

Sexuality in the wedding

Gary Harder and Lydia Neufeld Harder

The rules of the sexual dance have been changing rapidly in our society. No longer do most couples look to the church for permission, via a marriage license, to dance together sexually. Pastors no longer oversee the dance floor. However, many couples still come to pastors to preside at their weddings. They still come to the church to marry—and perhaps to look for deeper meanings for their married and sexual lives. How will we respond? How do we negotiate the changing dance floor scene?

Reflections from the dance floor (Gary)

I am all too aware of the overt sexuality she exudes. It frightens and disconcerts me a bit. It also excites me, enough at least to know that I need to keep my boundaries clearly in place. “Don’t start fantasizing,” I order myself. How then to begin the marriage preparation journey for this couple sitting before me? Especially when I know we will need to talk about their sexuality.

We find it difficult to be honest about sex in marriage preparation and in the wedding service. It hovers just beneath the surface, just out of reach of words, unnamed until someone tells a crude joke at the reception.

Jan and Eric (not their real names) have come to my office because they want me to officiate at their wedding. They come hesitantly. They bring guilt feelings. They have been living together for almost a year and cannot reconcile that fact with their upbringing and stated convictions that full sexual

expression belongs only within marriage. They are Christians, and they feel they have betrayed their Christian commitment. They are tired of hiding their living arrangement from their families, and they want to commit their lives to each other in marriage.

I can see how Eric might have succumbed to Jan’s sexual appeal—and for that matter, how Jan could have been attracted

to Eric's strong aura of maleness. They start listing excuses for moving in together. There were economic realities. They already knew they wanted to get married, so they just started having sex a bit early. And then Jan is in tears. "Can we still get married in the church? Will you still marry us?"

In some ways the church has seen the marriage license as a license to have sex. The wedding service legitimates full sexual expression. Marriage is the boundary that regulates our sexuality. Before marriage, sex is bad. After marriage, sex is legitimized—almost regardless of how it is expressed. We have had a hard time naming sexual abuse within marriage.

But we find it difficult to be honest about sex both in marriage preparation and in the wedding service. It hovers just beneath the surface, bubbling away just out of reach of words, unnamed until someone tells a crude joke at the reception and leaves most of us embarrassed. In the way we do weddings, can we somehow deal honestly and compassionately with sexuality? Can we address sex

Perhaps integrity around our sexuality is a gift the church can offer a couple getting married. But then we will have to get our act together. We have to be open about sex in the church.

with integrity, aware of the highly sexualized nature of our society, aware of how our society commodifies sexuality? Can we be ready to offer a wholesome vision of sexual expression?

Perhaps integrity around our sexuality is a gift the church can offer a couple getting married. But then we will have to get our act together. We have to be open about sex in the church. We have to talk about it. We have to name the blessing and the curse, how

sex can wonderfully enrich our lives and how it can harm us and empty our relationships of meaning. We have to struggle as a church to understand and own our vision for a healthy sexuality. And we need to pass on our vision to our children.

But how do we make our sexuality sacred, a part of our journey with and toward God? How do we resist letting our secular society control our understanding of sexuality?

From colleagues in ministry I have heard about three possible ways of responding to a common law couple wanting to get married. Some pastors start with rules, insisting that the couple move apart and refrain from intercourse until after the wedding.

Others try to ignore the issue, believing that if they don't ask, they won't have to deal with it. Others try to engage the couple about their sexual expression as honestly as they can, and from there point to a fuller, covenanted vision.

The Bible is more forthright about human sexuality than we are often able to be. Let's consider Genesis 1 and 3.

In pleasure and delight God breathes life and spirit into the human beings. "I have created relating beings," exults God, "loving beings, male and female beings. Companionship and intimacy can replace loneliness and alienation."

God delights in seeing Adam and Eve enjoy the garden, each other's companionship, and conversation with their Creator. The woman and man tend the garden, name the animals, run free and naked and unashamed, taking pleasure in each other's love and in each other's bodies. And God laughs with them in joy.

But alas, other powers also reside in the garden and in each psyche. Another spirit breathes an unwelcome discordant reality into Eden. These first mythical humans, like each of us, have a lust for power, perhaps the strongest urge of all. Power. Control. Avoidance of vulnerability. Wanting to be like God, knowing good and evil, they eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree.

Then comes the blaming. And denial. And defending the indefensible. And exploitation. And hiding from God and from each other. All hell breaks loose as they are chased out of the garden.

The intimacy is lost. These first humans are alienated from each other and from God. Their nakedness is now a source of shame, and they cover their sexual parts. In their brokenness, Eden slips out of their grasp. But is it lost forever?

If we are honest with ourselves, we will acknowledge that many of the couples—maybe even the majority—that we marry in the church are not virgins on their wedding night. We are a long way from Eden. What do we do with that reality?

Integrity starts with candor in the office, with being honest with the couple wanting to get married. Far better to deal with the reality of the couple living together before marriage than to pretend, white wedding dress notwithstanding, that they are “pure.” I thank Eric and Jan for being so open and honest with me. “I think we can now talk candidly about what your living

The Song of Songs revisits the wholesome sexuality of Eden. The song is a symphony of sensuality in five movements. Gone is the violence and cover-up of a distorted Eden, replaced with a restored and full mutuality.

together has meant for your relationship. And my hope is that it can lead to a wedding service that has integrity.”

We are now free to explore a more full-orbed vision of intimacy. Jan and Eric acknowledge that their sex drives have taken over their relationship, that they are struggling to find other intimate ways to relate to each other. They are not able to keep in touch with each other emotionally as well as they want to. They have not explored how they could include spiritual intimacy in their relationship, even though both are Christians and regularly attend church. Their friendships and social networks are not well developed. Perhaps their guilt about their living arrangement is an inhibiting factor. They are dissatisfied with various aspects of their relationship. Even their sex life is less than satisfying. Will getting married magically heal their relationship?

Marriage can contribute to healing, but not without hard work. Jan and Eric drink in that bigger picture of intimacy. Over time they begin to address areas that they have neglected in their haste to move in together. They begin to be more vulnerable to each other emotionally. They even start praying together, one of the hardest kinds of closeness to embrace, because it is so intensely intimate. I realize, as we explore this terrain in preparation for their marriage, that I am no longer conscious of the overt sexuality that first drew my notice on meeting Jan. As my relationship with her and Eric has deepened, other aspects of her identity now engage my attention.

Their wedding is honest and joyful. I can name before their families and communities their journey from living together to a relationship that is ready for the multifaceted intimacy of a healthy marriage. We freely reinsert sexuality into the service.

The Song of Songs revisits the wholesome sexuality of Eden. The song is a symphony of sensuality in five movements. It is unashamedly erotic. Gone is the violence and cover-up of a distorted Eden, replaced with a restored and full mutuality. The woman is as free as the man to make advances. Neither dominates or exploits the other.

She begins the song, and he responds.

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
For your love is better than wine,
your anointing oils are fragrant,
your name is perfume poured out. . . .*

*I compare you, my love,
to a mare among Pharaoh's chariots. . . .*

*My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh
that lies between my breasts.
My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms
in the vineyards of Engedi. . . .*

*Ah, you are beautiful, my love;
ah, you are beautiful;
your eyes are doves.
Ah, you are beautiful, my beloved,
truly lovely. . . .*

*With great delight I sat in his shadow,
and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
He brought me to the banqueting house,
and his intention toward me was love. . . .*

*How beautiful you are, my love,
how very beautiful.
Your eyes are doves
behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
moving down the slopes of Gilead. . . .
Your two breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle,
that feed among the lilies. . . .*

*My beloved is all radiant and ruddy,
distinguished among ten thousand.
His head is the finest gold;
his locks are wavy,
black as a raven.
His eyes are like doves. . . .
His body is ivory work,
encrusted with sapphires. . . .*

And finally this symphony of sensuality ends, as it must. The curtain is drawn shut, and with it the circle of intimacy between the two closes as they become one:

*Make haste, my beloved,
and be like a gazelle
or a young stag
upon the mountains of spices!*

Earthy, embodied, erotic, sensual, mutual—a powerful yet tender love song written in a patriarchal context, revisiting old Eden and sending waves into ever new Edens.

Jan and Eric's marriage is happy and honest, growing in the context of their congregation. They continue to learn that intimacy is God's gift to them and their gift to each other. One wonderful part of their many-faceted intimacy is enjoyment of each other's bodies in full sexual expression.

Musings from the balcony (Lydia)

The balcony overlooks the dance floor, providing perspective on the unfolding sexual dance. The view from the balcony encourages us to reflect and ask, what is really happening here?

When I step back to reflect theologically on weddings and sexuality, I realize that most of the time I do not think about the wedding as "the liturgical ritualized celebration of the sexual union of two persons."¹ In fact, the words of the wedding service rarely speak about the mystery of sexual desire or the creative reproductive power of sexual union. Because the wedding is a worship service, we assume that the focus is on the spiritual and

sacred covenant that is deeper and broader than having sex. However, what strikes me about our wedding practices is that we often leave our sexuality at the church door. We have become so comfortable with separating the sacred and the secular as we enter worship that we don't even notice that no one is speaking about physical intimacy at an event in which it should be celebrated as a gift of God.

I wonder if this separation of the sacred and secular leaves us open to the seductive power of our technological culture. That culture wants to take over our most intimate relationships and

The words of the wedding service rarely speak about the mystery of sexual desire or the creative reproductive power of sexual union. We often leave our sexuality at the church door.

make them shallow, artificial, superficial. In our society the perfect sexual relationship is a commodity that can be acquired with the right technique or through using the right beauty product or by having so-called safe sex or by planning the most romantic wedding. The market encourages couples to enjoy sexual goods without responsibility, without outside interference, and without the burdens of a community ethic. Marriage is available to anyone who wishes for it, and if

one product does not suit, perhaps another will. The wedding is in danger of becoming a counterfeit, a spectacle produced for public consumption. Sexuality has been reduced to a possession rather than experienced as a gift of God which we tend and nourish through hard work.

In earlier times, we could not so easily ignore sexuality. If a couple lived together, a baby would likely appear before long. If a woman died in childbirth, her husband needed to find a new wife in order to provide a secure home for his children. If a young man bought a farm, he sought out a wife to share the work with him. Partnership was built into the marriage relationship for economic and social reasons. Therefore community rules could be effective in encouraging a deeper and more multifaceted relationship. Sexuality was a part of a larger whole, blessed and regulated by the community, because the community needed the family and the family needed the community.

Now couples may no longer look to the community to provide economic and social support and sanctions. What they may fail to

realize is that our most profound human capability to be intimate with others and to be fruitful within our community is being crippled by a culture that converts our sexual nature into a consumer product. Couples may long for a deeper understanding of sexuality but discover that their church is afraid to speak about sexuality's power. They may wish for community support but worry that their sexual desires are not understood. They may even wish they could counter the domination of the wedding industry but do not know where to start.

Can weddings become public events that engage the community and the couple in ways that reorient sexuality toward a full-orbed practice of marriage? Can our weddings become celebratory events that establish honest marriage relationships? Can weddings speak about sexual intimacy as a gift of God that nonetheless requires an investment of our attention and effort? Can we recognize sex as a gift we will not fully enjoy if community support and encouragement are absent?

The transition from singleness into marriage is not an easy one, despite our romantic notions. We need worship rituals that acknowledge the difficulties, admitting that sexual intimacy in its fullest sense does not come easily within our society of consumerism. But above all, couples need to know that God delights in marriages in which sexual intimacy mirrors the love that God has for the church and for all humankind. The church must focus its wedding preparation and wedding services on celebrating this kind of love. Then what we say and celebrate in weddings will be good news for the dancers and for the church.

Notes

¹ William Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 127.

About the authors

Gary and Lydia Neufeld Harder have been married for forty-four years. They are semi-retired from their respective careers, Gary as a pastor and Lydia as a professor of theology. Now they work part-time as transitional pastors of Wideman Mennonite Church, Markham, Ontario, and they co-teach a course in church and ministry at Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario.