

DIVINE
SEX

A COMPELLING VISION FOR
CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIPS
IN A HYPERSEXUALIZED AGE

JONATHAN GRANT



BrazosPress

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex*
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Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-1-58743-369-6

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15 16 17 18 19 20 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Esther

Contents

Foreword by James K. A. Smith 9

Acknowledgments 13

1. Adjusting Our Vision: *Christian Formation and Relationships in a Sexualized Age* 15

Part 1 Mapping the Modern Sexual Imaginary

2. Seeking the Truth Within: *Love, Sex, and Relationships within the Culture of Authenticity* 29
3. Three Paths to Freedom on the Road to Nowhere: *The Dead End of Modern Liberty* 54
4. We Are What We Acquire: *Consumerism as a Corrupting Dynamic* 73
5. The Hypersexual Self: *Sex and Relationships as Happiness Technologies* 96
6. Churches without Steeples: *The Loss of Transcendence and the Atomistic Worldview* 116

Part 2 Charting a New Course for Christian Formation

7. Searching for Truth That Transforms: *Introducing a Christian Social Imaginary* 133
8. Seeing the Good Life and Becoming What We See: *The Role of Vision within Sexual Formation* 136

Contents

9. Getting to the Heart of Things: *Redeeming Desire and
Becoming Our True Selves* 165
10. Living the Gospel Story: *Narrative Discipleship within the
Narrative Community* 188
11. Becoming What We Do: *The Formative Power of Practices* 215
- Epilogue: *Melodies of Heaven* 237
- Select Bibliography 239
- Index 247

Foreword

JAMES K. A. SMITH

When you write a book on desire, people expect you to talk about sex. When you talk about *agape* as rightly ordered *eros* and describe human beings as “erotic” creatures, the temperature in the room clicks up a couple of degrees, and people are waiting for a libidinous turn in the conversation.

But I’m the *last* person who should be writing about sex. Indeed, in that respect, I am a complete square, an alien from another age. I was married when I was nineteen years old and have had sex with exactly one person—the lovely woman who has been my wife for twenty-five years. While I can recall pages of dirty magazines floating around the locker room, my formative years were not haunted by the ubiquity of pornography we know today. I attended a Bible college where women were allowed into the men’s dorm rooms for exactly two hours *per semester*, under close surveillance. So the worlds of *Sex in the City* or Lena Dunham’s *Girls* are pretty much unimaginable to me.

Still, I have four children (which I hope is some proof that I *like* sex!) and have a deep awareness that they have grown up in a foreign country. While we have open lines of communication and we talk about both the gifts and guardrails of healthy sexuality from a biblical perspective, I sometimes fear that their mother and I must sound like those parents in Charlie Brown movies: a kind of droning “Wah wah wah wah waaaah” that, however well

intentioned, is a language that makes no sense to younger Christians in the twenty-first century. This isn't because the transcendent norms of biblical discipleship are passé but rather because the world in and from which our children hear them has radically changed. This doesn't mean we need to revise or reformulate a biblical understanding of sex, but it does mean we need to recontextualize it so that it can be heard anew for what it is: an enduring gift for human flourishing.

This is why I'm so grateful that Jonathan Grant has written *Divine Sex*. He displaces the reductionistic way traditional Christian morality is usually articulated: as though sufficient knowledge coupled with (Herculean!) willpower are all we need. This kind of "thinking-thing-ism" tends to forget that, in discussions of sex, there are other organs beyond the brain that might be, shall we say, *relevant* to the discussion. Our sexual lives don't just play out in rational, deliberate choices we make, as though sex is the conclusion to some syllogism. Our sexual lives are ways of life we live into because our hearts and minds have been captivated by a picture of the so-called good life. As Grant rightly emphasizes—resonating with my argument in both *Desiring the Kingdom* and *Imagining the Kingdom*—our sexual being-in-the-world is affected by the formation of our imagination. We are creatures of habits, and such habits are formed in us by the rhythms and rituals we are immersed in, even (indeed, even more so) if we don't realize it. Our loves and longings and desires—including our sexual longings—are not just biological instincts; they are learned. But the pedagogies of desire that train us rarely look like lectures or sermons. We learn to love on the register of the imagination.

Grant sympathetically recognizes the ways in which Christians are embedded in cultural patterns that shape us without our realizing it. We have to appreciate, he rightly points out, "the extent to which the modern self, with its focus on being free in the negative sense of being free *from* other people, has seeped into the Christian imagination and distorted our vision of sexuality and relationships." Or as he puts it a little later, "The red thread running throughout this book is the conviction that we are, more than we realize, *made* by our context." This is why the first half of *Divine Sex* is focused on a diagnosis of the cultural milieu that forms and shapes our imagination—including how we imagine sex in ways we might never articulate. And Grant's analysis is stellar: it is pointed and honest

without being alarmist and despairing. Drawing on (and lucidly translating) the important work of scholars and social scientists like Charles Taylor, Christian Smith, and Mark Regnerus, as well as engaging some of my own work, Grant helps us understand how and why the world that forms us has changed—and hence what effective Christian *counter*formation would look like. The diagnosis of our cultural condition is not then taken as license for revision of biblical norms; instead, it provides the impetus for a fresh articulation of why those norms could be received as liberating us from the enslavement that parades itself as sexual “freedom” today.

The result is pastoral theology *as* ethnography, written from the front lines of our secular age and growing out of ministry in London and elsewhere. Grant isn’t writing from some protected enclave where traditional plausibility structures are alive and well. No, this book is written from the trenches of ministry in some of our most pluralistic—and hedonistic—global cities. Its voice is at once theological and pastoral: a brilliant work of cultural analysis that seems to always keep embodied names and faces in view. (I also have to admit that I am jealous of Grant’s uncanny facility with metaphor, simile, and the word pictures that paint his argument. As my Pentecostal sisters and brothers like to say, “This stuff will *preach!*”)

This is a book that needed to be written. I pray that it will make its way into the hands of not only pastors and parents but also the wide array of those leaders who care for the body of Christ in the twenty-first century. It speaks both to those who are single and to those who are married. And it is a must-read for anyone working with young people today; it should be read by youth pastors and university chaplains as well as by student-life divisions at Christian colleges and universities. Absorbing Grant’s insight, analysis, and constructive argument should not only deepen how we are talking about sex and discipleship; it should also give us new intentionality about the church as a formative community, enabling us to live into a different script that is good news: our sexual lives are hidden with Christ in God.

Acknowledgments

When you embark on a major faith project, there are many people who wish you well but a much smaller group who genuinely travel with you on the journey. This book belongs to them.

Studying and writing is a stage of life that involves a lot of plowing, sowing, and watering without yielding immediate fruit. In this hidden time, Donald Dewar, Josh and Carly Arnold, Steve and Rachel Cole, Clare Gates, Julie Noon, and Debs Paterson provided generous financial support without ever being asked. For their practical love and support I am eternally grateful.

I am also hugely appreciative of great friends in Vancouver who were a constant source of encouragement and fun: JJ and Lisa Kissinger, Dan and Krista Carlson, and our home group, including Sarah Clarke, Lisl Baker, and John Gardner, who provided a willing “laboratory” for the live-testing of many of the ideas contained in this book! I am privileged to have had mentors in Don Lewis and Reid Johnson, who were always available for conversation and prayer.

Anne Cochran and her formidable group of praying women in North Carolina have tracked with me every step of the way, while Kathy Gillin and Pauline Kirke provided invaluable contributions to the manuscript from different ends of the earth.

The concept, research, and academic spine for this book took shape as a ThM thesis at Regent College, Vancouver, BC. Many people provided

Acknowledgments

input into that project, but I especially want to thank Professor Bruce Hindmarsh for his generous encouragement.

Special thanks also to our dear friend Cherith Fee Nordling. She has been a kindred friend and cheerleader for some years, as well as an inspiring example of the rare phenomenon of one who wholeheartedly pursues life in Christ. It was Cherith's personal commendation that led to James Ernest at Baker Publishing graciously receiving and considering an earlier manuscript of this book. Thank you, James!

The simple truth is that this book would not exist without the determination and huge contribution of my wife, Esther. It was together that we first began to work and minister in the area of relationships, and this book is a continuation of that partnership.

Esther has carried the vision for this book as deeply as I have, and each time this project looked to have foundered on yet another reef, her tenacity and inspiration kept the project afloat and moving forward. Esther has a unique ability to make abstract ideas tangible and practicable in real lives, and without her contribution this would be a much less readable and useful book.

Indeed, the reason I believe passionately in the beauty and hope of Christian relationships is in large part because of her friendship, love, and perseverance through these last twenty-one years of marriage.

Finally, I want to thank my parents, Ian and Mary Grant, who have modeled a life of trusting obedience to God.

I

Adjusting Our Vision

Christian Formation and Relationships in a Sexualized Age

A few years ago, while celebrating our fifteenth wedding anniversary, my wife, Esther, and I stayed at the base of the twin mountains of Whistler and Blackcomb, the mammoth ski resort on Canada's West Coast. Our hotel was right at the foot of the ski fields, so that these huge mountains shot straight up outside our window. The view was spectacular, and it was mesmerizing to watch the many gondolas and chairlifts climb the slopes before passing over vertiginous ridges and out of sight. As the spring sun glistened off the icy slopes, it was easy to forget that this is rugged terrain, exciting and terrifying in equal measure. Deaths are common during the ski season here because of the huge *off-piste* area and constant avalanche risk.

Looking up at the awe-inspiring scene that morning, I was struck by the parallels between this environment and the state of relationships today, even within the church. Like those imposing mountains, love and romance have become alluring but risky places. Our culture's romantic idealism encourages us to boldly explore the boundless playground of sex and

relationships. Yet we quickly succumb to “exposure” when faced with the corrosive elements of our culture’s hypersexuality and its fatalism about lasting commitments. This combination of factors has turned romantic relationships from places of adventure and exhilarating risk into crevasses of death and despair.

Having tossed away the map and abandoned the network of chairlifts and gondolas that could orient us and safely guide us in our sexual lives, our culture finds itself lost and desperate in a veritable whiteout. The prevailing wisdom says, “Find your own way,” and yet these mountains are no place for the creative novice. The evidence is in, and it’s compelling. Our cultural experiment has left a trail of relational wreckage, and it has left us in a state of denial about where we stand.

As a society, we have encouraged powerful sexual scripts that shape the narrative world in which modern relationships unfold. We have, for instance, put our confidence in sex but lost our faith in marriage. Young people are encouraged to delay “settling down” while becoming sexually active at ever-younger ages. Research suggests that for many young people, dating and sex are becoming synonymous—one simply follows from the other. Fully 84 percent of American 18- to 23-year-olds have had premarital sex, while this figure rises to 95 percent for all Americans (of any age) who have had sex outside of marriage.¹ Beyond the realm of real-life relationships, virtual sex—thanks to the wildly successful innovation of online pornography—is flooding into mainstream culture.

All this unfolds against a backdrop of failed marriages that, over several generations, has undermined the imaginative possibility of marriage as a permanent form of relationship. This cultural environment makes the Christian vision of sexuality and marriage seem naive, unreasonable, or at least unworkable as a real-life philosophy—even for many Christians.

And yet in the midst of this cultural fatalism lies the strong hope of the Christian vision of relationships. In our hotel room that morning, I read about the origins of the Whistler ski resort. In its beginnings in the 1960s, critics argued that these mountains were too hostile for a commercial ski resort; they were simply too inaccessible, wild, and unpredictable. But through a massive network of roads, chairlifts, and gondolas, an otherwise

1. Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

impenetrable context has become an exhilarating place to explore and enjoy—even becoming a venue fit for the Winter Olympics. We face a similar challenge in relation to sex and relationships today. With lifelong committed marriages no longer considered “natural,” we are tempted by the warmth of the spring sun to get involved and explore—and yet the weather seems to quickly change as we find ourselves getting deeper into uncharted territory.

Tragically, the church has absorbed many of the same perspectives and so has come to reflect the surrounding culture rather than transform it. Yet this need not be our fate. Within this crisis, God’s vision of life is a plan for comprehensive human flourishing in all its fullness. Just like those chairlifts and gondolas, it provides orientation, know-how, and momentum for exploring and enjoying the depth, breadth, and glory of God’s creation, particularly in our romantic relationships.

The seeds of this book were planted several years ago when Esther and I were pastors at a church in London. The vast majority who attended the church were young, single adults in their twenties and thirties. As we got to know their many different stories over a period of years, we felt a growing sense that addressing the area of relationships and sexuality was one of the biggest challenges we faced. Because of our responsibility to disciple and shepherd this generation within that church, we couldn’t ignore their confusion. Relational issues were commonly the most difficult and vexing aspects of their lives. For many, intimate relationships were a major source of confusion, frustration, disappointment, anger, and often despair as they moved through their thirties and into their forties without any “success” in finding love. This often resulted in a crisis of faith: “How could God lead me into this lonely pit when I’ve followed him and all his rules about sex?” Others seemed to marginalize their Christian faith and sexualize their relationships while not knowing what to do with the guilt that followed. At the same time, we were shocked by the number of friends, Christian and otherwise, whose marriages were splitting apart after only a few years.

In addition, a relatively toxic atmosphere was developing in the church between the sexes. Each side pointed across the divide, blaming the other side for what was going wrong. The men seemed to have all the choices of partners but couldn’t commit to one relationship, while the women only wanted to be approached by the “right” guy and treated anyone they perceived as “wrong” with disdain. The likelihood of rejection made guys

reluctant to risk themselves by initiating relationships. Couples who subsequently split up found it difficult to be in church together, and so one or both would usually leave.

It was not a universally grim picture, of course. People were still getting together, and the church was an exciting place to be, both spiritually and socially. But we realized that the church's discipleship needed to address this critical issue, or else we were just putting our heads in the sand. We were seeing a disconnect between people's spiritual worlds and their Friday- and Saturday-night lives. They seemed to be getting their view of God from the church and their view of sex and relationships from popular culture.

We also saw that churches across the board were struggling to address this complex issue. It is, I believe, a critical challenge for the church, as this generation of young adults becomes ground zero in the sea change brought about by the modern world and its approach to intimate relationships. We, as the church, need to catch up. We must work to understand the needs of this generation as it deals with the brokenness and fragmentation of modern sexuality.

This recognition was the beginning of a journey for me, both in thought and in ministry, to explore and address some of these issues. There seemed to be courses and information available but not a lot of writing about how to approach this area in a way that might be transformational. Esther and I began by hosting a course focused on relationships—strictly for “non-marrieds,” which was loudly cheered when we announced it in church! The course struck a resonant chord within our community and attracted people from other churches, which confirmed to us the hunger that exists in this area of life. More recently, I have sought to understand and answer some key questions: What is it about our cultural moment that has led to such a complex dysfunction in sexual relationships? In what significant ways is our secular context shaping our sexuality? And, in response to this, what is the Christian vision of relationships, and how can Christian leaders give that vision power in people's real lives? This book is an attempt to address these questions.

The importance of this area is confirmed to us almost every week. Recently, my wife and I spent an evening helping a couple prepare for their approaching marriage. Although both appeared to have a mature Christian faith, they described some weighty issues that they were struggling to come

to terms with. He had a long-standing addiction to online pornography, and they both were concerned about how this would affect their marriage. In addition, the bride-to-be had suddenly become uncertain whether she was attracted to her fiancé at all. The previous week, we had met with three single friends, all eligible women in their late thirties. Each expressed a deep sadness about the fading reality of their long-held dreams to be married and have a family. The following night, our home-group meeting was dominated by conversation and prayer around issues of relational uncertainty and angst. In light of this widespread neurosis, what is the task at hand, and where do we start?

Come with me on a thought experiment for a moment. Let us assume for the sake of argument that the priority of Christian leaders and pastors is to encourage and bring about, by every means possible, the steady growth, maturity, and integrity of those in their care. Now let's assume that these leaders are also able to categorize and prioritize the obstacles and challenges that these same disciples face in their normal lives. Perhaps they could loosely rank each issue on the basis of its *frequency*: for instance, "faced every day," "once per week," "once per month," and so on. Perhaps they could further categorize each issue on the grounds of its *severity*, such as "ability to resist or resolve this issue from 1 to 10." To complete our thought experiment, the leaders might rank how much time and attention they give to each issue within the teaching and discipleship of the church: for instance, "focus by the church from 1 to 10."

Now it's time for me to place my poorly concealed cards on the table. Surely we can affirm the assumptions described above: that the goal of Christian leaders is indeed to pursue growing maturity within their churches, and that they can also understand and rank the issues that Christians are facing in their everyday experiences. My strong suspicion is that issues relating to sexuality and relationships, for young Christians in particular, would appear right at the top of these lists as the most frequent and the most severe. And yet these same issues would most likely rank near the bottom of our lists regarding the amount of focus we give these challenges within the church. Why is that? The answer is complex, but it demands our attention and a response.

The beginning of that answer lies in the fact that we are already deeply formed within our modern cultural context. These issues, we are told, are

“private,” to be left up to the conscience of each person acting in isolation. The core conviction of this book is that we can only get to the heart of these most important issues and address them effectively by means of a Christian conscience that is freed from the limitations of the modern imagination.

An old Irish joke tells how a tourist in the County of Cork asks a local man how to get to the big city of Dublin. “Ah,” responds the local man with a deeply furrowed brow, “I wouldn’t be starting from here.” There is a temptation in the context of discipleship to make the same mistake, to start with the question, “What is the Christian vision of sexuality and relationships?” and then move directly to the final question, “How do we live that out within our church communities?” Yet this practice avoids the most important aspect of contemporary formation. The question we must first address is contextual: “What is it about our cultural moment that makes the Christian vision of sexuality seem naive and unrealistic at best and downright repressive at worst, even to many young Christians? Why does the church’s view of sexuality, with all its ‘rules’ and ‘restrictions,’ fail to resonate with so many contemporary believers?”

Only once we have understood the nature of the present challenge can we fully answer the other two questions. Surely we need to know where we stand before we can plan our journey toward the place we want to be. If we think of our pastoral vocation as being akin to that of a spiritual physician, then we can see the importance of making an accurate and insightful diagnosis of the illness so that we can apply the gospel most effectively to the formative cause.

We must guard against two common mistakes in this complex arena. At one extreme, without a critical diagnosis we can too easily accept the way things are, simply absorbing our cultural understanding as our own worldview. The most compelling conviction in this regard is the idea that the quality of love between two people—whoever they are and whatever they do together—should be the only consideration when taking a relationship into the sexual realm. Many Christians have no coherent way of countering this open-ended moral imperative. They either accept it as being self-evident or reject it by proof-texting Scripture.

At the other extreme, without a careful diagnosis of the issues, we can fall into the trap of rejecting all modern cultural norms. A common example is the modern quest for self-fulfillment. If we view this as purely

self-centered and problematic, we will be tempted to discard it entirely. Yet the problem is not with self-fulfillment per se but rather with the fact that it has come to be placed above all other priorities. This impulse needs to be rebalanced within the other prerogatives of the Christian life: obedience to Jesus, patience in suffering, and self-giving *agape* love within the community of faith. The temptation to reject modern culture in all its forms is like prescribing a broad-range antibiotic to treat a specific infection. The patient may be healed, but her immune system will be greatly weakened.

The Formative Power of Context

One of the most influential legacies of modern politics and philosophy is the conviction that personal identity is premised on the individual's freedom to choose his or her own source of meaning and form of life, largely free from outside influences. This conviction has seeped so deeply into Western consciousness that it has become part of the religious landscape. Many Christians, for instance, believe they can simply build their self-identity entirely on Scripture over against, and parallel to, secular culture. Such confidence is deceptive. American sociologist Robert Wuthnow observes, "The basic premise of social science research is that religion is embedded in a social environment and is thus influenced by this environment," so that "broad social trends do define how people think about themselves."² James K. A. Smith further suggests that pervasive "secular liturgies"—our regular cultural practices, such as going to the mall or the movies—represent the "affective dynamics of cultural formation," which are shaping the identities of everyone who lives within Western culture, Christians and non-Christians alike.³ Such secular liturgies, Smith argues, represent a powerful *mis*formation of the self that undermines the gospel.⁴

Charles Taylor describes this "cultural formation" of the self using the notion of the "modern social imaginary."⁵ It represents the sum total of

2. Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 20.

3. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 88.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23–30.

how we collectively imagine our social life in the Western world, including our economy, community, family, intimate relationships, environment, and politics. For most of us, this social imaginary is not primarily expressed or received as a collection of intellectual ideas or beliefs but is carried in “images, stories, and legends” that embed themselves deep within our consciousness and practices.⁶ Through this process of cultural formation, the modern world’s conception of the human self makes it difficult to imagine alternative ways of seeing and being in the world. This view, as Taylor says, has “come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention.”⁷ The problem is that this modern self is not well equipped for sexual fidelity and committed relationships.⁸

Christians are not immune to this problem. Wuthnow points out that certain trends in American society have influenced religious groups, including young evangelicals, particularly in the areas of premarital sex, delayed marriage, and divorce.⁹ While religious beliefs strongly shape young people’s *attitudes* toward sex, relationships, and marriage, Wuthnow suggests that there is a significant gap between what evangelicals *believe* and what they *do* in this area. For instance, while young American evangelicals have become more likely over the last generation to say that premarital sex is “always wrong,” fully 69 percent of unmarried evangelicals in this group said they have had sex with at least one partner during the previous twelve months.¹⁰ The hugely influential “abstinence pledge” among young people in the United States has had muted success in changing the sexual behavior of young Christians.¹¹ We are also told that one in two Christian marriages in America will now end in divorce. By some measures, this is higher than the national average.

6. *Ibid.*, 23.

7. *Ibid.*, 29.

8. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

9. Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 20.

10. *Ibid.*, 139–40.

11. Mark Regnerus sums up this phenomenon: “While religion certainly *influences* the sexual decision-making of many adolescents, it infrequently *motivates* the actions of religious youth. In other words, religious teens do not often make sexual decisions for religious reasons. The ones who articulate religious reasons and act in step with their stated beliefs are the exception, not the rule. Most religious adolescents remain influenced by their faith tradition and practices, but not motivated by them.” See Mark D. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 184.

During the relationships course we led at our church, nearly five hundred attendees responded to an anonymous survey that asked a number of questions concerning issues of sexuality. In matters of pornography and sex before marriage, among others, it was difficult to tell whether the survey had been conducted within a church context or in a purely secular one. This is a crisis needing attention. Whichever way you slice and interpret the social data, experience confirms that the church has a genuine problem. Something in our approach to discipleship is not getting to the heart of things.

Although a number of influential Christian leaders have addressed issues relating to sexuality, the church has often struggled to perceive and effectively come to terms with the significant *misformation* of the self that occurs within the (post)modern world. The common approach of teaching people to live according to Scripture, without giving due attention to the formative influence of our cultural context, unwittingly and ironically succumbs to the modern illusion that we can choose our own reality, largely free from external influences. This myopic approach to cultural formation runs the risk of incorporating secular assumptions about human identity into our models of discipleship. Although this may be unintentional, it undermines the formation of mature Christians who are able to sustain sexual practices that are faithful to the Christian vision of life. Basically, our inability to perceive the influence of cultural *misformation* is undermining the power of the Christian gospel to guide and form people so they can walk its pathway to sexual maturity.

Christian leaders tend to use the Bible as their exclusive source for framing Christian speaking and living. Yet only through a kind of “thick description” of our present circumstances, being attentive to both the world and the church, can we deeply understand the hope of the gospel in redefining and reforming the self within our complex times.¹² Understanding the nature of the modern self has enormous significance for spiritual leaders because it cuts to the heart of Christian identity and mission within our culture. Is Christian identity being formed by the church, or is it being formed by the culture at large? Only by getting to the root of this issue can we effectively pursue the task of allowing God to reshape people in the gospel.

12. James K. A. Smith, series editor’s foreword to Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 12.

Adjusting Our Vision

When my grandparents were in their eighties, their television developed a fault that made the screen permanently bright green. It was good for viewing garden shows or nature programs, but it was pretty disconcerting the rest of the time. Being a thrifty Scotsman, my grandfather never got it fixed! Although it's tempting to caricature culture's influence on us in this way, its effects tend to be more subtle. Culture gradually adjusts our vision, rather than completely changing it. When you cover one eye, for instance, you still can see everything clearly, but your depth perception is compromised. Basically, you no longer see in 3-D. Our cultural context works in a similar way. It is a lens through which we view life, shading and adjusting how we see things. And yet, because we tend to look *through* it rather than *at* it, we are often unaware that this cultural lens is affecting our vision at all.

Modern culture has this sort of influence on our way of seeing life. If Christian vision involves seeing with two eyes—one divine and the other human—modern culture covers one eye so that we begin to see only from the human perspective. In essence, it compromises our spiritual depth perception and tempts us to become the center of gravity of our own lives. One of the critical roles of Christian leaders, including parents, is to be guardians of the lens. We need to attend to the lens because Scripture calls us to see with new eyes, from the perspective of eternity. Consequently, this book is an attempt to describe the significant ways in which our cultural lens is shaping our identity and relationships and how we can refocus the church's vision through the lens of the gospel.

Making Disciples as Our Core Priority

Like the early church, we need to nurture a passion for making disciples who reflect the image of our Master and stand distinct from the world around them. Genuine and tangible personal change is not only possible; it is an imperative of the gospel. Indeed, the priority of Paul's ministry was to present his congregations at Christ's return as mature communities of disciples—without “blemish.”¹³ This is not the defeatist language of “sin-

13. Eph. 5:27; Col. 1:22.

ners saved”; it is an energetic expectation that these communities would truly become temples of the Holy Spirit and living epistles of the message to those around them.¹⁴ Paul was more of a tent-making discipler than a tent-meeting evangelist. He spent much of his time teaching and mentoring his converts in the way of life appropriate to the new community of Christ.

Attending to people’s sexual and relational lives is a critical part of this journey of discipleship because we are *connectional beings*. As Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker say, “Relationships are a large playing field upon which other life contests and struggles get worked out.”¹⁵ Focusing on discipleship in the area of relationships, then, is not just about checking a box in a program of spiritual formation or helping Christians to live happier lives. It is important precisely because the whole purpose and target of the gospel is reconciled relationships. Good relationships within the community of faith are about living into our future destiny now. Romantic relationships are an important area of focus because in these relationships we are called to commit ourselves most fully and sacrificially—and yet it is here where we run into such trouble. We cannot afford to let sexual and relational formation remain a secondary concern within the church, one that we deal with in the occasional sermon or specialist course. Sustaining faithful relationships and encouraging the ability to live disciplined sexual lives may be one of the most influential missional tasks of the contemporary church as we witness to the kingdom of God in the midst of a sexually confused and relationally fatalistic culture. This should make equipping men and women to live whole and healed lives in the area of sexuality and relationships a key priority and passion for Christian leaders.

The basic conviction of this book is that Christian faith and secular culture exist in complex interrelationship. This creates both challenges and opportunities for discipleship. The first part of the book considers the following questions: What is the modern self, and how does it approach sexual relationships? How has our cultural moment shaped what we think and do in this area? Having identified the signs of the times and their influence, the second part will propose an alternative Christian vision of personal identity as the basis for a practical model of formation, one that integrates issues relating to sexuality and relationships.

14. 2 Cor. 3:1–3.

15. Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex*, 138.