and Leon Kass, eds., Wing to Wing, Oar to Oar (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).
4. Ibid., 630.
an issue-oriented approach than Achtemeier did in her book. In doing so he attempted to answer many of the
questions about the moral issues of our sexuality. In contrast to Winner’s criticism of these conversations as
theologically shallow, Smedes offers a deep and thoughtful response to these complicated concerns. (Winner has
actually expressed appreciation for Smede’s work, noting that it is “one of the best books I’ve read about sex . . . It is
clear, it is straightforward . . . it is compassionate.”)

One of the most helpful books I have found in teaching human sexuality in a seminary setting is Authentic
Human Sexuality by Judith and Jack Balswick. The value of this work is that the authors constructed a faithful
and intelligent discussion of human sexuality that is moral without being moralistic. They discuss some of the
most volatile issues of our day such as homosexuality, sexual addiction and pornography from a position that is
informed by solid social scientific research, theology and scripture. Readers are given the opportunity to consider
these issues intelligently and from a balanced perspective oriented toward the ideal of “authentic sexuality.”
Rather than a proof-text for deciding right and wrong, this work is a thoughtful and practical guide for living
beyond the legal limits of sexuality to discover the joy and blessings of being an authentic sexual human being.

Another fine work that is helpful in thinking about how the culture is shaping our view of sexuality, and how
we might think differently, is Sexual Character by Marva Dawn. Readers of Dawn’s other works will recognize
her as an important voice in helping the church to be the church. In this discussion of sexual ethics, she again
reminds readers of the distinctive nature of the church as a community that forms the character and virtue of its
members. An interesting commonality between this book and Authentic Sexuality is that both conclude with the
Hebraic concept of shalom as an ideal image of God’s creation intentions for a divinely ordained human sexuality.

In the field of marriage and family therapy, a revolution in the treatment and counseling of sexual problems
has occurred in the last fifteen years, due primarily to the groundbreaking work and writing of Dr. David
Schnarch. His first book on the subject, published in 1991, is Constructing the Sexual Crucible: An Integration
of Sexual and Marital Therapy. Schnarch bases his treatment approach in the family systems theory of self-
differentiation, and in doing so provides nothing short of a paradigm shift for understanding intimacy, spirituality,
personal growth and marital relationships. Subsequent books include Passionate Marriage: Love, Sex, and
Intimacy in Emotionally Committed Relationships, and Resurrecting Sex: Resolving Sexual Problems and
Rejuvenating Your Relationship. Passionate Marriage is a less clinical and easier to read presentation of much
of the theory and research that is detailed in his first work; Resurrecting Sex is a more specific work dealing with
specific sexual and medical issues.

Individuals interested in reading the work of David Schnarch should be aware that his writing is very intense
and explicit. His descriptions of conversations in marital therapy sessions are graphic and detailed. With that
caution in mind the reader who is able to move past the initial shock of this feature will, I believe, discover a
truly transformed and beautiful appreciation for the value of sexuality in their own personal spiritual growth.

Readers of this issue of Leaven may have observed that none of its articles are devoted to one of the most
debated issues of the day, homosexuality. In determining the focus of this issue the decision to avoid the topic
was intentional. It seems that in too many instances the volatile nature of the debate about homosexuality, and our
culture’s preoccupation with that one aspect of human sexuality have so enamored our focus and conversation
that we often forget to speak of other important dimensions of sexuality. I will recommend one resource that is
an excellent text for dealing with this topic. Homosexuality, Science and the “Plain Sense” of Scripture, edited
by David Balch, is a collection of ten essays that present many of the core perspectives from both sides of the
debate. Dealing with approaches to biblical interpretation, sexual ethics and the application or misapplication
of science in deciding the issue, the book is not exhaustive on the topic but it is a thorough presentation on key
areas. I think that anyone who is serious about learning more about homosexuality will benefit from reading
this collection. At its very least, this work demonstrates that a respectful yet forthright and uncompromising
conversation about homosexuality is possible.

JACK HOLLAND is PROFESSOR OF CHRISTIAN CARE AND COUNSELING AND DIRECTOR OF THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY
PROGRAM AT EMMANUEL SCHOOL OF RELIGION IN JOHNSON CITY, TN

7. Winner, Real Sex, 21.