



The Spirit

I

don't know which is worse," she cried, "the fact that we hardly ever have sex, or that when we do, I end up feeling used."

Beth and Steve stared at the floor, too embarrassed to look at me but obviously in pain. We'd been making great progress on emotional distance and poor communication in their marriage, but today's session had turned to the topic of their sexual relationship.

"We just don't seem to connect during sex. I know it's supposed to be this wonderful thing, but mostly it just feels like a duty; like I'm servicing him, and he's not really *with* me. I feel so empty afterward. It's gotten to the point that we hardly ever do it at all. We tried to talk about it once with Bill and Mary, the couple that teach our Sunday school class, but Bill just quoted the Scripture about not withholding ourselves from each other. There's got to be more to it than that! I swear, sometimes I wish God hadn't even made sex in the first place!"

A Common Problem

Sexuality is probably the most difficult issue we deal with in marriage counseling, and yet most of us are ill prepared to work effectively with it. This is in spite of numerous studies citing sex as one of the most common causes of marital conflict and divorce. Many counseling programs offer only an introductory course in human sexuality, and many M.Div. programs don't even offer it as an elective. This lack of training results in otherwise skilled Christian counselors unconsciously avoiding the subject, fumbling awkwardly with it, or worse yet, referring to a secular sex therapist who may recommend interventions that are not God-honoring.

Unlike many of our training programs, Scripture addresses sexuality frequently. God knew the power of what he was giving us, for good or for evil. He made it abund-

dantly clear that we are not to misuse the gift, but he also greatly affirmed its frequent enjoyment within the bonds of marriage. He knew it would either be the glue that bonds us together or the dynamite that blows us apart. It is imperative that we become more skilled in working with sexuality so that it becomes that bond for our clients.

The Spirit of the Act

When addressing difficult issues, Jesus repeatedly emphasized the importance of the spirit of an act, rather than simply the letter of the law. If the spirit of an act is wrong, the results will not be glorifying to God... no matter how right the act may appear. God looks on the heart. And so, though it is true that the Word admonishes us not to withhold ourselves from each other, we must be careful not to slap a Scripture verse on a problem that warrants great sensitivity. If we can help bring lasting healing and real growth to a couple's sexual relationship, we will have blessed them with one of God's greatest means of expressing and deepening their love for each other.

Many sexual problems can be resolved simply by helping a couple talk more effectively.

In being careful not to oversimplify sexual problems, we also want to be sure that we don't make them more complex than necessary. Facilitating lasting healing does not necessarily require one to become a sex therapist. Much of the work is an outgrowth of the work we already do—enhancing relational intimacy and encouraging better communication. Many sexual problems can be resolved simply by helping a couple talk more effectively.

This is because, at one level, sexual intercourse is merely a

of the Act

Having Sex or Making Love?

CHRISTOPHER MCCLUSKEY

form of communication. The term *intercourse* is not even a specifically sexual term; it simply means an exchange or communing between persons. We can help a couple look at the messages they are conveying in their *verbal* intercourse throughout the week, pair these with the rest of their *relational* intercourse, and then compare their *sexual* intercourse to see if the messages are consistent. If messages of love, devotion, and oneness are not reflected in the rest of the relationship, their sexual intercourse is a lie. This is why so many spouses feel used and empty after sex; the physical expression of giving oneself completely to the other belies the loneliness and distance that actually characterize their marriage.

Our goal, then, is not simply to help couples have better sex. There is a world of difference between "having

sex" and "making love." Our culture uses the words interchangeably, and the acts are the same, but they are vastly different in spirit. Merely "having sex" does not glorify the Father. Just as we are not to partake of Christ's body through communion in an unworthy manner, we are not to take lightly the joining of our bodies in sexual communion. Simply "having sex" misses the spirit of God's plan for us to celebrate our oneness through a covenant act. We want to help our couples share the true spirit of "making love."

An Intimate Marriage

For a couple to experience that spirit, they must first have an intimate marriage—one in which they are coming to deeply know, and be known by, the other. True sexual *intimacy* is always the

outgrowth and expression of intimacy in the rest of the marriage. We put the cart ahead of the horse if we focus on sexuality when there is still great distance in the rest of the relationship.

But once a couple has established a fairly intimate marriage, we can help each partner more effectively convey and deepen their sexual intimacy. This will require a childlike playfulness on their part. The language will prove awkward at times, and the subject will create some embarrassment, but just as we can only enter the kingdom of heaven as little children, a couple will only find intimate connection sexually when they approach it with childlike wonder and curiosity.

Vulnerability

Part of that child state involves a willingness to soak up one's partner, as well as to fully give of oneself. This again requires healing in the rest of the marriage, since each partner will only be that vulnerable when he or she feels truly safe. Examining the thoughts and feelings each person has during physical, emotional, and spiritual nakedness will reveal lingering areas of mistrust, hurt, anger, and trauma. It is rich ground for continued healing and growth.

To help with some of the awkwardness of discussing sexuality, couples should be encouraged to read a few pages a night together from one of the excellent Christian texts available on healthy sexuality. This will help desensitize them to the topic and provide solid information, which will make productive dialog much easier.

As a couple increasingly views their lovemaking as a means of communicating, try to ensure that nothing is tarnishing the message, whether fantasizing about another, problems with body image and performance, or faulty views of sex as dirty or a necessary evil. Encourage them from Scripture to

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"delight themselves in each other" (Song of Songs 1:2; 4:10) and "enjoy all of their choice fruits" (4:16). This is to be a time of abandon, giving and receiving fully in body, soul, and spirit. Surrendering like this invites a climax that is not merely physical but spiritual as well.

Perhaps the most critical piece of lovemaking is the period of restabilizing immediately after the act is completed. Many couples quickly jump out of bed to go clean up, or simply roll over and go to sleep. Encourage them to spend a few moments basking in the afterglow, soaking in an awareness of what they have shared together. After such a time of transparency and vulnerability, this is a rich opportunity to affirm each other, cuddling, caressing, and soliciting feedback. There are few moments in marriage where we can become so aware of our love.

Summary

We must become more skilled and comfortable in working with sexuality if our clients are to experience the fullness of what God intended in marriage. Our tendency has been toward avoidance, or admonishing from Scripture, without the kind of care and attention we give any other area of marital conflict. If couples cannot come to us for real help and healing, they are left with no good alternatives. Our answers lie not so much in techniques as in understanding the spirit of the act and helping our clients convey that spirit to each other.

Christopher McCluskey, MSW, is a Psychotherapist, Certified Sex Therapist, and Christian Life Coach. A co-founder of Sexual Wholeness, he produced the highly acclaimed video "Coaching Couples into Passionate Intimacy." He can be contacted at his website: www.christian-living.com

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Resources for Couples

William Cutrer & Sandra Glahn, *Sexual Intimacy in Marriage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998).

Archibald Hart, Catherine Hart Weber, & Debra Taylor, *Secrets of Eve* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1998).

Christopher McCluskey, *Coaching Couples into Passionate Intimacy* (video) (Tampa, FL: Media Resource Center, 2000).

Clifford & Joyce Penner, *The Gift of Sex* (Waco, TX: Word, 1981).

Douglas Rosenau, *A Celebration of Sex* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1994).

Ed & Gaye Wheat, *Intended for Pleasure* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1977).