

The Rape of Solomon's Song, Part 1

Code: A396

(By John MacArthur)

Apparently the shortest route to *relevance* in church ministry right now is for the pastor to talk about sex in garishly explicit terms during the Sunday morning service. If he can shock parishioners with crude words and sophomoric humor, so much the better. The defenders of this trend solemnly inform us that without such a strategy it is well-nigh impossible to connect with today's "culture." (In contemporary evangelicalism that term has become a convenient label for just about everything that is *uncultured* and *uncouth*.)

Sermons about sex have suddenly become a bigger fad in the evangelical world than the prayer of Jabez ever was. Everywhere, it seems, churches are featuring special series on the subject. Some of them advertise with suggestive billboards purposely designed to offend their communities' conservative sensibilities.

Quite a few pastors have earned widespread media coverage by issuing "sex challenges" to church members. These are schemes that make daily sex obligatory for married couples over a specified time—usually between seven and forty days. (How people are made accountable for this is a question I'm afraid to raise.)

I would be the last to suggest that preachers should totally avoid the topic of sex. Scripture has quite a lot to say about the subject, starting with God's first words to Adam and Eve ("Be fruitful and multiply"—Genesis 1:22). God's law has numerous commands that govern sexual behavior, and the New Testament repeatedly reaffirms the Old Testament standard of sexual purity. Finally, in the closing chapters of Scripture we are told that sexually immoral people will be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 21:8). So there's simply no way to preach the whole counsel of God without mentioning sex.

But the language Scripture employs when dealing with the physical relationship between husband and wife is always careful—often plain, sometimes poetic, usually delicate, frequently muted by euphemisms, and *never* fully explicit. There is no hint of sophomoric lewdness in the Bible, even when the prophet's clear purpose is to shock (such as when Ezekiel 23:20 likens Israel's apostasy to an act of gross fornication motivated by the lust of bestiality). When an act of adultery is part of the narrative (such as David's sin with Bathsheba), it is never described in way that would gratify a lascivious imagination or arouse lustful thoughts.

The message of Scripture regarding sex is simple and consistent throughout: total physical intimacy within marriage is pure and ought to be enjoyed (Hebrews 13:4); but remove the marriage covenant from the equation and all sexual activity (including that which occurs only in the imagination) is nothing but fornication, a serious sin that is especially defiling and shameful—so much so that merely *talking* about it inappropriately is a disgrace (Ephesians 5:12).

Above all, Scripture never stoops to the lurid level of contemporary sex education. The Bible has no counterpart to the Hindu *Kama Sutra* (an ancient Sanskrit sex manual supposedly transmitted by Hindu deities.) Nothing in Scripture gives any vivid how-to instructions regarding the physical relationship within marriage.

That includes the Song of Solomon.

In fact, Solomon's love-poem epitomizes the exact opposite approach. It is, of course, a lengthy poem about courtship and marital love. It is filled with euphemisms and word pictures. Its whole point is gently, subtly, and elegantly to express the emotional and physical intimacy of marital love—in language suitable for *any* audience.

But it has become popular in certain circles to employ extremely graphic descriptions of physical intimacy as a way of expounding on the euphemisms in Solomon's poem. As this trend develops, each new speaker seems to find something more shocking in the metaphors than any of his predecessors ever imagined.

Thus we are told that the Shulammitte's poetic language invoking the delights of an apple tree (Song 2:3) is a metaphor for oral sex. The comfort and delight of a simple embrace (2:6) is not what it seems to be at all. Apparently it's impossible to describe what that verse *really* means without mentioning certain unmentionable body parts.

We're assured moreover that the shocking hidden meanings of these texts aren't merely *descriptive*; they are *prescriptive*. The secret *gnosis* of Solomon's Song portray obligatory acts wives must do if this is what satisfies their husbands, regardless of the wife's own desire or conscience. I was recently given a recording of one of these messages, where the speaker said, "Ladies, let me assure you of this: if you think you're being dirty, he's pretty happy."

Such pronouncements are usually made amid raucous laughter, but evidently we are expected to take them seriously. When the laughter died away, that speaker added, "Jesus Christ *commands* you to do this."

That approach is not exegesis; it is exploitation. It is contrary to the literary style of the book itself. It is spiritually tantamount to an act of rape. It tears the beautiful poetic dress off Song of Solomon, strips that portion of Scripture of its dignity, and holds it up to be laughed at and leered at in a carnal way.

Mark Driscoll has boldly led the parade down this carnal path. He is by far the best-known and most prolific popular proponent of handling the Song of Solomon that way. He has said repeatedly that this is his favorite passage of Scripture, and he has come back to it again and again in recent years, culminating in a highly publicized series released on video via the Internet last year.

I keep encountering young pastors who are now following that same example, and I'm rather surprised that the trend has been so well received in the church with practically no significant critics raising any serious objections. So we're going to analyze and critique this approach to Song of Solomon over the next couple of days, including a look at some specific examples where the line of propriety has clearly been breached.

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