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Resource Guide

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Resource Guide

JACK HOLLAND

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 naïve . . . They seem theologically vacuous."¹

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*,² 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.³ 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."⁴ 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*,⁵ by Elizabeth Achtemeier, and *Sex for Christians: The Limits and Liberties of Sexual Living*,⁶ 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.

5. Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Committed Marriage* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976).

6. Lewis B. Smedes, *Sex for Christians: The Limits and Liberties of Sexual Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976, 1994).

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."⁷)

One of the most helpful books I have found in teaching human sexuality in a seminary setting is *Authentic Human Sexuality*⁸ 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*⁹ 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*.¹⁰ 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*,¹¹ and *Resurrecting Sex: Resolving Sexual Problems and Rejuvenating Your Relationship*.¹² *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*,¹³ 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.

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7. Winner, *Real Sex*, 21.

8. Judith and Jack Balswick, *Authentic Human Sexuality: An Integrated Christian Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).

9. Marva Dawn, *Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

10. David Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible: An Integration of Sexual and Marital Therapy* (New York: Norton, 1991).

11. David Schnarch, *Passionate Marriage: Love, Sex, and Intimacy in Emotionally Committed Relationships* (New York: Norton, 1997).

12. David Schnarch, *Resurrecting Sex: Resolving Sexual Problems and Rejuvenating Your Relationship* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).

13. David L. Balch, ed., *Homosexuality, Science and the "Plain Sense" of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).