

Sexuality & Spirituality: A Most Powerful Combination

by Shannon Ethridge, M.A.

No words in the English language could possibly describe the look of panic on my mom's face as she pulled into the driveway to witness 5-year-old me standing barefoot in the dew-covered grass, holding a fallen electrical line in my tiny hand. I'd been watching *Sesame Street*, when suddenly the TV went dead, along with all of the lights in the house. I went outside to ask my dad to investigate, but stumbled upon a potential explanation when I saw the severed black cord lying limp on the front lawn. So I picked it up, as if somehow I could reconnect it to its power source and restore everything to the way it was supposed to be. And, amazingly, I lived to tell about it.

In many ways this article is my attempt to do something similar—to reconnect us, the body of Christ, to our original Power Source, particularly to restore energy, passion, and creative freedom in the marriage bed. Hopefully I'll get better results this time, and avoid any shocked facial expressions in the process.

Is there any real connection between our sexuality and spirituality? Is there a direct connection between our bodies and our spirits?

Think of the spirit as the “energy” we're given as humans who are made in the image of God. Think of our body as the “conduit” through which that energy flows. Without the conduit (the body), there would be no way for us to experience that energy and let it flow from ourselves to another human being. But without the energy (the spirit), our bodies alone can't muster the deep human connection we naturally crave.

Oh, many try. They find human outlets for their physical sexual desires—manipulative seduction, child molestation, sexual abuse, sexual addiction, prostitution, human trafficking—it wears all kinds of ugly masks.

But a physical connection to someone with whom we also share a strong spiritual and emotional bond, that's something else entirely. That's pure love . . . romance . . . passion . . . intimacy . . . ecstasy. When we're expressing our sexuality in the way our Designer intended, there is an enormous, undeniably powerful connection between sexuality and spirituality.

Like two sides of the same coin, body and spirit are intertwined together. So since we can't possibly separate the body and spirit, or sexuality from our spirituality, how about looking to see what we can learn from fully integrating and celebrating the synergy between the two?

A Most Shocking Question

“How is our relationship with God *sexual*?”

This was the question a professor posed to our small group in a Human Sexuality class at Liberty University. Translation: “What does our spiritual relationship with God have in common with our sexual relationship with our mate?”

Here are just a few answers that surfaced during this lively discussion – that in both relationships there are deep levels of:

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| * Trust | * Vulnerability | * Genuine interest |
| * Full acceptance | * Deep desire | * True communion |
| * Closeness | * Connection | * Life-giving transference |

* Openness	* Honesty	* Humility
* Risk	* Intimacy	* Passion
* Purpose	* Pleasure	* Transcendence
* Euphoria	* Completion	* Synergy

Given there are *so many more* possible answers, perhaps there's a greater connection between spirituality and sexuality that we've ever fathomed!

When we pause to really ponder it, we have to admit it's quite fascinating that God would create us both "in His image" *and* as "sexual beings," simultaneously! It's easy to wonder, *But WHY did God make us this way?* Did God design sexuality as a burden, or as a blessing?

You be the judge. What else in all of creation can...

- Comfort you when you are sad?
- Calm you when you are anxious?
- Provide an outlet for expression when you're excited?
- Relieve boredom?
- Help you forget your current trials and tribulations?
- Make you sleep better?
- Provide intense, guilt-free pleasure?
- Help you feel deeply connected to another human being *and* to God?
- Erase feelings of loneliness and isolation?
- Give you an interesting break from your daily routine?
- Relieve stress, and even certain aches and pains?
- Enhance your overall health and vitality?

- Fulfill your hopes and dreams of parenthood?
- Rev your engine, float your boat, light your fire?
- Send sparks through your brain and shivers down your spine?
- Make you feel so giddy, so special, so cherished and celebrated?

Yeah, only sex can do all that. And it does all that quite well!

So what was God thinking when He created sex? I believe He was thinking, “I’m going to make their day... and their nights too!”

Seeing & Celebrating God Through our Sexuality

I also think God created sexual intimacy to provide us with a peek into His own character and nature. As we understand our sexuality more fully, we understand God more fully, and vice versa.

As I’ve contemplated this relational dynamic, here are a couple of thoughts on what God has shown me about Himself through the avenue of our sexuality:

- A coaching client once asked me, “Why did God create us in such a way that we have physiological responses to our emotions? When I’m attracted to someone, why do I get butterflies in my stomach, sweaty palms, and a racing heart? Why do I get all giddy?” At first I responded, “I have no idea!” but then it was like God opened up my brain and poured the answer in, like liquid Drano to unclog my thoughts.

He said, “Shannon, I created humans to respond to love like that so that they’d know how I feel when they turn their hearts and attentions toward Me!”

I sat there, blown away for a few seconds. When I shared the epiphany with my coaching client, she was blown away too. *The God of the Universe gets giddy over us when we turn toward Him?* Yes, He does. And He's given you a glimpse into that fact through the thoughts and feelings you've had toward the object of your affections (your spouse).

- One day I was contemplating why God designed the human body to feel such intense pleasure when we experience orgasm. (If you haven't crossed this bridge in your marriage yet, I have some helpful tips for you in *The Passion Principles* book!) Seriously, sex feels plenty good while it's happening, and it creates beautiful babies, and it bonds a couple together in extraordinary ways, so why give us such a stunningly ripe cherry on top as *orgasm*? God's reply to the question? Just like a fun game of peek-a-boo, our Heavenly Father wanted to give us just a glimpse of what we have to look forward to—the “big finale,” if you will. Is there any moment in our existence in which we feel a more primordial delight, a greater loss of control (in a good way), or a greater sense of absolute euphoria than in those sacred moments of extreme, intense pleasure? I can't help but believe that when Christ returns for us someday and ushers us into our Heavenly home, the intensity of that pleasure is going to be even more mind-blowing and soul-stirring than the most amazing orgasmic experience we've ever had! The joy and delight of sexual intimacy is merely a *foretaste* of the intimacies and ecstasies that await us in Heaven!

My guess is that some will read these statements and wonder, *How can sex possibly be a sacred activity, especially when it's the motivation behind so much evil in the world?*

It's true that sex used for any purpose other than marital bonding is incredibly degrading and destructive. But we can blame Satan for this dynamic, not God. Satan distorted sexuality seven different ways in the book of Genesis alone, and he still distorts it in a multitude of ways. However, passionate sex between husbands and wives is truly an act of worship of the God who gave us such an extraordinary gift – and He gave this gift *before* the Fall of man! So we must remember that there's absolutely nothing sinful about sexual intimacy as God intended. Christians *can* be holy and horny at the same time! Our healthy marital sex lives exuberantly express to God, "We embrace *Your plan* for our sexual fulfillment, and we celebrate the fact that a vibrant marriage bed brings the deepest satisfaction possible between two human beings!" In short, "Yeah, God!!!"

The Power of Prayer

So if there's such a powerful connection between our sexuality and our spirituality, perhaps investing a little more spiritual energy in preparing for sexual encounters is a wise move.

Would you like to guess what we've found to be the *best* aphrodisiac available? Prayer! When we snuggle up together and hold each other, then pour out our hearts to God on behalf of one another, it creates such an intense bond! In fact, it's sometimes impossible to just roll over and go to sleep. We can't help but want to follow the "Amen" with a whole lot of good lovin'!

Go ahead, give it a try tonight, and see if drawing closer to God doesn't draw you incredibly closer to one another, and vice-versa!

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Love vs. Lust

I'm saddened to hear so many Christians worry about "feelings of lust" toward their marriage partner. Do we really *lust* after our spouse, or is it perfectly natural to frequently want sexually intimacy with our mates?

One of the best definitions of *lust* came from James Robison during our *Life Today* interview. James said, "Lust isn't noticing that something is sexually attractive. We can't help but do that because God is the Creator of such stunning beauty! Lust is being manipulative and trying to make something yours that simply doesn't belong to you."

Your spouse, however, *does* belong to you, so letting him or her turn your head and turn you on over and over is perfectly okay. In fact, it's cause for celebration!

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Sexuality: Friend or Foe?

In every battle we face, the best strategy is to first "know the enemy." Well, Christian brothers and sisters, the enemy is *not* our sexuality. There's nothing sinful

about sex in the proper context (marriage), or even sexual desires that are surrendered to God and not acted upon in any unholy way (see Hebrews 4:15).

Yet so often we've been taught to loathe "the flesh." We must remember that the Son of God became flesh Himself (see John 1:14 and Hebrews 2:14). Scholars believe that when the Bible warns against "the flesh," it's referring to our fallen sinful nature, *not* our bodily desires.

Indeed, our physical cravings are not the enemy. Our desires for human connection and powerful, pleasurable experiences are God-given, and our bodies are in fact temples of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 6:19).

So perhaps instead of viewing our flesh as this evil thing that is to be despised and derided, we can learn to celebrate our bodies as the conduit through which God's spirit flows, as well as the conduit through which sexual energy flows toward one another in marriage. Indeed, our bodies, and the sexual energy flowing through them, are nothing short of sacred!

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The Power of a Clean Slate

Pre-marital sexual activity can do a lot of relational damage, and that damage often doesn't surface until long after the honeymoon phase is over. Many Christians bemoan the fact that they *still* struggle with guilt over pre-marital sexual involvement (years or even decades later), or they are still holding a grudge because they feel they were manipulated, coerced, or taken advantage of while dating their spouse.

We can begin the sexual healing process by initiating two small steps:

- 1) Take responsibility for your part in the dance of sexual dysfunction.
- 2) Start with a clean slate by forgiving both yourself and your mate completely.

During one of my Women at the Well Intensive Workshops, a wife was mourning the loss of her virginity prior to marriage. Eventually, I compassionately asked, “Did he hold a gun to your head?”

She was shocked, but sat with the question just long enough for something to obviously click in her brain. The hard lines on her face melted as she looked me and courageously declared, “No. No, he didn’t.”

I could tell it was a much-needed “Aha!” moment for her, as I thought she might stand up afterward and shout, “Hooray! I don’t have to play the victim anymore!” In truth, the responsibility was on *both* their shoulders, not just his. She could have said *no* just as easily as he could have.

Unless we are being forcefully raped, we *always* have a say in the matter. Perhaps we said *no* with our words, but our reciprocal and responsive actions probably spoke a lot louder in the heat of the moment. We each must own up to the power that we willingly surrendered, and give up the victim mentality. It serves no good purpose.

When we recognize that we weren’t victims, but rather, initially-reluctant-yet-ultimately-willing partners, then forgiveness is no longer a one-way street. It becomes a two-lane highway. It’s amazing how much easier it is to forgive another person when we realize how much we ourselves are in need of forgiveness for the exact same

infraction. Throwing a stone isn't something we're as eager to do when we realize just how much we belong in the middle of the stone-throwing circle ourselves.

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Letting Go of Sexual Legalism

Historically, the church has focused on fear-inducing sex-negative messages instead of empowering sex-positive messages. As a result, many walk on sexual eggshells. Some Christians have even opted out of sexual intimacy for the most part. They fear “displeasing God” with any sexual thought, feeling, or action. But does a married couple thoroughly enjoying sex without any guilt, shame, or inhibition displease God at all? Does He roll his eyes in disgust? Absolutely *not!* Like a parent watching a beloved child excitedly open presents on Christmas morning, I believe a couple delighting in the gift of one another's bodies brings our Heavenly Father great joy!

But do you know what *does* upset God? The same thing that upset Jesus – legalistic religious people putting words in God's mouth and putting spiritual burdens on people's backs that He never meant for them to carry. While I can't speak directly for God or Jesus, I also get pretty upset when I hear things from within the Christian community that sound a little something like sexual legalism – things such as “women shouldn't wear sexy lingerie for their husbands or else it will awaken his appetite to look at pornography... the missionary position is the only ‘holy way’ for a married couple to have sex... oral sex is animalistic behavior... a man shouldn't expect his wife to have sex more than once a week or else she'll feel ‘put upon.’” When I hear comments such

as these, I can't help but think, *Wow! I don't recall reading that anywhere in my Bible!*

Sentiments like these may be well intentioned, and come from very sincere Christians who deeply love the Lord, but one can be sincere, yet still be sincerely wrong. And I believe this might be one of the reasons that most of the world does *not* look at the church as a source of real wisdom when it comes to sexual matters.

If we are ever going to re-establish Christians as authorities on the topic of healthy sexuality, we must move beyond our own sexual and religious baggage, study scripture carefully, and proclaim that a married couple's chosen sexual repertoire is entirely between the husband, the wife, and God. Barring any sexual activities specifically forbidden in scripture (such as adultery or prostitution), there is complete *freedom* in the marriage bed to mutually experiment, explore, and enjoy all of the many wonders of human sexuality!

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