

Sex.Life

By Scot McKnight

BOOK EXCERPT



She was sitting in my office, hesitant and nervous and wondering what I would think.

...

She suddenly said, "My boyfriend and I have been doing something I'm embarrassed about." She hesitated some more and her face began to flush and she began to tear up. "We've been sleeping together. Everyone on campus now knows. What should I do?" I did my best not to act surprised; I did my best to approach her with the healing words of God's grace; and I did my best to let her explore her own conscience. We spent some time together; she trusted me and never saw me the same way again. One of her most powerful comments though was this: "I've ruined my reputation with some of my friends, and I will disappoint my mom so much when I tell her — but I will." Then this question: "Do you think I will ever feel like God has forgiven me?"

...

He was sitting in my office, trembling over what he had done.

He fumbled with some words, and then just blurted out this question: "Do you think I will lose my salvation because I had sex with my girlfriend?" I asked a question or two, as the fuller story unfolded. He had sex with his girlfriend three years earlier, as a high school junior. It violated everything he had been taught by his parents and his church; and he said it violated his own conscience. His single-time sexual activity with his girlfriend had tormented his soul and mind for three years. I was the first person he had told, and all he wanted to know was if God forgives sins of a sexual nature.

Sex and the Kingdom Vision

In her mind-blowing survey of sexual behaviors on college campuses, called *Sex and the Soul*, Donna Freitas discovers two sorts of students, and the names this professor uses for them might surprise you. She's discovered both "godly" students and "secular" students. The first group fully integrates faith and their sexual behaviors — even when they don't live up to them — while the second group finds no (or almost no) connection between spirituality and sexual behaviors. The "godly" students do not believe sex is a personal decision but is instead "always religious" and it is always "other-centered."

Freitas discovered that their faith tells godly students to see things this way. The "secular" students, on the other hand, split sex and religion into two entirely separate spheres, according to Freitas. What they do sexually is "nobody else's business as long as everyone directly involved consents." But it is not because the secular students are not spiritual; in fact, Freitas concluded that the secular students' spirituality simply says almost nothing about sex. For some of them, good sexual relations *are* a form of spirituality.

If you have One.Life, what do you want your love and sex life to look like when you look back on it when you are older?

Someone who follows Jesus and who gives her or his One.Life to the kingdom dream of Jesus, and that means surrendering to become a moral zealot like Jesus, asks yet an-



other question: What does Jesus' kingdom dream — a kingdom marked by self-sacrificing love, justice, wisdom, and peace — have to say about the sexual culture of today? Where does sexuality fit into the dream kingdom of Jesus?



Besides the rather obvious point that Jesus grew up in a world marked by Torah, and a Torah that prohibited sex for anyone outside of marriage and yet showed that sex was a gift from God and therefore good, how does his dream for love, peace, wisdom, and justice impact sexual behaviors? I don't know if you've ever thought about sexual behaviors in light of Jesus' kingdom vision, but that vision has much to say about sexuality — and sexuality today is on steroids.



Three Kinds of Sexual Statistics

There are three kinds of statistics about the actual sexual behaviors of young (and not always) adults today.

The first kind of statistics cover the *details*.

- By the time of graduation from high school, almost 75 percent of high school students have had sex.
- Adolescent females who are sexually active between fifteen and nineteen years old will have, on average, seven different sexual partners during their lives.
- Sixteen percent of high school students have had four or more sexual partners.
- About 70 percent of college students have had sex with at least one partner in the last year.
- Nearly 50 percent of college students have had oral sex in the last thirty days.
- Between 10 percent (females) and 17 percent (males) of college students have had three or more partners in the last year.

A second kind of statistics concern *attitudes and experiences*, and this evidence should deeply concern the follower of Jesus.

Only one-third of the females report that they really wanted to have sex the first time they had sex. (There's more here than just hesitancy about sex; many of these women admit to coercion and unwillingness to do what they did.)

"While two out of three young men said it was better to get married than go through life single, *fewer than half of the young women felt that way*" — so reports Laura Sessions Stepp who has become America's leading journalist on the sexual behaviors of young women. The subtitle of her book *Unhooked* reveals a powerful undercurrent in the hook-up culture: *How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both*.

Sessions Stepp also tells us that in one study of 555 undergrads, almost four out of five had hooked up and that "half said they started their evenings planning to have some form of sex, with no particular person in mind."

Many who engage in sexual behaviors this way walk home that night, or the next morning, absorbed with a sense of shame.

Erwin McManus, pastor at Los Angeles's Mosaic, captures this thought perfectly: "There is no such thing as free sex. It always comes at a cost. With it, either you give your heart, or you give your soul." That is, "you can have sex without giving love, but you can't have sex without giving a part of yourself."



The results — the statistics above — show that many, if not most, of young adults dabbling in casual sex are profoundly dissatisfied with it, dissatisfied enough that they are calling into question the single most important institution in society: marriage.



The third and most important statistic in all of this though has to do with *the nature of the relationship*:



Almost none of these students is in a serious, long-term relationship with the one with whom they are engaging in sexual activities.

Few today would be surprised to hear that sex has found a way to break itself free from faith, but evidence now shows that sex has also lost its moorings to a serious relationship. Sex has become getting “hooked up” with those who are (relationally) “unhooked from” a serious relationship.

It is too easy to pull the heavy hammer out on this one and pound away with expressions like “it’s wrong” or “purity matters” or “sex is for marriage” — all of which Jesus would have inherited from his parents and read in his Torah and absorbed in his culture. But evidence shows that the “it’s wrong” strategy is not working, and so we want to go deeper and ask if words like *kingdom* and *justice* and *love* and *righteousness* and *wisdom* address these pervasive sexual behaviors today.

What kind of sexual relationships do you want in the One.Life you’ve got?

Behaviors of Love

One day after a session of my class Women, the Bible, and the Church — a class that explores both what the Bible says about women and a theology of relationships — a young woman asked me if she could talk to me. In less than five minutes she said these things: “This class comes at the perfect time for me. I’ve been living with my boyfriend for a year. I never wanted to but he insisted, and a few weeks back he got mad and left. I’ve not seen him since. I need this class to think again about who I am and what it means to love a man. Thanks.”

“I’m glad you are taking this class,” I said.

And she walked away. It made me head back to my office pondering what my students might be going through — most of them in silence.

After interviewing scads of young women who opened up the closets of their hooking-up practices to her, Laura Sessions Stepp spoke of the damage this does to young women: “A girl can tuck a Trojan in her purse on Saturday night, but there is no such device to protect her heart.”

In other words, there’s more to sex than the body. Sex implicates the emotions. Because there is no prophylactic for the heart, many today suppress the emotions involved in a genuine relationship. A professor of health education at Indiana University asks this question: “Hooking up is purposely uncaring. If they turn off the emotional spigot during this time, what will happen to them as older adults?”

Listen to these words of a young woman: “You’re supposed to know what to do and how to do it and how to feel during and afterward. You learn to turn everything off except your body and make yourself emotionally invulnerable.”

And yet another woman expresses how she has learned to steel herself against the pain, but she makes her point in a question that reveals the self-inflicted wounds of our sexual culture: “Does that part of us that seeks connection eventually start to break down when we no longer associate sex with love?”



After interviewing college students who had been involved in sex with partners to whom they were not committed, Donna Freitas observes, "After a few years of living in the environment they felt exhausted, spent, emptied by the pressure to participate in encounters that left them unfulfilled."



While some emerging adults do (rarely) report general sexual and emotional happiness after sex with uncommitted partners, studies show that more than half used words like these to describe how they feel . . .



regret
dirty
used
guilty
empty
ashamed
alone
miserable
duped
And even . . . abused.

Some have to take a bath to feel clean, and some struggle for a sense of forgiveness for months. In fact, Donna Freitas found most had dashed hopes after casual sexual encounters. One young man writes, "I often feel as though I've betrayed myself and my values by being physically intimate with someone I do not share an emotional intimacy with." One young woman, in her journal, writes: "[I] feel bad about myself (like a sleaze) . . . Feel empty . . . I degraded myself."

There is not a chance under the kingdom's sun that Jesus wants anyone to feel degraded because of a sexual relationship. There's something seriously wrong with sex when the gift of God makes us feel ashamed or dirty. Sex is designed for pleasure and the intimacy of love, and scientific research is just beginning to unravel some of sex's mysteries.

Sex and Science

Some in medical research examine what goes on when two people engage in sexual behaviors. First, from simple and casual skin-to-skin touching to the heightened pleasures of orgasm, the brain releases a neurochemical called dopamine, which tells your brain that what you are doing feels very good. To grasp the magnitude of the body's chemical response, we need to know that sexual pleasure and drugs both generate the same dopamine experience. The pleasure of sex, therefore, is like the pleasure of an addicting drug. At its simplest, dopamine is designed by God to create the desire to have more sex. But there's more to sex neurochemically than pleasure.

The brains of both men and women release neurochemicals during sexual behaviors that also say: "I am bonding emotionally with you." Oxytocin tells a woman's brain that the man is hers and vasopressin tells the man's brain that the woman is his.

Here is an alarming medical conclusion: Bonding occurs chemically *whenever* sexual relations occur — not just when a person chooses bonding to occur and not just when a person is intimately in love with another person.

One more brain item: When anyone engages in sexual behaviors, the brain creates pathways of connection that render that experience easier to repeat and, in fact, that render that experience something the brain wants to repeat over and over. That is, synaptic pathways, or tunnels of sexual pleasure, are created in the brain simply by engaging in sexual behaviors.

Which leads to a problem. When a young man or a young woman begins to sleep around or share sexual experiences with more than one person, shame and feeling dirty result because



our God-designed brain gets confused. That sense of feeling dirty is partly the neurochemicals in the brain saying, "I'm confused. Who is this new person you are having sex with?"



What we all need to keep in mind is that our brain and neurochemicals remember the synaptic pathways of former lovers. This is exactly what the comments of the young adults above were leading to. Those who engage in sexual behaviors are opening brain flow that can become massively complex and frustrating for the person who wants to create multiple bonding experiences. The question the young people I quoted above are asking is the right one: Does this behavior create obstacles for future healthy intimacy and obstacles for the possibility of long-term faithful, loving relationship?



The answer, according to science, is *yes*. Sex devoid of relational commitment confuses our brain's neurochemicals and begins to corrode our capacity for one of our deepest yearnings: the yearning for commitment and faithfulness, or bonding with someone who loves us. Let me put this more forcefully:

It is impossible to engage in the hookup culture without damaging your brain's innate desire for healthy, faithful, emotional bonding.

Alicia makes this confession: "I also realized that hooking up had influenced my notions of self-worth, love, relationships and expectations of men in ways I hadn't realized."

I assure you, there's a better way. It's the kingdom way.

Sex and Love

Jesus's view of sex and love were profoundly Jewish, and that means they emerged out of Israel's story and Israel's Scriptures, what Christians today call the Old Testament. In that context, love and sex were about consummating marriage, procreation, expression of love and pleasure — but all of this in the context of a rugged, realistic lifetime commitment where the body really does matter.

Let's begin with the idea that the body really does matter, because for some Christians the body is inferior to the soul or spirit or mind. Therefore, to them, what the body does doesn't really matter. That's a form of Gnosticism.

For others, while they think what they do with their body does matter, they can't integrate their spirituality into their embodiedness. So, instead of seeing their body as important to following Jesus, they let it tag along to the spirituality game they play but hope the body keeps quiet the whole time and perhaps sits in the corner without attracting attention to itself.

The one thing Jesus learned in the Jewish world was that the body isn't a container for the spirit but that the body is fully integrated with spirit. For Jesus, there is complete integration of body and spirit. So, it can be put this way: The reason Jesus and his Jewish world talked about sex and bodies so much was because the body was so important. Your body matters and what you do with your body is your spirituality!

Jesus' view of rugged, realistic commitment can be found in what he taught about divorce. At the time of Jesus there were two basic views, as there are in most cultures on most issues most of the time. One group believed that divorce should be granted permissively and for any good reason, and that a permissible divorce meant a permissible remarriage. A famous rabbi, Hillel, is credited with this view. Another group, led by a rabbi named Shammai, thought the only permissible ground of divorce (and remarriage) was what Moses taught in Deuteronomy 24:1. The verse indicates that a man might become displeased with his wife if he "finds *something indecent*" about her. On those two Hebrew words, *erwat dabar* ("something indecent"), the fate of families hung. For Shammai, something indecent meant sexual immorality like adultery or in-

cest. But for Hillel it meant whatever displeased the man — and the expansiveness of that was later illustrated to be as broad as: “Even if she burns your toast!”

In this context of a raging debate about permissiveness in divorce and remarriage, we get this report from Matthew 19:

“Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?’ ” (v. 3).

That is, they are asking if Hillel is right: Can you get a permissible divorce for most any reason you can find? Jesus’ response astounded even his disciples, and he gives his answer in three parts, and these three all illustrate that Jesus believed that marriage was permanent and that sexual relations and love make sense only within that context:

#1: God makes the marriage.

“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (v. 6).

#2: Divorce was only permitted due to sin.

“Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning” (v. 8).

#3: Marriage is permanent.

“I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery” (v. 9).

His disciples, because they had imbibed the permissiveness of their own culture, were shocked. They said:

“If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry” (v. 10).

So Jesus took their comment to the opposite, morally zealous extreme:

Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others have been made eunuchs; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven.

The one who can accept this should accept it. (vv. 11 – 12)

If those words don’t illustrate the moral zeal of Jesus and his belief that marriage is for keeps, then nothing does.

But this forces another issue to arise. “Okay,” you might say, “I can see that Jesus’ moral zeal led him to believe marriage was permanent and that sex only made sense within a context of rugged commitment to one another forever. I can see that. But where’s the love? It’s got to be more than just keeping the law.”

You’re right, and this is why we not only have to listen to Jesus in light of his historical context but also in light of his Bible. The biggest problem with understanding sex today is that we don’t understand what love is. Here’s where we are headed: Love is not what we call romance, neither is it dopamine highs. Brain scientists will tell us right up front that both of those expressions are mostly chemical.

What then is love? Love is a rugged commitment to be with someone. “Being with” is what love is all about. And in a Christian context for someone who follows Jesus, love is being with someone as we both follow Jesus. The Bible sketches a wonderful view of love, and it’s one we need to listen to more carefully.

Israel’s story had one book that was devoted to this theme of rugged, committed love and marriage and sex, and it is a book that presents what can only be called a kingdom ideal of love,



sex, and relationship: the Song of Solomon. This book, which is a series of beautiful, evocative, and erotic poems, shaped Jews to see that love and sex belonged together. This was in dramatic contrast to what they were finding in Greece and Rome at the time. The Song of Solomon reveals two humans — a man and his wife — who are obsessed with one another in rapturous love, who playfully delight in one another's presence and bodies, and whose words are so other-oriented and vulnerable that one must describe this book as Songs of Delight and Songs about Loving You.

It doesn't take much imagination to know what these two lovebirds are saying to one another as they coo love poems to one another from Song of Solomon (Song of Songs) 4:16 – 5:1.

She

Awake, north wind,
and come, south wind!
Blow on my garden,
that its fragrance may spread abroad.
Let my beloved come into his garden
and taste its choice fruits.

He

I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;
I have drunk my wine and my milk.

Friends

Eat, friends, and drink;
drink your fill of love.

Or this from Song of Solomon 7:6 – 9, 10 – 12:

He

How beautiful you are and how pleasing,
my love, with your delights!
Your stature is like that of the palm,
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.
I said, "I will climb the palm tree;
I will take hold of its fruit."
May your breasts be like clusters of grapes on the vine,
the fragrance of your breath like apples,
and your mouth like the best wine.

She

May the wine go straight to my beloved,
flowing gently over lips and teeth.
I belong to my beloved,
and his desire is for me.
Come, my beloved, let us go to the countryside,
let us spend the night in the villages.
Let us go early to the vineyards
to see if the vines have budded,
if their blossoms have opened,
and if the pomegranates are in bloom —
there I will give you my love.

In one of my college classes, after I read the last two chapters of the Song of Solomon in a dramatic fashion, one young man at the back of the room, with dopamine now at work in his system, uttered: "Man, am I glad this is in the Bible!"



The good news is that it is. The good news also is that it is designed to guide the sexual behaviors of humans. The Song of Solomon is ancient Israel's "love and sex" manual. But there is one thing that shapes the dopamine delights of this most sacred of sex manuals: a committed relationship that expressed itself in being "with" one another. These two poets come alive in loving one another. In other words, the themes are shaped by chemically induced commitments that are found in the release of vasopressin and oxytocin: "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine."

Sex is about relationship.
Sex is about love.
Without relationship and love, sex wounds.

Student after student tells me the same story, sometimes without even using words.

The Three Hardest Words to Say Today: "I.Love.You."

Humans, Jesus' dream constantly affirms, are made to love one another, and only in loving others do humans become fully human. Humans are wired to connect with one another and in that relational connection the electricity of love flows and lights up the human being. (Sex is only one part of this electric connection.) But somehow four lies about love have been hoisted from the depths of nonsense and downloaded into the culture of our world. They are these:

I love you means . . .
Lie #1: I am needy.
Lie #2: I am weak.
Lie #3: I am dependent (or codependent).
Lie #4: I lose my independence.

Our culture has rammed this list of system-crashing lies into the minds and hearts of this generation. Yes, some humans connect to others out of an unhealthy neediness or weakness and become codependent and lose their sense of self. But, God made us to love others and to connect to others and it is not wrong to be social and to fall in love so much that you feel like you can't exist without another person — I know I felt that way when I fell in love with my wife, Kris. I just didn't want to live without her (and still don't). I was fifteen and Kris was fifteen; we were sophomores in high school. I couldn't wait to see her between classes and after school and on the weekends. The world, so it seemed to me, wasn't complete unless Kris was in it.

We've been with one another for more than three decades, which means we've done lots of things together. Every evening for the last eight years, usually around 4:00 p.m., I make our dinner salad. I get out the spinach leaves and the cutting board and the knife and the bowl, and I wash the leaves and then cut the leaves carefully into smaller bits. Then I get out broccoli slaw and tomatoes and onions and Pecorino Romano cheese and dried berries and nuts and broccoli florets and carrots. Then I begin to chop away, and in about fifteen minutes the salad is ready.

You might be wondering why I've only been doing this for eight years, so I'll tell you: Kris and I had been married for twenty-eight years before it dawned on me to help in the kitchen. Kris is a psychologist, and she knew just how to handle my eagerness at that point. She encouraged me, and within two days the job was mine! What I'm telling you is that love is not simply about dopamine rushes and about special moments of intimacy. Love in the Bible is about being *with* someone in a lifetime commitment, and the routine activities of our days — like making salad — are inherent to what it means to be *with* someone. I am with Kris in these sorts of ways, and it is this kind of "withness" that shapes our marriage and our love.

Many today think we have progressed beyond those days of rapturously loving another person so much we don't feel complete without them or committing ourselves to be with another person for a lifetime. Leonora Epstein, in a CNN.com column, was speaking with her therapist



about her struggles in relationships and thinking the feminist therapist might just delve into some “childhood father complex” when her therapist uttered these jaw-dropping words: “Some women are just happier in a relationship.”



Epstein questioned herself: “Huh? Isn’t the modern woman supposed to be totally amazing on her own?” Then she thought through her own story to discover this: “When in committed relationships, I was happier. When single, I was depressed.” What was most jaw-dropping in her reflections was this conclusion: “And perhaps ‘needing a man’ is an indication of the more basic human instinct — not for reproduction, but for companionship.” Leonora is not about to give up on her “better alone” thinking though: “The idea still doesn’t sit right with me as someone who has put so much energy into making me happy.”



The message of our culture is to do it on your own and to get your affirmations from yourself and your accomplishments: “Don’t make the commitment for life but just see how long it lasts.” So we have a generation of highly inspired workaholics who are struggling with the decision to avoid companionship as a central goal of life and, as other studies are showing, they are becoming more and more depressed because of the absence of committed relationships.

Instead of being taught that the aim of life is to love God and to love others, including (if chosen) a bonding relationship with one person as a commitment to be “with” that person for life, our culture teaches that committed love is a constraint on a life already full with all kinds of goals. Instead of being taught that sex flows from genuine love and that genuine love craves commitment, our culture hears that raspy voice of Tina Turner: “What’s love got to do with it?”

For instance, a woman named Sienna said it this way: “Commitment to a boyfriend, carried out with the same intensity, seemed like one expectation too much.” That is to say, some believe they can’t afford to invest time, energy, and emotion in a deep relationship. “Hooking up appears to be a practical alternative.”

A young man named Tom, who likes sex, puts it flippantly because his focus is on other things: “I think that guys don’t want to worry about having a girlfriend so much. It’s, like, somewhat of a burden.” The burden or constraint of committed love, which alone satisfies human relationships, has become an optional part of life for many. Laura Sessions Stepp says this so well: “Sigmund Freud is said to have believed that a happy life is made up of two things: love and work. Society has asked [today’s] young women to choose between the two, and they’ve chosen work, at least for the short term.” The instinct to work is clashing with the potentially soul-satisfying demands of lasting love.

Our culture, and clearly this can be exaggerated, finds “I love you” to be the hardest three words to say. Why? This generation knows what real love costs and that it means committing to be with someone forever. A young Duke University woman named Anne Katharine Wales says this: “Somewhere along the line most of us have gotten really close to someone, maybe even fallen in love. . . . For some reason, this scares us beyond belief. Somehow this doesn’t fit with our plan of achieving our dreams. We want to be independent; we want to go off and change the world in our own way. But we never planned on falling for someone else.” The result is a generation that is wary and cynical and selfish and anxious about love. That wariness is wounding this generation deeply and hooking up is not satisfying its yearnings.

Romance, Anyone?

Studies show that the deepest kind of romance desired today is that a young woman wants a boyfriend and a young man wants a girlfriend, and they want to hold hands in public, going on official dates, and just plain talking with one another. In other words, they want someone who will be “with” them in a loyal way.

Donna Freitas interviewed a sexy young woman named Amy. She’s hot and she likes to dress the part and young men like her to be hot and dress the part. She knows it. It “helps me feel



good about myself," she says. "I just want to be fun." Freitas observes that "being fun" has led Amy down a painful path, and she offers a potent observation that lies at the core of Amy's dream: "There is one major thing that the girl who seems to have everything is missing: a boyfriend." After getting to know Amy, Freitas says: "Amy really wants to find a boyfriend, someone who will love her. She's tried everything she knows: hooking up, being friends with benefits, playing hard to get. Nothing has worked." She continues: "[Amy wanted] a real boyfriend, one who loved her and respected her, and who would admit to their relationship in public by doing something as simple as asking her on a date or holding her hand while walking across campus." What Amy wants is the norm, but our culture — your culture — works against it.

Donna Freitas discovered in talking to college students that the number one romantic experience was "just talking" and "talking for hours." In fact, Hephzibah Anderson, in her confession of a year-long commitment to chastity, described how relationships without sex were more romantic and emotionally satisfying, because, as she puts it: "When you've closed yourself off physically, it's easier to open up emotionally."

This is where a good dose of Jesus' kingdom vision deconstructs a culture gone terribly awry. For Jesus, the kingdom vision of love, justice, peace, and wisdom shapes everything. Personal relationships, because they emerge out of that vision, will also be shaped by love, justice, peace, and wisdom. Romance is a desire and love is a desire because God wired us to connect with others, and to connect deeply — emotionally, spiritually, physically, and sexually. But emotional, spiritual, physical, and sexual love only work well between two who are committed enough to start a family and to be with one another forever. (I'm not suggesting that singleness is wrong; I am saying that lovelessness, in the sense of lasting commitment, is contrary to how we are designed.)

When I was blogging about how love and sex have become disconnected and how love in our culture has become something to fear rather than something to pursue, a professor at a Midwest liberal arts university, Anette Ejsing, offered a set of stunning observations about what is going on with young women today in a world where sexual relations have hopped the rails of decency. She writes that what is being described in the hook-up culture "is a state of being no woman can sustain." With wisdom, Anette warns of the breakdown of love that will happen to those in the hook-up culture. She says:

It must [or, will] morph into something else, which could include the following:

- *Men cannot be trusted, I want to stick closer to my girlfriends than my male partners. Maybe I even want to explore sexual relationships with women I can trust because they also feel the same way.*
- *People cannot be trusted, so I would rather be an island unto others.*
- *I feel unworthy of someone's love, so I will not dare to hope in love (from a partner, or others).*
- *Depression! (It only takes a brief glance at stats on the use of antidepressants among young adults and college students to realize this is happening a lot.)*

Sexuality is a much more integral part of who we are as human beings than we generally care to admit.

What would Jesus say? Jesus is weeping. Why? Not simply because purity codes have been crossed but because what lies behind the traditional Jewish (biblical) laws about sex express what matters most to Jesus: love, justice, peace, and wisdom. Our culture has distorted love from the inside out.

There's a better way.



The Kingdom Choice: Chasing Romance or Settling into Fidelity?



We observed above that emerging adults today want romance, but I'd like to suggest that the word *romance* is not the right word because it doesn't go far enough. What emerging adults want, so it seems to me, is the fidelity inherent in a loving, faithful, intimate relationship. What they want is someone to be *with* for a lifetime. In fact, our culture confuses romance with love. Which leads me to one more fundamental idea about love and marriage and sex. Along about the medieval age love morphed its way into the Platonic, courtly romantic ideal where love became intoxication with the intoxicating feelings of loving another person.



Some married men and married women then had two kinds of relationships: one with a husband or wife and one with a lover (with whom they might never physically consummate their relationship). Instead, they tantalized and titillated themselves with the emotional surges connected to falling in love. Often they would put obstacles in their own paths in order to intensify their feelings, equating those romantic feelings with love itself. What mattered was the burning fire of feelings instead of the joy of the beloved.

This romantic theory of love, which finds its way into Hollywood and novels, distorts the rugged choice of settling into fidelity. This romantic theory of love puts emotions and feelings and (my) personal happiness at the center of what love is. In other words, romantic love more often than not *uses* another person to fulfill one's own desires and passions.

Jesus' world is against this romantic theory of relationships. What flows directly from Jesus' kingdom dream is a rugged and settled commitment to the other person rather than to my own swarming feelings and to my own happiness. Instead of loving love, as in courtly love, the kingdom lover loves the other and lives his or her life for that other — the way the lovers in the Song of Solomon take delight in the other. (Notice how often in the poetry from Song of Solomon the lovers speak of the other.)

Instead of loving the absence of the other, as is the case with romantic love, because it generates emotional yearning for the other, kingdom lovers delight in the daily, routine presence of one another, whether the emotions of romance are present or not. Eating together, walking together, sitting together, praying together, sleeping together, and living a life together is the way we settle into fidelity. There is only one guarantee for sustaining marriage in a kingdom way: the promise to stay married trumping emotional happiness. Why? Because the lover believes the other's good is the chief concern. One of the world's experts on the societal history of love is the French scholar Denis de Rougemont, who makes this profound observation from the perspective of a man (whom a woman loves in return): "To choose a woman for a wife is to say to Miss So-and-So: 'I want to live with you just as you are.' For this really means: 'It is you I choose *to share* my life with me, and that [sharing of life] is the only *evidence* there can be that I love you.' "

As I write this paragraph, Kris and I have been married for thirty-six years. Recently my class was talking about wedding vows, and the subject of whether or not to use standard vows or to write your own vows came up. Which led us to read a traditional vow:

To have and to behold,
from this day on,
for better or for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish;
until death do us part.

As we were reading the vow and the students were discussing with one another what their views were, this came to my mind: Yes, that's our story, that's our vow, that's what Kris and I have lived. Ups and downs, good days and bad days, months when we hoped we'd have enough



money and months when we relaxed. As I pondered these words and students were talking about whether they'd use traditional vows or write their own, I thought about what marriage was. In my view, only one expression can sum up the real story of marriage:



I will be with you.



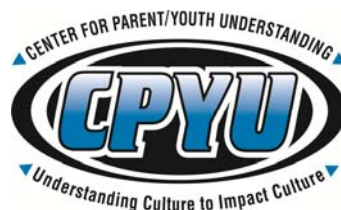
Underneath the dopamine and beyond the neurochemicals is the commitment I made to Kris and that she made to me, and it is the commitment that has sustained us: it is the commitment to be with one another until the end. We now have a story to tell of our One. Life *with* one another.

The great Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard never married, but while engaged he contemplated marriage in ways that few can surpass: "What I am through her she is through me, and neither of us is anything by oneself, but we are what we are in union."⁵⁷ Kierkegaard unlocks one of the doors to love: If we are humans through other humans, we are lovers through loving the one we love and through receiving the love of the one who loves us. "I.love.you" will become our words when the *you* is what the *I* most cares about.

I contend that the kingdom dream of Jesus reshapes what love is, what intimacy is, what marriage is, and what sex is, because Jesus' vision of the kingdom transforms the meaning of love.

Editor's Note: This article is excerpted from chapter 10 of Scot McKnight's book *One.Life: Jesus Calls, We Follow* (Zondervan, 2010).

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