

Closer

A REALISTIC BOOK
ABOUT INTIMACY FOR
CHRISTIAN MARRIAGES

Adrian and
Celia Reynolds

“We loved reading this book and found it hopeful, optimistic, even liberating! It’s written in a disarming and fun style that both challenges and speaks to every married couple, whether newlyweds or old-timers like us who are looking forward to applying all this wonderful wisdom about one of our favorite shared activities! We are experiencing a deeper level of communication, resulting in greater holiness and joy and intimacy towards one another.”

MARK AND LUCY GREEN Mark is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and President of White Horse Inn

“I would recommend this book to all marrieds and soon-to-be marrieds. It places the erotic joy of sex within the “creation, fall, redemption, new-creation narrative” and the expression of physical sexual intimacy in the context of holiness and sanctification. In a culture where sexual intimacy is commodified and cheapened, it is an encouragement to couples to ground their sex life in the intimacy, selfless love and oneness that Christ and his bride enjoy.”

PATRICIA WEERAKOON Christian sexologist; author; former Director, Graduate Program of Sexual Health at the University of Sydney

“Adrian and Celia, with modesty, wisdom and humour, ask and answer some of the taboo questions that surround sexual intimacy in Christian marriage. They establish five principles that are biblical and (therefore) practical, and which any couple at any stage of their married life would find helpful to review regularly. This is a book that is enjoyable to read and enjoyable to put into practice.”

PHILIP MOORE Network Director, ACTS 29 Europe

“Adrian and Celia have done a great job with *Closer*: a brave and realistic book, refreshingly honest and open about the issue of sex within marriage. Giving clear gospel foundations and principles, they encourage and help couples to communicate and navigate through the big questions. We found the emphasis on communication and the reminder that the pursuit of a godly sex life is part of our pursuit

of holiness especially helpful. Having counselled countless numbers of couples over the past 20 years, we know that this is a much needed book that we will be encouraging every married couple in our church to read.”

STEVE AND SIAN ROBINSON

Steve is the Pastor of Cornerstone Church, Liverpool, UK

“This refreshingly frank book is cleverly written so as to be informative without being embarrassing. Thoroughly biblical, highly accessible, with principles that will be relevant for couples whatever stage they are at. Fantastic as a resource for marriage prep—or for any marriages looking to explore God’s design for intimacy.”

JONTY AND LINDA ALLCOCK

Jonty is the Pastor of The Globe Church, London

Linda is the author of *Deeper Still*

“Adrian and Celia have written a little book on a big subject. Over the last two decades, as we have invested in our marriage and in Christian ministry, we have faced many situations ourselves and have seen many couples around us struggling with intimacy. We believe that to have at hand this honest and very personal yet deeply biblical treatment on this much needed topic will help many and will bring blessing and joy to couples who want to glorify God in every area of their lives.”

BEN AND HENI UHRIN

Ben is President of the Slovak Baptist Union

“Too often sex is either addressed spiritually without acknowledging the realities of life or it’s over simplified as if we should all have it figured out by now. Despite the challenge, Adrian and Celia have beautifully interwoven the wonder of God’s gift and design with being practical about the challenges and questions bombarding us—giving us a higher view of what being closer is really about.”

JEFF AND SARAH WALTON

Authors, *Together Through the Storms*

Closer

Adrian and
Celia Reynolds

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Closer

A realistic book about intimacy for Christian marriages

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SECTION 1

The beginning

How would you complete the following sentence?
In the beginning...

You might be someone who knows your Bible well, in which case you would perhaps complete the sentence the way the Old Testament does in Genesis—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”. Or maybe you thought of the New Testament wording from the start of John’s Gospel—“In the beginning was the Word...”? Full marks.

But you might take a more philosophical approach. *In the beginning there was nothing*, you could reply. You would also score highly. God made all things out of nothing (Hebrews 11 v 3), so considered from this angle, this answer is also right.

Or maybe you are more theological in your thinking (and, let’s be honest, just a little abstract). *In the beginning, God*. That’s your answer. Just, “God”. Period. Full stop. Your science teacher might not score this an A+, but your religious studies or philosophy teacher might award the top grade. Right again.

But seeing as this is a book about sex, let us suggest another way to complete the sentence.

In the beginning, *God thought of sex.*

We doubt you'd ever complete the sentence this way. Indeed, you might think that such a sentence is bordering on blasphemy, or at the very least, it's pushing the boundaries a little. But that kind of response reveals precisely the problem that many Christians have about sex. Married believers know sex is enjoyable, fun, intimate, delightful: but they can't quite bring themselves to include it in a list of holy disciplines.

Couples should pray. And read their Bibles. And belong to a church. And be hospitable. And be godly. And all of these in increasing measure, or at least with increasing delight and skill. And to this list, we want to add delight in one another and in the sexual union that God has gifted you. It's why we've written this book.

For in the beginning, *God thought of sex.*

IT BEGAN SO WELL

The first two chapters of the Bible describe God's "very good" creation. After each day of creation activity, readers are greeted with the same refrain: "And God saw that it was good". Then, at the end of day six, when God creates the land-based animals and man and woman, the refrain alters a little. It becomes "God saw all that he had made, and it was *very good*" (Genesis 1 v 31).

This is his divine verdict on creation. It is perfect in every way—fit for the purpose for which he had made it. No sin. No evil. No death. No pandemics. No environmental

disasters. And this perfection was in the bedroom too. No selfish motives. No pain. No frustration. No rape. No sexual assault. Just perfect.

The pinnacle of this perfection was the creation of man and woman themselves. We should not separate them out from the rest of creation entirely; they form—together with the entire world—part of God’s universal creating prowess. Adam and Eve are made from the same material as the animal kingdom (compare Genesis 1 v 24 with 2 v 7). Nevertheless, it is impossible to read these opening chapters of the Bible and not realise that humankind is something special.

Only humankind is made in God’s image (Genesis 1 v 27). Only humankind is addressed directly (Genesis 1 v 28). Only humankind has the actual breath of God within them (Genesis 2 v 7). And this specialness is exemplified in the role that God gives to his first people.

It is summarised in verse 28 of the first chapter: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’”

At first glance this creation mandate (as it is sometimes called) seems to have two elements. One is procreation: “Be fruitful and increase in number”. The second is to “rule over” creation. While it may sometimes be useful to consider them separately, it should be pretty obvious that they are not entirely distinct.

For the world of God's creating power is a big place. There are lots of animals. Lots of birds. Lots of fields to plough. Lots of lakes to fish, and so on. Adam and Eve may be the first of humankind, but if they are going to fulfil the command to rule over "every living creature" they are certainly not going to be able to do it alone. Hence the first part of the mandate: "Be fruitful and increase in number".

And how are they to do this? The answer is, of course, sex. Martin Luther, the German reformer, famously quipped that if he had been planning things he would have gone for the easier approach of bringing people into the world the same way God did—through forming them from the ground. But he was also the first to acknowledge that he was not the Great Planner. God was, and is. And his perfect plan was for Adam and Eve to make love and make babies.

In the beginning, *God thought of sex.*

THINK BIG

However, when seen in the whole sweep of the Scriptures, Genesis 1 – 2 presents a picture of sexual union which is even more profound than this. Read on to the end of chapter 2 and its retelling of the creation account. Once man and woman are created, and Adam has sung the first recorded chart topper to his new love (v 23), the chapter closes with a remarkable statement:

That is why a man leaves a father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame. v 24-25

Here is the first marriage and the author deliberately takes Adam and Eve's story and makes it our own. We know he is doing this because the first sentence doesn't actually describe Adam's situation precisely: he has no father and mother to leave. Rather, the narrative takes Adam and Eve and appropriates their story to the whole of history. This verse is for all who will come in their line. It's for us.

In their union, God establishes (still as part of his perfect creation, note) a pattern for all time. This union is a "one-flesh" union. Our minds might immediately jump to sex when we read this phrase, but in fact it describes something more profound than even the act of a husband and wife sleeping together. After all, if a couple cannot enjoy sexual intimacy for a season (for example because of illness) it does not stop them being a one-flesh unit. However, it would also be true to say that nothing expresses this oneness like sex does.

If you are married (and we're assuming that most people reading this book are), you know this is true. Think of all the things you like doing together: sharing a glass of wine over a cosy dinner, perhaps; screaming together for your team at a sports event, or singing along with your favourite band at a live gig; having a great holiday experience. All good. But none of them (or anything else you could think of) really expresses "two becoming one" like sexual intimacy can and does, either physically or emotionally.

So far so good. But there is more. For as the Bible story unfolds, we discover that this one-flesh union of a man and a woman, joined together in marriage, and consummated and

enjoyed in the bedroom, is itself a picture of something even greater. Whether it is in the pictures of the Old Testament or the explicit teaching of the New, the Holy Spirit inspired Bible writers to see this joining together as a picture of the eternal and pure relationship between Christ and his church, the Saviour and his beloved, the Bridegroom and his bride.

Take just one place—Paul’s letter to the Ephesians:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5 v 25-32

The apostle Paul quotes this very verse from Genesis to make—initially—a point about how husbands are to love their wives. But in so doing, he seamlessly moves into a more profound point: that at its root, marriage is itself a picture of a deeper relationship—“Christ and the church”.

The Church of England *Book of Common Prayer* marriage

service—in words which date back to 1549—recognises this connection and makes it explicit in the famous words read out at countless weddings:

Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this Congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy Matrimony; which is an honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church.

TAKE ME TO HEAVEN

What this means for married couples is simple. Our marriages themselves reflect a deeper truth than two loving individuals brought together for a lifetime: they reflect the one-flesh union between Christ and his church. And just as sexual intimacy is the deepest *experience* of our earthly one-flesh union, so it must follow that our sexual intimacy is the deepest *reflection* of the extraordinary oneness that being joined to Christ brings.

It is more than making babies; it is making a point.

All of this means that sex, in its proper context, is holy. Not only is it part of God's very good creation, but it reflects the purest and deepest relationship any human can experience: that of being part of Christ's bride, joined to him for all eternity. Sex is many things, as you will no doubt know! It is fun, it is frustrating. It is messy, it is joyful. It is funny (sometimes!), it is consoling. But above all, it is holy. By that

we mean that God sets it apart as a gift to married couples to serve him as we seek the good of one another.

The historian Tom Holland recognises this in his recent bestseller *Dominion*, a book which charts the influence of Christianity upon the world. He writes that in this holy understanding of marriage...

... was another marker of the revolution that Christianity had brought to the erotic. The insistence of Scripture that a man and woman, whenever they took to the marital bed, were joined as Christ and his Church were joined, becoming one flesh, gave to both a rare dignity.

Or, as one of our friends put it in a slightly more down-to-earth way, when a husband or wife invites their spouse to “Take me to heaven, darling!” they are speaking much better than they know.

The story of sex does not end with Genesis 2, however.

If only it did.

Instead, things now take a turn for the worse.

MUCH WORSE

It is impossible to think of the goodness of sexual intimacy without also contemplating its corruption. There is joy in the bedroom, but there is also frustration. There is selfless devotion, but there is also self-absorbed fantasy. There is mutual serving, but there is also rape and assault. There is freely giving oneself, but there is also sexual blackmail. And so the list goes on.

All of this corruption can be traced back to one chapter of the Bible—Genesis 3. Theologian and author Don Carson says that to truly understand humanity’s issues, we need to understand humanity’s root problem—and according to Genesis 3, that problem is a rejection of God, his good rule and his gracious plan.

It doesn’t take long for Adam and Eve to assert their independence from God and pay the consequences. This third chapter of the Bible tells their sorry tale which is the story we all share. In essence, it is the story of the first couple seeing themselves in place of God and paying the price. Their rebellion against their Creator and rejection of his one rule for the garden draws his swift and righteous justice, what we sometimes call “the curse”.

The curse affects every element of the creation mandate. Verses 15 and 16 of chapter 3 directly impact both the command to be fruitful (for childbearing will be a painful process) and the command to rule together (for both man and woman will now be in confused conflict).

Moreover, the very nature of the work of ruling that they are given to do will be affected. “Cursed is the ground because of you” (v 17). The creation mandate is not removed. But it is made much more difficult because of sin. It should not surprise us therefore that sin affects sex, given that we have seen how integral sex is to God’s very good creation. Each of us sees how comprehensive this impact is.

For example, we know that, although there is lots of sex

around, not all of it is holy. Context counts for a lot. In a marriage relationship, between a man and a woman, sex is sanctified, though sin can still make it unholy. Outside of this relationship, it is *never* holy; it is quite the opposite, in fact. For it neither reflects the creation setting that God has given, nor pictures the exclusive relationship Christ has with his church.

As our friend Sam Allberry writes in his excellent book *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?*, “Like any powerful force, it needs to be used rightly, which means being used in the right setting”. We should not think this is an odd concept. There are plenty of examples of how the setting makes all the difference.

Consider driving a car. If we told you that we were driving at 65 mph, you would need to know a little more before you knew if we were driving carefully and legally, or not. If the journey was on a fast road with a 70 mph limit, you would consider that to be careful, safe driving. If, instead, it was past a school with a 20 mph limit, you would consider that to be the height of recklessness, and we would be fully deserving of the firm hand of the law.

And so it is with sex. Context is everything. And what is holy and good and wholesome in marriage, is equally unholy and damaging outside of it. As couples come to recognise this distinction, they can find that past sinful experiences hold them back in their marriages. As this is such an important issue to address, and possibly one that you personally are wrestling with, we have written specifically about two aspects of it in the supplementary chapters at the end.

Even if this is not your experience, every couple also feels the effects of the fall on their own sexual relationship. This is the closer-to-home-application of the reality of Genesis 3. Sometimes, theologians talk about the doctrine of “total depravity”: not that everything is as bad as it could be (it is patently not), but that everything we think and do is affected by sin to some extent.

You feel this in the bedroom. We know you do, because we do, and everyone we have spoken to does as well. Motives, thoughts, actions and the ability of our bodies to function the way we want them to—all are affected by sin. So sexual fulfilment is affected directly. Some of these sins are obvious. Some are hidden (such as a wandering imagination).

All of this is a world away from “naked, and they felt no shame” (Genesis 2 v 25). We all want that experience. We all long for honesty, closeness, the exquisite delight of being seen, appreciated, accepted and cherished for what we are. Yet we also want to cover up, push people away and turn off the light, because sin permeates every fibre of our being. That tension between ‘close but not too close’ in even the best of marriages is a constant reminder that brokenness is in the world.

Moreover, the infection of sin also has an indirect impact. Even when there is no direct causation, sickness is in the world because sin is. It’s not usually right to make direct links between sin and individual illnesses we might suffer from—Jesus certainly does not (see John 9 v 1-3, for example). But in the Bible’s big picture, sickness is an alien invader into God’s

perfect world. The response “not tonight, I have a headache” is also ultimately a consequence of Genesis 3.

In his book, *The Genesis of Sex*, O. Palmer Robertson points out how the fall, and the sin that results, leads to a dramatic corruption of God’s plan for intimacy in just the first book of the Bible. He shows how “carelessness, lust, adultery, rape, incest and homosexuality” all flow from Adam and Eve’s first fall from grace within just a few generations. We should not be surprised when we see the same drama playing out in our own lives and the lives of those around us. Only saddened.

THINGS CAN ONLY GET BETTER. AND BETTER.

But we are not without hope. For we know that in the Bible story creation and the fall are followed by redemption. It is the gospel which gives Christians hope. This gospel is the good news that God himself, in the person of Jesus, has entered into the broken world in order to rescue us, and it. In Jesus who died and rose again there is both forgiveness and power to change. Our sin is no longer counted against us; nor is it our master. As the old hymn writer Charles Wesley so succinctly and memorably puts it, “He breaks the power of cancelled sin”.

And this glorious gospel affects all of life. We are not just spiritual beings, transformed by faith in Christ on the inside only: we all have experienced and continue to pray for external transformation too.

Take our speech for example. We know that without Christ and his indwelling Spirit, our words, like every other part of

our being, are tainted by sin. We don't always tell the truth. We speak rashly. We lose our tempers.. We gossip. But we hope and expect that the gospel will change us. We don't expect to carry on with the same sinful speech and we're frustrated when these old patterns of behaviour creep through.

It's just the same when it comes to sexual intimacy. We should expect redemption to make a difference to us in the bedroom as much as it does on the twitter feed. In fact, we often tell people that when it comes to sex, Christians should be joyful optimists. They should not only treasure and enjoy sex, recognising its place in God's economy; they should also pray, hope and trust for it to become ever more sanctified. More of this shortly.

Redemption is not the end of the matter, however. In the pattern of Scripture, creation-fall-redemption is followed by consummation. For Christians, we should expect better in this life as the Spirit transforms us. And we should expect *much* better as we await the most glorious of hopes: "Just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man" (1 Corinthians 15 v 49). Better, yes. And one day, much better.

We realise that any talk of consummation in a book about sex runs the risk of being seriously misunderstood! For the purposes of being absolutely clear, we are not talking about sexual consummation here: the initial joining together of a husband and wife, thankfully not in today's society an event requiring witnesses (though it has in times past).

Spiritual consummation is quite a different thing. It reflects that the whole of human history is headed somewhere. God's plan is to bring things to a glorious climax (if you'll excuse the pun). The apostle Paul explains this in the same section of Ephesians that we considered earlier. This climax will be the full and final joining together of Christ the Bridegroom with the church his bride: "to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5 v 27).

And when this glorious consummation takes place, there will no longer be any need for the earthly picture God has given us now. There will be no marriage in heaven because we will have the greater reality to which it points. There will be no sexual intimacy in heaven because every believer—whatever their marital state on earth—will experience in every single moment the perfect and indescribable joy of being joined intimately to their Saviour.

All of which gives Christians a good and right perspective on sex. It is a temporary joy before the eternal reality takes over. As another of our friends, pastor and author Christopher Ash, puts it, "Sex is not *ultimately* important. But it is *jolly* important". Maybe for the moment we could all echo the Kane Gang's 1980s classic: "This could be the closest thing to heaven I have ever known". But that's not a song we'll be singing when Jesus returns. We'll have no need.

All of this puts us at odds with the world. When we first wrote about sex, we sent a copy of what we had prepared to Suzi Godson. Suzi is one of the UK's foremost sexual counsellors,

author of many books and countless articles. We have always liked her writing, valuing—as she seems to do—many of the same things we value: patience, commitment, selflessness and so on. She kindly read what we had written and wrote us a short note in return. “I wish you well with your book”, she wrote, “but you clearly have a completely different view of sex from me.”

At first, we were a little annoyed. Was the outworking of our view really so different? Yet as we reflected on her response, we realised she was exactly right, for in all the common ground on behaviour, communication and resolution that we shared, Suzi would never be able to say the one thing that we believe is a prerequisite to any Christian discussion about making love:

In the beginning, *God thought of sex.*