LISA GRAHAM McMINN

FOREWORD BY STANLEY J. GRENZ

Sexuality HBH NGING

EMBRACING INTIMACY
IN A BROKEN WORLD

SEXUALITY AND HOLY LONGING

Embracing Intimacy in a Broken World

Lisa Graham McMinn

Foreword by Stanley J. Grenz



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Published by Jossey-Bass A Wiley Imprint 989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 www.josseybass.com

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Excerpt from "No Easy Victory" used by permission, Christianity Today, 2002.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McMinn, Lisa Graham, date.

Sexuality and holy longing: embracing intimacy in a broken world / Lisa Graham McMinn.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7879-6818-2 (alk. paper)

1. Sex-Religious aspects-Christianity I. Title.

BT708.M43 2004

241'.66-dc22

2003018750

FIRST EDITION

Praise for Sexuality and Holy Longing

"Eureka! We've finally found the book our students keep asking for. Lisa McMinn's thoughtful insights on body-soul connection (Incarnation theology) is just what the Christian community desperately needs. She is one of the few authors who dares write about sexuality with human compassion and strong conviction."

—Judith K. Balswick, Ed.D., and Jack O. Balswick, Ph.D., professors, School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California

"Sexuality and Holy Longing provides an invaluable service to the church that finds itself surrounded by a culture obsessed with sex and not understanding the fullness and richness of sexuality as God intended. Dr. McMinn challenges the church to embrace the beauty and sacredness of beings created in the Image of God rather than attempting to shield our children from their sexuality."

—Trevecca Okholm, minister of children's ministries, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Newport Beach, California

"This book reads like the work of a friend who has brought warmth, wisdom, knowledge, balance, and candor to an aspect of our lives in which many of us feel the need for healing and hope."

—Richard Sartwell, director, Friends Center, George Fox Evangelical Seminary, Portland, Oregon

"Sexuality is so broken in our society, and we the Church can make a difference. This book will help us think deeply, beyond commands to creation and beliefs and principles and choices."

—John P. Casey, senior pastor, Blanchard Road Alliance Church, Wheaton, Illinois

"This book provides a very useful and faith-based perspective to the public discourse on sexuality. Communities of faith seeking to help those struggling with sexual brokenness will find a healthy framework for understanding these issues."

—Skip Trudeau, president, Association for Christians in Student Development

"In my seventeen years as a pastor and now as a seminary president, I have looked for a book like this one. Dr. McMinn has dealt with human sexuality directly but sensitively, theologically and practically, candidly but tastefully. Even after finishing sections of the book in which I was still unconvinced of one of Dr. McMinn's perspectives, I nonetheless was stretched to reconsider my own viewpoints and to rethink long-held positions. One of her gifts is that of dealing with complex and controversial issues clearly and, while doing so, (to use her words) 'staying vulnerable to the arguments of other positions.' I will recommend this book highly to all pastors, Christian leaders in training—in fact, to all who want to understand sexuality in the context of human identity and God's grace."

—Greg Waybright, president, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois

"This book is a timely and needed reminder that sexuality is a gift from God to be celebrated and shared."

-Michelle R. Loyd-Paige, professor of sociology, Calvin College

FOREWORD

FEW PEOPLE TODAY WOULD DENY that we are sexual creatures. Throughout our lives we are made acutely aware as a matter of course that we exist as either male or female. This awareness is noted already at the beginning of life; the first statement that is generally made at the birth of a baby is an assertion of the sex of the newborn. This awareness is likewise noted at nearly every juncture of our earthly pilgrimage. Among the first characteristics we notice in encountering another human is whether he or she is male or female. And rather than being simply set aside, this cognizance of the sex of the other person continues to exercise a powerful, even pervasive influence on all of our subsequent social interactions.

That nearly everybody is acutely interested in sex likewise seems to be a universally acknowledged postulate today. In fact, this assumption drives much of contemporary Western life. A few minutes spent in front of the TV screen, scanning the titles and descriptions of the latest Hollywood releases in the weekend newspaper, or perusing the advertisements in the current edition of any popular magazine—whether Cosmopolitan, Time, or even Good Housekeeping—would likely be sufficient to convince even the most ardent skeptic that sex still retains its perennial position at, or near the top of, the list of our society's most ardent obsessions.

Where can we turn for insight as to how we should understand our sexuality, concerning who we are as sexual beings, and—above all—regarding what it means to live as sexual persons? For many people living in what is perceived to be a "post-Christian" world, the default resource is no longer the church. Rather, an increasing number of people today take their primary cue from the messages emanating from popular culture, the findings of the latest sociological study or Gallup poll, or simply subjective perceptions as to what their peers are thinking.

Despite what many people assume today, the Christian faith and its foundational resource, the Bible, have much to say about human sexuality. Indeed, this topic constitutes one of the very first themes to emerge in the biblical story. The narrative with which the Bible commences

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reaches its high point with God fashioning humankind in the divine image, a creative act that entails the forming of humans as male and female (Genesis 1:26–27). The second chapter of Genesis provides additional detail. The creation of the first woman occurs as God's antidote for the debilitating solitude of the original man. The biblical writer narrates God as declaring, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18 NIV). Then, upon catching sight of Eve, Adam exclaims his delight: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23).

The narrative of Genesis 2 indicates (in contrast to what many of our contemporaries have been led to assume) that the Bible views sexuality first and foremost in a positive light. Being created male and female is God's good gift to us. While celebrating sexuality as a gift from God, however, the Bible also presents a realistic picture of the human story. The biblical narrative of the human story reminds us repeatedly that we possess the uncanny ability to twist (to our detriment) our fundamental sexuality. The Bible declares that what God entrusted to us as a stewardship and intended to be an aspect of our well-being all too readily becomes an occasion for us to do great harm to ourselves and to exploit, oppress, and injure others. Yet this does not mark the end of the story, for the Bible then narrates the action on our behalf of the God who meets us in the midst of our folly, unfaithfulness, and failure. In Christ, the Bible declares, God offers us forgiveness and a new beginning. Through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Bible asserts, God desires to redeem us as sexual creatures, so that we might be transformed into the sexual people—both male and female—that God created us to be.

Given the celebratory, realistic, and redemptive perspective from which the Bible treats human sexuality, it is no wonder that Christians are eager to proclaim boldly the biblical understanding of our creation as male and female. At no time in history has the need for bold, balanced, biblically oriented Christian articulations been greater than now. So often the voices emanating from popular culture, the popular media, and pop sociology propagate only truncated understandings of human sexuality and prescribe what are ultimately misguided prescriptions for living as sexual creatures. And sadly, by offering what is perceived to be a quasi-gnostic, sex-denying stance, "pop-Christian" declarations have all too often merely contributed to the confusion.

In a context such as this, Lisa McMinn's book comes as a welcome addition to the growing body of helpful literature on human sexuality. With sensitivity and dexterity, she brings together solid biblical acumen with

insights she has gained through her work on the sociology of sexuality. She is surely correct when she presents sexuality as deeper than genital sex. She rightly reiterates the biblical view that sexuality is not simply about physical attraction, but that it arises out of and is intended to facilitate the universal human quest for wholesome relationships—indeed, above all, relationship with God. But most importantly, McMinn insightfully points out that the contemporary acknowledgment of the sociological embeddedness of our conceptions of sexuality offers an unprecedented opportunity for Christian communities of faith to take seriously their rightful, God-intended role in the task of forming persons who live out the biblical vision of sexuality, which elevates this all-pervasive dimension of our humanness as God's good gift intended for our human well-being. In short, McMinn offers a profound call to us to be a people who know firsthand the divine grace that comes to us through the holy longing we call "sexuality," so that we can truly embrace this aspect of our being despite the brokenness of the world in which we are called to live and minister.

STANLEY J. GRENZ
Pioneer McDonald Professor,
Carey Theological College, Vancouver, British Columbia;
Author of Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHEATON COLLEGE GRANTED MY HUSBAND, Mark, and me sabbaticals in the same semester to write. Reading each other's writing over a cup of coffee at nearby coffee shops became a rich part of our Sabbath day rest. Mark read and re-read chapters, giving me an honest critique and wonderful affirmation and inviting me to think deep and wide. Thank you, Mark, for partnering with me in this book. And thank you, Wheaton, for a sabbatical that allowed me time to study, read, ruminate, and write.

Students in my Sociology of Sexuality and Gender Roles classes granted me permission to share pieces of their journals, and men and women I interviewed let me walk loudly into some of the quiet places they reside in as single men and women. Thank you for your willingness to let your thoughts be known. You have enriched this book tremendously by allowing your stories to be told.

I am also indebted to writers and readers who critiqued all or pieces of this manuscript. The people at Jossey-Bass, particularly my editor, Mark Kerr, embraced this book from the beginning and kept pushing me to connect the dots, stay connected with readers, and see this book as one with potential for serving the Church. Sheryl Fullerton marvelously picked up where Mark left off. Mary O'Briant is a gifted copyeditor; she refined and smoothed many rough edges. They and others at Jossey-Bass (including the three anonymous reviewers who made insightful comments) have made me a better writer and this a better book. My writing group—Cindy Crosby and Camerin Courtney-kept me from being too much of an academic (and from using too many parentheses). Pamela Nelson, a registered nurse who works at Wheaton College, fed me several studies on adolescent sexuality. The following people all read and responded to various chapters: Pamela Augustine, Allison Belt, Christina Bieber, John Casey, Lynn Cohick, Brian Howell, Dennis Hiebert, Jana Sundene, and Dan Trier. Thank you for taking the time to read and respond to these ideas.

My daughters, Danielle Rae, Sarah, and Megan, redefine and further shape me through motherhood and bless me with friendship now as women. To each of you, thank you. You have shaped me and blessed me with your lives.

Winfield, Illinois 2004 Lisa Graham McMinn

SEXUALITY AND HOLY LONGING

Other Books of Interest



Let the Children Come:

Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective

Bonnie I. Miller-McLemore

Hardcover

ISBN: 0-7879-5665-1

"Let the Children Come is not only engagingly written and filled with common sense, it is also theologically illuminating and pastorally astute."

> —From the Foreword by Lisa Sowle Cahill, J. Donald Monan, S.J. Professor of Theology, Boston College

"This book will help us to live with and care for children with greater understanding, compassion, and respect."

-Dorothy C. Bass, editor, Practicing Our Faith

"In this appealing book, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore rescues the traditional themes of Christian theology for a positive, practical theology of children and child raising."

—Rosemary Radford Ruether, Carpenter Professor of Feminist Theology, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California

In this important and much-needed book, theologian, author, and teacher Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore writes about the struggle to raise children with integrity and faithfulness as Christians in a complex postmodern society. Let the Children Come shows that the care of children is in itself a religious discipline and a communal practice that places demands on both congregations and society as a whole. The author calls for clearer and more defined ways in which Christians can respond to the call to nurture all children (not just their own) as manifestations of God's presence in the world. Miller-McLemore raises and investigates questions that up until now have largely been left unasked, such as: What are the dominant cultural perceptions of children including religious perceptions with which parents must grapple? How have Christians defined children and parenting, and how should they today?





John Wilson

Miroslav Volf

The Best Christian Writing 2004 John Wilson (Editor)

Paperback

ISBN: 0-7879-6964-8

This collection of the finest contemporary Christian writing is "a prime example of diverse beliefs among Christians."

—Los Angeles Times

"Chosen by Christianity Today editor Wilson, this eclectic treasure trove, on subjects as diverse as repentance, being an unmarried believer, and the evangeli-

cal Christian Book Association convention, contains some truly extraordinary writing. . . . Rich in whimsy, overflowing with gentle wonder, and laced with both irony and anguish, these pieces by and large live up to their rather audacious billing, as the best of the best."

-Publishers Weekly, August 25, 2003

This year's volume brings together an elegant and engaging array of essays by Christian luminaries tackling relevant issues. These writers distill the riches of belief into lucid explorations of faith and truth, reflecting the many dimensions of today's Christianity. As John Wilson puts it, "This collection of Christian writing is for anyone who acknowledges the dilemma of being human.... What you will find in these essays is Christianity in its natural habitat, which is the whole world with all its beauty and suffering, its simplicity and complexity, its clarity and its muddle."

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INTRODUCTION

Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

-St. Augustine

ON OUR WAY BACK FROM CARIBOU COFFEE, I got into a conversation about kissing with my two older daughters, Rae and Sarah, both in their twenties and home for their sister Megan's high school graduation. I grew up watching Westerns starring John Wayne (my Dad's favorite), *Star Trek*, and *Love Boat* (which Dad would have forbidden if he had ever watched it, given its disregard of traditional Christian morals). In all cases, couples kissed by mashing their lips together.

With the passing of years, couples mashed said lips for longer periods and with greater intensity, but it was still just the magical meeting of lips. I thought it very romantic and sensual, and my expectations for kisses reflected what I observed. But my daughters grew up in a peer culture that watched *Friends*, *Dawson's Creek* (both of which we discouraged for reasons not unlike my Dad's disapproval of *Love Boat*), and openmouthed, tantalizing tongue kisses in the movies, which over time came to include the increasing exposure of Other Things also thought to titillate and draw in young and old audiences alike at \$9.00 or so a ticket. They found such kissing romantic and sensual, and their expectations of kisses also reflected what they observed, read about, and heard among their peers.

My daughters and I grew up with somewhat different notions and expectations regarding kissing, specifically, and our sexuality more generally. But the kissing evoked similar emotions in our adolescence: a longing to belong, to be loved. God created humans so that we would yearn for human companionship, and our sexuality keeps us restless and striving for meaningful connection. "It is not good for the man to be alone," God said before creating Eve as Adam's companion. When God

presented Eve to Adam, Adam's first words were, "At last!" (Genesis 2:18, 23). Companions ease the existential loneliness of being created sexual—a reminder that we are not quite complete, not so self-sufficient as we sometimes imagine. Sexuality is central to the human experience; it is embodied in our maleness and femaleness. We will all experience longing, even as our culture's tolerance and ways of expressing sexuality (for example, the mashing of lips versus tantalizing tongue kissing) changes over time.

Ways of expressing sexuality and tolerance for different behaviors change because ideas about sexuality change. Ideas about sexuality are embedded in cultural beliefs about bodies, sex, and sexuality. We learn about these beliefs at home, through peers, at school, through the media, as well as in church, Sunday School, and youth group. Humans are social creatures by nature, so when we are unsure what is expected of us, when gaps are discovered in our knowledge, we look around to pick up cues. Movies, music, magazines, billboards, and TV fill in any discernable gaps—so completely, in fact, that not much is taboo anymore.

The long-running TV show *Seinfeld* broke through norms of privacy by introducing masturbation as a topic for public consumption and every-day conversation. We learned that all men do it (which we suspected already), that women do it, too (which we were less sure about), and that a contest to see how long one can go without doing it demonstrates how much we need to be able to do it. We can tune into a variety of talk shows and listen while guests describe their sexual indiscretions, unusual sexual preferences, and sordid sexual experiences. From soft-porn billboards on the freeway to invitations to pornographic sites popping onto our computer screen, images, attitudes, and values about sex make their way into our lives.

I teach at Wheaton College—a Christian liberal arts school in the Midwest. One of the most challenging and rewarding classes I teach is Sociology of Sexuality. My goal for that class and for this book is to help students and readers understand and embrace their sexuality in ways that honor God and acknowledge the longing for consummation and completion that God has imprinted on our bodies and souls. I tell my students the story of a Jewish rabbi who carried a satchel of dust in one pocket and a satchel of gold in the other. It reminded him that he was precious yet ordinary, made in the image of God, yet also broken. So it is with our sexuality; it is precious, yet fallen.

The Church is a community of sojourners making their way toward God through the dust and ashes of a broken world. There is much beauty along the way, as God has long been about the business of exchanging ashes for beauty and mourning for joy (Isaiah 61:1-3). We know about ashes. We see them in priests who molest children, pastors who are caught red-handed in pornography addictions, sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancies, the high divorce rate. Some ashes are subtle—so subtle that taken-for-granted assumptions about life are not recognized as distortions of sexuality. When girls and women hate their bodies, disdain their periods, fear childbirth, feel competitive with other women, or are crippled by fears of abandonment, these too are ashes—distortions of sexuality. When boys or men want to (or think they are supposed to want to) sleep with every girl or woman they encounter or want to be independent, silent loners like the Marlboro Man, or if they feel that inadequacy in any perceived area can be compensated for by asserting sexuality in some way, these are distortions of sexuality. Because we take distortions for granted ("boys are subject to their raging testosterone"; "menstruation really is horrible"), we fail to recognize how our sexuality is misunderstood, stifled, reduced to sexual interactions.

Communities of faith sift through ashes for beauty. Culture powerfully shapes our ideas about sexuality, but so can the Church. The Church resides within culture, always influenced by culture, but it is a unique institution that reminds us there is more to our existence than what we can see, feel, smell, and hear. Living with a longing for heaven has the potential to change the way we see and live our lives as sexual people. When Christians examine their taken-for-granted assumptions about life, then myth and distortion can be recognized, maybe dispelled; perhaps ashes can be exchanged for beauty. A student in the Sociology of Sexuality course wrote the following about his out-of-class discussion group:

My small discussion group was illuminating when it comes to the differences in the sexuality of men and women. It was there that I was able to more clearly understand that a woman's period is an important part of her sexuality, that women also want to enjoy sex, that they may not feel free to do so, and that pornography among men is a big deal to women. This was good for me to learn because before I did not consider a woman's period to have anything to do with sex, I thought that women would find sex gross, I never worried about whether I as a man would enjoy sex, and I considered pornography a relatively small detail in my personal history.

In the sifting, examining, and challenging of assumptions, this student began to experience the grace and power of God to redeem broken ideas and patterns regarding sexuality.

Sexuality: Embedded and Embodied

Human sexuality is both *embedded in culture* and *embodied in physical*, biological bodies. Adam and Eve's experience in the Garden of Eden might have been the only human experience largely unencumbered by cultural traditions and norms. With subsequent generations, norms about sexuality emerged, multiplying quickly in the biblical record. The account of the Jewish people shows a culture with numerous laws and practices regarding sexuality. Male circumcision, laws about intercourse, and rituals of cleanliness that surrounded menstruation and emissions of semen were spelled out and meticulously followed as taken-for-granted practices in Hebrew culture. Beliefs about sexuality are embedded in culture and cannot be separated from how a culture understands, legitimizes, and practices sexual behaviors.¹

Sexuality is also embodied in that being human is to exist in a body that is generally either male or female.² To be male or female is to see, relate to, interpret, and experience the world through bodies that are male or female. Everything we experience, we experience as females or males; we cannot compartmentalize ourselves from our sex. We note, consciously or unconsciously, whether the teacher of a course we've signed up for is female or male. We notice the sex of the person who cuts our hair. We note whether our doctor, pastor, boss, or child's coach is male or female; their sex affects how we experience them and how we relate to them. The simplicity of a cold glass of water we enjoy on a hot summer day may be relished in the same way, no matter which sex we are; nevertheless, we experience drinking the water through bodies that are male or female. Words whispered or shouted come to us through bodies that are female or male. We are moved by a rocket taking off in space or by the sight of Michelangelo's David through bodies that are male or female. We inhale ocean air or each other's bodily odors through bodies that are female or male. We caress, push away, hold, release. All this we experience and interpret as sexual creatures because we are embodied, either female or male.

Ideas about how we are to define and experience our sexuality and how we are to relate to others according to our sex emerge from our biology (the embodied dimension), our interactions with others, our religious beliefs, and our particular time and place in history (the embedded dimension). That five-year-old Jason thinks five-year-old Jacqueline has cooties is related to his time and place in history. It comes from his culture. If thirteen-year-old Jason has wet dreams, and thirteen-year-old Jacqueline is menstruating, this is a result of biology and would generally occur for any male and female, at any point in history. That Jason and Jacqueline believe sex should be saved for marriage comes from their culture, likely