

## Chapter One

### The Link Between Sexuality and Spirituality: Covenantal Relationships

Sex, sexuality and the marriage covenant are not ends in themselves; they are linked to God's profound, loving mission for the world.

From the perspective of Scripture, wholesome sexuality is closely linked to wholesome spirituality, which we understand as our human effort to align ourselves with God's desire for our lives and for creation. Often the same words we associate with healthy "spirituality" also describe healthy "sexuality"—words like wholeness, trust, warmth, reverence, relationship, safety, love, truthfulness, oneness, communion, integrity, spontaneity, vulnerability, gratitude, and the importance of covenant, which binds these ingredients of commitment together.

The close link between spirituality and sexuality in the Bible is illustrated by the way Scripture often entwines two covenantal marriages: the covenant between God and God's people, and the covenant between man and woman. Both are intended to be mutual, reciprocal relationships, but occasionally God is the victimized husband of the unfaithful or adulterous spouse, Israel. In the Book of Revelation, the people of God are the holy and unblemished, adorned bride of Christ.<sup>4</sup> In Ephesians, the relationship between Christ and the church is described as the model relationship for husband and wife.<sup>5</sup>

Why does the Bible use sexuality, and particularly marriage, to illustrate the covenantal commitment between God and God's people?

As strange as it may sound, sex, sexuality and the marriage covenant are not ends in themselves; they are linked to God's profound, loving mission for the world. They are the building blocks used by God to create the world, bless it with goodness, and then re-create and restore it with holiness, reconciliation and *shalom*. They are, in other words, missional.

The close link between spirituality and sexuality shows that healthy sexuality is more than sex. Sexuality is our way of being and relating in the world as male and female. Sexuality is rooted not only in our physical bodies but in our minds, feelings, wills, self-understandings, and our erotic longings. Sexuality embodies our longing to experience wholeness and intimacy. It moves us toward relationship and community, with God and with each other. Fundamentally, sexuality draws us into biblical covenant.

The sexuality metaphor illustrates that the biblical understanding of covenant is far more than a business contract. It is a mutual and intimate relationship between God and God's people. We, and God, yearn for the wholeness and intimacy best expressed through a communal commitment to the purposes of God.

4 Rev 21:2

5 Eph 5:21-33

In this way, God's objectives for covenant are meaningfully expressed through images of sexuality and marriage.

Both covenanted sexuality and covenanted spirituality find their best expression as *agape* love in action. This kind of love—selfless, unconditional, and potentially sacrificial—is offered as a decision rather than pure emotion. Both bind us together with God and with each other through eternal commitment. And both are instruments of God's mission in and for the world.

The story of sexuality/spirituality begins with the Garden of Eden in Genesis, and culminates with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven, adorned for her husband, in Revelation.<sup>6</sup> Both the Garden and the New Jerusalem symbolize harmonious, reciprocal relationships as they are meant to be, with creation, among human beings, and with God. In a sense, they represent the east and the west horizons—the rising and the setting of creation.

However, most Scripture focuses on the realities of life lived between these horizons. While life between is nourished by the ideals of creation, it persistently falls short of them. The biblical image of the city, for example, extends beyond Jerusalem, the new city of peace. It also reaches for the troubled cities of Babel, Sodom, Nineveh, and Babylon. Yet Jerusalem continues to symbolize the city God designed to heal and nourish.<sup>7</sup> As God's people, we are called to be a visible city on the hill.<sup>8</sup> There is a new creation in spite of the old one not living up to its potential.<sup>9</sup>

The delight of healthy sexuality and the pain of spiritual brokenness are experienced and readily understood by all of us. Sexuality offers one of the most profound images we have to contrast these realities with the healthy way God wants all relationships to be.

#### In summary

- *Both sexuality and covenanted spirituality find their best expression as agape love in action.*
- *The story of sexuality/spirituality begins in the Garden of Eden and culminates in the New Jerusalem.*
- *Both the Garden and the New Jerusalem symbolize harmonious, reciprocal relationships as they are meant to be—with creation, among human beings, and with God.*
- *Most Scripture focuses on the realities of broken life between the horizons of the Garden and the New Jerusalem.*

6 Gen 2:8; Rev 21:2, 10

7 Ps 122:6-9

8 Matt 5:14

9 Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17