

# Eunuchs, Semantics, and the Theological Divide

Oxford academic Emma Percy, writing in the most recent edition of *Theology* poses the question “Can a eunuch be baptized?” and derives “insights for gender inclusion from Acts 8.” It’s an interesting question to pose about an interesting text. I came to the article at the suggestion of a colleague and as observation of how the thinking of the church engages (or fails to engage) with the prevailing issues of sex, gender and identity.



It’s a fraught topic. We are talking about a fundamental sense of “self” here. That’s a simple, hard, question: *Who* are you? We can inform (and hear) the answer in terms of biology, psychology, sociology or a dozen other aspects. But at the bottom of it all is one of those explorable-but-not-fathomable theological *mysteries* where we can get to the end of our language and risk talking at cross purposes.

Percy’s article enters into this space. Her exegesis delivers some often overlooked aspects of Philip’s encounter *on the road to Gaza* and her argument extends to some good pastoral guidance. In the end, however, this essay, in itself, reveals the semantic divide that besets these issues in particular, and theological discourse in general.

There is much to affirm. In the account in Act 8, of course, we have a *eunuch*. Percy emphasises the physicality of this term: the word “eunuch” applies to a person who has been castrated and it was a real phenomenon in the culture of the time. And, of course, the answer to the titular question is affirmative. In the eunuch’s *own words*, “‘Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?’”

This inclusion is kerygmatic in a profound way and Percy does well to expound it. She highlights the gospel in it: covenantal exclusion overcome, “dry branches” grafted in, those with no physical legacy drawn into the eternal family of God, etc. She is rightly incredulous: “I cannot count the number of sermons I have heard about the Ethiopian eunuch which have made no reference to the significance of his being a eunuch!”

In applying the text to the contemporary debate Percy is firstly ready to admit that “it is not appropriate simply to map the term ‘eunuch’ on to those who are intersex or transgender.” She is secondly ready to do exactly that, using the lens “of people who do not fit into neat binaries of male and female.”

And so she brings us to consider intersex persons. The mapping is *not* direct: A eunuch is an emasculated male and so defined by the binary, and what has been lost; an intersex person has *indeterminate* sex, described by referencing variations of either end of the binary or neither. Nevertheless, for both the eunuch and the intersexed, their embodied selves don’t fit “neatly” into the sexed categories, and the gospel inclusion of the eunuch *does* inform our response.

Percy outlines the pastoral implications. To give just a few of her words:

*The Acts 8 story itself offers an important reminder to make inclusion a priority. Baptism becomes for the Church the mark of a Christian and, unlike circumcision, it does not require a particularly gendered body. Women can be baptized and so too can those whose bodies do not conform to gender norms...*

*Clergy need to be aware of the pastoral needs of families with intersex babies who may want baptism before they feel*

*they can assign a gender to their child. Registers ask for the child's sex, but surely this is not a necessary requirement of baptism. In a culture where children are often identified as male or female by scans, even before they are born, the families of those who cannot be so neatly categorized need compassionate pastoral support.*

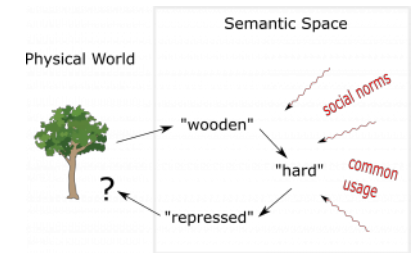
It is when she turns next to consider transgenderism that we begin to run into the semantic issues that complicate dialogue on these sorts of issues. To explain what I mean, I need to give my take on how language works in our search for meaning:

All language is ultimately self-referential, but it begins with a simple *referent*. An example helps: when communicating the physical reality of a tree we use a word, such as "wood." It's a simple syllable that refers to the physical reality of what trees are made. A simple word, a simple physical referent, a simple meaning.

In the joy that is human creativity, semantics get expanded. The fact that wooden objects are hard and rigid extends the meaning of "wood" to include a sense of hardness or immovability. By this I can describe someone's facial expression as "wooden." The simple word now means something additional, that is more complex and abstract.

This expansion is not a logical necessity, the expanding meaning only partially derives from the characteristics of the physical tree. In a large part, the meaning comes from convention, common usage, and social norms; the semantics of the word are at least partly socially constructed. And that construction can shift and expand even more: I could also use "wooden" to mean "rustic" or "natural." And now a word that is objectively derived from the physical stuff of a tree can mean anything from "emotionally repressed" to "undisturbed by the advancement of modernity"!

The linguistic complexity can come full circle. The original word, applied back to the initial referent, brings its expanded meaning with it. And this is what leads to contradictions, the limitations of language, and talking at cross purposes.



To finish with my example: I might have in my garden a beautiful tree, that is full of life and character; the way it sways in the wind and the flowers that form on it speak of joy and vitality. In attempting to describe this I might reach for an antonym. To communicate the verve and vitality of my tree, I could say *"my tree is not wooden."* Linguistically, it is a contradiction, effectively nonsense. It only communicates *meaning* if there is a shared understanding of semantics, agreed upon social norms that construct the sense of what that means. If two interlocutors did not share or agree on the semantic space they would be talking at cross-purposes.

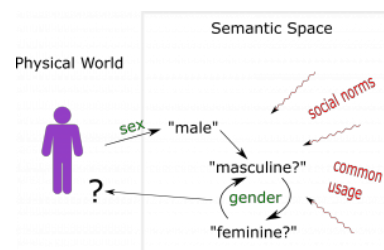
It's a simplistic illustration. It is manifoldly more complicated when we engage not with trees but with the meaning of self, our sense of identity.

In Percy's engagement with intersex the semantic ground is relatively safe. She emphasises the *physicality* of the eunuch and intersex, using physical words, even anatomical ones such as "micro penis." These words are closely connected to the simple referents of physical bodies. Her meaning, and therefore, her *exhortation*, is thoroughly graspable. And it should be grasped even by the most conservative reader. In the politics of it all, conservatives who throw the whole "LGBTI" alphabet soup into the one anathematised pot, should get a bit more bothered about doing the hard yards of seeking to understand the meaning of those letters and, at the very least, take a lead from Percy's wisdom on how to care for those who are intersex.

But as the consideration moves from intersex to transgender, the semantic complexity escalates; the mystery of self is manifest in the various constructions and reflections that come in the search for meaning. It can never be fully mapped out, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. To that end, I find an important linguistic distinction between sex (as in intersex) and *gender* (as in transgender):

The concept of sex has a clear referent. We use words such as "man" and "woman", "male" and "female" and they closely encapsulate physical characteristics. It's why we use "male" and "female" to describe plugs and sockets!

The expansion of these words in a shared semantic space is an engagement with a sense of *gender*. Gender is more socially or self-constructed, a *sense* or even a "feeling" of what it *means* to be male or female. We use words such as "masculine" or "feminine" to explore this meaning.



Part of this meaning derives from the physicality of the referent sex. e.g. "masculine" might adhere to a sense of muscular dominance, or assertive impositional (some might even say "penetrative") engagement; "feminine" might adhere to softer embrace, or fierce motherly protectiveness. But in this semantic expansion, the meaning also derives significantly from social expectation, poetic legacy, various forms of prejudice, and all the other things that you find in the shared language of a human community.

And, of course, as the semantics come full circle, those constructed meanings are applied back to the physical referent. Our language reaches its end point: We end up talking about "manly men" or "boyish girls" – linguistic tautologies and contradictions that only make sense if the social inputs into the semantic process are shared and agreed upon.

This is not just some academic exercise. The subject at hand here is a sense of *self*. It is how we conceive of and find meaning in our own bodies, and locate ourselves within the milieu of meaning. Human history is full of people fighting over *words* (consider current controversies about the use of pronouns) and this is why: the social constructions have semantic force and so influence, even impose, on our sense of self. The cost and pain of these fights, particularly as they relate to gender, is something that I can really only observe and seek to understand:

Take for instance, the feminist movement. A certain socially normative sense of “feminine” which encapsulated notions of weakness, passivity, or intellectual inferiority, was rightly rejected. A strong contingent of unashamed women refused to agree that such semantics should inevitably, invariably, or ever at all refer to them. Through various forms of persuasion and social action the social norms were shifted (and could still shift some more) and this in turn has shifted our understanding of femininity, demolishing gender distinctions where those distinctions were meaningless or unjust, and delivering a larger degree of freedom to those who are physically female. In simplistic terms, **in order to reflect a sense of self**, the referent *biological sex* differences were strengthened (“I am strong, I am invincible, I am woman!”) and the *semantic gender* differences were redefined, minimised, even eliminated.

The complexity of transgenderism is that it approaches self-meaning from the *other direction*, beginning not with biological sex, but locating primary meaning in the sense of gender – as masculine or feminine or of neither or both senses. Semantics that derive from the physical sex are deconstructed, leaving the self-and-socially-constructed semantics as the primary source of meaning.

As this meaning is applied back into the physical world, the meaning of gender collides with its physical referent,

manifesting as a disconnect between meaning and reality, and reflected in our language. The linguistic progression is this: a reference to “a man who feels like a woman” (a description) becomes semantically equivalent to “a man who is a woman” (a contradiction) becomes semantically equivalent to simply “a woman” (as a disconnected label, an arbitrary nomenclature).

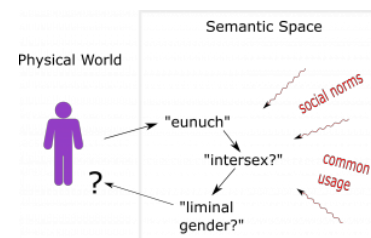
At this point it is entirely logical, albeit ethically perplexing, to make physicality conform to the semantic construct. In simplistic terms, **in order to reflect a sense of self**, the referent biological sex differences are redefined, minimised, even eliminated, and *semantic gender* differences are constructed and absolutised.

Much more could be said about the complexities, inconsistencies, and contradictions that this creates within a human community. Suffice it to say that I find myself exhorting for the importance of physicality. The irreversible modification of one’s body to conform with a self-and-socially-defined semantic of gender seems to me to be a fraught and ultimately unfruitful quest for meaning. It would seem to me wiser and more compassionate to affirm the complexity of the sex-gender dynamic, and embrace and include whatever we might mean by the “feminine male” or the “masculine woman” or the interwoven complexity of gender expressed constructively and joyfully in male and female bodies. I think the Scriptures have some beautiful light to shine on and guide such an exploration.

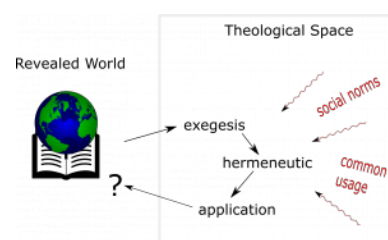
What has intrigued me, however, in engaging with Emma Percy’s article, is how the semantics of her discourse correlate closely with the semantic direction (and ultimate disconnect) of transgenderism itself. As she broadens her application of Acts 8 from intersex to transgender she buys into the semantics. Her rhetoric moves from her earlier, grounded, positive kerygma and becomes that of unanswered questions and provocative exhortations that are built upon her own theological constructs.

Even the meaning of the eunuch shifts, from the historical physicality of the Acts narrative into her own semantics of gender.

The progression is clear: The eunuch's physical referent is initially explored and carefully correlated to other physicalities, but then subsumed into a mere metaphor of "liminal gender." Once captured into Percy's theological world, the historical figure is not actually needed and could quite literally (and ironically) be "cut off" from the argument.



The correlation between positions taken in the gender identity debate and theological process shouldn't surprise. It's not for no reason that such issues have become the touchstone of theological divides!



Like all quests for meaning, theological method will find itself engaging with the revealed world of Scripture and the general truths of science and common sense. Semantics and interpretation will play their part as social assumptions and hermeneutical lenses are applied. Some methods emphasise the biblical referent as the primary source of meaning. And others will look to the socially-and-self-constructed semantics. It seems to me that Percy's framework is doing the latter, following the same semantic course as transgenderism: deconstructing the referent, and locating meaning in that which is socially-and-self-constructed. She juxtaposes ecclesial norms (marriage, baptism, the gender of Jesus) with the semantic force of gender fluidity. The hanging question and the wondering implication embraces the deconstruction.

That is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. Genuine inquiry uses the semantic space to explore mystery. There's a lot to like in Percy's essay and it has helped my own exploration.

But it does bring to bear the issues of theological language, and whether I am understanding what Percy is meaning.

Consider a word like "inclusion", which is important enough



to be in Percy's sub-title, and which I affirm as a gospel imperative. Does Percy mean it the way I mean it? Or is it empty language which can only be inhabited with meaning if I share and agree with her constructed semantic? Perhaps the answer is simply more dialogue, but the risk of cross-purposes remains significant. The fact that I need to ask these semantic questions reveals my fear: that we are more and more a church with a shared language, but a disparate sense of meaning, with separate methods of exploring the mysteries of this world that cannot easily be shared.

---

## Informing the Shared Conversations

The Diocese of Oxford is currently engaged in the Shared Conversations process about approaches to human sexuality in the Church of England.



I recently had the opportunity to attend a morning's presentation on the issues at Christchurch Oxford.

I am posting in order to provide a link to video recordings of the presentations.

They were thoughtfully and irenically presented. There is not much I can usefully add to the prevalent commentary on this process. I will only add my thoughts that the morning was more a good articulation of the differences and the divide than a clarification of the way forward. The initial presentation by Scot Peterson was factually useful. Both

Professor Alexander and Dr. Paul put across their points of view clearly and carefully. I now have more understanding of both sides; it has gently reinforced my agreement with Dr. Paul.

<https://vimeo.com/139928603>

<https://vimeo.com/140174738>

<https://vimeo.com/140169783>

---

## Q&A: 'Ministers: we accept equality'. What are your thoughts?

**Clara** asks (on my facebook wall): *I read an interesting article today titled, 'Ministers take aim at religious extremists: we accept equality'. Wondered your thoughts on this issue.*



The article that Clara refers to is this: <http://www.news.com.au/national-news/federal-election/ministers-take-aim-at-religious-extremists-we-accept-equality/story-fnho52ip-1226676430143>

The signatories to the letter referred to in the article can be found here: <http://www.australianmarriageequality.com/wp/2012/04/04/42-multi-faith-clergy-call-for-marriage-equality/>

The letter is actually quite old (April 2012). The fact that it is being raised in July 2013 as a rhetorical riposte to ACL

attacks on Kevin Rudd is symptomatic of how these things get used as political footballs: “Christians talking against gay marriage? Well, here’s our Christians talking about gay marriage and they support us!” There’s nothing particularly wrong with that, that’s one of the reasons the letter was written in the first place I’m sure.

So what are my thoughts? Nothing profound really.

This not a surprise. The signatories to the letter are mostly your left-leaning Anglicans and Unitings with the odd Baptist and so forth. Nothing unexpected. We could talk about how representative these leaders are of the Christian populace and the fact that they generally belong to the parts of the church that are in decline, but whatever, that isn’t the point.

For me the two interesting things are this:

**1) Firstly:** Christians must demonstrate that their views are Christian.

I’m not saying that these leaders aren’t Christian. What I am saying is that it is not enough to say “I’m a Christian and I support SSM.” They need to articulate and demonstrate the connections between the Christian philosophy and the SSM agenda and why they are congruous and supportive of one another. This is how you give your support substance and weight.

It is particularly so when you have signatories from a wide range of faith positions (including non-Christian) – what philosophical ground, that is common and not antagonistic to the positions held, is being used to espouse the opinion? Without that it’s not much more than a rather small petition.

From what I can see of the text of the letter (not easily accessible as far as I can see, even through the AME website) this hasn’t been done. The two texts I do have are this excerpt:

*“As clergy from various different faiths and denominations in Australia, we believe marriage is a fundamental institution in our society. It fosters greater commitment between partners, provides children with a sense of security and stability, and strengthens ties with families and communities. Marriage is a blessing to be shared, so we encourage people of faith who support marriage equality to voice their support for the reform by responding to the House of Representatives inquiry on same-sex marriage today.”*

This isn't much more than the “marriage is a blessing” and “blessing should be shared” argument. Which says nothing at all really. None of us will disagree on the blessing of marriage. What we do disagree on is the characteristics of marriage which inform and construct and advance that blessing.

Rowland Croucher (say it ain't so Rowland!) is the other text which does inform this a bit:

*“How can I, a heterosexual who's been very happily married for 50 years, tell anyone else they don't have the right to form a loving, committed, lifelong union and enjoy the fruits of marriage as I have done?” wrote Reverend Dr Rowland Croucher, from John Mark Ministries, Victoria. “Marriage is not a club to be restricted to some. Like the Gospel, it is a blessing to be shared.”*

And at least he gives some reasoning, albeit thin. Here Dr. Croucher connects “marriage” to the inclusivity of the gospel. Which has some merit, because the gospel is inclusive.

(The “how can I tell anyone else line” is rhetorical fluff because it doesn't speak to the core issue of what marriage actually is, just to the fact that whatever it is it cannot be arbitrarily restricted – we all agree with that.)

Now this is all great, but as Christian leaders, these people need to present a clear and coherent connection between a Christian framework and their position. I won't reiterate all that here, but the sorts of questions that go unanswered by Croucher et al. include clear rebuttals "OK, Rowland, but the Gospel is also exclusive (Christ alone) and calls for a surrender of one's whole life (including sexual activity, both heterosexual and homosexual), how do you coincide these Christian truths with your statement about marriage?" And also fundamental questions of epistemology, Scriptural affirmations of the connection of marriage with the created order and so on.

In other words (and this speaks to why marriage is so contentious), our understanding of marriage derives from the full sweep of Christian philosophy. If you're going to talk about this you need to demonstrate coherence across the whole. These signatories haven't done this.

**2) Secondly:** "Christian" is not a badge. It's used that way by revisionists all the time who think in terms of "attributes" and "minorities."

Religion has become an "attribute" of a person, not a voluntary and adopted wholistic framework for life. Therefore if you can demonstrate that one "Christian" agrees with you, you can assert that there is no reason why someone else wearing that badge shouldn't also.

This is an insipid and patronising understanding of how religion and worldviews work. The badges don't matter, it's the substance that counts. The people that don't support SSM have good reasons for not doing so. It's not enough to throw their badge back at them, you actually have to deal with their reasonings and demonstrate their unreasonableness.

**To conclude.** What are my thoughts? Nothing unexpected, just another demonstration of the insipidness that tends to

dominate this debate.

---

## **Q&A: Why do we need a “Marriage Act” at all?**

Thanks for the question, which I assume derives from an article on my blog ( <http://god-s-will.blogspot.com/2010/09/asking-right-question-in-marriage.html> ). Caveat: These are initial thoughts only.

The fundamental question to ask is whether or not we want marriage law to be passive or active. The passive sense of law is to reflect society – to enact or provide a legal model that encapsulates societal reality and allows for legally guided (and bound) interactions between members of society according to those reflected norms. The active sense of law is to guide, shape or even control society – to provide rights, assert responsibilities, and enable punitive measures in order to modify behaviour or shape cultural norms.

FLOW OF THOUGHT #1 – We need something in the passive sense, to reflect society.

---

The problem is that if we look at society I don't think this “something” is the Marriage Act. In particular, it is not the concept encapsulated in the Marriage Act that is the “solemnisation” of a marriage.

Solemnisation is not just about something being solemn or heartfelt. Legally speaking we can consider it to be a “formality necessary to validate a deed, act, contract.” I guess its much like the settlement on a house – something

happens when the keys are exchanged. It is not wrong to think of a solemnified marriage as an enacted contract then, in two senses:

a) A contract between the parties. Entering into marriage implies (as is recognised in law) a whole bunch of rights and responsibilities. These only usually come into play when a marriage ends (e.g. inheritance rights) or breaks down and where some form of reparation for obligations-not-met are required – alimony, custody of children, separation of assets etc.

b) A contract with society. Entering into marriage implies a legal state that is recognised and taken into account when it comes to affairs external to the couple – everything from taxation, social welfare, interaction with the education system, issues relating to privacy, issues relating to next-of-kin, and (topically for NSW at the moment) the adoption of children etc. – all take into account (to a greater or lesser extent) the existence, or not, of a marriage contract.

But solemnisation, legally speaking, is becoming more and more meaningless. For instance, the “common law” or “de facto” marriage, is now pretty much taken as an implied contract even though it has never been “solemnified.” This is true in both sense of the contract. As a contract between the parties the implications of a relationship breakdown financially and in terms of children etc. is now pretty much identical to that of “real” marriages. Similarly, as a contract with society, there is very little distinction made between solemnified and registered marriages, and de facto situations.

To a lesser extent, the advent of “civil unions” or the ability in some jurisdictions to register a same-sex relationship, also provides the rights of the contract without the solemnisation of a marriage. This is particularly the case in the sense of the contract between the partners (shared property rights etc.), yet increasingly so in the sense of the

contract with society (availability of the privilege to adopt etc.)

As the distinctiveness of solemnised marriage is reduced, so is its value.

Solemnisation alone, therefore, provides very few things, legally, that are not provided for by other means. Perhaps this is simplistic, but the only thing you can get via legally solemnised marriage that you can't get anywhere else is:

a) Convenience. Sign four or five pieces of paper and you have the legal recognition of your relationship in a few easy steps. More importantly: your relationship can be enacted by proclamation (we are now married) rather than by demonstration (we are cohabiting, so consider us married).

b) Cross-recognition. Generally speaking (and less uniquely now that there is provision for cross-recognition of civil unions), a legal marriage in one jurisdiction is recognised in another.

c) Symbolism – you get to refer to your relationship, unquestioningly, as a “marriage” and have the certificate to prove it.

And none of these things are inherent to any deeper concept of “marriage.”

Personally, I would, for instance, and for some good theological reasons (for another time), define a marriage relationship as: a faithful, sexual, lifelong relationship between a man and a woman in a covenant freely entered before God, each other and the community. If any of those characteristics were not present a relationship would not easily be classified as a marriage in my thinking.

Legal solemnisation is not needed for any of these characteristics to exist. It is not even needed for a relationship with these characteristics to be legally recognised (although it is a possible way in which that legal



recognition can occur).

So why have legal solemnisation at all? Let relationships be formed either by behaviour or voiced intention or religious rite and then them recognised as legal by registering them. Let the legal reality be a \_recognition\_ of relationship rather than the creation of the relationship. Let marriage (defined by man-and-woman) be, legally, simply one form of recognised civil union (defined more broadly as the case may be – including non-sexual relationships).

After all, that is, in practice, what we have now. And if we are looking at representing reality, let us represent it.

Freedom can still be exercised. Ministers of Religion would, just like now, be able to lead people through religious rites – to solemnify spiritually – and exercise their conscience and religious freedom as to who they would do this for and who they wouldn't do it for. Relationships covenanted within those rites would be able to be registered and recognised legally. All is well.

The debate about what gets to be called “marriage” therefore becomes what it actually is – a cultural debate about definitions and nomenclature.

However,

FLOW OF THOUGHT #2 – Do we need something in the active sense, to shape society?

---

Starting with my definition of the characteristics of marriage – a faithful, sexual, lifelong relationship between a man and a woman in a covenant freely entered before God, each other and the community. Is it possible to ensure that the legal representation of marriage reflects that definition?

Only partially, but substantially. Solemnisation, with any

effect, can only insist on the objective characteristics of a relationship – that it is a covenant freely entered before the civic community, and that it is between a “man and a woman.”

The debate is about whether to reduce the restriction of this latter characteristic to “between two people.” Some would even like to see the characteristic further liberalise to recognise polyamory – i.e. more than two people.

The fact that the law is resistant to change in this characterisation of marriage is itself a “shaping of society.” The law is active. And there is value to that.

The problem is that it is only active in a shallow sense. If the legal affirmation of marriage will only extend to the depths to which solemnisation under the marriage act extends then this is not very far because the activity of solemnisation is of lessening practical effect (see previous flow of thought). It confers fewer and fewer particular rights and the choice to not seek legal solemnisation of a relationship carries less and less penalty.

Those who are intent on marriage law maintaining a particular objective definition of marriage need to not only argue for the retention of that definition but also consider the extent of its enforceability. Their needs to be an increased discussion of how the law can actively assert that definition. The argument needs to not just be about what legal marriage is but what legal marriage does – what unique rights does it bestow? What things are unavailable to those who do not avail themselves of legal marriage? What penalties apply where a marriage covenant is broken?

The question becomes: where do we draw the line as to what the law should do?

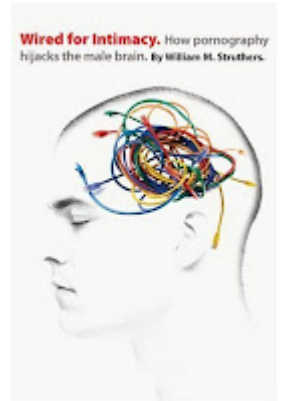
Which is where I’ll leave it – unanswered for now.

Originally: <http://www.formspring.me/briggswill/q/1093895321>

---

# Review: Wired for Intimacy

William Struthers' *Wired for Intimacy: How pornography hijacks the male brain* is one of those books that can only be reviewed in comparison. In this case to Allan Meyer's *From Good Man to Valiant Man*. Both books deal with the topic of sexual integrity in men. Both books take a holistic approach – dealing with pornography and sexual addiction as a combined spiritual, psychological, and *neurological* issue. This approach, in both books, is a very helpful one as it allows men to get a handle on the real value and tangible outcome of what it means to discipline oneself and take every thought captive.



Struthers is better than Meyers' in a number of areas. As a professor of psychology and a lecturer in behavioural neuroscience he is certainly more qualified when it comes to unpacking how negative neurological pathways are built up and then reinforced by pornographic habits.

*“This is how a pornography addiction and sexual compulsion is built from scratch. It involves the visual system.. the motor system... the sensory system... and neurological effects of orgasm (sexual euphoria from opiates, addictive dopamine in the nucleus accumbens and reduced fear in the amygdale). They have now begun to store this pattern as a reinforced neurological habit.” (Page 99)*

His applied theology is also better. His chapters on masculinity (“Made male in God’s image” and “Masculinity”) are a more helpful exploration than Meyer’s eisegetic four-faces

ox-lion-eagle-man imagery.

But when it comes down to the “so what do I do with it?” question – this is where Struthers is weak and where Meyers’ pastoral and discipling heart shows its strength. For instance Struthers’ dealing with masturbation begins with the pastoral equivalent of “don’t do it or you’ll go blind”

*“Men who compulsively masturbate (more than 2-3 times a week) can suffer from depression, memory problems, lack of focus, concentration problems, fatigue, back pain, decreased erections, premature ejaculation, and pelvic or testicular pain” (Page 169) [I wonder if the same is said of men who have sex more than 2-3 times per week?]*

And while he does move beyond this it is mostly description rather than prescription of help. This is typical throughout the book.

So in the end, go to Struthers for a better understanding, go to Meyers for some thoughts as to how to help someone (or yourself). Would love to see the book that merges the strengths of both.



---

## Review: Not Under Bondage

Barbara Roberts' book is subtitled "Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery & Desertion." It is a thorough consideration of how issues surrounding divorce and remarriage are handled by Scripture. While there is a definite pastoral aspect to this book (Roberts herself has been through an abusive marriage) it's main approach is *exegetical*. After setting the scene, and summarising her conclusions and where she is coming from, Roberts makes a decent consideration of relevant Pauline (1 Corinthians 7 in particular) and Old Testament passages as well as unpacking the teaching of Jesus.



The questions are clear: What are the Biblical grounds for divorce? And, if divorce is allowed, is remarriage also allowed? She helpfully puts forward the key concepts at the beginning of the book:

- *The Bible distinguishes between "treacherous divorce" and "disciplinary divorce".*
- *Disciplinary divorce is permitted by the Bible. This applies in cases of abuse, adultery or desertion, where a seriously mistreated spouse divorces a seriously offending spouse.*
- *Treacherous divorce is condemned by the Bible. It occurs when a spouse obtains divorce for reasons other than abuse, adultery or desertion.*
- *If the offending partner was sexually immoral, the Bible allows the non-offending partner to remarry.*
- *If the offending partner was abused, deserted or unjustly dismissed the other, and the offender has been judged to be "as an unbeliever", the Bible allows the mistreated partner to remarry.*

By taking an exegetical approach Roberts is providing a service to victims of abuse who tend, often as a consequence

of their abuse, to be “better at understanding the *letter* of God’s Word than they are at interpreting general principles from scripture.” (Page 37, emphasis mine). Here there is assistance to those who are vulnerable to being on the receiving end of scripture misapplied cruelly and abusively.

Coming to this book from a pastoral point of view I was encouraged by some of her conclusions. For instance, in general, the principle that “it is impossible to tell a victim that she ought to leave or stay at any particular juncture – the decision when or whether to leave must be left to each victim... all we can do is lay out the biblical principles that permit separation and help the victim to assess the discernible risk factors, leaving the ultimate choice to her.” (Page 43) When people come for answers what they often really looking for is empowerment, freedom to choose the right thing.

The main food for thought for me was her consideration of 1 Corinthians 7. In particular, a key plank in her “abuse is grounds for divorce” argument rests on firstly, the equating of the abuser with being an “unbeliever” who has left (or has brought a separation to the marriage – see Page 48) , and secondly, the necessity for church discipline to determine whether the abusing party is “acting as an unbeliever.” The exegesis may need some strengthening in parts but I do not think this is an invalid application of a difficult text. It certainly aligns with her aim of allowing *all* of Scripture to speak – a harmonizing of Moses, Jesus and Paul (Page 108), if you like.

This part, and the rest of the book, certainly gels with my experience (and myriad mistakes) in engaging with people who are facing marital breakdown. I think evangelical considerations of marriage often take an overly-sacramental view that inappropriately elevates the covenantal bond to something eternal and unbreakable. My analogy is that in marriage a new “unit” is formed (the couple in unity) – it is valuable, like a person. It should not be harmed, but can be

harm, it should not be killed, but can be killed. Roberts unpacks how the Bible affirms the value of marriage in the strongest possible way, without becoming separated from the reality that marriage covenants are broken.

Roberts' insistence on church discipline should not be ignored. Yet, for me, it is the most difficult of her exhortations. Not because I disagree with her in the principle of it – but overwhelmed by the practice of it. So often it is incredibly difficult to find out what the truth is behind a marriage breakdown: who is the abuser, who is not? is the marriage sick, or just broken? is what the person saying a true expression of victimhood or manipulative lie? Roberts would do well to expand on *how* church leadership may go about exercising the judgement it needs to exercise.

For those trapped in abuse – particular those who are or have experienced religious justifications for that abuse – this book is invaluable. For those expected to give Biblically-grounded advice, this book is a must-read. I by-and-large agree with Roberts' principles but they need careful application wrapped in a cry to God for wisdom.



---

## Review: Pure Sex

Unlike recent books on sex that I have read, which are based on psychology and some mild theology, *Pure Sex*, by Sydney Anglican stalwarts Tony Payne and Phillip Jensen is a solid historical and doctrinal look at the topic.



The negatives first. Firstly, it seems a bit dated – concentrating more on newspaper commentary more than the more relevant new media for instance – but we might forgive that as it was written in 1998 when it was still fine to refer to The Internet with breathless capitalisation. Secondly, it reads like an article in *The Briefing*. Again this is unsurprising as the authors are regular TB contributors. But it means that it reads like a stale academic essay being read by Kel Richards (“you may think dear reader” on page 93, groan) and covers the soft inner heart of application in half a mile of doctrinal concrete.

But these are just stylistic complaints. The content is basically fine stuff that by and large sums up my own thoughts on sexuality and helped me consider some different ways of articulating it. The second and third chapters are the best.

The second chapter is entitled “the search for nudity” and unpacks the beauty and bounds of sexuality in the Bible extremely well. Introducing the concept of nudity-without-shame that is part of God’s good creation we read:

*“How do we hope that our lives will be better because of sex? Is it a case of simply accumulating orgasms, and the one who has had the most when he dies wins? Or is there more to it than that? What do we really want from sex?*

*“It could be the answer is nudity.*

*“Is it possible that what we really want is a relationship not simply of physical nakedness and pleasure, but of deep*



*personal nakedness as well?” (Page 18)*

I found one of those gem-phrases of wisdom in this chapter: “Once a sexual relationship has begun, it cannot be ended without grief.” (Page 30)

The third chapter is entitled “A brief history of sex” and unpacks some of the historical framework for the sexual revolution of the 1960s. I learned a lot here – particularly about the nature of Victorian moralism and the Freudian basis for the strangely axiomatic notion that repression of sexual expression is inherently neurotic.

*“As this brief history has tried to demonstrate, the sexual revolution of the last 30 years has been a long time in the making... It was there [in the Victorian era] that the fuse was lit. Freud, Mead, Russell and Kinesy all played their part... It was in the mid-60’s, when the conditions were right, that the bomb went off.” (Page 45)*

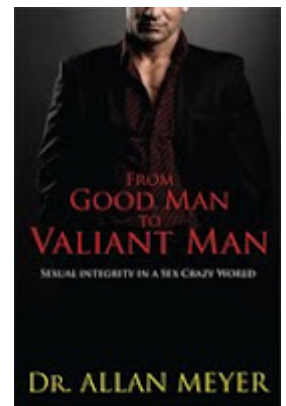
There are other things worthy of mention. The failure to talk about masturbation (apart from a wave off on Page 98) is unhelpful. The consideration of singleness in chapter 7 is very helpful. The appendix on homosexuality is a good overview. And why shouldn’t they throw in a Two Ways to Live?

The book is short and to the point. If a person is enquiring, seeking, willing to unpack and engage then this book would be a valuable resource. Pastorally, this is a tool, not a substitute. There is very little (beyond the essential turn-to-Jesus gospel) by way of specific application and words of wisdom from other places would be needed. In this way they have not quite totally achieved their aim of having something to say, in practical terms, other than “Don’t” (Page 16). But it’s good foundational stuff and a worthy read.

---

# Review: From Good Man to Valiant Man

We use some of the Careforce Lifekeys courses in our church. They are a useful tool for discipleship and the promotion of a practical spiritual engagement with real life. *From Good Man to Valiant Man* has been written by Careforce's Allan Meyer and is closely tied to the "Valiant Man" Lifekeys course which concentrates on the sexual discipleship of men.



The sub-title of the book says it all: the aim of both course and book is to promote "Sexual integrity in a sex crazy world."

The discipling of the sexual man is a topic gaining significant ground in recent times. Driscoll's *Porn-Again Christian* is an obvious example of someone unafraid to deal with issues surrounding sexuality and holiness and robustly calls men to responsibility. I also recently scanned through a Tim Challies ebook called *Sexual Detox* that covers very similar ground to Meyer albeit less thoroughly. Tellingly, both Driscoll and Challies provide their material freely online where it can be of the best use. Meyer doesn't but that does not prevent his book from being a worthy contribution.

The framework of the book is, unsurprisingly, shaped around the Lifekeys course structure – inviting people to discover the blessing of recovery by entering the "arena of healing" (Page 38). While the related exegesis of the beatitudes may be weak, the application of the "eight attitudes" of humility, emotional honesty, teachability, proactivity, forgiveness,

pure motive, healing love, and courage is helpful. It means that the substantial topic can be approached from the point of view of a man as a man – not a man within distracting contexts of relationship fraught with the tendency to blameshift.

Meyer makes the framework specific in two ways. Firstly, through a metaphor for masculinity which is, once again exegetically weak but practically useful. This metaphor is the four faces of a man as an “ox” (provider), “lion” (protector), “eagle” (spiritual leader), and man (sexual, physical person). The fundamental thrust is to promote masculinity as servant-heartedness and self-sacrifice – for instance the basis of headship in a marriage relationship is boiled down to “you die first.” (Page 23).

Secondly, and much more usefully, Meyer unpacks the physical, psychological and neurological aspects of masculine sexuality.

He describes the chemical mechanics of sexual development and physical attraction and makes the most valuable point of the entire book: **“You renew your mind biologically not just spiritually”** (Page 175). This shows how the task of holiness and goodness is so clearly a masculine endeavour – earthy, practical, not a task relegated to the effeminately, ethereally spiritual. Neural pathways built from years of fantasy, pornography and masturbation can be retrained and bypassed by those willing to walk that path.

*Retraining the brain requires that you deliberately judge your thought patterns, build an off-ramp, and take your thoughts to godly places.” (Page 179)*

This is a call to holiness in grace not shame – an exhortation, a championing for men to succeed in sexual purity and so find the blessing of right-living in themselves and the ones close to them. It is helpful.

Other aspects are less robust. The “ewe-lamb principle” (Page 146) which encourages a husband to consider their wife in

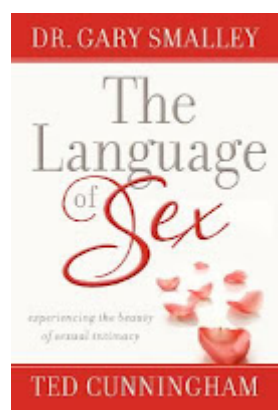
terms of the 2 Samuel 12 parable of a “ewe-lamb” in need of their tender protection is not necessarily invalid, but it doesn’t avoid paternalism and doesn’t interact with the reality of diverse personalities. How would a phlegmatic man married to a choleric wife apply this principle? Our wives are not children in need of father, but women in need of a godly husband.

This book obviously derives from years of experience as a man and a pastor and from a wealth of research and pastoral care. The content is practical and educational. It will need to be unpacked for some – but that’s our job. I will be using many of the principles in this book in my own discipleship and in the discipling of others.



---

## Review: The Language of Sex



One of the increasingly frequent tasks I have in a growing church is the need to lead engaged couples through preparation for marriage. I find it useful to be on the look out for better resources and fresh input and insight – and find the benefit to Gill’s and my own relationship a blessed side-effect.

When it comes to books the stock-standard resource we use has been Gary Chapman’s *Five Love Languages*. I will now be adding Smalley & Cunningham’s *The Language of Sex* to the pile of “recommended’s” and have some on hand to give away when appropriate.

There’s a whole bunch of Christian pop-pysch “improve your sex

life” books going around at the moment. Most of them can’t seem to get away from some sort of giggle-factor adolescent “married Christians are allowed to be naughty” type shallowness. I find Leman’s *Sheet Music* to be a bit like this and of little value. They often read like a breathless over-eagerness to catch up with the sex of the ’90’s presuming (and wrongly so, most twentysomething Christians don’t need to be told, yet again, of the non-proscription of oral sex) that Christians are still repressed in the ’50’s. And for those who are genuinely struggling there is often a tantalising picture of marital sexual freedom painted with little help provided or light shed to actually help them get there.

Smalley and Cunningham’s book is different. It takes an appropriately long time to get to issues such as technique and sexual education – and even then only covers them relatively briefly. In their own words, they explain:

*“You’ll notice that this chapter about creativity [in sex] is not near the front of the book. That’s on purpose. The foundation of honor, security and intimacy is the bedrock on which to build creativity. One reason affairs get started is because individuals are looking for “greener grass.” Greener grass deceives you into believing that you must go outside the marriage to experience greater heights of sexual intimacy, without all the responsibility. That’s simply not true.” (page 147)*

Their key framework is their “formula”:

**Honour → Security → Intimacy → Sex**

*“... honor creates security. Security creates intimacy. And intimacy sets the stage for great sex. The truth is that you cannot have great sex without honor and an open spirit.” (page 16)*

And so they spend the bulk of the time effectively and usefully teaching the readers to build honour, security and intimacy into their marriage before they get to the “sex ed” detail. The path to sexual fulfillment is through investing in the other person and in relationship – and that’s where they concentrate their teaching.

Much of it is common sense. But it is usefully constructed and presented common sense. It makes the book a useful tool for helping get past the presenting issue to the *actual* issue. It is advice that, while not exhaustive, is followable and practical and solidly cognisant of the realities of Christian growth and the difficulties and stumbles that often come on the road of maturation.

Some of those who are significantly struggling or facing overwhelming abuse-recovery or addictive behaviour issues will quickly reach the end of what this book has to offer. Yet, even then, I could see the material providing a “way in” to understand and so be an effective stepping stone on the path to finding necessary help.

I found this book to be biblical, gentle, and real. Recommended.



---

## Review: The Single Issue



Al Hsu's *The Single Issue* should have been called "The Person Issue." It is a book that is meant to be about singleness – it certainly is that – but it so well-handles the issue that it provides an excellent insight into life itself, the place of relationships, community, marriage, celibacy and God-given identity. Without realising it, I think Al Hsu's has provided an excellent work on the spiritual disciplines of life – no matter what your marital status.

I was lent the book by a friend of mine as a means of preparing for our current sermon series on "Money, Sex, Power." There is plenty of material on sex and sexuality (consider my previous review of the book *Sacred Sex*) and its expression in married life. What material out there affirms both sex and singleness without seeing them as uncomfortable guests in an awkward conversation? A lot of writers are condescending at best and deluded at worst when it comes to commentary on sexuality and singleness. Al Hsu brings a contribution that is biblical, meaningful, applicable, and delightful.

Hsu recognises that there is an overemphasis on married life in the church and a misplaced ideal. The church's response to the sexual liberation of the 20th century has meant an idealisation of the nuclear family – and the Christian single person comes under a significant amount of pressure and expectation to marry and fit into that ideal. But Hsu asks:

*"Is there an alternative to all this? Can Christian singles find a positive view of singleness that moves beyond traditional expectations and stereotypes? However one might classify or categorize today's singles, several things are clear. One is that singleness itself does not determine a particular lifestyle... More significant is our attitude towards being single and how we choose to live as singles."*

*“To that end, singles are asking many questions. ‘Am I to be single for ever, or will I eventually marry?’ ‘What is God’s will for my life as a single person?’ ‘How do I satisfy my needs for companionship and relationship?’ ‘What is my identity in a world of married couples?’” (p28-29)*

And so Hsu does a fantastic job of unpacking singleness – it’s history (chapter 2) and biblical expression – and the many misconceptions concerning it. For instance, “the significance of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19 is that it affirms that *single persons are no less whole people for lack of marriage*, in contrast to Jewish thought.” (p35) Later on he uncovers the incorrect Greek mythology of “soul partner” that lies behind the prevalent thought in Western culture that “each one of us is an incomplete half searching for the perfect other half who will make us whole. This belief runs completely counter to biblical teaching.” (p76)

He also does well to unpack the issue of God’s will when it comes to marriage – not just the general will of God but the particular will that causes people to perhaps even blame God for the lack of a partner. In this regard he gives an excellent exegetical exposition of the concept of the “gift of singleness.”

*“... the ‘gift of singleness’ is not something that must be spiritually discerned or subjectively felt. Singles do not need to search their hearts to see if they are truly able to live as contented singles. It is not some supernatural empowerment for some function of ministry. Rather, the gift is a description of an objective status. If you are single, then you have the gift of singleness. If you are married, you don’t. If you marry, you exchange the gift of singleness for the gift of marriedness. Both are good. Simple as that.” (p61)*

He then affirms how singleness is indeed a gift – providing



freedoms and opportunities that are not available to the married person. And I love how he demonstrates how holy singleness expresses God's love just as much as holy matrimony:

*"By not having a spouse, a single person is free to build many relationships with many people. In this way, the single adult is an example of the fact that God loves all people, not just a few. While married Christians emulate God's exclusive love, single Christians demonstrate God's non-exclusive love." (p98)*

The two chapters of the book that have the most broad applicability are the chapters entitle "From loneliness to solitude" and "From aloneness to community." These are chapters that unpack and help us not just with our marital status but with our *humanity*. There is much depth to these chapters and a constant drawing of a person to live their life for God in the *kairos* (time/opportunity) of the present. A summary seems trite, but it gives the broad idea – "Fellowship with God is the solution for loneliness. Companionship with fellow Christians is the cure for aloneness." (p138)

Finally Hsu touches on the issue of sex and sexuality. He does not waiver from the biblical view of marriage being the only place for sexual intercourse. But he is never negative. Here we have pure sweetness of beautiful, counter-cultural truths. "Sex is a drive, not a need," (p173) he asserts. "It is no higher calling for singles to be celibate than for married couples to be monogamous." (p177) Celibacy is not a denying of sexuality, rather celibate people are "fully aware of themselves as sexual beings but who express their sexuality in a celibate way." (p178)

Even here the application is not just for singles – but for all those who struggle to express sexuality in a godly way. The world cries out for us to express our every whim –

whatever comes “naturally.” But as Hsu asserts:

*“The answer to this point of view is to recognize that the Christian life is rarely ‘natural.’ Far from it. It is not natural to love your neighbour, or to turn the other cheek, or to forgive someone who has wronged you. In the same way, resisting sexual temptation – or any kind of temptation – is not the ‘natural’ thing to do.”(p183)*

And applies:

*“Instead of fighting an endless and losing battles against sexual temptations, a more constructive approach for Christian singles [and I would add married people as well] is to come to view sexual temptations as an affirmation of our identity as sexual beings – and also as a reminder of our dependence on God.” (p180)*

This is an excellent book. I have a couple of small quibbles - I think he overemphasises advice for people to wait for a while before they get married – I can see his point, yet I cheer for young people in their early twenties (even late teens) who are willing to step up to the plate of commitment – for that is also counter-cultural. But this book is a good read – especially for singles, and those who are struggling with their singleness – but this book would be a benefit for anyone seeking to engage with the deep things of life.

