

## Chapter Four

### Redesigning the Garden as We Journey Toward the New City

Scripture does not give up hope for healthy spirituality and sexuality. There are many efforts to re-design and re-fashion an understanding of God's will for creation and God's people, according to the time and circumstances in which they find themselves.

While God's people live between horizons, Scripture focuses on maintaining as much resemblance to God's ideal as possible, and restoring or limiting broken realities wherever practical. These dynamic and diverse efforts are directed toward redesigning and refashioning understandings of God's will for people and creation in the midst of particular circumstances, times, and needs. Between horizons, Scripture deals with pastoral concerns and imperfections of the human condition, including matters that we don't always understand. At the same time, they point toward God's larger ideal and purpose.

God addresses these broken realities with a strategy that highlights both the origin and destiny of creation. God does not want to give up on sexuality at its best, designed for the well-being of creation. Nor does God want to accept practices of sexual abuse that are generated as people live in the broken world.

#### Perspectives from the Old Testament

The Old Testament offers many attempts to control and organize the brokenness of life. It is intended to counter the degradation resulting from a broken sexuality and spirituality, an understanding that is also addressed in the New Testament.<sup>26</sup>

For example, when women became the property of their husbands rather than their helpers, the Law of Moses added protection for women through divorce procedures.<sup>27</sup> While a man is prohibited from having sex with another man's wife—which would rupture the marriage covenant—he is obligated to impregnate the widow of his deceased brother to ensure continuation of the family line as an instrument of blessing for the world.<sup>28</sup> Many sexual expressions violate the yearned-for unity of healthy sexuality and spirituality. As a result, they are disallowed by law and result in severe punishment.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the brokenness of sexuality and spirituality, Old Testament prophets continue to use metaphors of courtship and marriage to describe the covenant that God desires with Israel. God is faithful to Israel and God redeems Israel, the cast-off wife.<sup>30</sup> "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."<sup>31</sup> God's covenant with Israel, says Hosea, is like a loving marriage that reflects both the Garden of Delight full of animals, birds, and creeping things, and the need for a City of Peace—a place of safety where the bow, sword, and war are abolished:

*I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD (Hosea 2:18-19).*

God is portrayed as a lover and husband infatuated with Israel. When Israel is unfaithful, God is heart-broken and eagerly awaits reconciliation.<sup>32</sup> God invites Israel, the bride, back into covenant.

Deuteronomy expressly forbids intermarriage with foreigners and their inclusion in the Assembly of the Lord.<sup>33</sup> But in Isaiah, we find a surprisingly pastoral response to the law of the foreigner:

*Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off (Isaiah 56:3-5).*

With these words, Deuteronomic laws for both the eunuch and the foreigner are inverted. These "outsiders" no longer need to remain separated from God's people. God's original and final intent for all people is restored; "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people."<sup>34</sup> This is an understanding that Jesus also demonstrates when he cleanses the temple.<sup>35</sup>

The Book of Ruth offers another picture of redesigning and restoring God's purposes. In an effort to maintain Israel's covenant as a chosen people, the Law clearly prohibits marriage between Israelites and foreigners.<sup>36</sup> Ezra and Nehemiah even call for a mass divorce from foreign wives,<sup>37</sup> but the book of Ruth offers a different response.<sup>38</sup> In order to fulfill the law of the deceased brother,<sup>39</sup> Boaz takes Ruth, the Moabite and foreign daughter-in-law of Naomi, as his wife. The stated purpose is to make sure that "the dead may not be cut off from his kindred."<sup>40</sup> But in doing so, Boaz violates the law of the foreigner that prohibits a Moabite from entering the assembly of the Lord.<sup>41</sup> Ironically, Ruth, the forbidden Moabite, becomes the model Israelite. The offspring of Boaz and Ruth, Obed, becomes the grandfather of King David.<sup>42</sup>

26 1 Tim 1:8-11

27 Deut 22:19, 29

28 Deut 25:5-6

29 Lev 18; 20:10-21; 21:1-9

30 Isa 54:6

31 Isa 62:5

32 Jer 3:12-15

33 Deut 7:1-7; 23:3

34 Isa 56:8

35 Mark 11:17

36 Deut 7:2-6; 23:3

37 Ezra 9-10, Neh. 13

38 Ruth 4:10-15

39 Deut 25:6

40 Ruth 4:10

41 Deut 23:3

42 Ruth 4:17-22

God continues to work through us despite our brokenness.

Other disadvantaged women contribute to this legacy. Consider Rachel, Leah, and their maids, who “together built up the house of Israel.”<sup>43</sup> Each of these women are sexual partners of Jacob, who then becomes the patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel. Then there is Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, who marries two of Judah’s sons sequentially, and when they each die she bears twins from Judah, her farther-in-law, through an act of prostitution.<sup>44</sup>

Fast-forward to the New Testament and Matthew’s Gospel, and these colourful ancestors of Jesus, the Messiah, are listed alongside those who would be deemed more “righteous.” Jacob is named as father of Judah. Judah is cited as father to the twins Perez and Zerah by Tamar, who had married two of Judah’s sons. The line is then traced via Perez, whose line directly leads to Boaz. Boaz is listed as the son of Rahab the prostitute and the father of Obed, via Ruth the Moabite foreigner. The blood-line ends with “Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”<sup>45</sup>

In the realities of their circumstances, people who do not reflect God’s ideal are instrumental in the birth of the Messiah. God’s purposes are accomplished in strange and surprising ways.

### Perspectives from the New Testament

Hope for creation’s restoration continues in the New Testament. Throughout its pages, sexuality and spirituality are interrelated. The story of Jesus and his early followers unfolds within the framework of a new creation that comes in Christ:

*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*  
(II Corinthians 5:17).

### Jesus’ views on sexuality and covenant

The Word becomes flesh in the man Jesus, who remains single. We know nothing of Jesus’ relationship to his earthly father, but his relationship with his mother and siblings seems tense at times.<sup>46</sup> He uses the intimate term “Abba”—father—for God, and the Gospels call Jesus God’s Son. Jesus’ innermost circle of disciples is male, but he has close friendships with women. This is against social norms of the time and sometimes of shock to the Pharisees. He has women followers, too.<sup>47</sup> Jesus cares for children and speaks sharply against those who harm them. His perspective of masculinity does not demand violent resistance to the Romans. Instead, he allows himself to be stripped and shamefully crucified.

Jesus rarely speaks directly to issues of sexuality. His parables and teachings focus primarily on the abuse of wealth and power. His greatest priority is his spiritual connection with God and what God wishes to do in the world. Even so, Jesus ties sexual lust to the commandment against adultery. He stands up for a woman caught in the act of adultery. He strengthens the protection of vulnerable women when he speaks out against divorce more emphatically than do some of his contemporary rabbis.

When the Pharisees question Jesus about the Law of Moses, where divorce is permitted under some circumstances, Jesus points beyond that

law and back to the Garden. He reminds the Pharisees of the male-female image as one flesh and about man clinging to his wife.<sup>48</sup> This, for Jesus, is the hope that informs us. He states that a divorced man who takes another woman for his wife becomes an adulterer, yet he makes an exception to that rule in the case of unchastity.<sup>49</sup> This is clearly an acknowledgment that we live between horizons.

Jesus carefully upholds God’s ideal while recognizing the context in which people find themselves. He allows for an exception and redesigns the Garden in a way that leads us toward the New City. Jesus indicates that becoming eunuchs for the kingdom is preferable to insisting that we need to be fruitful and multiply. He weighs what appear to be contrasting values, and decides to emphasize one value over the other. And he adds: “Let anyone accept this who can.”<sup>50</sup>

The biological family and traditional assumptions of sexuality take second place to the proclamation of the coming kingdom where a new family is being created. In this family, God is parent, Jesus is Son, and those who follow him are brothers and sisters in Christ.

When a woman from the crowd shouts out to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” Jesus replies, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”<sup>51</sup> Sexuality must be in service of spirituality. It is not because of biological organs, motherhood, marriage, procreation, or family heritage that one gains the blessing of God, but through obedience to God.

By placing everything under the scrutiny of godly obedience, Jesus challenges the fabric of family in his society:

*Let the dead bury the dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God* (Luke 9:60).

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple* (Luke 14:26).

The New Testament proclaims that God becomes flesh and dwells among humanity. And just as we find God creating human sexuality at the beginning of the story in the Garden, so we find Jesus’ sexuality remains embodied at his resurrection. His disciples touch him, eat with him, and converse with him. The risen Jesus remains recognizable as the sexual being that they knew.

Why did Jesus remain embodied as male? This is an important mystery to ponder. While we tend to de-sexualize any post-resurrection life—suggesting that sexuality is not good and belongs in the impure realm—the risen Christ is embodied as a sexual being. This underscores the importance of holding body and spirit—sexuality and spirituality—in unity. It is a clear reminder that God created sexuality for good.

### Paul and the image of marriage

Like Jesus, the Apostle Paul lives as a single male. Paul discourages marriage because “the appointed time has grown short,”<sup>52</sup> but deems it necessary in the face of uncontrollable passions.<sup>53</sup> For the married

43 Ruth 4:11

44 Gen 38:24

45 Matt 1:1-16

46 Mark 3:31-35

47 Luke 8:2-3

48 Matt 19:1-12

49 From the Greek word “porneia”

50 Matt 19:12

51 Luke 11: 27-28

52 I Cor 7:29

53 I Cor 7:36

couple, Paul encourages the mutuality in conjugal relations.<sup>54</sup> His views regarding the role of women in the community and the ministry of the church seem diverse. At times he admonishes women to be silent in church, yet women are key leaders in his ministry. However, Paul goes beyond Jesus and allows for separation, particularly when an unbeliever does not wish to remain married.<sup>55</sup> Still, he seems to attribute saving value to the marriage union, even when it is with an unbeliever. The overriding concern is that “God has called us to peace.”<sup>56</sup> Paul understands that in some mysterious way, an unbelieving spouse is made holy through the believing one.<sup>57</sup>

The Letter to the Ephesians uses Christ’s relationship with the Church as a model for how husband and wife should relate to each other.<sup>58</sup> Sexuality and spirituality come together once more to help us visualize God’s intention, just as they did through the prophets in the Old Testament. The relationship of husband and wife is one of mutual subordination, respect, love, and sacrifice, even to the point of death. It also carries a deeper covenantal significance—we are all of one body as the church. The capacity of the husband to love his wife as Christ loved the church, and the wife to respect her husband, is ultimately described as a “great mystery.”<sup>59</sup> It symbolizes the relationship between Christ and the church,<sup>60</sup> but in the process the church is encouraged to reflect on *her* relationship to *her* “husband.”

The image of marriage is clearly tied to the description of creation’s final reconciliation. The church, portrayed as the holy city—the New Jerusalem—is like a “bride adorned for her husband.”<sup>61</sup> The church is the “bride of the Lamb,”<sup>62</sup> getting ready for the “marriage of the Lamb.”<sup>63</sup> There seems to be no better image than marriage to describe God’s desire for the future of the church and the world.

### ***Nothing is impossible with God***

We do not know anything about the marital status of the twelve apostles, other than for Peter, but Jesus and Paul both remained single. As key figures of the New Testament, their example of singleness needs further comment.

The emphasis on exercising maleness in a way that does not require a man to “cling to his wife” or to be “fruitful and multiply” is noteworthy. This seems to be one of the ways in which the New Testament actually redesigns rather than restores the Garden. It draws attention to elements such as singleness and celibacy that are missing in the Genesis accounts. It replaces the importance of procreation with the need for faithfulness and commitment to God’s mission in the world. This is a startling shift in understanding the role of sexuality in God’s plan.

While the Garden tips the scales toward offspring, the New Testament tips the scales toward focused commitment to God’s Kingdom. In

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54 1 Cor 7:1-5  
55 1 Cor 7:10-16  
56 1 Cor 7:15  
57 1 Cor 7:14  
58 Eph 5:21-33  
59 Eph 5:32  
60 Eph 5:32  
61 Rev 21:2  
62 Rev 21:9  
63 Rev 19:7

either case, male and female sexuality remain. But the option of singleness and celibacy is assumed to be acceptable, even preferred and necessary at times.

With his special birth, Jesus joins a long list of significant biblical characters born through God’s intervention in the normal processes of human procreation—Isaac from elderly, barren Sarah; Jacob and Esau from barren Rebekah; Reuben and his brothers from Leah because she is not loved; Joseph to barren Rachel, to take away her reproach; Samuel to miserable Hannah whose womb had been mysteriously closed by God;<sup>64</sup> and John the Baptist to elderly, barren Elizabeth “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”<sup>65</sup> The Psalmist celebrates this surprising power of God: “He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!”<sup>66</sup>

After the angel Gabriel announces the news of pending miraculous births to Elizabeth and Mary, he concludes by stating that “nothing will be impossible with God.”<sup>67</sup> The birth of the Messiah to the virgin, single Mary is the culmination of God’s special blessing on marginalized women of the biblical story in order to bring about God’s purposes. In each case, God reaches out to a vulnerable woman and gives to her a significant place in the story of God’s people.

Jesus’ virgin birth brings continuity to the earlier biblical story of special births, but it also brings discontinuity. This special birth takes place apart from the human sexual act and apart from the male. Thus in the end, God’s salvation plan does not depend on the human procreation initiated in the Garden. The virgin birth is one more example of how God can use—or not use—human sexuality to fulfill God’s mission for humanity on earth.

From the virginal womb of unmarried Mary, God begins the new creation in Christ.

### **In summary**

- *The Old Testament offers many attempts to control and organize the brokenness of life between horizons.*
- *Even when the law is broken, God finds ways to use offenders for good purpose. This is apparent through the human lineage of Jesus, which contains murderers and adulterers.*
- *While the Garden tips the scales toward offspring, the New Testament tips the scales toward focused commitment to God’s Kingdom.*
- *The virgin birth is one more example of how God can use—or not use—human sexuality to fulfill God’s mission for humanity on earth.*
- *Christ’s relationship with the Church serves as a model for how husband and wife should relate to each other.*
- *There seems to be no better image than marriage to describe God’s desire for the future of the church and the world.*

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64 1 Sam 1:5  
65 Luke 1:17  
66 Psalm 113:9  
67 Luke 1:37

## Conclusion

Although it is clear that we cannot fully do justice to biblical perspectives on sexuality in a short study, it is time to take stock of the rich discoveries we have made.

We have seen a somewhat bewildering array of stories, experiences, and perspectives in terms of the relationship between sexuality and faithfulness. We have witnessed soaring hopes in the Garden, and the multiple and miserable ways those hopes were betrayed. We have also witnessed God's tenacious patience to move God's mission forward and through the imperfect world between the horizons of the Garden and the New Jerusalem.

God has not been foiled by rape, prostitution, adultery, and fornication. God has not been paralysed by patriarchal abuse, the slavery of women, or the injustice and violence of social systems. Instead, God used a surprising menu of initiatives such as:

- transforming barrenness and old age into fertility;
- incorporating foreigners and maids as key contributors to the lineage of God's people;
- encouraging singleness and eunuchs in the development of the Kingdom; and
- engaging celibacy and virginity.

All of these events occurred to advance God's mission of reconciling creation. This underscores the key affirmation: when all is said and done, the primary focus of sexuality is not simply ethical, it is theological. God is good. God is faithful. God's covenant with humanity will not be thwarted. God, and only God, is God.

Perhaps the Apostle Paul summarizes this best by indicating that previous critical categories, including maleness and femaleness, are reshaped through Christ Jesus in favour of the overarching hope of God's promise:

*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.* (Galatians 3:28-29).

### **Some observations as we go forward**

We conclude by drawing attention to some things in Scripture that are especially striking from our perspectives today. Consider:

- the entwining of sexuality with spiritual faithfulness;

- the understanding of sexuality in covenantal terms as a foundation for a covenantal people;
- the close tie between sexuality and God's missional purpose in the world;
- the New Testament's shift away from procreation to bring about God's purposes;
- the shifting interpretation and practice of "law" in terms of the inclusion and exclusion of foreigners in the people of covenant;
- the option of singleness and virginity as legitimate and even necessary parts of sexuality;
- the equality of male and female "in Christ," just as Jews and Gentiles are equal "in Christ";
- the persistent effort to use marriage, sexuality, and sex as images to understand God's covenantal purposes for people-hood; and
- the inclusion of inappropriate sexual behaviours such as prostitution and rape in the Messiah's ancestry.

This review helps us to realize that as a church and as a society, we live between the horizons of the Garden of Delight and the City of Peace. Even at their best, our present realities rarely reflect biblical preferences. This is as true about sexuality within our marriages as it is about sexuality beyond them. Paul's insight that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"<sup>68</sup> certainly rings true when we try to measure our own expressions of sexuality in light of God's design.

It is helpful to note how much of the Bible is dedicated to pastoral concerns raised by living between horizons, always with the hope of moving toward the New City. Laws, lessons, images, and actions struggle to maintain some resemblance to the Garden in the realities of the time between. Different voices and diverse strategies unite in the struggle for faithfulness.

Biblical sexuality is intimately entwined with spirituality and God's design for creation, as we witnessed in the Garden and yearn for in the New City. Restoration and redesign are clearly evident in biblical understandings and practices. As we live between horizons, we can be assured that God will continue to work in unexpected ways, transforming apparent impossibilities into key possibilities for mission and ultimately, restoration.

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68 Rom 3:23

