

Speaking of Sex: Why the Song of Songs is Apologetically Important

Offering balanced biblical teaching about sex is important not just pastorally but apologetically. Sex can point beyond itself to the numinous and divine. Our culture tells us we are “nothing but mammals”, but sex can offer hints that we are souls. People want to know that Christianity is true in a modernist sense, but also that it is life-enhancing – that it ‘works’. When seekers are examining Christian sexual ethics, they may be really asking: is your God a cosmic killjoy or an all-wise friend in whose presence is fullness of joy and pleasure for evermore? That is a fair theological question which deserves both experiential and intellectual answers, and to which the Song of Solomon is very relevant. But does anyone teach it? In this session the speaker will explore the Biblical view of sex, in contrast with other popular views, concluding that Christian ethics on sexuality are indeed life-enhancing, and thus reflect God’s character and good purposes.

Grenville Kent has lectured in Old Testament and Arts at Wesley Institute in Sydney, Australia, for a decade, and has spoken at evangelical meetings in 25+ countries, particularly for young adults on campus. He co-edited the recent IVP book *‘He Began with Moses...’: Preaching the Old Testament Today*. His PhD (Manchester) analyses Old Testament narrative and his DMin (ACT) is in Apologetics. Grenville also holds a BA and MA in Film and is producing an apologetics film series found at www.bigquestions.com.

A. Our cultural moment: a snapshot

1. Sex is everywhere. Pornification
2. The same-sex debate

“One of the key blockers... when it came to Christianity, was the church’s stance on homosexuality, with 3 in 10 (29%) Australians expressing that this completely blocked them in engaging with Christianity.” -Australian Communities Report, McCrindle Research, p.15 www.towardsbelief.org.au/background.aspx

Actor Ann Hathaway was raised Roman Catholic and considered being a nun, but rejected the religion at 15 after learning her brother Michael was gay. ‘I couldn’t support a religion that didn’t support my brother... Now I call myself a nondenominational Christian, because I haven’t found the religion for me.’ Katy Hall "[Anne Hathaway quit Catholicism for her gay brother](#)". *Huffington Post* (Feb 9, 2010)

3. The clergy abuse scandal vs. Jesus. (Matthew 18:6)
4. A major image problem for Christians: anti-sex, repressive, authoritarian, hypocritical.

B. Need for a coherent response.

1. Not just moralising and culture warring, but worldview discussion
2. Three views of a human being (a comparative pop anthropology)
 - a. Secular materialism: ‘nothing but mammals’
 - b. Traditional religious moralism: ‘Stop that, you’ll go blind!’
 - c. *Nephesh* view: Mind-body-spirit
3. Is God good? Is Christian teaching life-affirming?
4. Is the gospel good news about sex? Does it redeem all creation, including our sexuality?

C. Challenges in teaching the Song

1. Rarely preached: ‘functional de-canonization’ (David Carr)
2. Rarely taught to pastors.
3. Quest for the historical Solomon. Language and dating.
4. The allegorical method

D. Approaches to the Song of Solomon

1. It’s erotic, and inspired Scripture.
2. It’s wisdom literature.

3. It's subtle theology.
4. It's a metaphor.
5. It's outside the garden of Eden.
6. It shows redemption.
7. It's ancient (and sometimes difficult).

E. Samples

He sings:

I dream of you, my love,
As my filly among Pharaoh's chariots,
Causing chaos in the cavalry. (1:9-10)

He sings:

My wife, my closest friend is a walled garden,
A private spring, a secret fountain.
You grow a whole orchard of pomegranates
All the sweetest fruits,
Fragrant henna and spikenard,
Spikenard and saffron,
Ginger and cinnamon,
All the aromatic trees of frankincense
Myrrh and aloes,
With all the finest spices –
Your secret garden beds have their own source
Of living water
And streams from the snowy peaks of Lebanon
(4:12-15)

She sings:

Then wake up, South wind
Blow, North wind.
Blow on my garden,
Carry its spicy scents
So my beloved enters his garden
And eats its pleasant fruits. (4:16)

He says:

I'm entering my garden, my soulmate, my wife,
I'm enjoying my myrrh and my spice
I'm tasting my honey,
Wine and milk at the same time. (5:1a)

She sings:

My lover is bursting with life.
He stands above ten thousand.
His head is like the purest gold of a statue, hair
wavy and black as a raven.
His eyes are like doves by the rivers,
Mounted like jewels in a milky-white
background,
His cheeks are like gardens of spice and perfume
His lips are among the lilies, smooth as *lotion
parfumée*
He has great golden arms like a statue's,
decorated with jewels.
His horn is elephantine ivory, a scepter studded
with sapphires.
His legs are pillars of marble, set on bases of
pure gold.
He is tall and straight like a cedar forest...
His mouth is sweetness itself.
He is totally desirable.
This is my lover and this is my friend, Jerusalem
girls. (5:10-16)

She says:

Place me like a seal over your heart,
Wear me like a medal on your arm for all the
world to see our love.
For love is stronger than death,
As jealous as the grave.

It burns like a blazing fire, like an almighty
flame
Floods cannot quench love, rivers cannot wash it
away.
If a wealthy man offered you everything to buy
love,
You could only laugh in his face. (8:6,7)

Male chorus sings:
We have a little sister
And she has no breasts.

What will we do for her
When she's besieged by men who want her?
If her walls are unbroken,
We'll build her a silver battlement.
But if she swings like a door,
We'll board her up with cedar. (8:8,9)

She sings:
I was a castle wall – impenetrable, impregnable
–
With breasts like stone towers!
But to my beloved,
I became a city of peace. (8:10)

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References

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