**Grace to You** :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

**The Rape of Solomon's Song, Part 4**
Code: A399

*(By John MacArthur)*

Before we close this brief series, I promised to answer as many questions as possible from people who have commented here, via e-mail, through Twitter, and at Challies.com.

I first want to thank Tim Challies for his courage in hosting a discussion about this topic. The very mention of propriety and language obviously stirs contemporary evangelical passions—and not necessarily in a way that is helpful. It's not easy to find forums on the Internet where such a volatile matter can be openly discussed with profit. And because of some of the very problems this series has addressed, even Christian forums aren't always safe havens from profanity and grossly carnal behavior. I'm grateful to Tim for sponsoring a more dignified level of dialogue.

I resounded with the utter shock Tim expressed when he was exposed to some of the material from Driscoll's Scotland sermon (the message that sparked this blog series). After reading some of Driscoll's outrageous statements, Tim reacted the way any pure-minded Christian would react:

I have a real problem with anyone interpreting Song of Solomon like that . . . . To be honest, words fail me when I even try to explain myself—when I try to explain how I just cannot even conceive of Song of Solomon like that. The poetic nature of the Song is entirely eroded when we assign such meaning to it: such specific meaning. And I think as well of what it may do to a couple to be able to say "Look, this *specific* sex act is mandated in Scripture. So let's do it." That may be said to a spouse who has no desire to do that act or who even finds it distasteful. And yet with our interpretation of Song of Solomon, which we really have no way of *proving* (at least beyond a reasonable doubt) we are potentially bludgeoning an unwilling partner into doing something. I just … again, words really fail me here.

Tim, you were right to be shocked. The most shocking thing to me is that some people do not seem to be shocked at all. What would easily receive an NC-17 rating by the world is being heralded and defended by some in the church.

I should explain that I don't use the Internet directly; I don't even own a computer or have an Internet connection in my home. I'm totally dependent on staff and pastoral interns who print material that I need to read and make sure I get it.

So for those who perhaps expected that I would interact with their comments in real time on the blog, I simply have no easy means of doing that. I scan comments when I receive them—which usually isn't until the next day—but I cannot answer blog-comments directly, nor would I be able to devote my time to Internet forums even if I were connected.

But I do want to take this opportunity to reply to the most frequently asked questions from the past few days. Virtually all the questions and criticisms that have been raised can be grouped in two categories. A few are questions and observations about the proper interpretation of Song of Solomon. Virtually all the rest have to do with my criticism of Mark Driscoll.

I'll answer several questions from the first category, and summarize my answers to the second category in two final answers.

* * * * *

**1. Can we "give the sense," when we preach poetry without doing, verse-by-verse, precept-by-precept exposition? Or is it better to just leave it "carefully veiled," as MacArthur writes?**

The question misconstrues what I said. I have never suggested that the clear meaning of any text ought to be "carefully veiled." I pointed out that some things in Scripture *are* carefully veiled, and we should not impose our own speculative interpretations on them.

In other words, I'm urging pastors to deal with what the text says, and steer clear of imposing gnostic-style secret meanings on ideas that are deliberately left obscure or totally hidden by the Holy Spirit.

I'm saying nothing more than I would say about speculative interpretations of *any* part of Scripture: it's unwise. No, it’s seriously *dangerous*. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us . . . " (Deut. 29:29).

I'm also saying that the way the Spirit discussed the holy intimacy and privacy of marital love is antithetical to the sort of crass, graphic pseudo-interpretations some contemporary evangelicals seem to crave.

* * * * *

**2. Song of Solomon is a very explicit erotic book. How can you possibly argue that this book of the Bible, which is God's Holy Word, is anything but "fully explicit"? Isn't it a denial of the obvious to claim that the Song of Solomon is not a pretty graphic description of sex?**

explicit -- *ek  SPLIS  it* -- Distinctly expressing all that is meant; leaving nothing merely implied or suggested; unambiguous

Since there is not one explicit mention of a reproductive body part or sexual act in Song of Solomon, no credible commentator on the Song would ever make such a claim about that book. Furthermore (and this is the key point of the whole discussion) Song of Solomon is not "erotic" literature in any sense—i.e., it is not intended to arouse readers sexually. Clearly it should never be preached in a way that has that effect. That is so obvious a point that only an exploiter of the book would ignore it for prurient interests.

* * * * *

**3. Do you not see a distinction between metaphor and euphemism?**

Of course. But sometimes a metaphor is *also* a euphemism, and that is clearly the case with some of the disputed imagery in Song of Solomon. There is no exegetical way to decide what the various jewels, flowers, scents, oils, and other sensual pleasures named in the poem represented in the author's mind. He purposely leaves them vague. The symbols are therefore not necessarily meant to have any one-to-one relationship with corresponding realities; rather they are general emblems of beauty and desire. Solomon uses the symbolism *instead of* saying anything explicit—which (by definition) makes these metaphors euphemistic, too.

Along these lines, Richard Hess,on pp. 34-35 ofhis Baker Old Testament Commentary, notes the danger of reading too much into the Song's beautiful metaphors:

The metaphor of the Song is the richest of any book in the Bible. It is, however, not intended to provide a simple one-to-one correspondence. In fact, interpreters are most likely to go astray into absurdities when they attempt to match things up where they are not explicit. . . . The best interpretation is to remain sensitive to the language of imagery and attempt to follow its contours without imposing too much demand on specifics of interpretation. . . . The Song does not entertain its readers with prurient expositions nor educate them as a sex manual.

* * * * *

**4. Could it be that your scruples about graphic descriptions of sexual acts are cultural and generational? Perhaps the culture in which you minister isn't as uninhibited as the subcultures other preachers are trying to reach.**

Sex is not something new in the postmodern era. Every culture and every generation has dealt with the same obsessions and perversions as today—though not always with the same unbridled self-

indulgence our culture encourages. Every Christian has always faced the same lusts and temptations that assault us: "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man" (1 Corinthians 10:13). Those who think pornography and unrestrained debauchery weren't commonplace in the pre-Internet era ought to visit the ruins of Pompeii and see what life was like in the culture of Rome during the apostle Paul's generation.

Paul ministered in cultures that were far less “inhibited” than ours. Yet when he found it necessary to deal with sexual topics—whether giving positive instruction about the marriage relationship or a negative exhortation about sexual sins—he *never* spoke in sexually graphic terms.

Moreover, what was sinful in Paul's era is still sinful in our porn-saturated culture. And Paul's strategy for reaching Corinth (one of the most sexually perverted subcultures ever known) is the same strategy we ought to be using today. That includes some careful, dignified, authentically biblical teaching on sexual issues (cf. 1 Corinthians 7). But *holiness*, not how-to advice on sex, is the heart of what pastors ought to be teaching about sex (*especially* in a sex-addicted culture). And our teaching on the subject must be done with grace, dignity, and sanctification, not in the manner of blue comedy.

The truth is that God’s Word never gives specific instruction about the details of a married couple’s personal preferences in their sex life. Sermons that pretend to find such instruction, like the sexual preoccupation demonstrated in these assaults on the Song of Solomon, are more damaging than helpful—because they elevate the imagination of the preacher to a higher position of prominence and authority than the true revelation of God.

Neither Paul nor any other legitimate church leader in 2000 years has ever found it necessary (or even helpful) to use streetwise sex education—not as an evangelistic strategy, and certainly not as a means to sanctification for people already overwhelmed with sex-talk from a corrupt culture. Adopting the world’s obsession with sex and filthy talk cannot possibly have a sanctifying effect, because the strategy itself is unholy.

The notion that degenerate subcultures and sexually-addicted people cannot be reached without “learning to speak their language” is an absolute fallacy. Grace Church is seven miles from Hollywood, in the heart of Southern California, in a carnal, pleasure-mad culture well-known worldwide for everything but healthy spiritual values.No city in America is more “unchurched” than our valley, which houses more than three million people. The people of Grace church are reaching friends and neighbors in every imaginable subculture—from ex-cons to ex-Catholics to people in the entertainment industry. We baptize new believers virtually every Sunday night. It is neither necessary nor helpful to inject explicit sexual references into the conversation in order to reach people from such a culture. God draws them to Christ through the gospel.

* * * * *

**5. You titled your articles "The rape of Song of Solomon." If you object so much to strong language and sexual themes, doesn't that seem over the top?**

One of the fundamental problems with this whole discussion is a refusal by many to acknowledge the crucial (and elementary) distinction between *strong* language and *obscene* language. Mark Driscoll himself contributed to this confusion by blending and blurring the two issues in his message last fall at the Desiring God Conference.

Scripture condemns heretics in powerful, sometimes indelicate, terms (e.g., Galatians 5:12). But the Bible is never smutty, and the *strong* language in Scripture certainly doesn't make *profane* language or filthy joking acceptable (Ephesians 5:4).

In the first article of the series, I explained why the title is fitting. If someone thinks it is an example of what I have decried, that person hasn’t understood what I am saying at all. Rape is an act of forced violation; and this treatment of Solomon’s Song is a molestation of the book, tearing off its God-designed veil, publicly defiling its purity, and holding it up for leering and laughter.

* * * * *

**6. Was Driscoll’s sermon really as bad as you say? Aren’t you overreacting to what is ultimately just a difference in style?**

During the Downgrade Controversy, Charles Spurgeon was essentially accused of the same thing—a misrepresentation of the facts and an overreaction to the issues. Here is what Spurgeon said in response to his critics:

The controversy which has arisen out of our previous articles is very wide in its range. Different minds will have their own opinions as to the manner in which the combatants have behaved themselves; for our own part we are content to let a thousand personal matters pass by unheeded. What does it matter what sarcasms or pleasantries may have been uttered at our expense? The dust of battle will blow away in due time; for the present the chief concern is to keep the standard in its place, and bear up against the rush of the foe.

Our warning was intended to call attention to an evil which we thought was apparent to all: we never dreamed that "the previous question" would be raised, and that a company of esteemed friends would rush in between the combatants, and declare that there was no cause for war, but that our motto might continue to be "Peace, peace!" Yet such has been the case, and in many quarters the main question has been, not "How can we remove the evil?" but, "Is there any evil to remove?" No end of

letters have been written with this as their theme—"Are the charges made by Mr. Spurgeon at all true?" Setting aside the question of our own veracity, we could have no objection to the most searching discussion of the matter. By all means let the truth be known.

In the spirit of Charles Spurgeon, then, I feel there is no other course of action than to let the truth be known. **This link** (which someone emailed to me yesterday) will take you to *some* of the things Mark Driscoll has said about Song of Solomon. My preference would be not to link to these things at all (there is, in fact, much more that I *could* link to), and I would warn that the content is highly offensive ( *especially* since it was preached in a Sunday worship service where children, teenagers, and young singleswere present). But, as Paul told the Corinthians, sometimes it is necessary to bear with a little foolishness in order that the truth might be known.

The New Testament could not be more clear. The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart (Matthew 12:34). And those who teach publicly are held to a higher level of accountability (James 3:1). Pastors, in particular, are to be models of purity (1 Tim. 4:12), above reproach both within the church and without (1 Tim. 3:2–7). Purity in doctrine, purity in life, and purity in speech are all part of the biblical qualifications for those who would be God's spokesmen.

**Ephesians 4:29** Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

**Ephesians 5:4–5** There must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

**1 Thessalonians 4:7** For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

**Titus 2:6–8** Likewise urge the young men to be sensible; in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.

That's why I am making such an issue of this. Because the New Testament makes an issue of it. It is *not* simply a difference of opinion, generation, preference, style, or methodology. It is an issue that arises from clear New Testament mandates related to the character of an elder. If anything, I don't think I have reacted strongly enough.

* * * * *

**7. Why did you single out Driscoll and connect him with the "sex challenges"? Why call him out *publicly*? He has already repented of his unguarded speech, and he is being privately discipled by men like John Piper and C. J. Mahaney, who keep him accountable. Did you consult them before calling Driscoll out by name? If the problem is as serious as you claim, why haven't *they* said something publicly about it?**

In the sermon that prompted this series, Mark Driscoll (speaking specifically to wives in the congregation) made several comments that were far, *far* worse than the seamiest sex challenges. Furthermore, Driscoll's edicts to married women were not mere "challenges" but directives buttressed with the claim that "Jesus Christ commands you to do [this]." That material has been online and freely circulated for more than a year. But you'll be hard pressed to find even a single Web forum where anyone has demanded that Driscoll explain why *he* feels free to say such things publicly.

I am pointing out something that should not be the least bit controversial: pastors are not free to talk like that. In response, a flood of angry young men, including several pastors and seminary students—not one of whom has ever attempted a private conversation with me about this topic—have felt free to post insults and public rebukes in a public forum, declaring emphatically (with no obvious awareness of the irony) that *they don't believe such things should be handled in public forums.*

(To be clear: I'm not suggesting that anyone needs to contact me privately about public remarks I have made. Quite the contrary. But those who insist such disagreements should be handled privately reveal the hypocrisy of that claim when they use a public forum to berate and accuse a pastor whom *they* disagree with.)

When 1 Timothy 5:20 says, "Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all," it is talking about elders in particular. Those in public ministry *must* be rebuked publicly when their sin is repeated, and public, and confirmed by multiple witnesses.

Nevertheless, I *have* written Mark privately with my concerns. He rejected my counsel. As a matter of fact, he preached the sermon I have been quoting fromseven weeks after receiving my private letter encouraging him to take seriously the standard of holiness Scripture holds pastors to. Here is a small selection from the six-page letter I sent him:

[Y]ou can[not] make a biblical case for Christians to embrace worldly fads—especially when those fads are diametrically at odds with the wholesome speech, pure mind, and chaste behavior that God calls us to display. At its core, this is about ideology. No matter how culture changes, the truth never does. But the more the church accommodates the baser elements of the culture, the more she will inevitably compromise her message. We must not betray our words through our actions; we must be *in* the world but not *of* it. . . . . It's vital that you not send one message about the importance of sound doctrine and a totally different message about the importance of sound speech and irreproachable

pure-mindedness.

Mark Driscoll’s response to that admonition and the things he has said since have only magnified my concern.

Mark did indeed express regret a few years ago over the reputation his tongue has earned him. *Yet no substantive change is observable.* Just a few weeks ago, in an angry diatribe leveled at men in his congregation, Driscoll once again threw in a totally unnecessary expletive. A few weeks before that, he made a public mockery of Ecclesiastes 9:10 (something he has done repeatedly), by making a joke of it on national television. So here are two more inappropriate Driscoll videos being passed around by young people and college students for whom I bear some pastoral responsibility. In their immaturity, they typically think it’s wonderfully cool and transparent for a pastor to talk like that. And they feel free to curse and jokein a similar manner in more casual settings.

It is past time for the issue to be dealt with publicly.

Finally, it seriously overstates the involvement of John Piper and C. J. Mahaney to say they are “discipling” Mark Driscoll. In the first place, the idea that a grown man already in public ministry and constantly in the national spotlight needs space to be “mentored” before it’s fair to subject his public actions to biblical scrutiny seems to put the whole process backward. These problems have been talked about in both public and private contexts for at least three or four years. At some point the plea that this is a maturity issue and Mark Driscoll just needs time to mature wears thin. In the meantime, the media is having a field day writing stories that suggest trashy talk is one of the hallmarks of the “New Calvinism;” and countless students whom I love and am personally acquainted with are being led into similar carnal behavior by imitating Mark Driscoll’s speech and lifestyle. Enough is enough.

Yes, I did inform John Piper and C. J. Mahaney of my concerns about this material several weeks ago. I itemized all of these issues in much more thorough detail than I have written about them here, and I expressly told them I was preparing this series of articles for the blog.

To those asking why pastors Piper and Mahaney (and others in positions of key leadership) haven't publicly expressed similar concerns of their own, that is not a question for me. I hope you will write and ask *them*.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2014 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).