

The Rape of Solomon's Song, Part 3

Scripture: Luke 6:45; 1 Corinthians 12:23; Ephesians 5:31–32

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[Editor's Note: Readers should be warned that this article contains offensive material. Nonetheless, it is included here for the sake of substantiating the thesis of this article.]

I emphatically agree with those who say the Song of Solomon is not mere allegory. It is best understood when we take it at face value, like any other text of Scripture. Many interpreters whom I otherwise hold in high esteem (including Spurgeon and most of the Puritans) have unfortunately done more to confuse than clarify the Song's message by treating it in a purely allegorical fashion that eliminates its *primary* meaning.

Solomon's Song is, as I've said from the outset, a love poem between Solomon and his bride, celebrating their mutual love for one another, including the delights of the marriage bed. To interpret this—or *any other portion of Scripture*—in a purely allegorical fashion is to treat the interpreter's own imagination as more authoritative than the plain meaning of the text.

However, those who pretend to know the meanings of poetic symbols that are not clearly identifiable from the text itself commit the very same error. Their speculation is likewise a way of exalting their own imaginations to a higher level of authority than the plain sense of the text.

That's a particular problem when the interpreter sees a mandate for oral sex in the simple metaphor of a fruit tree or imagines that the best way to contextualize and illustrate portions of the text is by verbally undressing his own wife in order to make the point as vivid as possible. In such a case, not only has the speaker given far too much weight to his own speculative imagination; he has given a fairly clear signal that his imagination is not altogether pure (Luke 6:45).

And that is a far more serious problem than merely allegorizing the text.

By no means do I want to minimize the dangers of allegorizing the text. That approach to hermeneutics is full of mischief, even in the hands of pure-minded men who are generally sound in their doctrine. I don't approve of allegorical flights of fancy, *especially* with a text like Song of Solomon, which poses enough difficulties with the obvious built-in metaphors and poetic language it features.

Allegorizers of the Song of Solomon generally see it as an expression of tender mutual love between Christ and His church. Most of them would say that Christ is represented by the voice of Solomon; the church is represented by the voice of the Shulamite. Some interpreters go further yet and imagine they hear three or more voices speaking out of the text. (Invariably those who multiply the voices try to make the verses fit some complex libretto that arises more out of their own personal agenda than from the text itself.)

Still, regardless of how many voices are heard and who is supposedly speaking, nearly all who allegorize this poem see it as a canticle of love between Christ and the church. It's probably fair to say that this allegorical view focusing on Christ and the church has been the dominant interpretation of the poem throughout church history.

That, of course, doesn't make it right. I happen to think it is not the correct approach to interpreting this text. But it's not a view that ought to be dismissed with vulgar contempt—*especially* with a coarse joke attributing homosexual behavior to Christ.

If you have heard any of Mark Driscoll's teaching on the Song of Solomon, you have surely heard his joke in that vein. For example, in [the sermon that prompted me to write these articles](#), Driscoll says, "Some have allegorized this book, and in so doing, they have destroyed it. They have destroyed it. They will say that it is an allegory between Jesus and his bride the church. Which if true, is weird. Because Jesus is having sex with me and puts his hand up my shirt. And that feels weird. I love Jesus, but not in that way."

Driscoll has said almost the exact same thing in at least three other sermons. For example: "Jesus keeps making out with me and touching me in inappropriate places." "Now I'm gay, or highly troubled, or both." "As a guy, I do not feel comfortable with Jesus, like you know, kissing me and touching me and taking me to bed. Okay? I feel sort of very homo-erotic about that kind of view of Song of Solomon."

Even in his most recent *Peasant Princess* series, he repeats a version of that very same joke:

Now what happens is some say "Well, we do believe in the book [of Song of Solomon], and we will teach it, but we're gonna teach it allegorically." And there's a literal and an allegorical interpretation. They'll say, "Well the allegorical interpretation, it's not between a husband and a wife, Song of Solomon, love and romance and intimacy; what it is, it's about us and Jesus." Really? I hope not. [Laughter from crowd] If I get to heaven and this goes down, I don't know what I'm gonna do. I mean it's gonna be a bad day. Right? I mean seriously. You dudes know what I'm talking about. You're like, "No, I'm not doing that. You know I'm not doing that. I love Him [Jesus] but not like that." [Laughter from crowd]

Driscoll blew off criticism about that kind of joking by claiming it's not blasphemy because it has nothing to do with the "real" Jesus. He says he is simply making fun of a false notion about Jesus. And he continues making the joke. Here's the problem with that: Scripture clearly teaches that the love between a husband and wife in all its aspects is a metaphor for Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:31-32).

Thus even a non-allegorical interpretation of Song of Solomon, (simply taking the love-song between Solomon and the Shulamite at face value) ultimately points us to Christ and his love for the church. The text ought to be handled by the preacher accordingly, not as an excuse to bathe in the gutter of our culture's easygoing obsession with crude sex-talk and graphic sexual imagery.

Some who have commented on these articles have suggested that I ought to give a full exposition of Solomon's Song rather than merely critiquing the bad interpreters and decrying the contemporary church's fixation with sex.

That would require a long series, and I'd prefer not to devote weeks of time on this blog to a topic that I have raised only in order to make a simple, single-pointed admonition. But those wondering what my exposition of Solomon's Song would be like will find full notes on the text in *The MacArthur Study Bible*.

Those notes should be a sufficient answer to the commenter who pretended to wonder if I am saying it would be better not to comment on Song of Solomon at all.

Of course that is not what I am saying, nor can anyone claim that I have even implied anything of the sort—without twisting my words or putting *their* words in my mouth. (That literally happened in a string of comments at another blog where this issue was under discussion. An early commenter accused me of opposing line-by-line exposition of the Song. Halfway down the comments, people were putting that claim in quotation marks, attributing it to me.)

What I *am* saying is that the bounds of propriety—especially when dealing with subjects like sex—should be set by whatever text we are dealing with. To interpret beautiful poetry by translating it into scurrilous soft-porn is to corrupt the most fundamental *intent* of the text.

This is nowhere near as difficult to grasp as some are pretending, but perhaps a simple parallel will suffice: There are other private body functions and "less honorable" or "unpresentable" body parts (1 Corinthians 12:23). We find these mentioned or alluded to at times in Scripture without ever being too specific. We all would be rightly offended if the preacher gave a long, descriptive discourse or how-to instructions in the Sunday worship service, outlining these "unpresentable" things.

For stronger reasons than simple modesty, certain acts involving fornication, autoeroticism, and other things people commonly "do in secret" are shameful to talk about in *any* public context (Ephesians 5:12), much less a church service. They may be suitable subjects for a private counseling session, or the doctor's office, or a college biology lecture, but they are not fitting topics for a worship service where God should be glorified, Christ should be uplifted, women should be shown respect, children's innocence should be guarded, and single people's prurient curiosities should not unnecessarily be enflamed.

When a speaker deliberately arouses lusts that cannot possibly be righteously fulfilled in unmarried college students, or when his personal illustrations fail to guard the privacy and honor of his own wife, that is *far worse* than merely inappropriate. When done repeatedly and with the demeanor of an immature bad-boy, such a practice reflects a major character defect that is spiritually disqualifying. Any man who makes such things the main trademark of his style is quite simply not above reproach.

As recently as a decade ago, that point of view would not have raised a peep of controversy.

The fact that it is so controversial now is simply more proof that evangelicals have become too much like the world, and too comfortable with the evil characteristics of our culture.

Tomorrow, Lord willing, I'll post the final installment in this series. Several questions have come up repeatedly from people who have commented on these articles, and in tomorrow's final installment, I want to answer as many of them as possible.

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