

Vanderbilt University

**Navigating Sexual Love in Christian Marriage:
A Playful Pursuit of Purpose**

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of

Vanderbilt Divinity School

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Ministry in Integrative Chaplaincy

by

Scott Washburn Bennion

Nashville, Tennessee

May 1, 2024

ABSTRACT¹

This paper aims to clarify the essential foundations and components for sexual flourishing, focusing on cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied married couples who identify with the conservative Christian faith, specifically those in or entering mid-life.² It delves into the complexity of unexamined inherited sexual values that impact couples in mid-life. Existing literature is critiqued for being overly restrictive or permissive, termed the *Radical No* and *Radical Yes*. Identifying the need for theological and existential foundations, this paper explores the idea of a sacramental teleology for the marital act, leading to an integrated and holistic approach to sexual love in marriage. This alternative approach supports deeper levels of embodiment and intimacy, transcending superficial understandings of sexuality. The writer proposes a non-hedonistic, *playful pursuit of purpose* where spouses mutually enjoy the richness of sexual love with one another, while also sacramentally having the potential for an ineffable encounter with the Triune God and a heavenly vision for the life to come.

¹ Disclaimer: This thesis explores sensitive topics related to faith and sexuality within specific religious contexts. This research intends to gain insights into what keeps married couples in mid-life from an experience of sexual flourishing and wholeness. As a clinical chaplain and faith-based, pastoral counselor, I have had the privilege of working with survivors of abuse related to faith and sexuality and have gained valuable insights into their challenges. I, too, am a survivor of both spiritual and sexual abuse. While I understand that each survivor's experience is unique, I hold a degree of solidarity and empathy. The material discussed herein may be emotionally triggering for some readers, especially those who have experienced such abuse. I encourage all readers to approach this content with discretion and empathy, recognizing its potential emotional impact. It is crucial to provide support and resources for survivors, and this research is conducted with a commitment to sensitivity, informed by both professional experience and a profound respect for the experiences of survivors.

² Cisgender and heterosexual are concepts that have emerged over the last couple hundred years, referring to different aspects of a person's identity. Cisgender is a term used to describe individuals whose gender identity aligns with their sex at birth. Heterosexual refers to a person who is romantically attracted to people of the opposite gender.

Part I. Introduction

For practically my entire adult life, I've been married. Like many couples, I have navigated the highs and lows inherent in marital unions. These experiences have encompassed exceptional moments and ordinary mundane times. Both contribute significantly to the intrinsic beauty and transformative essence of marriage. In other words, marriage in its essence serves as both a sanctuary and a crucible.

Those who lean into the challenges that come with marriage will discover the qualitative nature of this union for those who persevere, in contrast to the allure of the grass being greener elsewhere. However, to be transparent and a bit candid, I must express that within the realm of sexual love in married life, few experiences have been as emotionally painful for me. The giving and receiving of love in the marital embrace, often marked by fits and starts, becomes an intense journey as two individuals yearn deeply to be seen, heard, known, and loved in this most intimate of encounters.

Regrettably, my struggles are not unique. In my capacity as a clinician in private practice as a faith-based pastoral counselor as well as the marital counseling I do as a VA Medical Center chaplain, I've witnessed recurring patterns of relational and sexual brokenness, where spouses persistently miss connecting. There is a prevalent misconception that the resolution lies in discovering the right technique or tool, often fueled by messages from the church and broader culture that contribute to destructive outcomes.

In the pages that follow, I invite you to join me on a journey where I will begin by delving into my own experiences, followed by an analytical examination of what I perceive as prevailing and destructive trends or undercurrents. Subsequently, I propose an alternative path

forward. The overarching aim is to engage in *a playful pursuit of purpose*, inviting a reconsideration of prevailing notions about sexual love in marriage.³

A Personal Prelude

As I think about my experience growing up in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church or Latter-day Saints), I remember spending my youth trying to *do* what was necessary to be right with God and stay right with God. It seemed that much of my youth was focused on the externals of looking a certain way and living a life largely guided or informed by a rigid moral imperative that distinguished Latter-day Saints from others. This focus on externals seems to be akin to the guarding of exits and entrances highlighted in Mary Douglas's work on Leviticus where she looks at the holiness codes related to food, sex, and skin diseases.⁴ The maintenance of borders determined who was in and who was out literally and these codes seemed to reinforce this. Civilization, or being civilized, was about putting things in their proper place and keeping them there. It was believed that if things were not kept in their proper place chaos would ensue and ultimately death would result. I experienced a moralism in my LDS experience that was often focused more on what one shouldn't do than what one ought to be doing. This seems akin to what Douglas described, to be about keeping things in the proper place while maintaining borders and order.

From my experience as a Latter-day Saint and my understanding of the culture and theology, the LDS Church places a lot of emphasis on personal effort and works for achieving

³ This entails a willingness to suspend current ideas and embrace new practices that foster sexual flourishing in married life. Ultimately offering spouses a sacred space to experience profound meaning and purpose in an embodied and intimate way through a sacramental approach to sexual love. Sexual flourishing encompasses the profound Jewish concept of Shalom—wholeness, integrity, soundness, community, connectedness, righteousness, justice, and well-being. These attributes extend to one's relationship with themselves, one another, and with the Triune God.

⁴ Hornsby, Teresa J., "Gender, Sexuality, and the New Testament." VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. October 15, 2021. Video, 41:42. <https://vanderbilt.app.box.com/s/nh7939ebt9ojg3o4f2hty7hk8due6uf7/file/873183132075>.

personal salvation and exaltation. Outward obedience to the LDS Church's teachings was the way one is determined to be worthy (or not) of God's blessings temporally and eternally. One of the LDS Church's scriptures, The Book of Mormon, says it this way, "we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do" (2 Nephi 25:23). In another place in the same book, it says: "Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, *then* is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ" (Moroni 10:32, emphasis added).⁵ Another of the LDS Church's scriptures, the Doctrine and Covenants, Section 89 forbids the use of alcoholic drinks, tobacco, tea, and coffee in what is known as the Word of Wisdom.⁶ Church teachings also place a high degree of emphasis on abstaining from sexual intimacy of any kind until marriage. There was a lot of focus on what I would call *thou shalt not*s. For many in the LDS Church when their worth and ultimately their salvation is tied to performance it leads to feelings of guilt, shame, and fear. Shame is, in my opinion, the most destructive. This was my experience, and though not everyone's experience, it persists for many. It is also important to note that this reality has similar expressions in other non-LDS religious contexts.

Although my experience in the LDS Church is not what is known as purity culture proper it was my introduction to trying to live a certain way to appease or please God, as I sought to do the right thing. My youth was fraught with messages inducing shame as I consistently dealt with my guilt about failing to measure up to this external religious standard or from fear of being

⁵ Joseph Smith, The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, First Edition (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).

⁶ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, The Doctrine and Covenants | The Pearl of Great Price (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018).

judged by others in the religious community. My shame could be more accurately referred to as “sacramental shame”. In the words of Moon and Tobin:

Sacramental shame is a form of religiously imbued chronic shame that gets distilled in many ... as a disposition. Dispositional shame, however it is cultivated, holds people in constant fear of being rejected or abandoned because of who they are, and causes immeasurable, sometimes fatal harm.⁷

I struggled to feel worthy of God’s love because, for me, that divine love was tied to *my* performance. As I look back at the many messages received from church leaders and family members, I can now see how they were spiritually damaging and even abusive. I was always led to believe that if I had more faith, was more obedient, and sinned less, then I would get the spiritual answers I so desperately longed for. Internalizing these messages gave rise to spiritual distress and an ongoing sense that something must be inherently wrong with me.

Years later, I would embrace the person and work of Jesus Christ in a Protestant, born-again experience, where I trusted in Him alone for my salvation. In contrast to the faith of my youth, I was looking to Jesus and his righteousness, not my own, which at that time gave me a lot of comfort, and still does today. This shift from the LDS faith to Protestant Christianity was more than merely changing religions. It was an identity change in that trusting in Jesus alone for eternal life provided me with a new life and identity as well as forgiveness of sins and a right relationship with God.

I went on to pursue a theological education and was eventually ordained. Unfortunately, I was met with what I experienced as a punitive moralism not altogether different from my LDS upbringing when I was confronted with my own private sins, and eventually a divorce. I was told by my ecclesiastical leader and bishop, a pastor to pastors, “Make your marriage work or have all

⁷ Dawne Moon and Theresa W. Tobin, “Sunsets and Solidarity: Overcoming Sacramental Shame in Conservative Christian Churches to Forge a Queer Vision of Love and Justice,” *Hypatia* 33, no. 3 (2018): 451–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12413>.

your credentials pulled overnight.” At this point, I found myself in an existential crisis of sorts with an added sense of despair and loneliness as my clergy circle of colleagues largely disappeared. It was years later, in a forgiveness exercise, that I recalled just how traumatic this experience was, affecting my relationship with myself, others, and God.

In the aftermath of this experience with my bishop, I found myself wandering and alone, like a “sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36 ESV). This led to a distancing of myself from Christianity and the Church. I put *Jesus on the shelf*, so to speak, and though I never denied my faith I largely lived life on my terms like the prodigal son, experiencing even more relational and sexual brokenness while looking for love in a “far country” (Luke 15:13). I found myself exploring, studying, and living out permissive ideas and views related to relationships, sexuality, and spirituality that, in many respects, were the complete antithesis of both my upbringing as a Latter-day Saint and my Christian faith as an emerging adult.⁸

Part II. Exploration and Analysis

Dominant Formations and Struggles: The *Radical No* and *Radical Yes*

In hopes of addressing relational and sexual brokenness, I focus on what I view as the *Radical No* and the *Radical Yes*.⁹ One view seems to be fueled by what has been called purity culture, the other by what I think could be referred to as permissive culture. I hope to show that although these two views may have had good intentions, they often keep Christian couples from

⁸ For some the word, permissive can have an implied connotation differing from the definitive meaning, and for that reason, I offer a definition of the word permissive from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language., 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992): “1. Granting or inclined to grant permission; tolerant or lenient. 2. Characterized by freedom of personal behavior or a disregard of traditional social mores.”

⁹ These two expressions—*Radical No* and *Radical Yes*—arose out of a mutual conversation with Dr. Julia Sadusky. Author. Speaker. Psychologist. <https://www.juliasadusky.com>.

experiencing an integrative and flourishing sexual life with one another and the Triune God.¹⁰

Looking primarily at these two undercurrents in no way is to suggest that there are no additional factors inhibiting sexual flourishing between couples (e.g., desire discrepancy, infidelity, lack of sex education, pornography use, trauma, etc.). It is also not to suggest that some might be able to navigate these undercurrents successfully as people of faith but in my view, their impact is more dominant than often realized in the lives of Christian couples and relationships in the broader culture. By starting with the *Radical No* and the *Radical Yes*, I am seeking to bring attention to what I believe may be driving forces of unhealthy sexual attitudes and behaviors, ultimately undermining sexual flourishing at a foundational level.

First a word about other factors inhibiting sexual flourishing between couples. Couples rarely seek me out directly to help them with their sexual health and relationship. Rather, they often present as needing help with communicating better or that they are looking for help with increased conflict arising in their relationship. As therapists often say, “the presenting issue is often not the issue.” When I discover a lack of sexual flourishing in a couple’s relationship it often presents as some type of desire discrepancy, mismatched desire, or low sex/no sex (having sex less than once a month). Sadly, both partners come to counseling defeated not as a unified front but often either pointing fingers at one another or with one party assuming full responsibility.

As we go deeper, unresolved issues such as pornography use, feelings of betrayal, infidelity, and trauma come to the surface. Sometimes these issues are private and sometimes they are known. Further, it becomes clear that there are layers of guilt, shame, and a lack of sex

¹⁰ The Christian theological view of God, one God in three divine persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit articulated in the historic creeds of the undivided church – the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

education. In other words, couples have little to no shared vision or values regarding sexuality. Sexual flourishing is a foreign concept and how sexual love contributes to the health of their relationship with each other and God is equally foreign. Many couples have little to no consciously held personal principles that they hold individually. Typically, I introduce them to basic sexual health principles like:

1. Consent
2. Nonexploitation
3. Protection from HIV/STIs and unintended pregnancy
4. Honesty
5. Shared values
6. Mutual pleasure.¹¹

By introducing individuals to principles associated with sexuality, it establishes a foundation for further conversations on sexual values.

I acknowledge the mutual influence of physical and emotional intimacy. According to Christian authors Shaunti Feldhahn and Michael Sytsma, struggling couples have less sex, while thriving couples have more.¹² Prioritizing sexual intimacy in marriage is crucial. Before delving into its components, let's examine the Radical No and Radical Yes and their impact on the foundation of sexual love and flourishing.

The *Radical No*: Purity Culture

The first undercurrent I want to explore is what I call the *Radical No*, which has been referred to as purity culture, an evangelical movement that promoted a particular Biblical interpretation and view of purity. Purity culture arose in the early 1990s on the heels of a decade

¹¹ Douglas Braun-Harvey and Michael A. Vigorito, *Treating Out of Control Sexual Behavior: Rethinking Sex Addiction*, 1st edition (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2015), 45-48.

¹² Shaunti Feldhahn and Dr Michael Sytsma, *Secrets of Sex and Marriage: 8 Surprises That Make All the Difference* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2023), 50-52.

riddled with the pain and uncertainty that came with the AIDS epidemic.¹³ It lasted about a decade but its effects are far-reaching. It was an effort to support young people in abstaining from sexual relations until marriage. Related to purity is the idea of holiness (or being set apart) but though purity is a part of holiness when considered alone it becomes truncated. Holiness seems to have a directional focus, a teleology, a purpose that is about being set apart unto God. Being holy seems to mean living in accordance with whom you were created or designed to be as an image bearer of God. In the Anglican tradition, in which I was shaped and ordained, purity is an expression of personal holiness that benefits one's relationship with God as well as with others in the community of faith. One can read more about this perspective of holiness from Anglican theologians such as J.I. Packer and John Stott.¹⁴ They saw the pursuit of personal holiness as an essential aspect of spiritual growth and Christian witness.

Purity, on the other hand, as a goal in and of itself seems to miss the deeper teleology of holiness and to be more about getting to a finish line of sorts. It is for this reason that I suggest it becomes truncated when considered alone. Sadly, I think this was often the result because many of the conversations about purity happen in isolation. "What we need more of is conversation(s)."¹⁵ For example, community offerings such as workshops with sex-positive curriculum, not merely isolated private book studies where people are left to themselves to make sense of things. Though purity culture is not a scriptural expression itself, scripture does often reference leading a pure life, one that is set apart. Passages from the Bible such as 1

¹³ Around the same time the solidifying changes in gender roles also created a backlash of what it means to be a Biblical woman. Debates arose between those referred to as egalitarians and complementarians. — Personal conversation with Dr. Melissa Snarr, Vanderbilt Divinity School.

¹⁴ J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness: Know the Fullness of Life with God*, Reissue edition (Ventura, Calif: Baker Books, 2009).

¹⁵ Rachel Joy Welcher and Scott Sauls, *Talking Back to Purity Culture: Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2020), 15.

Thessalonians 4:3-8, Romans 12:1, and 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 were used to support the position.

For instance, Paul instructs:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you (1 Thess 4:3-8).

On the face of it, this seems completely reasonable that one would be seeking to align their life with the teachings of scripture in pursuit of a life that aligns with their beliefs and values. The problem as I see it is when the pursuit becomes an end in and of itself and extra-Biblical codes of purity are put in their place.

Another problem is how in the words of Rebecca Lemke, purity culture “allowed many parents to skirt the responsibility of discussing sex with their child while simultaneously believing that the issue was being addressed through ‘role models’ and purity events.”¹⁶ In other words, it points out the neglecting of parental responsibility to “train up a child” (Proverbs 22:6) and the ancient declaration of faith in God and the ways of God as taught in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. I witness the effects of such views and neglect in my practice. Regularly in my practice when I ask clients about their personal and shared sexual values they look at me mystified not quite sure what I mean. When I inquire about messages they received in their home life or at church they pretty much all shrug their shoulders and say, “We didn’t really talk about it.” What they do know they confess is from para-church purity gatherings and largely from the internet.

¹⁶ Rebecca Lemke, *The Scarlet Virgins: When Sex Replaces Salvation* (Norman, OK: Anatole, 2017).

The result is that many people and especially women struggle to own their voice in marriage due to feeling a lack of safety, not being in touch with their feelings and needs, and out of a fear of rejection.¹⁷ As such they defer to their husband's sexual needs at the expense of their own. In session, I often see clients who attach their sense of self and spiritual worth to their sexual history, a sexual history full of shame that has been largely informed by messaging they received from purity culture. This shame and their lack of education about who they are as sexual beings and what sexual love in marriage looks like presents itself when they come to see me. They often turn to pornography to fill this gap and the newly married husband and wife often receive one-dimensional, dangerous, and distorted messages about the sensitive sexual intimacies of sexual love.¹⁸

To further complicate things these messages around purity are different for men and women, often in ways that oppress women causing them to lose their voice. Women received messages idolizing virginity. Virginity became synonymous with purity and even replaced one's primary identity in Christ. Sex outside of marriage was viewed as dirty and dangerous, something to be avoided at all costs. To arrive at marriage, not being a virgin was deeply shameful and struck one's sense of worth and value at the heart. As Rachel Joy Welcher writes in *Talking Back to Purity Culture*, "a woman's worth rests not in her soul but between her legs."¹⁹ As such, clients (men and women) have disclosed to me how they would develop work-around

¹⁷ Laurie Handlers, *Sex & Happiness: The Tantric Laws of Intimacy*, ed. Siobhan Mullally, 1st edition (Butterfly Workshops Press, 2007), 70-80.

¹⁸ Laura M. Brotherson, *Knowing HER Intimately: 12 Keys for Creating a Sextraordinary Marriage*, Illustrated edition (Inspire Book, 2016), 167.

¹⁹ Rachel Joy Welcher and Scott Sauls, *Talking Back to Purity Culture: Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2020), 20.

behaviors, a technical virginity of sorts, to explore sexual activities other than intercourse, all the while telling themselves they were pure and still a virgin.

I remember when Josie, a middle-aged woman, came to see me with her husband for couples counseling.²⁰ She shared about how after nearly 20 years of marriage, she struggled to feel connected to her husband and how sexual intimacy had all but vanished. When I explored this with them it became clear that they had little to no sex education and that the primary message they did receive from their parents and their local parish was to stay pure and that God would be most pleased if they were to marry virgins. This highlights the truncated view mentioned above and how silence about sexuality sends its own messages.

Women also received messages that they were not as sexual as men, downplaying who they were sexually, and if they were taught about sexuality at all it was through the lens of male sexuality. For instance, when couples share with me in a session about struggles with desire or desire discrepancy I often see that instead of a wife's *responsive desire*²¹ (common to most women and men in mid-life and beyond) just being different from *spontaneous desire* (common to most men before mid-life and some women), it was often looked at as a weak or inferior sex drive.²² "According to Barry McCarthy and Emily McCarthy, "low sexual desire and desire discrepancies are the most common sexual problem couples bring to therapy."²³ However, most couples present with a non-sexual reason for needing counseling (e.g. communication issues, conflict resolution, etc.)

²⁰ The following example has been modified to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. All identifying information has been removed or changed.

²¹ Emily Nagoski, *Come As You Are: Revised and Updated: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life*, Updated edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).

²² Brotherson, *Knowing HER Intimately*, 175.

²³ Barry McCarthy and Emily McCarthy, *Rekindling Desire*, 3rd edition (New York: Routledge, 2019).

In addition, they were often simultaneously burdened with the responsibility of being the sexual gatekeepers of men who seemingly could not control themselves, being told to dress modestly and receiving conflicting messages like being attractive but not too attractive. All of which was absolving men, directly and indirectly, of exercising self-control, one aspect of the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). This mindset often carries over into married life where these internalized messages received by women become a one-way duty to serve their husband's sexual needs while denying or suppressing their own needs for emotional and sexual intimacy. Thus, many lose their voice and sense of place in married life and don't experience the joys of sexual love. If that were not sad enough, these oppressive and often abusive messages are all too frequently reinforced by uninformed, untrained, or immature pastors in matters related to sexuality. Examples of such abusive pastoral messages can be found in the book, "The Great Sex Rescue."²⁴ The authors point out how such messages perpetuate a culture of victim blaming and shame while often keeping survivors from getting the help they need. All of this leads to an environment that does not foster sexual flourishing.

When these messages carry over into married life and the marital bed, instead of there being an expression of sexual love that is motivated by the words of scripture, "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21), the result is the opposite of health and wholeness. The space between becomes one of self-centered attitudes and behaviors and sex becomes a kind of god and each partner's needs fuel a sort of battleground. Hearts have become hard and two people who vowed to live life together as one now find themselves strangers in a strange land. They increasingly turn inward and consider contingency plans in their private

²⁴ Gregoire, Shelia Wray, *The Great Sex Rescue: The Lies You've Been Taught and How to Recover What God Intended* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2021).

worlds in the event things do not work out. This is what is sometimes referred to as an emotional divorce where one or both partners have disengaged from one another.

I am reminded of two veterans who came to see me. Julie and Gary, a couple in their early 40s where sexual intimacy was a dreaded and rare encounter.²⁵ And I paraphrase: Julie's rolling to the outside of the bed thinking to herself, "Is he going to want *it* again tonight?" while Gary simultaneously thinks "Is she ever going to want it again?" So, it is either a battleground for winners and losers or both retreat to the edges, and the marriage bed becomes defiled. By "defiling the marriage bed," I draw on the biblical understanding that sex between married partners is not considered sinful, or impure by God, so long as it is consensual and with the covenantal bond of marriage.²⁶ When mutuality is lost and competition becomes central, the marriage bed can become defiled or unholy. In other words, the harmony and shared understanding between partners is disrupted, leading to potential negative consequences for the overall health of the relationship.

The messages men received from purity culture were different from those received by women but also as destructive. Purity culture taught men to evaluate women largely through the lens of their sexuality and developed a mindset that conflated virginity with purity. Such a mindset leads to men sizing women up based on externals. Rachel Joy Welcher notes that in a sex-saturated society, purity culture leads men to think of themselves as obsessed with sex, that they are *sex machines* or *lust machines*.²⁷ She goes on to point out that John Eldredge "believes that the reason men fall into lust is because their manhood has been repressed, damaged, and

²⁵ The following example has been modified to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. All identifying information has been removed or changed.

²⁶ How this phrase is interpreted and applied may vary depending on one's basic beliefs (or worldview), everyday theology, and cultural and/or religious background.

²⁷ Welcher and Sauls, *Talking Back to Purity Culture*, 57-58.

managed.”²⁸ When men in my practice internalize such messaging, they often view themselves as victims, enslaved to their sexuality. In other words, they identify with their passions more than Christ, and purity culture tells them to fight harder to win the battle while consciously or unconsciously they are led to see women’s behavior as a big part of what leads to their struggle to be pure.

It is common for counselors and therapists to see how these ingrained messages lead to an inability of clients to integrate their sexual and spiritual selves.²⁹ This *Radical No*, expressed in these distorted and harmful messages about sexual purity leaves my clients with little to no idea of how to live out their sexuality, let alone sexually flourish, with others while single and when they potentially get married. Then, years later, often during mid-life or when they are approaching mid-life, they struggle with physical and emotional intimacy, not quite sure what happened. Worse yet such struggles are wrapped in shame and often accompanied by traumatic events, past and present, as they try to figure things out by themselves.

Living out received values, not consciously held, many of which are from the messaging of purity culture and the *Radical No* is something I routinely see in my practice. To put it another way, this highlights the work of Mary Douglas mentioned above, couples are living out received sexual values that are focused on, keeping things in their proper place to maintain borders and order related to sexuality.³⁰ Clients have little to no awareness of how this impacts or limits their ability to experience an integrative and flourishing sexual life or how this robs them of intimacy with each other and God. I wish I could say these messages have only been internalized by my

²⁸ Eldredge, John, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001).

²⁹ Tina Schermer Sellers, *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church: Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy* / Tina Schermer Sellers. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

³⁰ Hornsby, Teresa J. “Gender, Sexuality, and the New Testament.” VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. October 15, 2021. Video, 41:42. <https://vanderbilt.app.box.com/s/nh7939ebt9ojg3o4f2hty7hk8due6uf7/file/873183132075>

clients with evangelical Christian backgrounds. However, this is not the case. I find that this purity mindset, this *Radical No*, is larger and transcends the walls of evangelicalism. Perhaps it was always a part of the broader culture but came to be codified in these unhealthy ways with parts of evangelicalism during this time.

The *Radical Yes*: Permissive Culture³¹

Another undercurrent I encounter, when couples come to see me to address relational and sexual brokenness, is what I call the *Radical Yes* of permissive culture. Many hear this word and immediately associate it with words like *promiscuous* as in having many indiscriminate or casual sexual relations. Others associate permissive as *lasciviousness* or unrestrained sexual behavior, or a habitual inclination to such behavior; lustfulness.³² Though these often do flow from the *Radical Yes* of permissive culture they are not one and the same. As a reminder, the word *permissive* is about granting permission, and excessive freedom of behavior.³³ I think this is an important distinction because when couples grant themselves permission regarding sexuality it empowers them to consider exploring new ways of thinking about sexuality and participating in sexual love together. For example, a couple visited with me who released a linear, performance-driven view of sex. Once they were open to permitting themselves to try something new, the couple was better prepared to receive an idea that sex was more akin to a smorgasbord of options for pleasure and connection that they could mutually decide upon together. They were also ready to consider sexual intimacy from a holistic perspective versus merely a linear one. While this is a

³¹ For some the expression “unfettered”—not controlled, limited, or prevented by anyone—may work better. — Personal conversation with Dr. Melissa Snarr, Vanderbilt Divinity School.

³² The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language., 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

³³ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.

successful shift of openness, it becomes problematic or perhaps even dangerous when a permissive mindset becomes unfettered.

This permissive *unfettered* mindset around sexuality, this *Radical Yes*, is best articulated by one of the leading voices on sexuality and relationships. Articulating her view of sexual health and fulfillment, Gabriella Cordova taught that the best sex or sexual liberation means having sex with whom one wants (or as many people as one wants), when one wants, as often as one wants, in whatever way they want, provided there is mutual consent and best practices are in place.³⁴ In other words, for her and the other facilitators at this event, consent was king (or queen) and one's desires were central. This differs from a perspective that acknowledges the undeniable pleasure of sex but does not consider pleasure as the primary goal of sexual activity; instead, it serves as the incentive for participation.³⁵

Some of the mindset that flows from this *Radical Yes* is the desire for autonomy, self-realization, and excessive freedom of behavior or perhaps full liberation from the *Radical No*. One strong expression of this desire for autonomy, self-realization, and excessive freedom of behavior is what is known as the sexual revolution. A mindset emerged in the 1960s and 1970s when traditional religious, and cultural beliefs, and values around sexuality and relationships were being challenged by the introduction of new ideas or perhaps ideas from another period that were now taking root. Examples include the emergence of highly effective and affordable birth control, no-fault divorce, and the legalization of abortion. Prior to the emergence of reliable contraception, most women did not have sex until marriage.³⁶ Though the experiment of the

³⁴ Love Coach Academy Intimacy Training and Certification. Sex and Intimacy in Conscious Relationship. Gabriella Cordova. Educator and advocate for sex-positivity and healthy sexuality. Founder of Sex Positive World. <https://www.sexpositiveworld.org>. This is a paraphrase of what to the best of my memory I recall her saying.

³⁵ Sean McDowell, *Chasing Love: Sex, Love, and Relationships in a Confused Culture* (B&H Books, 2020), 79.

³⁶ Louise Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 1st edition (Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA, USA: Polity, 2022), 138-139.

sexual revolution was a significant part of this social movement of liberation, it was not just about sex and relationships.

Traditional paths and ideas were being challenged by those advocating for ideas associated with the sexual revolution and life as it was known was changing. Ideas about gender and roles were being questioned as well and there were growing legal rights for women. For instance, up to 1974, women could not have a bank account or a credit card in their name. All progressive movements have inherent strengths and weaknesses and this period is no different. These ideas were not new but rather newly discovered ideas from the past (e.g. Greek thought and culture) as well as ideas that were coming to center stage with the influence of continental philosophy, liberal theology, and psychology.

Author Robert Bellah, coined the term, “expressive individualism” which is an underlying attitude for those embracing the *Radical Yes*. He defines it this way: “Expressive individualism holds that each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized.”³⁷ This seems to align well with what I call a humanistic, existential psycho-spirituality. For many, God and His commandments were no longer at the center of things for making decisions but each person was left to determine right and wrong for themselves, to create their own existential reality. Others see this as “merging with a radical individualism, in part perpetuated by conservative Christian free market capitalism, which prioritized market choice as consumption as an end itself.”³⁸ Expressive individualism is likely the result of both secularization and consumerism.

³⁷ Robert N. (Robert Neelly) Bellah, *Habits of the Heart : Individualism and Commitment in American Life : Updated Edition with a New Introduction / Robert N. Bellah ... [et Al.]*, 1st Calif. pbk. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

³⁸ Personal conversation with Dr. Melissa Snarr, Vanderbilt Divinity School.

Throughout the 21st century, each decade appears to have progressively relaxed sexual ethics, morals, and values more than the preceding one. Individuals in my office, particularly those who came of age during the 1960s and 1970s, often reflect on these decades as a time of sexual liberation, commonly referred to as the sexual revolution or what I term the *Radical Yes*. Opinions on this period vary, with some viewing it as a pinnacle of moral decay, while others see it as a progressive high point. Though some see it as a pinnacle or high point, it seems that things have only accelerated over these decades. Regardless of how one views this period, it is not without effect on relationships and sexuality. It reveals that people are spiritually hungry for deeper purpose and meaning in their lives as well as a greater sense of pleasure, connection, and sustained intimacy with themselves and others, including the mysterious Unknown.³⁹

One example of this new permissive culture of sex and relationships, the *Radical Yes*, is what is known as hook-up culture, seen on college campuses and beyond. To illustrate, some of my clients also experienced trauma within the *Radical Yes* as they engaged in hook-up culture. I am thinking of Amy⁴⁰, a single mom of two, who shared how she regularly hooks up with men to fill the void in her life, compromising her values about waiting for commitment. Looking back now at her chosen pattern of behavior she is traumatized by her choices, she tells me how sex has lost its meaning and how she feels deep shame, and grieves her loss of self.

It is important to understand that hook-up culture and hooking up (or casual sex) are different. Many of my clients practice casual sex and sex outside of marriage. Some tell me that, as college students, friends often discouraged them from dating and relationships, rather encouraging them to hook up sexually with other students was just part of the college experience.

³⁹ Dan Scott, *Naked and Not Ashamed: How God Redeems Our Sexuality* (Eugene, Or: Harvest House Publishers, 2008).

⁴⁰ The following example has been modified to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. All identifying information has been removed or changed.

I wonder if underneath this sentiment is what Donna Freitas references in her book, *Sex and the Soul*:

A lot of people come into college expecting to meet their husband or wife ... once you get here you realize that it is really just not that easy to do. Like, finding love just isn't that easy. Sex is probably a lot easier. —student at nonreligious private university⁴¹

Perhaps this is the case for some while others being away from home means they can do life on their terms, engaging in things they want to explore, and largely escape their parent's beliefs, morals, and values.

What a hook-up looks like varies and is ambiguous but “the purpose of the hook-up ... is the opposite of ambiguous. The goal is ‘fast, random, no-strings-attached sex.’”⁴² It was to establish a kind of meaninglessness with a purpose that helped one move up in perceived social status. This is the idea of hook-up culture in contrast to hooking up. It is this hook-up cultural mindset, associated risks, and its implications that Lisa Wade says makes so many students unhappy.⁴³ In other words, causal sex doesn't deliver in terms of existential meaning and what it does deliver is superficial and risky. I say risky because in hook-up culture, alcohol misuse is considered a first step, and with alcohol in the mix, consent is ambiguous.⁴⁴ Thus, students are more vulnerable to sexual assault and many students allow themselves to participate in sexual behaviors they would ordinarily choose not to do.

For example, I regularly have women clients who report how they have felt “worn down or needed by their partners” in sexual encounters. When alcohol is involved they report feeling greater vulnerability and that they have given in only to regret it later. The lack of sexual

⁴¹ Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, Updated Edition: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses, Revised ed. edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 93.

⁴² Lisa Wade, *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus*, Reprint edition (W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 41.

⁴³ Wade 24.

⁴⁴ It is the opinion of the writer that this demonstrates that consent is necessary but not sufficient.

education in both purity culture and permissive culture allows a variety of unhealthy sexual behaviors to persist, even in married life. The question remains is hook-up culture really liberating? Again, per Freitas,

Hookup culture . . . is antifeminist through and through. Within hookup culture, the hookup is not an exciting, liberating sexual encounter that introduces participants to the freedom of unfettered sexuality and pleasure. Instead, young adults learn they have no choice but to accept—whether they like it or not—that the hookup is the norm for sexual intimacy. They learn that they must be casual about sex—even if they don’t feel that way. They learn that sex is something you ‘trade’ for social acceptance; that sex is something to get done much like the dishes; and that pleasure is low on the list of concerns, if it’s there at all.⁴⁵

Sexual liberation promises a lot, especially to women, by granting them a greater platform for their voices to be heard regarding roles and rights. However, it also falls short in providing deeper levels of spiritual and existential meaning.⁴⁶ Further, it is not without consequence, immediate and long-lasting, which is revealed in my practice as a couple’s counselor. This has been highlighted by the work of the feminist author, Louise Perry and journalist and opinion writer, Christine Emba.⁴⁷ Permissive culture has a shadow side with mental health implications just as much as purity culture.

Another example on the rise that lands within this area of the *Radical Yes*, and the broader hook-up culture, is Consensual Non-monogamy (CNM), a clinical umbrella term used to describe non-traditional, open relationship styles such as polyamory, monogamish, and swinging. Polyamory means many loves. It is the practice of, or desire for, romantic relationships with

⁴⁵ Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, Updated Edition.

⁴⁶ Many women, in the pursuit of love, engage in sex early in the relationship, often with little to no authentic commitment, only to be disappointed. Similarly, but in a different vein, many men seek intimacy and connection through pornography. Both endeavors separate sex from love. Sex does not equate to love.

⁴⁷ Christine Emba, *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation* (New York, NY: Sentinel, 2022).

more than one partner at the same time. It prides itself on the informed consent of all partners involved.⁴⁸

During my time with "Jesus on the shelf," I embraced an enjoyable polyamorous lifestyle. I encountered people who shared some of my values related to personal, and relational growth, self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and open and honest communication. I lived into what the permissive lifestyle offered and promised regarding relationships and sexuality. I learned and tried many different things and it provided me with a lot of "field work" as I interacted with others. However, though satisfying and even fun at times, polyamory and open relating added additional complexity to my life. There was even a season where I was involved with teaching in the community about conscious sexuality and relationships and explored teachings from other schools of thought about the subject.⁴⁹ In these circles, sexuality is seen much like psychedelics as a path to spiritual liberation.⁵⁰ It is important to note it was not all about sex; however, "temple nights" were about leaning into edges emotionally and physically with sexual and non-sexual touch).

One client, Matt, confided in me that though there was no formal expectation, he felt there was subtle but significant pressure. He owned that, in his own words, "it could be his own stuff" but his intuition told him he was not the only one feeling this way. We talked about how the environment seemed to break down one's convictions and sensibilities related to sexuality

⁴⁸ Dr Elisabeth Sheff, *When Someone You Love Is Polyamorous: Understanding Poly People and Relationships*, Second Printing edition (Portland, OR: Thorntree Press, 2016).

⁴⁹ For reference, some of the schools of thought and practice include sexual shamanism, and a practical form of esoteric Tantra.

⁵⁰ These sexual shamanic and tantric spaces were considered sacred and as such drugs and alcohol were not permitted to ensure there was safety and people could freely consent.

and relationships.⁵¹ These mystery schools lean heavily on spiritual monism—mind alone is eternal, worldview (e.g. mystical Hinduism and Tantra, Gnosticism, the New Age, and various occult practices.)⁵² The rhetoric in these circles, polyamory, and sexual shamanism was often about relationships and love.

Many though were there not merely in pursuit of personal and spiritual growth but to provide a sexual outlet for struggles in their monogamous relationships due to mismatched sexual desires.⁵³ In fact, even though polyamorous proponents say this is not the reason to embrace polyamory, regularly in my practice I encounter such people. To be fair, even my wife and I have had mismatched sexual desire and this is quite common among heterosexual couples but upon closer examination, it is more complex than connecting with a different partner.

It is common to meet with clients who are serial monogamists and ready to exit the relationship stating, “it just wasn’t meant to be.” The reality thought was that the “love drugs” had worn off, meaning the honeymoon period had merely ended. To illustrate, Mitchell, a divorced father of three and entrepreneur in his early 50s, sought me out for help with a “string of failed relationships.”⁵⁴ From our time together, it became clear that somewhere between six and thirty-six months, around the time the honeymoon period ended, he would either end his relationships or sabotage them to bring about their end. In a sense, polyamory provided him a place to medicate and feel good with serial relationships and sexual encounters until reality set

⁵¹ The following example has been modified to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. All identifying information has been removed or changed.

⁵² Surrendra Gangadean, *Philosophical Foundation: A Critical Analysis of Basic Beliefs* (Lanham, MD: UPA, 2008) 71.

⁵³ To be clear I am not suggesting that those who are sexually permissive or embrace a polyamorous lifestyle are sexual addicts. Rather, I am suggesting that the resolution or meaning these folks seek is not to be found where they are looking.

⁵⁴ The following example has been modified to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. All identifying information has been removed or changed.

in. He lacked the skills, tools, and practices to lean into relationships where fulfillment and flourishing are to be found.

Whether in polyamorous or monogamous relationships there is a point when the “love drugs” wear off and the relationship gets real. Permissive culture does its best to mask over this but in my experience, personally and professionally it leaves one wanting and desiring more. It lacks theological and existential meaning and seems to fall short of the idea of freedom and liberation.

Part III. Constructive Reflection and Interpretation

In this section, I aim to present a teleology for sexual flourishing, offering an alternative perspective to conventional notions that treat procreation, purity, and pleasure as ends in themselves. The objective is to address the paradox of hedonism, which suggests that individuals who consciously strive to maximize their personal pleasures are more prone to failure compared to those who prioritize intrinsic concerns for others and other entities.⁵⁵ In other words, the paradox suggests that a focus that relies solely on personal pleasure can lead to greater challenges, while a genuine prioritization of others inherently contributes to more successful outcomes. This exploration aims to shed light on the complexities and the intricate interplay between personal and communal well-being.

In practical terms, I intend to reconsider established ideas about sexual love and intimacy. It involves moving beyond the conventional emphasis on abstaining from sexual activity until marriage as the ultimate objective and dispelling the notion of sexual fulfillment as an isolated goal. Instead, the focus is on a nuanced understanding of intimacy, exploring what sexual flourishing entails for Christian couples in or approaching midlife within the context of marriage.

⁵⁵ Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

In the end, I intend to propose an alternative path that goes beyond the extremes of the *Radical No* and *Radical Yes*. This path aims to offer a conceptual framework, grounded in foundational elements, for understanding sexual love and the marital embrace⁵⁶ within the context of marriage. This framework is designed to resonate with couples, promote a deeper sense of embodiment, and foster intimacy with themselves, each other, and the Triune God.

During my time working with couples, conversations about sex and sexual intimacy are often neglected. Whether Christian or non-Christian, many individuals enter married life ill-prepared, particularly in the realm of sexual intimacy. In the course of questioning couples about their sexual values, a recurring observation is the manifestation of perplexity in their responses, akin to a state of surprise or being caught off guard, similar to the reaction of a deer in the headlights. What swiftly becomes apparent is that the values they do hold have been inherited from family, peer groups, religious leaders and church life, personal experiences, education, culture and society, media and entertainment (including pornography), and online communities and influencers. Their values generally come from a combination of these areas. Unfortunately, received values that are often unconsciously held align not only with my professional experience but also with the narratives I have encountered from individuals beyond the clinical setting.

Thus, people find themselves living according to values they have not consciously embraced, all the while being significantly influenced by extremes such as the *Radical No* and *Radical Yes* mentioned earlier. The concept of an integrative approach to experiencing sexual flourishing within marriage, one that supports deeper levels of intimacy and connection, often remains distant and overlooked. Nevertheless, when I question clients about their motivations for

⁵⁶ The terms "sexual love" and "the marital embrace" are often used interchangeably, although they hold slightly different meanings. "Sexual love" typically refers to the romantic and intimate connection between partners, encompassing emotional and physical intimacy. On the other hand, "the marital embrace" specifically denotes the physical act of sexual intercourse within marriage, symbolizing commitment, love, and unity. – ChatGPT, 2024.

engaging in sexual activity and what makes it appealing to them, the common thread, almost without exception, is the pursuit of shared pleasure and connection.

There is a noticeable absence of healthy sexual education and formation within conservative Christian communities before marriage.⁵⁷ This deficiency tends to manifest itself later in married life, particularly during the mid-life stage. As an illustration, women frequently disclose less-than-desirable, obligatory, or coercive early sexual experiences during counseling sessions, with such revelations often not occurring until mid-life. Such experiences profoundly influence their sexual trajectory, often manifesting in conditions such as vaginismus and diminished desire. Such findings underscore the enduring impact of early sexual encounters on women's sexual well-being and emphasize the importance of addressing emotional aspects alongside physical concerns in fostering a healthy sexual journey for married couples.⁵⁸ This also underscores that not all sexual experiences are positive or conducive to health, and that power imbalances can ultimately result in negative or unhealthy outcomes, and even abuse.

Many of my clients express that engaging in theological discussions about sexual matters is not a common practice within their families or congregations. Instead, there seems to be a prevailing culture of silence, leaving a void that is often filled in less-than-healthy ways. When families or churches seek to offer guidance on sexual formation, their approach often centers around advising on what to avoid, rather than having a discussion about the healthy aspects and the essence of sexual well-being. In simpler terms, these efforts often lack a comprehensive and

⁵⁷ It is worth noting that the mainline protestant denomination the United Church of Christ (UCC) and the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) faith community collaborated in the late 1980s to put together a comprehensive lifespan sexuality education curriculum called Our Whole Lives (OWL). These faith communities have different theological values than many conservative Christians and even each other. They are seeking to address the gap of knowledge that many youth and adults have in matters related to sexuality.

⁵⁸ Personal conversation on September 12, 2023, with Sheila Wray Gregoire, speaker and author of *The Great Sex Rescue* (2021), where she highlighted this connection, drawing on her research as well as studies conducted by the University of Toronto.

constructive approach. In some cases, these efforts can even be detrimental. This gap in sex education and a lack of open dialogue can lead to challenges in marital intimacy, leaving couples ill-equipped to navigate these issues effectively as they progress through their married lives.

Fortunately, within the landscape of conservative Christian communities, there are some thoughtful and well-informed theological voices emerging that address the issue of sexual formation with depth and care. These individuals and resources offer valuable insights into navigating the intersection of faith and sexuality, emphasizing the importance of sexual flourishing and fulfillment that support embodiment and intimacy for married couples, particularly during the mid-life stage.⁵⁹ Karol Wojtyla, a conservative to moderate thinker, explores the philosophical and ethical dimensions of love, emphasizing the importance of personal responsibility and self-giving in human relationships, expressed popularly as being a *good gift*. In his later work as Pope John Paul II, he further developed these ideas, presenting a profound theological exploration of the human body, sexuality, and the divine plan for the unity of man and woman in marriage. Both are works that one could spend a lifetime studying.⁶⁰

By drawing from these theological sources, I hope to shed light on healthier pathways to approach sex education, fostering greater understanding, intimacy, and fulfillment within Christian marriages, especially as couples enter the mid-life phase and beyond. These voices provide a unique perspective on how to cultivate a sense of sexual flourishing that not only

⁵⁹ In particular, I am thinking of Karol Wojtyla, *Love & Responsibility: New Transla*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik (Pauline Books & Media, 2013); and his later work as the pope, John Paul II and Michael Waldstein, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body / John Paul II*; Translation, Introduction, and Index by Michael M. Waldstein. (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006).

⁶⁰ Fortunately, there are books such as Edward Sri, *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love: Practical Insights from John Paul II's Love and Responsibility*. (Newburyport: Franciscan Media, 2015); and Christopher West, *Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing* (Image, 2013) that make John Paul II accessible everyday theology for those sitting in the pews.

aligns with one's faith but also enriches the marital experience, emphasizing the holistic development of a couples' physical and emotional connections.

Important to the theological and psychological exploration of sexual love within Christian marriage is a good understanding of historical developments of human sexuality. Throughout the history of Christianity, various theological voices have shaped attitudes towards sexuality building on the notion that “sexual morality was a presumptive requirement of communal belonging” discovered within the exchange of letters between the apostle Paul and early believers in the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.⁶¹ Representing the Eastern tradition, St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Maximos the Confessor are regarded as emblematic figures. In the Western tradition, the influential presence of St. Augustine overwhelmingly shapes the landscape. Augustine's theological perspectives regarding marriage established a lasting basis for Western Christian teaching in this sphere for the subsequent fifteen centuries, and continue to hold significant sway even in contemporary times.⁶²

Both traditions conclude that original sin cast sexual love in the sacrament of marriage in a less than favorable light.⁶³ In the words, of Tatha Wiley, “The Christian doctrine of original sin has fallen on hard times. And it has been articulated in ways that seem to deny the goodness of human sexuality and even of being human.”⁶⁴ Virginité came to be viewed as a superior path and

⁶¹ Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin* [Electronic Resource] : The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity / Kyle Harper., *Revealing Antiquity* ; 20 (Cambridge ; Harvard University Press, 2013), 91, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674074569>.

⁶² Philip Sherrard, *Christianity and Eros* (Denise Harvey, 1995), 11–16. Not always the most reliable authority on sexual health, St. Augustine, a prominent theological figure in Western Christian thought, appears to adopt a decidedly conservative stance (“No” par excellence) on sexuality due to his challenges in reconciling his previous libertine lifestyle with his subsequent commitment to Christianity, notably wrestling with matters of lust and chastity.

⁶³ Sherrard, 19–21.

⁶⁴ J. B. Stump and Chad Meister, eds., *Original Sin and the Fall: Five Views* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2020), 101.

the legacy of early Christian asceticism, which emphasized celibacy and the renunciation of worldly desires (e.g., lust, concupiscence, etc.) are regarded as a path to spiritual purity.⁶⁵ This ascetic strain of thought often regarded the physical and sexual aspects of human life and even sexual love within marriage with suspicion, associating sexual acts with sin, temptation, and inferior or base aspects of humanity. This backdrop, combined with certain interpretations of biblical texts that highlighted sexual restraint, contributed to the perception of sexual love in marriage as inherently sinful or at least problematic. In certain contexts, the idealization of virginity is associated with the notion of purity and the elevation of celibacy as a more spiritually elevated state.⁶⁶

However, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, there has been a somewhat more balanced approach in more recent days, where marriage as a sacred institution acknowledges the healthy aspects of sexual love while still advocating for self-control.⁶⁷ Even in the West, works such as Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, seem to offer a fresh understanding of sexual love and the marital embrace, within the institution of marriage, that in my opinion challenges the theology of some of the Church Fathers and early writers.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Lust – state of human fallenness that tainted human desires; an intense longing, particularly a strong sexual craving or passion.

⁶⁶ This emphasis on virginity, particularly for women, often stemmed from patriarchal structures that sought to control and regulate women's sexuality. The idea of virgin birth, such as in the case of the Virgin Mary, could be interpreted in ways that reinforced the perceived sanctity of virginity and, in some instances, implied a certain negative view of sexual activity. – Personal conversation based on feedback from Professor George Schmidt, Vanderbilt Divinity School.

⁶⁷ For example, two titles by Eastern Orthodox theologians: John Chryssavgis, *Love, Sexuality and the Sacrament of Marriage* (Brookline, Mass: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005); and Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love : The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition / Paul Evdokimov ; Translated from the French by Anthony P. Gythiel and Victoria Steadman; with a Foreword by Olivier Clement.* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

⁶⁸ John Paul II and Waldstein, *Man and Woman He Created Them : A Theology of the Body / John Paul II ; Translation, Introduction, and Index by Michael M. Waldstein.*

In more recent years, contemporary Christian theology and psychology have sought to revisit these historical viewpoints. They emphasize the sacredness of marital intimacy and encourage a more complete appreciation of sexual love within the context of a dedicated and affectionate covenant marriage.⁶⁹ These efforts align with the current and best insights from human psychology and relationships while staying true to conservative Christian values. This endeavor seeks to emphasize and elevate the sacred nature of marital sexuality, recognizing it as a divinely ordained gift that plays a vital role in the spiritual and emotional connection between a husband and wife. Also, highlighting its essence to be about holiness rather than mere happiness.⁷⁰

An Integrative Alternative to the *Radical No* and *Radical Yes*

When I counsel married couples and we consider issues surrounding their sexual intimacy, it frequently manifests as a disparity in desire. The presence of such sexual brokenness deeply saddens me as a clinician because, in the absence of sexual wholeness, couples are deprived not only of the joys but also of the physical, physiological, psychological, and spiritual benefits of sexual love. Furthermore, it unveils a profound yearning within both partners to be truly seen, heard, known, and loved in a manner that provides them with a profound sense of belonging and empowers them to live as more complete reflections of God. I suggest this is an aspect of what is meant by sexual flourishing for conservative Christian couples.

⁶⁹ Examples of this are the following works: Juli Slattery, *God, Sex, and Your Marriage* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2022); and Dr Juli Slattery and Gary Thomas, *Rethinking Sexuality: God's Design and Why It Matters* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2018). Slattery is the creator of the training curriculum, *Sexual Discipleship*.[®] In her book, *God, Sex, and Your Marriage* Juli offers and unpacks not techniques but rather Four Pillars for a Great Sex Life: Faithfulness, Intimate Knowing, Sacrificial Love, and Passionate Celebration.

⁷⁰ Gary Thomas, *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?*, Reprint edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2015).

As I note above, sexual flourishing could be related to keeping "the marriage bed undefiled. Hebrews 13:4 states "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." This verse emphasizes the sacred and holy (or sanctified) nature of the marital union. In context, "the marriage bed" pertains to the physical closeness and intimate affection that is reserved exclusively for a husband and wife to partake of together in sexual love.⁷¹ My theological interpretation understands "undefiled" as a sexual union that is considered pure and holy exclusively within the confines of a marriage. The marriage union, a sacred space, is thoughtfully designed by God for spouses to encounter intimacy, pleasure, and affirmation with one another, and not intended as a place for involvement with others. Within holy scripture, certain passages suggest that in the union of marriage, and through sexual love, one encounters a mystery that is both incarnational and transcendent. This offers a glimpse into the divine realm of union with God.⁷² Here in this playful encounter, time often seems to halt, creating a sacred moment.⁷³ Wife and husband seek to extend selfless love to one another as *good gifts*, opening the door to an embodied experience of oneness where two become one.⁷⁴

Viewing the human body as a gift underscores the sacred nature of human sexuality and relationships. According to the theological foundations supporting this perspective, the body,

⁷¹ This is not to suggest that sex in marriage is literally restricted to the couple's bed. Spouses are encouraged to cultivate Biblical eroticism and erotic playfulness that prioritizes adventure and curiosity.

⁷² A couple of examples: 1 Corinthians 6:16-20; Ephesians 5:31-32

⁷³ Hamman, Jaco., "Play-Informed Chaplaincy: Building Resilience & Fostering Compassion Satisfaction." VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. September 30, 2021. Video, 48:00. <https://Vanderbilt.App.Box.Com/s/Jkymm64j9es905hz8c77bel9y00csnf/File/866953937402.>"

⁷⁴ My appreciation for the idea of good gift(s) has been shaped by two significant experiences: 1) an immersive intensive course I attended in the summer of 2023 at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on the Marriage and Family, titled "John Paul II's Wednesday Catechesis and the Meaning of Human Love," and 2) insights gained from reading a chapter titled "Revealing Christ Through the Gift of Our Bodies" in a book on healing for those that have experienced relational and sexual brokenness. Andrew Comiskey, *Living Waters: Restoring Relational Integrity through the Broken Body of Christ* (Desert Stream Ministries, 2022).

including its sexual dimensions, is perceived as a divine gift, meant to be expressed and received with generosity and love within the sanctified covenant of marriage. This theological standpoint is enriched by the concept that love, as explored in St. Thomas Aquinas' examination of the nature of charity/caritas, involves the genuine pursuit of the well-being of the other.⁷⁵ In this sacred space, the realm of marriage, individuals can perceive themselves, their spouse, and God with renewed insight, fostering a connection that is profound, otherworldly, and rejuvenating. Simultaneously, this perspective magnifies God as spouses, created in the divine image, strive to be gifts to each other through their presence and selfless love within the marital embrace. This mutual commitment enhances the sacredness of the marital bond, emphasizing reciprocity of presence and sacrificial love.⁷⁶

It is because of what the undefiled marriage bed symbolizes, and how it points beyond itself, that the above passage undoubtedly suggests, even seems to encourage faithfulness—traditionally known as fidelity—within marriage and condemns adultery and sexual immorality outside of marriage. It underscores the crucial importance of upholding trustworthiness and commitment within the marital relationship, issuing a stern warning against infidelity and sexual sin. Grounded in Hebrews 13:4, this perspective is further enriched by theological insights and references from the New Testament, particularly Ephesians 5:21-33. In the context of “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ,” wives are called to submit to their

⁷⁵ Thomas, *Summa Theologica / St. Thomas Aquinas ; Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province.*, Complete English ed. (Westminster, Md: Christian Classics, 1981).

⁷⁶ Sexual love in marriage presents an opportunity to prioritize your spouse's needs and desires above your own, while they reciprocate, allowing you both to serve each other mutually. Note though that choosing to be a *good gift* to your spouse sexually does not involve permitting them to mistreat or manipulate you into anything unwanted. Should your spouse ever pressure you into any sexual activity against your will, reach out for support from a trusted friend, mentor, pastor, or counselor.

husbands as unto the Lord.⁷⁷ Just as the church submits to Christ, wives are encouraged to submit, or voluntarily yield, to their husbands in everything. It must be acknowledged here that the phrase "in everything" doesn't imply absolutely every single thing. Human depravity needs to be acknowledged, along with the conflicts that arise from competing loyalties, the need to submit to human authorities, and the imperative of obeying the Lordship of Christ.⁷⁸ Such a phrase must be understood in relationship to the whole of scripture, not contradicting other clear teachings or principles that can be deduced from scripture. For example, an instance such as a husband insisting that his wife watch pornography with him during intimate moments is clearly against biblical teachings and should not be complied with.⁷⁹ Further, the sacrificial love for a spouse, as outlined in scripture, is portrayed as sanctifying, purifying, nurturing, and cherishing. Reading the text carefully reveals that certain elements pertain to both husbands and wives, while others are exclusive to Christ's relationship with the Church.⁸⁰ The profound mystery of the two becoming one flesh, as stated, refers to the relationship between Christ and the church. Consequently, the call is for each individual to love their spouse as they love themselves. This reflects Christian teaching that provides support for the sacred, sanctifying, and even sacramental nature of marriage.

⁷⁷ It's crucial to interpret this verse carefully to avoid misapplications that could contribute to dangerous and unhealthy power dynamics. Emphasis should be placed on mutual submission, this is not a one-sided command. Husband and wife are called to submit to each other which expresses itself in both love and respect. It is prudent for Christian leaders to reinforce this emphasis alongside principles like equality, mutual respect, and love within the intricate framework of marital relationships.

⁷⁸ Steven R. Tracy, "WHAT DOES 'SUBMIT IN EVERYTHING' REALLY MEAN? THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF MARITAL SUBMISSION," *Trinity Journal* 29, no. 2 (2008): 298–303.

⁷⁹ Tracy, 289.

⁸⁰ Sarah Sumner, *Just How Married Do You Want To Be?: Practicing Oneness in Marriage*, 16th ed. edition (ReadHowYouWant, 2012), 58–63.

Ephesians 5:21-33 viewed through the lens of sexual love in married life reveals a theological and sacramental framework for understanding the marital relationship as a reflection of the divine union between Christ and the Church. The passage underscores the importance of mutual submission and selfless⁸¹ love between spouses, portraying sexual intimacy as a sacred and sacramental⁸² act of unity. Lest it get overlooked, this *mutual* submission is highlighted in verse 21 of the passage. The husband's sacrificial love mirrors Christ's love for the Church, while the wife's respectful response mirrors the Church's devotion to Christ. Within the marital embrace, this dynamic plays out as a profound expression of spiritual and emotional oneness, where sexual love becomes a means of honoring and glorifying God through the harmonious relationship of husband and wife.⁸³

Keeping this perspective in mind, I would like to expand on the insights of modern Christian theology and psychology, while also drawing from my understanding of the sacramental nature of relationships. This exploration reveals the marriage bed as a kind of sacred altar or, perhaps more accurately, recovers it as sacred. Such a perspective creates a space where sexual love in marriage is embraced, transforming it into a sacred realm for worship (or adoration) and profound reverence for one another, as both partners surrender together to the mystery that is God. Consider how this idea is captured in the way the word *worship* is defined in this work by Anthony LoBello:

Worship Weekley says that the Anglo-Saxon noun *weorthscope* means *glory* or *dignity*; he points out that the word is equivalent to the combination *worth-ship*. It is a title of respect,

⁸¹ Balancing self-love with selflessness in relationships involves nurturing one's individual identity while willingly prioritizing the needs and well-being of one's spouse through open and honest communication, shared values, and a mutual commitment to growth and reciprocity.

⁸² The Greek word for sacrament is "μυστήριον" (mystērion) or mystery.

⁸³ This description aligns with the principles of soft complementarianism in the context of Christian theology. Complementarianism is a theological view that affirms men and women as equal in the context of marriage and emphasizes distinct but complementary roles for husbands and wives.

as is clear from ... the pledge in the old marriage ritual, “With my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow,” but now it is reserved for the appropriate attitude before the Almighty. In that regard, it is equivalent to the Latin *adoratio* and the Greek *λατρεία*.⁸⁴

This helps to make sense of the eloquent words exchanged during the marriage ceremony, as presented in the *1662 Book of Common Prayer*, which beautifully convey the commitment:

"With this ring, I thee wed; with my body, I thee worship; and with all my worldly goods, I thee endow; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."⁸⁵ What follows is a poetic interpretation of these words by American poet John Godfrey Saxe:

That I adore thee, my most gracious queen,
 More in my spirit than my body's sense
 Of thine, were such incredible pretense
 As I would scorn to utter. Thou hast seen
 When eyes and lips, responsive to the heart,
 Were bent in worship of thy lips and eyes,
 Until, oh bliss! each pleasure-pulsing part
 Hath found its fellow in Love's sweet emprise;
 Each answering other in such eager wise
 As they would never cease to kiss and cling—
 Ah! then meseemed amid the storm of sighs
 I heard thy voice exclaiming, “O my King!
 So may my soul be ever true to thine,
 As with thy body thou dost worship mine!”⁸⁶

This poem fervently expresses an authentic love, emphasizing shared moments of intimacy and a harmonious union of pleasures in the pursuit of a love that feels almost beyond reach. Godfrey hints at a mutual adoration that transcends mere physical sensations, delving into the profound depths of an ineffable, heavenly connection. There is also the suggestion of a reciprocal commitment between the individuals, extending to a shared realm that goes beyond their selves.

⁸⁴ ANTHONY LO BELLO, “W” (Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 522, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvx077ht.26>.

⁸⁵ Samuel L. Bray and Drew Nathaniel Keane, eds., *The 1662 Book of Common Prayer: International Edition* (IVP Academic, 2021), 316.

⁸⁶ John Godfrey Saxe, “‘WITH MY BODY I THEE WORSHIP.’ Anglican Marriage Service” (New York, 1889), 244. John Godfrey Saxe is renowned for his rendition of the Indian parable, “The Blind Men and the Elephant.”

The poem concludes with a resolute affirmation of unwavering commitment, intertwining the physical and spiritual dimensions of devotion inherent in a committed and enduring love.

The marital bed, serves as a kind of altar, providing a sacred space for spouses to enter into the above and to forge deep connections with themselves, the Triune God, and their spouse. Here, husband and wife can express and exchange love, trust, and commitment in an embodied way that has the potential to shape all areas of their lives together. Within this sacred context, the marriage bed transforms into a realm that offers an experience of intimate connection, shared pleasure, and affirmation as well as a place for healing and growth, even a taste of transcendence.⁸⁷

The marital bed stands as a distinctive space that recognizes sexual love as a sacrament within the broader sacrament of marriage. It is important to clarify that this is not to suggest that sexual love (or the marital embrace) is one of the seven sacraments found in either the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Churches which are available for everyone but rather that sexual love is sacramental in nature.⁸⁸ Sexual love is considered sacramental in nature as it goes beyond the physical realm, signifying a sacred union that reflects divine principles and spiritual truths within the context of marriage, where the intimate connection between spouses becomes a tangible expression of profound unity and divine grace. Further, as mentioned above, this passionate and immersive bond of love between spouses mirrors the profound unity and intimate bond of love present in the sacred union between Christ and the Church. For this reason, it is not

⁸⁷ This alludes to "la petite mort," a French expression translating to "the little death" in English, commonly used metaphorically for orgasm or the brief loss of consciousness and physical sensations during sexual climax. The phrase is associated with the French language in the context of romantic or sensual experiences.

⁸⁸ The sacramental life or sacramental nature of things more broadly spoken about would be true of other non-sexual areas or practices of life as well (e.g. foot washing, communal eating, etc.) Though outside of the scope of this essay it would be reasonable to the sacramental imagination to consider that those who have embraced a vocation of celibacy or find themselves in a state of singleness could also access a sacramental way of living, offering connection to the Holy Other.

merely a bodily expression but a sacrament, a visible sign of an invisible reality, fostering a sense of reverence and sanctity within the context of the marital covenant.

Sacramental Imagination

Sacramental imagination acts as a sort of lens, enabling us to see beyond what cannot be perceived with the physical eye.⁸⁹ My sacramental thinking is formed in part by my formation and vocation as an Anglican minister. The Anglican (or Reformed Catholic) understanding of the sacraments, deeply rooted in the notion that they are "outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace," is expressed in the Anglican Catechism within the Book of Common Prayer.⁹⁰ It highlights the belief that the physical elements of the sacraments (e.g., water in baptism, bread and wine in the Eucharist) are outward and visible signs that convey inward spiritual graces. In both Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism you find similar definitions. In simpler terms, a sacrament is (1) a sign, (2) given by Christ, which (3) imparts grace.⁹¹

The Anglican (or Reformed Catholic) view of sacraments often reflects a middle ground between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox perspectives. While many Anglicans, like Roman Catholics, recognize seven sacraments of the Church, interpretations among Anglicans exhibit a degree of theological flexibility that allows for a range of interpretations, from Evangelical Anglican to Anglo-Catholic. This flexibility aligns with the Anglican tradition's emphasis on Scripture, tradition, and reason in theological interpretation. On the other hand, the

⁸⁹ It is similar though not the same as the expression to "see with the mind's eye."

⁹⁰ Bray and Keane, *The 1662 Book of Common Prayer*, 304–5.

⁹¹ Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love : The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition* / Paul Evdokimov ; Translated from the French by Anthony P. Gythiel and Victoria Steadman; with a Foreword by Olivier Clement., 124; *Catechism of the Catholic Church.*, 2nd ed. / rev. in accordance with the official Latin text promulgated by Pope John Paul II., Publication (United States Catholic Conference) ; No. 5-109 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 320.

Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox views exhibit a greater degree of dogmatic specificity (e.g. the Eucharist) and find authority in the Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition.

The Anglican view complements both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox perspectives by offering a more inclusive approach, sometimes referred to as a *Via Media*. It retains the seven sacraments but according to the *Anglican 39 Articles of Religion*, differentiates between Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, "two Sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the gospel," and the "five commonly called sacraments ... confirmation, penance, orders, matrimony, and extreme unction, are not to be counted for sacraments of the gospel."⁹²

In a broader, non-church sense, a sacrament can be understood as a visible and tangible expression of sacred or divine realities within the ordinary aspects of life. In the context of a sacramental life, it involves recognizing and imbuing everyday experiences with a deeper spiritual significance, perceiving them as opportunities for encountering the divine. In other words, seeing sacramentally offers a disclosure of God through material existence. This broader understanding aligns with the Anglican definition of a sacrament, which often includes not only specific religious rituals but also a recognition of God's grace operating through various elements of life, highlighting the sacred within the ordinary. In this sense, living a sacramental life involves viewing and engaging with the world in a way that acknowledges and celebrates the presence of the sacred amid daily experiences.

With this in mind, sexual love within the sacrament of marriage serves as a compelling sacramental lens by which to see. The intimate connection shared between spouses becomes a visible and tangible expression of a sacred reality embedded in the fabric of daily life. Through the mutual exchange of love, trust, and commitment, the marital embrace takes on a sacramental

⁹² Bray and Keane, *The 1662 Book of Common Prayer*, 638.

quality, symbolizing a profound unity that extends beyond the physical realm. In the context of sacramental life, the expressions of affection and intimacy within marriage are seen as more than mere physical acts; they become conduits for encountering the mystery that is God. It also guards against things such as purity, pleasure, and procreation, though important, from becoming idolatrous ends within themselves. Moreover, adopting this sacramental viewpoint prompts individuals to prioritize their marital embrace with a sense of reverence. It encourages them to perceive it as an opportunity to both experience and express the sacred, while simultaneously deriving joy from the seemingly ordinary moments of playful intimacy, or erotic playfulness, within married life.

In the sacred tapestry that encompasses our existence as beings created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27), the ultimate destination we yearn for is discovered or unveiled in the divine presence of the Triune God alone. Every yearning or longing, every aspiration, and every desire reach their fulfillment in that sacred presence. John 17:3 says it this way: "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." This profound teleology underscores the very essence of human existence — to seek and find God. It is in the pursuit of this ultimate truth that the intricacies of human relationships, particularly the intimate bond of sexual love, take on a transcendent dimension.

Sexual love, when approached in this way with understanding and reinforced by an integrated and embodied marital embrace, becomes a conduit for experiencing the divine and getting a foretaste of the heavenly or beatific vision. In the words of Sean McDowell, "Sexual union on earth is a pointer, an anticipation, a foreshadowing of a deeper union we will experience in heaven."⁹³ According to Hans Boersma, author of *Seeing God, the Beatific Vision*

⁹³ McDowell, *Chasing Love*, 81–82.

is regarded as the utmost and most comprehensive state of happiness, exceeding any earthly joy or fulfillment. It's commonly connected with the idea of eternal life and is seen as the apex of the soul's progression towards God.⁹⁴ Within Christian theology, notably in Catholicism, the Beatific Vision is intricately tied to the theological notion of theosis or divinization, where believers partake in the divine essence through the transformative journey of salvation.⁹⁵

In other words, I propose, that in the sacred union of marriage, lovers catch a glimpse of the beatific (or heavenly) vision and the eternal love of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This idea of beatific vision finds its roots in passages such as 1 Corinthians 13:12: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." The shared intimacy between spouses, naked and unashamed, becomes a window into this heavenly vision, reflected in the countenance of another — each image bearers of the divine. This revelation unfolds in the vulnerable exchange of intimacy, pleasure, and affirmation of another and realizing that such joys are ultimately found in the Triune God and accessed through the redemptive grace found in the person and work of the God-man, Jesus Christ alone. All of this highlights the deep beauty to be found in the mystery of marriage and the marital embrace. It lays bare this one-of-a-kind very sacred and human connection that is deeply beautiful and sacramentally points beyond itself.

To say it another way, this profound encounter is not meant to be an end in itself. Instead, it serves as a catalyst for a higher calling. In the words of Christopher West, "The union of the sexes—as beautiful and wonderful as it is in the divine plan—it is only a faint glimmer, a pale

⁹⁴ "Seeing God w/ Hans Boersma. Holy C of E Podcast Interview. December 14, 2021.

https://Open.Spotify.Com/Episode/3DYZZdiSOCGvWemVkGllrS?si=TB5LOLASSIGZw93m_b-HWw," n.d.

⁹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

within time of the eternal union with God.”⁹⁶ From this sacred place of union, a transformative journey begins — a pilgrimage of two souls walking shoulder to shoulder with the pursuit of God at the center. Spouses embark on a shared mission, free from distractions that might hinder the path. Together, they prioritize not only the sanctity of their sexual union but also the greater pursuit of communion with the Triune God. Their intertwined lives become a testimony to the sacred dance of prioritizing the eternal over the temporal, as they walk each other home to heaven. In this shared pursuit, the ordinary becomes extraordinary, and the mundane becomes a sacred rhythm of seeking God at every step of their journey.⁹⁷

Transitioning from the profound and ineffable mystery of sacred connection in marriage that is written in our bodies, we now shift our focus to the essence of living out such a vision. In the pages ahead, we will explore components and actionable steps to infuse this teleology and its sacred principles into the very fabric of daily life. In essence, this is where theory converges with everyday theology, and the sacred meets the practical.

Part IV. Strategic Suggestions for Practice

In the last section of this essay, a sacramental teleology of sexual love was proposed as an alternative to what I defined as the *Radical No* and *Radical Yes*. It emphasized that the absence of a foundation like a sacramental teleology of sexual love allows elements such as purity, pleasure, and procreation—significant as they are—to become idolatrous ends in themselves.

⁹⁶ Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners: Rediscovering the Meaning of Life, Love, Sex, and Gender*, Updated, Revised, and Expanded edition (North Palm Beach, Florida: Wellspring, 2018), 99.

⁹⁷ It is important to emphasize that as spouses embark on this spiritual quest they will benefit from recognizing that while their sexual union is a crucial aspect of their bond, it alone does not suffice for the profound journey towards a higher, transcendent connection. In other words, their sexual union is a necessary but not sufficient element in their journey.

The focus now shifts from the contemplative to the practical realm of the marital embrace. The aim is to make the theology discussed earlier accessible in everyday life, progressing from foundational principles to tangible steps and strategic suggestions. These are essential for spouses to fully experience the richness of their most intimate encounters with each other. The upcoming pages function as a template, guiding one through a transformative landscape where the sacred principles uncovered seamlessly integrate with the practical aspects of daily existence. This marks the point where theological foundations and practical components converge, allowing the spiritual aspirations of the sacred union to find expression in an everyday theology of deliberate choices related to sexual love that are made within the canvas of marital life.

A Playful Pursuit of Purpose

The subtitle of this essay is *A Playful Pursuit of Purpose*. I wrote this section with this subtitle in mind because all too often, in sessions with clients and in the therapeutic context in general, attitudes about sexuality, in particular, are so serious that they undermine the playful nature of sexuality that is possible within marriage. This is not to suggest that marriage is not a serious relationship, nor is it referring to the seriousness of sexual encounters that are marked by a deep emotional and physical connection between partners, but rather the seriousness that seems to be a cover-up for emotional and existential pain. In married life, it is essential to balance the sincerity required for emotional and existential depth with the lightness of a playful friendship and laughter. Such an authentic connection goes beyond the seriousness that may serve as a mask for underlying pain. Thus, the subtitle *A Playful Pursuit of Purpose* seeks to provide a perspective for approaching this section and the marital embrace. It underscores the inherent

playfulness that can be infused into sexual love, guiding the pursuit towards a deeper heavenly purpose.

Playfulness introduces an element of fun and enjoyment into married life. When spouses are willing to engage in playful exploration, they create a lighter atmosphere that can alleviate stress and foster a sense of joy. Then, *erotic playfulness* in the marital embrace serves as a natural extension of the balanced dynamics in married life.⁹⁸ Erotic playfulness acts as a catalyst, fostering deeper levels of mutual understanding and intimacy. This, in turn, supports the sincerity required for emotional and existential depth, ultimately leading to a more profound shared pleasure and connection between spouses. Such playfulness allows for variety in sexual encounters, encouraging couples to try new things and break away from routine. Importantly, from my clinical experience, the element of communication is enhanced through playfulness, as partners feel more comfortable expressing desires and sharing what they find mutually pleasurable. This open and embodied dialogue between spouses can lead to understanding, knowing, and seeing each other in a deeper way as image bearers of God, while continuing to present the possibility of seeing even more deeply the Eternal Other, the Triune God. Simultaneously, this embodied dialogue supports an enhanced comprehension of each other's preferences, ultimately contributing to a more satisfying and fulfilling sexual relationship with a teleology centered around profound mystery.

Teleology Over Techniques

Techniques can only take one so far. What's truly needed is everyday theology or practical theology. What if being a *good gift* is less about reaching a specific benchmark and

⁹⁸ First heard the expression erotic playfulness used by Jennifer Degler, Ph.D., a licensed clinical psychologist, life coach, speaker and author. <https://jenniferdegler.com>.

more about cultivating a disposition of mind, heart, and will that embodies sensitivity and consideration not just for oneself? As mentioned above, echoing the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas, it involves willing the good of the other.⁹⁹ With such a disposition and sensitivity, one can hold the other in whatever challenges they may be facing, whether it's the “gremlins” of trauma, or simply the vicissitudes of life that impact the marital embrace.¹⁰⁰ Keeping this in mind, being a good gift and experiencing fulfilling intimacy can harmoniously coexist.

This invites a shift, perhaps for the first time, in embracing a theological perspective on sex that opposes male-dominated views of sexuality and performance models. It also dismisses the idea that sex is solely about pleasure without any profound existential or theological purpose. This necessitates the ability to cultivate a new understanding of sexuality that captures one's imagination. Simultaneously, it involves challenging destructive and self-defeating narratives from the past, as well as addressing the behaviors or patterns that result from them.

Having a theological foundation that incorporates a sacramental lens of sexual love offers spouses a way to address the above without getting lost in the pursuit of purity, pleasure, and procreation as ends in themselves. This well-rounded understanding provides a pathway to integrate faith and sexuality. It informs and enriches intimate lives, ultimately leading to greater fulfillment and connection with oneself, each other, and the Triune God. Yes, procreation, purity, and pleasure matter and are a part of God's design for sexual love in married life. They also inform what it means to live from that design, but they point beyond themselves.

⁹⁹ Thomas, *Summa Theologica* / St. Thomas Aquinas ; Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

¹⁰⁰ Gremlins, in folklore and popular culture are mischievous mythical creatures known for causing technical malfunctions and disruptions. I am using them here as a symbolic representation of unpredictable elements that come up in relationship work, specifically the manifestation of trauma responses as unpredictable and disruptive reactions to triggering stimuli. I first was introduced to this idea/image by Isa Jones (2015).

The marital embrace of sexual love is designed by God to be a beautiful, pleasurable, and expansive experience. It is a deeply connecting encounter of union and belonging that provides a foretaste, in the present, of the fullness of eternal life. This extends until the consummation of all things in heaven with the Triune God.¹⁰¹ As spouses willingly and with a sense of curiosity adhere to this teleological vision of sexual love in marriage and reject or at least temporarily suspend their narratives associated with the *Radical No* and *Radical Yes*, we can then explore practical approaches to educate and support couples in embodying this sacramental mystery. This will involve implementing these ideas and transitioning from a performance or staircase model of sex, akin to taking an escalator, to one that is mutual, deeper, and richer, resembling more closely a smorgasbord of delightful foods. In other words, spouses, as friends and lovers, embark on a shared pursuit of oneness and not merely orgasm.¹⁰² Together, they create a sacred space that is expansive and supports the giving and receiving of love in a cyclical way, as opposed to an approach that is linear and purely goal-driven.

Purpose Guided Pleasure

Transitioning away from theoretical foundations, a mindset shift becomes imperative in the exploration of purpose-guided pleasure. Rather than viewing sex solely as a biological act, couples must undergo a transformative shift in perception. This paradigm shift involves spouses recognizing that their sexuality isn't a source of shame or a curse, but rather a gift from God meant to be joyfully embraced. Despite the messages of the *Radical No* and *Radical Yes*, they will need to intentionally embrace that sexual love in marriage possesses a sacramental quality

¹⁰¹ At the end of the age, with the consummation of all things, the sign of marriage and sexual love will no longer be needed (Revelation 21). It is for this reason that Jesus says in the Gospels that there will be no marriage.

¹⁰² Tim Alan Gardner and Scott M. Stanley, *Sacred Sex: A Spiritual Celebration of Oneness in Marriage*, 1st edition (Colorado Springs, Colo: WaterBrook, 2002), 49.

with deep teleological significance. Spouses may encounter resistance to the idea that sexual love in marriage possesses a sacramental quality. This perceived challenge is an invitation for individuals to engage their imagination, to consider that the connection between sex and spirit may be closer than initially thought.

By allowing for such a shift, couples will be better prepared to begin looking honestly at letting go of or unlearning harmful messages related to sexuality, many of which are shame-based. No doubt this work can be challenging and is often filled with complexity and for this reason, individuals may need the support of a pastoral counselor or therapist. From here, I hope that couples will be better prepared for practices, rites, and rituals that support an erotic playfulness conducive to teleology rather than mere techniques. The goal is to cultivate a form of intimate connection that goes beyond the physical; a connection that fosters soul-touching sex, which in the words of Tim Gardner, “touches the deep yearning of the soul.”¹⁰³

Moving forward, I assume that couples have devoted themselves to the essential mindset work mentioned above. With this new perspective, we are now ready to transition to the practical application of these principles—what I like to think of as best practices, rites, and rituals.¹⁰⁴ I hope that couples will see in the words of Rich Villodas, that “at the core of this relationship between sexuality and spirituality there is desire and longing” and “what we do with our sexual desires and longings says a lot about what we believe about God.”¹⁰⁵ The following definitions

¹⁰³ Gardner and Stanley, 51.

¹⁰⁴ As a clinician, who integrates, mental health and spirituality, I affirm the notion of common grace—the divine goodness and benevolence that God extends to all of humanity, regardless of their faith. This is reflected in God's universal care for His creation, as expressed in Matthew 5:45, where it is stated, For he (the Father) makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” With this in mind, the best practices, rites, and rituals herein are from various practitioners. This decision is not an explicit endorsement or support for the entirety of their bodies of work.

¹⁰⁵ Rich Villodas and Pete Scazzero, *The Deeply Formed Life: Five Transformative Values to Root Us in the Way of Jesus*, Reprint edition (Colorado Springs, Colorado: WaterBrook, 2021), 130.

for *spirituality* and *sexuality* from Debra Hirsh highlight this core desire and longing, what she calls “two sides of the one coin”:

Spirituality can be described as a vast longing that drives us beyond ourselves in an attempt to connect with, to probe and to understand our world. And beyond that, it is the inner compulsion to connect with the Eternal Other, which is God. *Essentially, it is a longing to know and be known by God (on physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels).*

Sexuality can be described as the deep desire and longing that drives us beyond ourselves in an attempt to connect with, to understand, that which is other than ourselves. Essentially, it is a longing to know and be known by other people (on physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels.)¹⁰⁶

In my clinical experience, couples frequently connect with the idea that, at a profound level, we all share an existential need to be seen, heard, known, and loved.

These practices, ordinary as they may seem to some, extend an invitation for spouses to approach the marriage bed with a fresh perspective. It encourages them to embrace one another through their sexuality as meaningful gifts, trusting that their desires and longings will be fulfilled by something beyond themselves. The following are examples of a few practices, rites, and rituals designed to uphold spouses in embracing the divine call to self-giving within the context of sexual love and fostering an I-Thou relationship, as Rudolf Otto calls it, marked by genuine interest in each other as bearers of the divine image.¹⁰⁷

Integrating Sex and Spirit

We pray at altars in the church, so why not extend our prayers to the marriage bed? I recommend that couples seek God’s blessing on their sexual life in general and specifically when they come together to enjoy the gifts of their shared sexuality. By doing so, it designates this

¹⁰⁶ Debra Hirsch and Gabe Lyons, *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations About Sexuality and Spirituality* (IVP, 2015), 26.

¹⁰⁷ Sandra L. Glahn and C. Gary Barnes, eds., *Sanctified Sexuality: Valuing Sex in an Oversexed World*, Illustrated edition (Kregel Academic, 2020), 184–86; Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1958).

time and space as sacred—set apart for communion with one another and the Triune God. It serves as a reminder to spouses of their union as husband and wife, emphasizing that this expression of love, vulnerability, and devotion is a sacred act deserving of reverence.

This prayerful moment can be as simple as offering intentions, or petitioning God for personal desires related to one's specific needs. Regardless, it is an invitation for spouses to take this aspect of their life seriously, just as they do with other parts of their life. Moreover, as experienced couples understand, scheduling intimate moments is a way to prioritize them amidst life's busyness. Pausing briefly will not hinder, but rather consecrate your time to the Lord.

Furthermore, I encourage couples to create a sacred space around themselves before engaging in intimacy (or before having difficult conversations). Face each other, place your hands on your hearts, and while maintaining eye contact, touch foreheads. Take a deep breath together—perhaps two or three. In the air, symbolically draw a bubble around yourselves, marking out this time and space for your intimate encounter. After this, openly share any desires, fears, and/or boundaries you may have.¹⁰⁸ Lastly, affirm those elements you would like to incorporate into your time of love-making like fun, creativity, and playfulness. Similarly, speak out loud about those things you would like to remove. For example, any potential hindrances, such as specific fears or blocks, that may counterproductively affect this sacred time.

In the preceding paragraphs, prayer and the creation of sacred space were introduced as intentional practices for integrating sex and spirit. Now, the focus shifts towards presenting couples with practices that carry a less overtly spiritual appearance. These practices and/or mindsets encourage spouses to establish a dedicated space for self-discovery, jointly exploring

¹⁰⁸ I first learned about this practice from Laurie Handlers, a sex and relationship coach and educator, who learned about it from Margot Anand. Margot Anand and M. E. Naslednikov, *The Art of Sexual Ecstasy: The Path of Sacred Sexuality for Western Lovers* (Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1989).

together their needs, values, longings, and desires. Prioritizing the significance of the marital embrace, these practices provide an opportunity to cultivate a shared space for an embodied encounter marked by interconnectedness and presence, enriching levels of purpose, meaning, and even transcendence. This approach to integrating sex and spirit is characterized by its lighthearted and playful nature, embracing an existential spirituality while upholding a preference for teleology over specific techniques. Further, these practices prioritize sexual love in marriage, providing new approaches for how to show up to the marriage bed as a gift for the other instead of seeing the other as a means to their own utilitarian end. All of which creates a meaningful space that transcends the physical, fostering a holistic integration of sexuality and spirituality with transcendental quality.

The 3-Minute Game is a practice designed to improve intimacy between partners. This practice like the one above also provides a practical way to integrate sex and spirit. The 3-Minute Game was created by Betty Martin, a somatic sex educator and author of the book *The Art of Receiving and Giving*. An outline of the practice can be found in Appendix 2.¹⁰⁹ This practice upholds the values of consent and mutuality by promoting reciprocity in an intimate setting. Spouses tenderly and playfully endeavor to fulfill each other's needs, values, longings, and desires in an intentional, embodied, and comfortable manner. It prioritizes the act of giving rather than focusing on what one can take from the other. It has as its aim clear communication, consent, and boundaries as partners express their desires for different levels of sensual touch. In the beginning, it is recommended to avoid sexy body areas. However, in time it may lead to more overt sexual touch or sexual relating afterwards.

¹⁰⁹ In appendix 2 an overview of the 3-Minute Game is provided in Betty Martin's words with some clarifying additions from my own experience with the game as a clinician and practitioner.

It is crucial to go slow with this game, especially in the beginning. Going slow goes a long way in creating a safe space where trust and intimacy emerge. Couples are encouraged to find the balance of leaning into their edges of difficulty without ever compromising themselves. This requires sensitivity and individuals being attentive to themselves and one another. When this is accomplished healing and growth often occur alongside the deepening of a sense of safety, trust and intimacy. Participants should feel free to opt out or modify the activity as needed.¹¹⁰

I would now like to transition to something that I consider to be more of a mindset than a practice, but still has a practical quality: Reframing Sex as a Hobby. This idea was introduced to me by Ruth Ramsay, a sex educator and counselor, who discussed it in a Ted Talk. *Reframing Sex as a Hobby* asks the question, “How do you think about sex?” Before providing a summary of what Ramsay is suggesting, it's worth highlighting that this notion of Sex as a Hobby invites spouses into a mindset that prioritizes the marital bed and the marital embrace. When spouses approach the marital bed with curiosity and attunement towards each other, the *hobby*, like the 3-Minute Game, is not a burden or about competition. Instead, it is about, using an expression mentioned above, erotic playfulness.

Far too frequently, the expression of sexual love within a marriage leans towards seriousness rather than playfulness. Consider, for a moment, your hobbies; enthusiasts often approach their hobbies with a combination of seriousness and playfulness. However, in many instances, the intimate connection between spouses becomes an afterthought, competing with the demands of daily life rather than holding a prioritized position. To initiate a positive shift, spouses should make a conscious effort to prioritize and plan for intimate moments. In simpler

¹¹⁰ Betty Martin and Robyn Dalzen, *The Art of Receiving and Giving: The Wheel of Consent* (Luminare Press, 2021), 29–30.

terms, planning for or scheduling time for intimacy is crucial; hence, getting *sexy time* on the calendar is a necessary step.

It is noteworthy that we typically do not relegate things of importance to the last moments of the day. As we embrace Ramsay's call to reframe *sex as a hobby*, it necessitates that spouses invest in self-education. This could involve taking a course, reading informative books, and similar endeavors. Just as hobbies often require new attire or accessories, spouses might consider incorporating sexy attire or accessories to enhance the marital bed experience.

Similar to injuries that can occur during one's favorite hobby, spouses may need to address physical discomfort or pain to ensure that the intimate *hobby* remains enjoyable for both partners. The paramount goal should be mutual enjoyment with an eye to the teleology mentioned above. Additionally, periodic check-ins become crucial to evaluate what is effective and what needs adjustment. Communication becomes a key element in treating sex as a hobby within the marriage, fostering understanding and satisfaction for both partners.¹¹¹

Healing vs. Curing

Married couples, despite their genuine commitment and openness to embracing a new paradigm, may find their experience of sexual love appearing tepid or lackluster. They may even find themselves beset by challenges such as the following, some of which may come from unconsciously held core beliefs and others from common dynamics in marriage all of which I see in my counseling practice:

- Deep-seated limiting beliefs that may hinder a healthy view of sexuality.
- Feelings of shame associated with one's sexuality.
- Psychological and/or spiritual barriers or strongholds that impede a positive approach to intimacy, sexual wholeness, and flourishing.

¹¹¹ Ramsay, Ruth, "Revamp Your Sex Life in 6 Minutes. TEDx Talks. July 11, 2023. Video, 6:36. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-3CANRKuAM>."

- Destructive messages that may have shaped their perception of sex and relationships.
- Trauma and associated triggers that may affect current sexual experiences.
- Lack of understanding about arousal and the nuances between responsive and spontaneous desire.
- Challenges arise when spouses have different levels of sexual desire or when desire seems absent.
- Considering the balance between novelty and routine in maintaining a healthy and satisfying sexual relationship.

Deeply rooted issues and specific challenges, such as these some of which stem from both the *Radical No* of purity culture and/or the *Radical Yes* of permissive culture will likely arise in the context of the marital embrace. Furthermore, when spouses contemplate the profound teleology for which the marriage bed serves and the significance it holds, it should come as no surprise that the marriage bed is a battleground for spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:12). We are not merely addressing psychological dynamics.

With this in mind, let's explore a subtle but significant distinction between healing and curing in the context of the marriage bed. This differentiation between healing and curing is derived from the work of Bruce Morrill, who defines curing and healing as follows:

Cure refers to the effective control or removal of the disease in a person's body. Healing, on the other hand, is an intervention affecting an illness. To heal somebody is to bring personal or social meaning to the misfortune experienced in illness such that the person attains a new or renewed sense of value and purpose in his or her world.¹¹²

As couples present themselves fully, with a sense of presence as gifts to each other, creating the potential for a profound connection that transcends the physical and delves into the realm of the eternal other, God, they should be aware that challenges such as those mentioned above will emerge. Even when couples adopt this renewed mindset and align themselves with the presented paradigm, challenges may still arise, potentially obstructing the sanctity of this sacramental

¹¹² Bruce T. Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death*, A Pueblo Book (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009), 75.

space. It is not uncommon for a prevailing *curing* mindset to insist on a quick fix by resolving, managing, or eliminating various issues before the marital embrace can be mutually enjoyed.

This mindset emphasizes the importance of cultivating a nuanced understanding of intimacy, recognizing that the journey toward a fulfilling sexual connection, sexual wholeness, and overall flourishing requires ongoing exploration and acceptance, rather than rigid adherence to a checklist of prerequisites. It encourages spouses to navigate challenges together, slowing down when necessary. While some traumas may persist, this approach views intimacy as a means of healing rather than a cure. This perspective underscores the need for sustained investment in each other and advocates for seeking professional help and resources when needed.¹¹³ Furthermore, it challenges spouses to perceive encountering difficulties not as a sign of inherent issues but as an integral part of living in a flawed world. Ultimately, this mindset is rooted in the concept of *healing*, promoting growth and resilience in the face of challenges.

In essence, the proposed paradigm shift from curing to healing encourages married couples not only to change their actions related to sexual love but also to cultivate a mindset that values the journey of intimate connection as a continuous and evolving experience versus merely a destination or problem to be fixed. Together spouses celebrate and mourn the highs and lows of married life including those that arise in the marriage bed. This approach fosters an environment in which spouses can navigate challenges together, embracing the depth and complexity of their shared journey toward a more profound and fulfilling union.

¹¹³ Negendank, Megan Lara and Stephanie Buehler, *Loving Someone Who Has Sexual Trauma: A Compassionate Guide to Supporting Your Partner and Improving Your Relationship*, 1st edition (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2023); Staci Haines, *Healing Sex: A Mind-Body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma*, 2nd Not for Online ed. edition (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2007).

Concluding Thoughts¹¹⁴

I embarked on a profound exploration of the multifaceted nature of sexual love in marriage, aiming to unravel its inherent mystery. Within the sacred covenant of marriage, I discerned the essence of oneness—a profound unity that transcends the physical realm and delves into the depths of the supernatural, spiritual realm when spouses come together as image bearers seeking to be good gifts to one another.

From personal experiences, influenced by encounters with the *Radical No* and *Radical Yes*, I offer a path not as a distant observer but as an active participant. Through personal struggle and introspection, I've gained insights into the intricate interplay of human sexuality and spirituality. Navigating the extremes of denial and excess—denying our sexuality or being driven by it—I have reconstructed my narrative surrounding sexuality and the marital embrace.

Among the false choices regarding sexual love today, I find the *Radical No* and *Radical Yes* especially harmful to conservative Christian married couples. While there are elements to be learned from both extremes, this work sheds light on an alternative path—a sacramental teleology—that transcends mere pursuit of purity, pleasure, or procreation as ends in themselves.

This journey has been one of self-discovery and has transformed my narrative surrounding sexuality and marriage. It has added a new dimension to my personal life as well as my vocation as a clinical chaplain and pastoral counselor. It also aims to guide others on similar journeys of personal and spiritual growth. Appendix 3 outlines the next steps to explore themes from this essay, unraveling the complexities of sexuality as a formative spiritual experience within marriage. Through ongoing conversation, we may deepen our understanding of sexual intimacy's transformative power in connecting us to the Triune God, each other, and ourselves.

¹¹⁴ See Appendix 1 for my closing Benediction

APPENDIX 1

Benediction

May Almighty God continue to stir within us reverence and reflection for the profound journey undertaken, an exploration of the myriad facets of marital love within the Christian faith. Within the sacred covenant of marriage, may we discover the essence of oneness, a unity that mirrors the divine relationship between Christ and His Church, transcending the physical and embracing the spiritual realm. As we ponder our personal encounters with the *Radical No* and *Radical Yes*, let us tread the path not as distant observers, but as active participants in God's plan for our unions.

Through the intricate interplay of human sexuality and spirituality, may we navigate the extremes of denial and excess, guided by the teachings of Christ and the wisdom of the Holy Scriptures and Tradition, reshaping our narratives surrounding sexuality and the marital embrace. Let us recognize the harm of false choices and embrace an alternative path—a *sacramental teleology*—that honors God's design for marriage and sexual intimacy.

As we contemplate the transformative power of sexual intimacy within marriage, may ongoing conversation deepen our connection to the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to each other as fellow believers, and to ourselves as beloved children of God.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, *Amen*.

APPENDIX 2

The 3-Minute Game

1. Roles: Two distinct roles exist in the game - the "giver" and the "receiver."
2. Communication: The receiver's task is to convey their comfort level and touch preferences throughout the three minutes. They may respond with a "yes" to certain touches, a "no" to others, or express uncertainties or specific requests.

Two questions, each serving as an offer or invitation:

"How do you want me to touch you for three minutes?"

"How do you want to touch me for three minutes?"

Each person alternates asking these questions, and the agreed-upon actions are then performed.

When you inquire about your partner's desires and receive a response, pause and assess whether you can fulfill it with a wholehearted commitment. Set limits as necessary.

Changing your mind during the activity is allowed, and requesting more than three minutes is acceptable, provided both partners receive equal time.

3. Setting the Timer: A three-minute timer is used. Throughout this period, the giver provides touch to the receiver, who communicates their boundaries and preferences.
4. Feedback: Following the three-minute interval, a debriefing period usually occurs. During this time, participants share their experiences, lessons learned, and insights gained from the exercise.

APPENDIX 3

Next Steps

Going forward, my intention is to establish grace-filled communities—discipleship circles, if you will—to perpetuate this conversation about an alternative approach to sexual wholeness and flourishing.¹¹⁵ I am strongly convinced that if spouses embrace the principles and teleology proposed above, prioritizing them over the superficiality of techniques and the ideology of the *Radical No* and *Radical Yes*, they will deepen their connection with themselves, each other, and the Triune God. I envision two approaches for the integration and implementation of purpose-guided pleasure:

1. Collaborating with churches that wish to support couples utilizing this material for a distinctive dialogue on sexual wholeness.
2. Bringing together 4 to 6 couples in a more intimate setting, such as a living room, to navigate through the material.

These two approaches might look like the following:

<p>7-Week Facilitated Conversation:</p> <p>Week 1: Narrative Introduction</p> <p>Week 2: The <i>Radical No</i></p> <p>Week 3: The <i>Radical Yes</i></p> <p>Week 4: Being a “Good Gift”</p> <p>Week 5: Sacramental Lens</p> <p>Week 6: Practices, Rites, and Rituals</p> <p>Week 7: Concluding Thoughts</p>	<p>Thursday to Saturday Retreat:</p> <p>Thursday Night:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening Session <p>Friday Morning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Radical No</i> • <i>The Radical Yes</i> <p>Friday Afternoon:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being a “Good Gift” • Sacramental Lens <p>Friday Evening:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dinner and Social Time <p>Saturday Morning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practices, Rites, and Rituals • Concluding Session & Next Steps
---	---

¹¹⁵ The expression *discipleship circle* I first heard from Francie Winslow, host of *Heaven in Your Home* podcast.

From this point, it's easy to anticipate that challenges and obstacles may arise. Transitioning from theology proper to everyday theology can be difficult. Therefore, process groups separated by gender will be designed specifically for men and women to address distinct concerns or foster a more tailored support system. Additionally, couple-to-couple mentoring from my spouse and me will be available. All these offerings aim to provide opportunities for further discipleship related to sexuality and enable individuals to bring their concerns directly to the Lord through facilitated healing prayer, such as the practice of listening prayer.

APPENDIX 4

Biblical Passages that Frame Many Conservative Christian Client's View of Sexuality

I. Marriage as the Divine Framework

Emphasizing the biblical foundation of marital unity and its importance in sexual relationships.

- A. Genesis 2:24-25: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame."
- B. Ephesians 5:31: "For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

II. Purity and Fidelity in Sexual Relations

Understanding the biblical call for faithfulness and purity within marriage. Also, the importance of sexual relations within marriage to avoid sexual immorality.

- A. Hebrews 13:4: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure (undefiled), for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."
- B. 1 Corinthians 6:18: "Flee from sexual immorality."
- C. 1 Corinthians 7:1-2: "Now for the matters you wrote about: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.' But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband."

III. Mutual Love and Respect

Highlighting the importance of mutual love, respect, and sacrificial love in marital relationships.

- A. Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."
- B. Ephesians 5:33: "However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."
- C. 1 Peter 3:7: "Husbands, in the same way, be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect..."
- D. 1 Peter 3:1: "Wives, in the same way, submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives."

IV. Chastity: Avoiding Lust and Adultery

Recognizing the biblical warning against lust and the importance of maintaining purity of heart.

- A. Matthew 5:27-28: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

V. Responsibility and Communication

These passages emphasize the mutual responsibility, selflessness, and need for open communication within the marriage relationship, where both spouses are encouraged to prioritize each other's needs and desires. Guidance for fulfilling marital duties and mutual consent.

- A. 1. Corinthians 7:3-5: "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife."

Advice on avoiding the seduction of adultery and the importance of marital intimacy.

B. Proverbs 5:15-20: "Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer—may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love. Why, my son, be intoxicated with another man's wife? Why embrace the bosom of a wayward woman?"

VI. Moderation and Self-Control

Understanding the biblical call for moderation and self-control in marital intimacy.

- A. 1 Corinthians 7:5: "Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer."

VII. God's Grace and Forgiveness

Acknowledging the role of God's grace and forgiveness in the context of marital challenges and mistakes. Grace is the antidote for shame.

- A. 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

VIII. Celebrating Marital Intimacy

- A. Song of Solomon

This entire book celebrates the beauty and passion of love within marriage. It explores the rich imagery and expressions of love found in the marital embrace and sexual love.

Highlights how this biblical text portrays the depth of emotional and physical connection within the context of marriage.

While the primary focus is on the romantic and sensual love between a bride and bridegroom, some interpret it as a symbol of the spiritual love relationship between God and humanity, as an allegory of God's passionate and intimate love for His people.

Bibliography

- Anand, Margot, and M. E. Naslednikov. *The Art of Sexual Ecstasy: The Path of Sacred Sexuality for Western Lovers*. Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1989.
- ANTHONY LO BELLO. “W,” 522. Catholic University of America Press, 2020.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvx077ht.26>.
- Bellah, Robert N. (Robert Neelly). *Habits of the Heart : Individualism and Commitment in American Life : Updated Edition with a New Introduction / Robert N. Bellah ... [et Al.]*. 1st Calif. pbk. ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Blackburn, Simon. *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. 3rd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Braun-Harvey, Douglas, and Michael A. Vigorito. *Treating Out of Control Sexual Behavior: Rethinking Sex Addiction*. 1st edition. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2015.
- Bray, Samuel L., and Drew Nathaniel Keane, eds. *The 1662 Book of Common Prayer: International Edition*. IVP Academic, 2021.
- Brotherson, Laura M. *Knowing HER Intimately: 12 Keys for Creating a Sextraordinary Marriage*. Illustrated edition. Inspire Book, 2016.
- Butler, Joshua Ryan. *Beautiful Union: How God’s Vision for Sex Points Us to the Good, Unlocks the True, and (Sort of) Explains Everything*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2023.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. / rev. in accordance with the official Latin text promulgated by Pope John Paul II. Publication (United States Catholic Conference) ; No. 5-109. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000.
- Chryssavgis, John. *Love, Sexuality and the Sacrament of Marriage*. Brookline, Mass: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005.
- Cloud, Henry, and John Townsend. *Boundaries Updated and Expanded Edition: When to Say Yes, How to Say No To Take Control of Your Life*. Enlarged edition. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2017.
- Comiskey, Andrew. *Living Waters: Restoring Relational Integrity through the Broken Body of Christ*. Desert Stream Ministries, 2022.
- Dillow, Linda. *What’s It Like to Be Married to Me?: And Other Dangerous Questions*. 53920th edition. Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2011.
- Eldredge, John. *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001.
- Emba, Christine. *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation*. New York, NY: Sentinel, 2022.

- Evdokimov, Paul. *The Sacrament of Love : The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition / Paul Evdokimov ; Translated from the French by Anthony P. Gythiel and Victoria Steadman; with a Foreword by Olivier Clement*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985.
- Feldhahn, Shaunti, and Dr Michael Sytsma. *Secrets of Sex and Marriage: 8 Surprises That Make All the Difference*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2023.
- Freitas, Donna. *Sex and the Soul, Updated Edition: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*. Revised ed. edition. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Gangadean, Surrendra. *Philosophical Foundation: A Critical Analysis of Basic Beliefs*. Lanham, MD: UPA, 2008.
- Gardner, Tim Alan, and Scott M. Stanley. *Sacred Sex: A Spiritual Celebration of Oneness in Marriage*. 1st edition. Colorado Springs, Colo: WaterBrook, 2002.
- Glahn, Sandra L., and C. Gary Barnes, eds. *Sanctified Sexuality: Valuing Sex in an Oversexed World*. Illustrated edition. Kregel Academic, 2020.
- Gregoire, Shelia Wray. *The Great Sex Rescue: The Lies You've Been Taught and How to Recover What God Intended*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2021.
- Haines, Staci. *Healing Sex: A Mind-Body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma*. 2nd Not for Online ed. edition. San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2007.
- Hamman, Jaco. "Play-Informed Chaplaincy: Building Resilience & Fostering Compassion Satisfaction. VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. September 30, 2021. Video, 48:00. <https://Vanderbilt.App.Box.Com/s/Jjkymm64j9es905hz8c77be19y00csnf/File/866953937402>." n.d.
- Handlers, Laurie. *Sex & Happiness: The Tantric Laws of Intimacy*. Edited by Siobhan Mullally. 1st edition. Butterfly Workshops Press, 2007.
- Harper, Kyle. *From Shame to Sin [Electronic Resource] : The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity / Kyle Harper*. *Revealing Antiquity* ; 20. Cambridge ; Harvard University Press, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674074569>.
- Hirsch, Debra, and Gabe Lyons. *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations About Sexuality and Spirituality*. IVP, 2015.
- Hornsby, Teresa J. "Gender, Sexuality, and the New Testament. VDS Doctor of Ministry Program. October 15, 2021. Video, 41:42." n.d. <https://vanderbilt.app.box.com/s/nh7939ebt9ojg3o4f2hty7hk8due6uf7/file/873183132075>

- Hyde, Janet, and John Delamater. *Understanding Human Sexuality ISE*. McGraw-Hill Education, 2023.
- John Paul II, and Michael. Waldstein. *Man and Woman He Created Them : A Theology of the Body / John Paul II ; Translation, Introduction, and Index by Michael M. Waldstein*. Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006.
- Lemke, Rebecca. *The Scarlet Virgins: When Sex Replaces Salvation*. Norman, OK: Anatole, 2017.
- Martin, Betty, and Robyn Dalzen. *The Art of Receiving and Giving: The Wheel of Consent*. Luminare Press, 2021.
- McCarthy, Barry, and Emily McCarthy. *Rekindling Desire*. 3rd edition. New York: Routledge, 2019.
- McDowell, Sean. *Chasing Love: Sex, Love, and Relationships in a Confused Culture*. B&H Books, 2020.
- Moon, Dawne, and Theresa W. Tobin. "Sunsets and Solidarity: Overcoming Sacramental Shame in Conservative Christian Churches to Forge a Queer Vision of Love and Justice." *Hypatia* 33, no. 3 (2018): 451–68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12413>.
- Morrill, Bruce T. *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death*. A Pueblo Book. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009.
- Nagoski, Emily. *Come As You Are: Revised and Updated: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life*. Updated edition. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021.
- Negendank, Megan Lara, and Stephanie Buehler. *Loving Someone Who Has Sexual Trauma: A Compassionate Guide to Supporting Your Partner and Improving Your Relationship*. 1st edition. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2023.
- Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John W. Harvey. 2nd edition. London: Oxford University Press, 1958.
- Packer, J. I. *Rediscovering Holiness: Know the Fullness of Life with God*. Reissue edition. Ventura, Calif: Baker Books, 2009.
- Perel, Esther. *Mating in Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic and the Domestic*. 1st edition. New York: Harper, 2006.
- Perry, Louise. *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*. 1st edition. Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA, USA: Polity, 2022.
- Ramsay, Ruth. "Revamp Your Sex Life in 6 Minutes. TEDx Talks. July 11, 2023. Video, 6:36. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-3CANRkuAM>." n.d.

- Rosenau, Douglas E. *A Celebration of Sex: A Guide to Enjoying God's Gift of Sexual Intimacy*. Revised and Updated ed. edition. Thomas Nelson, 2002.
- Saints, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day. *The Doctrine and Covenants | The Pearl of Great Price*. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018.
- Saxe, John Godfrey. "'WITH MY BODY I THEE WORSHIP.' Anglican Marriage Service," 244–244. New York, 1889.
- Scott, Dan. *Naked and Not Ashamed: How God Redeems Our Sexuality*. Eugene, Or: Harvest House Publishers, 2008.
- "Seeing God w/ Hans Boersma. Holy C of E Podcast Interview. December 14, 2021. https://open.spotify.com/episode/3DYZZdiSOCGvWemVkJllrS?si=TB5LOLASSIGZw93m_b-HWw," n.d.
- Sellers, Tina Schermer. *Sex, God, and the Conservative Church : Erasing Shame from Sexual Intimacy / Tina Schermer Sellers*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2017.
- Sheff, Dr Elisabeth. *When Someone You Love Is Polyamorous: Understanding Poly People and Relationships*. Second Printing edition. Portland, OR: Thorntree Press, 2016.
- Sherrard, Philip. *Christianity and Eros*. Denise Harvey, 1995.
- Slattery, Dr Juli, and Gary Thomas. *Rethinking Sexuality: God's Design and Why It Matters*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2018.
- Slattery, Juli. *God, Sex, and Your Marriage*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2022.
- Smith, Joseph. *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*. First Edition. Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981.
- Sri, Edward. *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love : Practical Insights from John Paul II's Love and Responsibility*. Newburyport: Franciscan Media, 2015.
- Stump, J. B., and Chad Meister, eds. *Original Sin and the Fall: Five Views*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2020.
- Sumner, Sarah. *Just How Married Do You Want To Be?: Practicing Oneness in Marriage*. 16th ed. edition. ReadHowYouWant, 2012.
- The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.
- Thomas. *Summa Theologica / St. Thomas Aquinas ; Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province*. Complete English ed. Westminster, Md: Christian Classics, 1981.
- Thomas, Gary. *Sacred Marriage: What If God Designed Marriage to Make Us Holy More Than to Make Us Happy?* Reprint edition. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2015.

- Tracy, Steven R. "WHAT DOES 'SUBMIT IN EVERYTHING' REALLY MEAN? THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF MARITAL SUBMISSION." *Trinity Journal* 29, no. 2 (2008): 285-.
- Trueman, Carl R., and Ryan T. Anderson. *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2022.
- Villodas, Rich, and Pete Scazzero. *The Deeply Formed Life: Five Transformative Values to Root Us in the Way of Jesus*. Reprint edition. Colorado Springs, Colorado: WaterBrook, 2021.
- Wade, Lisa. *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus*. Reprint edition. W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.
- Welcher, Rachel Joy, and Scott Sauls. *Talking Back to Purity Culture: Rediscovering Faithful Christian Sexuality*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2020.
- West, Christopher. *Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing*. Image, 2013.
- . *Theology of the Body for Beginners: Rediscovering the Meaning of Life, Love, Sex, and Gender*. Updated, Revised, and Expanded edition. North Palm Beach, Florida: Wellspring, 2018.
- Wojtyła, Karol. *Love & Responsibility: New Transla.* Translated by Grzegorz Ignatik. Pauline Books & Media, 2013.