

Chapter Two

Perspectives from the Garden of Delight

From the beginning, God focused on relationship, companionship, community, covenantal bonding, and mission.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind (adam) in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:26-27).

What does it mean to say that we are made in God's image? Some scholars point to our rational capacity, others to our moral and spiritual "soul," still others to our stewardship/dominion role, or to the intrinsic value and dignity of human life. However, being created in the image of God also illustrates the significance of relationship. God clearly wants a relationship with us based upon companionship, community, covenant, and mission. Because we are created in God's image, we have been gifted with God's longing and capacity for relationship. God created us to relate—in a human way to God and in a godly way to each other.

Humankind is created in God's image—not alone as individual male or female, but as image bearers together in communion with each other. There is nothing more essential to understanding a biblical perspective on sexuality than this. Sexuality is not necessarily equated with sexual activity but with the goal of community and companionship. Without each other, we incompletely mirror the image of God.

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28).

Not only are male and female created in the image of God, but they are "earth-creatures"¹⁰ called to participate in God's creative act. While procreation is not the only reason for human intimacy, the biblical view of sex and sexuality emphasizes the importance of procreation, children and family. Thus barrenness is the cause for deep sorrow—as experienced by Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth. The Psalmist captures the sentiment:

Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them (Psalm 127:3-5).

God wills procreation, and human sexuality yearns for it, because it is integral to the plan of God. However, procreation is not designed simply for the sake of having offspring. It is intended to align the realities of creation with the intentions of God, including humankind's call to walk and talk with the Creator.

10 "Earth-creatures" is a literal translation of "adam."

In Genesis, God tells Abraham and Sarah that from them will "come a great nation"; they will be given the gift of descendants so that they will be a continuing blessing to other families of the earth.¹¹

Children are a blessing for the *purposes* of blessing. It is through the continuation of blessing—via families—that God's transformation and liberation for the world will come. Here again we see the very close missional link between sexuality and spirituality.

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good (Genesis 1:31).

Sexuality is a good gift from God, too. Genesis views sexuality as an integral part of God's good creation. Unlike the Greek perspective which separates body and soul, the Genesis perspective does not compartmentalize the body or give higher status to one over the other. According to the creation account, the physical, sexual body is good—in fact very good. Male and female stand vulnerable before each other, naked and unashamed, without self-consciousness or fear.

The Old Testament Song of Songs delights in the physical pleasures of love. Sexual language teases readers with the possibility of returning to the Garden, to the human state before disobedience.

In this Song, man and woman relate to one another once again with equality, "head over heels" in their love for each other. The natural world around them rejoices in their mutual love.¹² The lovers' Garden becomes the "the Garden of delight that Eden was meant to be, the place where life may be lived fully in the presence of God."¹³

The fact that there is no overt reference to God in this love poetry has led some to believe it is purely secular. Yet interpretations throughout the centuries view it as a theological metaphor idealizing God's love for Israel, or Christ's love for the church, or even God's intimate connection with the individual human soul.

Human love, "the desire for intimate, harmonious, enduring relationship with the other,"¹⁴ is a metaphor for God's sacred love. Surely, this is why the Song of Songs has found a place in Jewish and Christian Scriptures and tradition.

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

11 Gen 12:1-3

12 Song of Sol 2:8-17

13 Ellen Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs*, Westminster Bible Companion, 2000, p. 232.

14 *ibid.*, p. 235

Then the man said,

*This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.*

*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to
his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife
were both naked, and were not ashamed
(Genesis 2: 18, 21-25).*

The only time that we find the words “it is not good” in the early chapters of Genesis is when God observes that the male is alone. His loneliness cannot be satisfied by God or by any other living creature.

The helper whom God creates is a suitable, bonding companion, not one of subordination but of mutuality.¹⁵ With God’s focus on relationship, companionship, community, and covenantal bonding, the helper God creates is neither inferior nor superior, but someone with whom man can build human community. Until woman is created, he is incomplete and alone. Because they are of the same origin, man does not exercise authority over woman by naming her as he does the other creatures. She is simply referred to as “woman”, and the two become one flesh. Only when they must leave the Garden does he name the woman “Eve.”¹⁶

The man declares that woman is “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh,”¹⁷ describing an undivided relationship, like Israel’s covenant relationship with God. In their devotion to each other, man and woman reflect more of what they already are: *one flesh*.

15 In Ex 18:4 and Ps 30:10; 54:4 the word “helper” is also used of God, once more illustrating the reciprocity of relationship.

16 Gen 3:20

17 Gen 2:23

The male leaves his family and clings to his wife, a term that is also used to speak of Israel’s faithfulness in her covenant with God.¹⁸ Rabbinic tradition understands *becoming one flesh* in at least three ways:

- Because woman is created from man’s side, man is incomplete without her and she is incomplete without him. They are one flesh.
- Together, man and woman continue to create, and the resulting child becomes the seamless melding of the two into one flesh.
- Through the sexual intimacy that makes offspring possible, man and woman become one flesh.

In each of the interpretations above, the covenantal clinging of man and woman involves participating in God’s creative plan, and mirrors God’s own covenant with humans.

In summary

- *As beings created in the image of God, man and woman were created to relate—in a human way to God and in a godly way to each other.*
- *Procreation is not simply for the sake of having offspring. As in the promise to Abraham and Sarah, descendants are to continue God’s creative purposes in the world and bring God’s blessing to other families of the earth.*
- *Because of God’s focus on relationship, companionship, community, and covenantal bonding, the helper is neither inferior nor superior, but someone with whom man can build human community.*
- *When man declares that woman is “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh,” he is describing an undivided, reciprocal relationship, like Israel’s covenant relationship with God.*

18 Deut 11:22; 30:20; Josh 22:5

Chapter Three

Broken Links

Scripture focuses on the realities of life lived between horizons. The brokenness of human relationships with the one and only God also shatters the proper relationship between sexuality and spirituality.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." (Genesis 3:7-10)

When Eve and Adam disobey God, their eyes open. They realize that they are naked. They grow fearful of walking and talking with their Maker. As a result, they must leave the Garden. Thus begins the long trek toward the other horizon, the New Jerusalem—the City of Peace.

Between horizons, spirituality and sexuality are entwined in their brokenness. Our own experience in church and society substantiates this. What characterizes this broken reality? Discord and blaming. Now, while still good, sexuality will also bear the pain of procreation through childbirth for the female, and inequality between husband and wife. The male struggles in his relationship with the soil. It yields thorns and thistles, and eventually reclaims him.¹⁹

The artificial separation of what belongs together results in brokenness in human relationships and daily toil.

Sexuality is fraught with new realities between horizons. Dominance and betrayal, control and manipulation, and power and violence appear. Abraham has sex with Sarai's servant. Polygamy becomes common. When the men of Sodom attempt to rape their male guests, Lot offers his two daughters to them instead. King David abuses his power by having sex with Uriah's wife, and then has Uriah killed. David's son, Amnon, rapes his own half-sister, Tamar, and then turns her away, desolate. In revenge, Tamar's brother, Absalom, kills Amnon. And the sordid story goes on.

Sexuality and spirituality are unmoored from God's purposes. The prophets use graphic sexual imagery to underscore this brokenness.²⁰ When Israel is enticed away from the one and only God by the idols of Canaan—who often are fertility gods—the prophets describe the idolatrous relationship as prostitution. In fact, Israel's sexuality is so broken that even the prophet's favourable metaphor for God is one of the noble, grieving bridegroom—but in these prophetic passages, that image carries within it the abhorrent dimensions of jealousy, control, spouse starvation, humiliation, violence and a cycle of abuse. Even the prophet's metaphor for God, drawn from the sexuality of the day, reflects Israel's brokenness.²¹

19 Gen 3:19

20 Hos 2; Jer 3:12-15

21 Ezek 16

The New Testament further develops the prophetic image of broken sexuality. With the description of the whore in the Book of Revelation,²² sexuality is completely severed from its intended spiritual purpose. Broken sexuality becomes "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations."²³ This time the utter brokenness of sexuality and spirituality is not used to describe the church, but the state—likely a reference to the persecuting Roman Empire. The whore's deviance goes far beyond her own activity. She is the one "with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk."²⁴

The writer of the apocalypse uses sexual imagery to forcefully describe the rupture of God's intentions through the actions of nations.

The misuse and abuse of God's intentions for sexuality are serious matters for the "body" of the individual and the "Body" of God's people. The two cannot—or at least should not—be separated. The Apostle Paul states:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? (1 Corinthians 6:15-19).

Paul's expression, "you are not your own," speaks to the unity God intends between sexuality and spirituality, and emphasizes the seriousness of breaking that union.

New Testament writers are aware that human sexuality has broken away from faithful spirituality in this time between horizons. Sexual immorality is often included in their lists of "evil intentions" that come "out of the heart."²⁵

In summary

- *When Eve and Adam disobey God, they become aware of their nakedness and fearful of their Maker. They are cast out of the Garden, the place where sexuality and spirituality are entwined as God intended. They must live between horizons as they trek toward the New Jerusalem.*
- *Sexuality is fraught with new realities on this journey. Dominance and betrayal, control and manipulation, and power and violence prevail.*
- *The prophetic image of broken sexuality is potently described in the Book of Revelation with the description of the whore. Sexuality is completely severed from its intended spiritual purpose, and unmoored from its identity with God.*

22 Rev 17:1-16; 19:2

23 Rev 17:5

24 Rev 17:2

25 Matt 15:19. See also Mark 7:21; 1 Cor 5; Gal 5:19-21; Rom 1:24-32

Appendix

The Power of Context

My wife, Irene, and I (Robert J. Suderman) visited an Anabaptist pastor and his wife in east-central India. We met their recently-married son, in his late twenties, and his young wife, who shared their home.

The young couple's marriage had been arranged by their respective parents, especially by the fathers. We talked about how their system works, and how they feel about it.

The son spoke enthusiastically. "There is no one else in the world that knows me as well as my father, so when it came time to look for a wife, I fully trusted that he would choose one who would match who I am. I had no doubt about his judgment."

The young woman expressed similar thoughts, indicating how good and secure she felt knowing that her parents were looking out for her welfare, and that they would never agree to a marriage unless they felt it was the very best for her.

We delicately approached the issue of "love" and the role it plays in choosing a marriage partner. They all agreed that the most important priorities for both parties are commitment to each other, family support, and the union's financial sustainability.

"Now that we are married," they said, "we are learning to love each other, a little more each day. It's a process." And they looked at each other with admiration and genuine trust.

They went on to describe the courting process. After being informed of the choice made, they were introduced and had several months to get to know each other. They also had the opportunity to say "no" to the choice if it seemed to be a mismatch. The well-regulated pre-marriage process lasted about six months and then the marriage was celebrated.

Our western/Canadian values were profoundly challenged—even shaken—by this table conversation. Although we are brothers and sisters in Christ, our assumptions vary dramatically:

- We assume that marriage is between two people; they assume it is between two families.
- We assume individual discernment is best in choosing a partner; they assume that marriage is too important to leave to the fleeting desires of the young. Older, wiser, broader discernment is needed.
- We assume that love is the foundation of marriage; they assume that communal commitment and covenant is the foundation. Love will follow later.
- We assume that attraction, including sexual attraction, is a prerequisite; they assume that attraction will be earned and will grow slowly with time.
- We assume that choosing marriage is a right of the individual; they assume that choosing marriage is a communal responsibility. The community can say "no" even though the individual says "yes."
- We assume that procreation is a free choice of the couple; they assume that bearing children in marriage is a responsibility for the survival of the family.

Between the Garden and the New City, biblical cultures do not measure up to God's design. They are not uniform in their understandings of sexuality or in their approaches to faithfulness. We find this same discord in today's cultures as we continue to live between horizons. Legal, political, medical and social perspectives, and attitudes toward sexuality, marriage, and gender, are in dramatic flux.

It takes a concerted effort for us to understand and appreciate each other. It is difficult to accept the assumed values of another culture and context.

This experience is instructive for the task before us. As we explore sexuality between the horizons, we should not be surprised if we encounter other perspectives that challenge our deeply held preferences. Nor should we be surprised by the variations we see in the diverse landscape of Scripture itself.