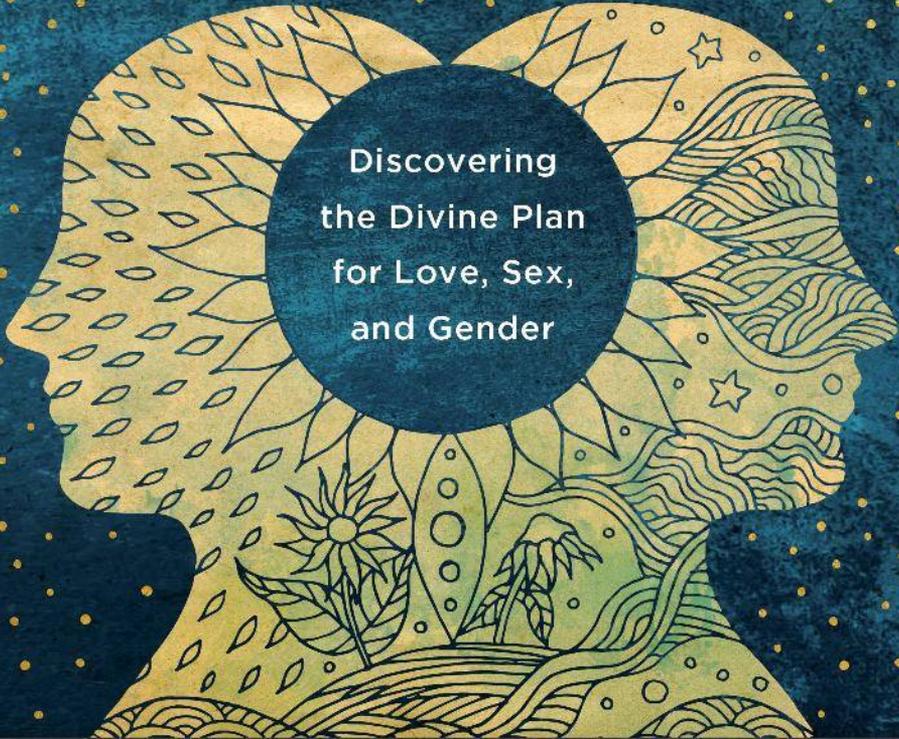


CHRISTOPHER WEST

FOREWORD by ERIC METAXAS

*OUR BODIES
TELL
GOD'S STORY*



Discovering
the Divine Plan
for Love, Sex,
and Gender

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FOREWORD

Eric Metaxas

In case anyone has missed it, the Western church is facing a serious reckoning with its inability to respond effectively to the secular world's challenges regarding the meaning of sex, gender, marriage, and the family. And what could be more central to human life than the meaning of these most central of human concepts? The popular culture has been telling us a saccharine, rainbow-hued fairy tale about our bodies and about human love that innumerable people have nonetheless found more compelling and appealing than anything they've probably ever heard in church. But it strikes me—and the author of this wonderful book—that that is because we in the church haven't been properly equipped to understand that our bodies tell a true story that is more glorious and transcendent and powerful and multidimensional and resonant and satisfying than we've ever imagined. As Christopher West illuminates for us in this much-needed and timely work, our bodies tell *God's* story.

The Enlightenment has taught us an infinity of things about the workings of the human body as a biological organism. But when it comes to the deepest meaning of our creation as male and female, the Enlightenment, ironically, has left us fumbling in the dark. It tells a story that is ultimately reductionist and that is therefore only part of the larger and grander story; and in being only part of the larger story but purporting to be the whole story, it is what we might accurately call a “lie” and a “fiction.” The body is not only biological. To say that we are only biological is like saying that Albert Einstein and Mother Teresa and Mozart were only clumps of cells. As West correctly asserts, “Since we’re made in the image of God as male and female, the body . . . is also *theological*. It tells an astounding divine story. . . . This means that when we get the body and sex wrong, we get the divine story wrong as well.”

Could this possibly explain why embracing the values of the sexual revolution has coincided with a widespread loss of biblical faith in general? “Sex is not just about sex,” posits West. “The way we understand and express our sexuality points to our deepest-held convictions about who we are, who God is, who Jesus is, what the church is (or should be), the meaning of love, the ordering of society, and the mystery of the universe.”

These are bold claims, but they are also indisputably and powerfully and dramatically true. And if you read this book you will see that West backs them up so that we can all see how true and inescapable they are. Of course these are not just his ideas. His task in this first-of-its-kind book is to make accessible for a broad Christian readership the insights of someone whom many consider the greatest Christian leader of the twentieth century. In my book *Seven Men: And the Secret of Their Greatness*, I wrote that there is much to be said for the view that that title belongs to the man who led the world’s Catholics into the

twenty-first century: John Paul II. Christian history will surely remember him for his fearless witness to Christ in the face of state-sponsored atheism (he was one of the key figures in the collapse of communism across Europe); for his tireless efforts in building bridges across denominational lines (he even reached out to Protestant and Orthodox Christians, asking them to help him reenvision the papacy); and for his courageous defense of the dignity of human life in the face of powerful ideological threats against it.

Today, however, as Christians in the culture and in their own congregations and families continue to grapple—and sometimes fail to grapple—with the near total eclipse of the biblical meaning of sex, gender, and marriage, it's becoming increasingly evident that John Paul II's greatest legacy may prove to be an extensive collection of biblical reflections he gave on the theology of the human body. This bold, compelling, hopeful, and healing vision of our creation as male and female has been hailed by Catholics and Protestants alike as an antidote to the sexual crisis now plaguing the church and the world. For that antidote to spread, however, the keen insights of these dense and scholarly lectures need to be put in a language that average believers can understand.

Which brings us back to Christopher West and the happy gift of this book.

West began teaching John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* to a primarily Catholic audience in the mid-1990s—efforts that soon found him authoring bestselling books and lecturing around the globe. When a committee at Focus on the Family charged with drafting an official statement on sexuality solicited West's assistance in the early 2000s, West took up the task of translating John Paul II's biblical reflections for believers who would rarely (if ever) pick up something authored by a

Foreword

pope. Having been raised Catholic but evangelized largely by Protestant believers during his college years, West is fluent in both languages, so to speak, which makes him the perfect candidate to write this book. In his introduction, West mentions the debt of gratitude he feels toward his Protestant brothers and sisters for inspiring him with their commitment to Christ and their love for God's Word. As you enter more and more into this study of God's Word, you will surely agree with me that we also owe him our gratitude for making John Paul II's Theology of the Body accessible and relatable to the whole body of Christ.

INTRODUCTION

There is really no way to overstate the profound impact [the Theology of the Body has] had on my mind and my soul. It helped me see how profound Christianity is in answering the deepest questions we all have about who we are and how we are called to relate to others and to God . . . by showing how the physical and spiritual are united in a profound way in our Lord Jesus Christ.

—Glenn Stanton

I gave my life to Jesus when I was twenty years old. I had been raised a Catholic and did the “Catholic thing” growing up. Unfortunately, like so many other Catholics, I hadn’t had an interior conversion to Christ. Jesus was a religious “idea” to me, a historical figure, and, I suppose, a holy teacher (whatever that meant). But I didn’t know him personally as my Savior until, largely through the influence of Protestant teachers and preachers, I started studying the Bible in my college years and experienced a dramatic conversion of heart.

Without a doubt, as strange as this may seem to some, the force that compelled me on my search for Christ was the swirling, maddening, tumultuous conundrum of sex. Let me explain.

Desire—eros, or erotic desire, to be more specific—kicked in pretty early in my life. I was often overwhelmed by a gnawing hunger and thirst I didn't know how to handle. God bless my parents and my Catholic school teachers—they all tried—but people can't give what they don't have. No one had formed them in the true beauty and splendor of God's plan for erotic desire, so they couldn't form me. I was given the traditional biblical "rules" about sex, and my teachers did their best to instill a fear in me of breaking them, but I was never given the "why" behind the "what" of sexual morality.

Okay, those are the rules I shouldn't break, but what the heck am I supposed to do with this crazy desire inside me? The basic message in the air was that sexual desire itself was "dirty" or "bad" and needed to be repressed or otherwise squelched. To put an image to the experience, it seemed the only thing my "Christian" upbringing had to offer me in my hunger was a starvation diet. Eventually the hunger became so intense that it trumped all fear of breaking the rules. As I wrote in my book *Fill These Hearts*, "A person can starve himself for only so long before the choice becomes clear: either I find something to eat, or . . . I'm gonna die. . . . This is why the culture's 'fast-food gospel'—the promise of immediate gratification through indulgence of desire—inevitably wins large numbers of converts from the 'starvation diet gospel.'"¹

Of course, it's equally true that a person can eat the fast food for only so long before all the grease and sodium take their toll. Once the pleasure of indulging wears off, bad food, I came to learn, is no less destructive than malnutrition.

Introduction

Were these the only two options for my hunger: death by starvation or death by food poisoning? Was there any “good food” to be had, food that could actually bring life to my aching soul? I wanted answers. I *needed* answers! If God were real, I figured he must have some kind of plan in giving us such strong sexual desires. So in a college dorm in 1988, I let loose a rather desperate cry of my heart, a ragged prayer that went something like this:

God in heaven, if you exist, you better show me! And you better show me what this whole sex thing is all about and why you gave me all these desires, because they're getting me and everybody I know into a lot of trouble. What is your plan? Do you have a plan? Show me! Please! Show me!

That's when I started studying the Bible, and eventually I encountered Jesus in a living, personal way. He wasn't just an idea to me anymore: I started experiencing the power of his resurrection in my life in dramatic ways, particularly with regard to my sexual brokenness. After years of selfish erotic indulgence, I was experiencing real deliverance and healing from addictive fantasies, attitudes, and behavior.

Soon after my conversion, I became part of an ecumenical community of Protestant and Catholic believers. We had Bible studies together; studied the works of A. W. Tozer, Andrew Murray, and Watchman Nee; prayed together; evangelized together; and enjoyed a committed Christian fellowship. There was a deep fear, however, surrounding sexuality within this group of believers. Grown men and women didn't know how to relate to each other and were largely kept separate. Dating was pretty much forbidden until you got “approval” from the leadership, who, in turn, basically arranged who dated

whom without much respect for the freedom of the people involved. Not surprisingly, under the surface of these tightly controlled relationships there was a lot of unaddressed sexual brokenness.

This painfully dysfunctional situation only compelled me all the more to dive into Scripture seeking answers to my questions about God’s plan for sex: *There’s got to be more than indulgence and repression! There’s got to be more than the fast-food diet and the starvation diet. Lord, what is your plan?*

Over a period of about three years of intense, prayerful study of God’s Word, I came to see that the Bible takes us on a journey from a wedding in the earthly paradise of Eden to a wedding in the heavenly paradise of the New Jerusalem. I came to see that the Prophets use some boldly erotic images in describing God’s love for his people, that the intimate love poetry of the Song of Songs was a window into things of heaven, and that the joining of spouses in “one flesh” was a “profound mystery” that revealed Christ’s love for the church (Eph. 5:31–32). In short, the spousal imagery of the Scriptures was bringing my faith to life, shedding light on the entire mystery of our creation, fall, and redemption in Christ. Yes, yes—there *was* more than the starvation diet and the fast-food diet! It’s called *the marriage feast of the Lamb!* And Christ didn’t come to *repress* our desires; he came to *redeem* our desires—to heal them, to redirect human hunger and thirst toward his eternal banquet of love.

Oh! I was on fire . . .

Expecting an enthusiastic response from the people in my Christian fellowship (and knowing how desperately we all needed help in this regard), I was surprised to be met with blank stares or worse when I tried to explain how the union of man and woman in “one flesh” was like a golden key that unlocked the mysteries of the Bible. Confused but not deterred, I started

looking elsewhere for confirmation. Then a fateful meeting with a high school theology teacher changed my life forever. Testing some of my “spousal” readings of the Bible on her, she interrupted, “Oh, you must have read John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*.” “What’s that?” I probed. She responded, “Gosh, I thought you’d already read it. What you’re saying sounds like his teaching.”

It turns out that John Paul II’s first major teaching project as the bishop of Rome had been a Bible study on God’s plan for man and woman so detailed and comprehensive that it spanned five years. It may well be the most in-depth biblical vision of what it means to be created male and female ever presented in Christian history. When I read it for the first time in 1993, I knew I was holding a new kind of sexual revolution in my hands and that I’d spend the rest of my life studying it and sharing it with the world.

Although I began my work translating John Paul II’s rather dense scholarship in a predominantly Catholic context, it didn’t take long for it to spread across denominational lines. I have been humbled and honored over the years to be invited to address countless Protestant congregations and events. I agree with Craig Carter’s prediction that “Protestants, especially evangelicals, will embrace the *Theology of the Body* in greater and greater numbers in the years ahead” and in doing so “will be in the position to launch the second sexual revolution” through a compellingly positive “Biblical approach to human sexuality and the family.”²

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my Protestant brothers and sisters for helping to bring me to Christ and for inspiring me to love God’s Word as I do. Translating the *Theology of the Body* into a language more easily accessible to you—the goal of this book—is a small way of saying thanks.

ONE

OUR BODIES TELL GOD'S STORY

I know some muddle-headed Christians have talked as if Christianity thought that sex or the body were bad in themselves. But they were wrong.

—C. S. Lewis

In the early 1900s, a “respectable” woman wore an average of twenty-five pounds of clothing when she appeared in public. The sight of an ankle could cause scandal. Over the next hundred years the pendulum swung to the other extreme. Today, scantily clad, hyper-eroticized images of the human body have become the cultural wallpaper; and graphic, hard-core pornography has become our main reference point for the “facts of life.”

Is it any wonder in our post-sexual revolution world that our deepest, most painful wounds as human beings often center on our sexuality? And by “sexuality” I mean not only what we do

with our genitals behind closed doors but also our very sense of ourselves as male and female. We live in a world of chaotic, widespread gender confusion, a world that seems intent on erasing the essential meaning of sexual difference from the individual and collective consciousness.

A Bold, Biblical Response to the Sexual Revolution

All of this has posed an enormous challenge to Christians. How have we responded? Those who began acquiescing to what might be called “the new morality” had to reinterpret the Bible in order to do so, a move that eventually led many believers and denominations to abandon the basic tenets of the Christian faith. On the other hand, Christian leaders who upheld traditional biblical faith and morality often found themselves without a convincing language to engage their own congregations, who were being increasingly influenced and formed by the ethos of the secular culture. The same held true for parents with their children. The silence was deafening. “The Bible says so” and “thou shalt not” weren’t enough to prevent people from getting carried away by the tide of so-called sexual liberation.

In the early 1950s, right at the time Hugh Hefner launched *Playboy* magazine, a young Polish priest, philosopher, and theologian named Karol Wojtyla (pronounced “voy-tee-wa”) started quietly formulating a fresh, bold, compelling, biblical response to this modern brand of liberation. This was a man steadfast in his commitment to traditional Christian values but also open and attentive to the challenges being raised by the modern world. As a student of contemporary philosophy himself, he understood how modern men and women thought, and he believed he could explain the biblical vision of sex in a way that would ring true in their hearts and minds. From Wojtyla’s

perspective, the problem with the sexual revolution was not that it overvalued sex but that it failed to see how astoundingly valuable it really is. He was convinced that if he could show the utter beauty and splendor of God's plan for the body and sexuality, it would open the way to *true freedom*—the freedom to love as Christ loves.

Over the next twenty years, he continually refined and deepened his vision via the pulpit, the university classroom, and in countless conversations and counseling sessions with dating, engaged, and married couples. (Wojtyla's open, honest approach with young people—no subject was off-limits if sought honestly—was very similar to that of Francis Schaeffer.) In December 1974, now as archbishop of Krakow, he began putting this bold, biblical vision to paper. On page 1 of his handwritten manuscript, he gave it the title "Theology of the Body."

This was an altogether different kind of Bible study on sex. It was not the all-too-common attempt to scour the Scriptures looking for proof texts on immorality. The goal was to examine key passages from Genesis to Revelation—over fifteen hundred in all—in order to paint a total vision of human love in God's plan. In essence, Wojtyla was saying to the modern world, "Okay, you wanna talk about sex? No problem. But let's *really* talk about it. Let's not stop at the surface. Let's have the courage to enter together into what the Bible calls the 'profound mystery' of our sexuality. If we do, we'll discover something more grand and glorious than we have ever dared to imagine."

This was a vision that had the power to change the world—if the world only had a chance to hear it. That chance came when, in October of 1978, this little-known Polish bishop was chosen as the first non-Italian pope in 450 years, taking the name John Paul II. Having only recently completed his Theology of the Body manuscript (it was originally intended as a book to

be published in Poland), he decided to make it his first major teaching project as pope, delivering small portions of the text over the course of 129 weekly addresses between September of 1979 and November of 1984.

It took some time, however, for people to grasp the significance of what this in-depth Bible study had given the world. It wasn't until 1999, for example, that his biographer George Weigel described the Theology of the Body to a wide readership as "a kind of *theological time-bomb* set to go off with dramatic consequences, . . . perhaps in the twenty-first century." While John Paul II's vision of the body and of sexual love had barely begun to shape the way Christians engaged their faith, Weigel predicted that when it did, it would "compel a dramatic development of thinking" about virtually every major tenet of the Christian faith.¹

God, Sex, and the Meaning of Life

What might the human body and sex have to do with the basic tenets of Christianity? There is, in fact, a deep, organic connection between the two. As mentioned above, rejection of the biblical vision of sexuality has led in practice to a rejection of the basic principles of the faith. And here's why: if we are made in the image of God as male and female (see Gen. 1:27), and if joining in "one flesh" is a "profound mystery" that refers to Christ and the church (see Eph. 5:31–32), then our understanding of the body, gender, and sexuality has a direct impact on our understanding of God, Christ, and the church.

As we will see throughout this book, to ask questions about the meaning of the body starts us on an exhilarating journey that—if we stay the course—leads us from the body to the mystery of sexual difference; from sexual difference to the mystery

of communion in “one flesh”; from communion in “one flesh” to the mystery of Christ’s communion with the church; and from the communion of Christ and the church to the greatest mystery of all: the eternal communion found in God among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is what the tenets of Christian faith are all about.

As we’re already seeing, the body is not only *biological*. Since we’re made in the image of God as male and female, the body, as we will unfold in some detail, is also *theological*. It tells an astounding divine story. And it does so precisely through the mystery of sexual difference and the call of the two to become “one flesh.” This means that when we get the body and sex wrong, we get the divine story wrong as well.

Sex is not just about sex. The way we understand and express our sexuality points to our deepest-held convictions about who we are, who God is, who Jesus is, what the church is (or should be), the meaning of love, the ordering of society, and the mystery of the universe. This means that John Paul II’s Theology of the Body (henceforth TOB) is much more than a biblical reflection on sex and married love. Through reflecting on those profound mysteries, we are led by the TOB to “the rediscovery of the meaning of the whole of existence . . . the meaning of life.”²

Christ teaches that his highest will for our lives is to love as he loves (see John 15:12). One of John Paul II’s main insights is that God inscribed this vocation to love as he loves *right in our bodies* by creating us male and female and calling us to become “one flesh” (see Gen. 2:24). Far from being a footnote in the Christian life, the way we understand the body and the sexual relationship “concerns the whole Bible.”³ It plunges us into “the perspective of the whole gospel, of the whole teaching, even more, of the whole mission of Christ.”⁴

Christ's mission is to reconcile us to the Father and, through that, to restore the order of love in a world seriously distorted by sin. And the union of the sexes, as always, lies at the basis of the human "order of love." Therefore, what we learn in the TOB is obviously "important with regard to marriage." However, it "is equally essential and *valid for the [understanding] of man* in general: for the fundamental problem of understanding him and for the self-understanding of his being in the world."⁵

Looking for the meaning of life? Looking to understand the fundamental questions of existence? Our bodies tell the story. But we must learn how to "read" that story properly, and this is not easy. A great many obstacles, prejudices, taboos, and fears can derail us as we seek to enter the "profound mystery" of our own embodiment as male and female. Indeed, the temptation to disincarnate our humanity and, even more, to disincarnate the Christian faith is constant and fierce. But ours is an *en-fleshed* faith—*everything* hinges on the incarnation! We must be very careful never to *un-flesh* it. It's the enemy who wants to deny Christ's coming in the flesh (see 1 John 4:2–3).

Spirit and Flesh

When it comes to present-day Christianity, people are used to an emphasis on "spiritual" things. In turn, many Christians are unfamiliar, and sometimes rather uncomfortable, with an emphasis on the physical realm, especially the human body. But this is a false and dangerous split. Spirit has priority over matter, since God, in himself, is pure Spirit. Yet God is the author of the physical world, and in his wisdom, he designed physical realities to convey spiritual mysteries. "There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God," as C. S. Lewis insisted. "God

never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why he uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not. . . . He likes matter. He invented it.”⁶

We should like it too. For we are not angels “trapped” in physical bodies. We are *incarnate spirits*; we are a marriage of body and soul, of the physical and the spiritual. Living a “spiritual life” as a Christian *never* means fleeing from or disparaging the physical world. Tragically, many Christians grow up thinking of the physical world (especially their own bodies and sexuality) as the main obstacle to the spiritual life, as if the physical world itself were “bad.” Much of this thinking, it seems, comes from a faulty reading of the distinction the apostle Paul makes in his letters between Spirit and flesh (see, e.g., Rom. 8:1–17; Gal. 5:16–26).

In Paul’s terminology “the flesh” refers to the whole person (body and soul) cut off from God’s “in-spiration”—cut off from God’s indwelling Spirit. It refers to a person dominated by vice. And in this sense, as Christ himself asserted, “the flesh counts for nothing” (John 6:63). But the person who opens himself to life “according to the Spirit” does *not* reject his body; it’s his body that becomes the very dwelling place of the Spirit. “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? . . . Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

We honor God with our bodies precisely by welcoming his Spirit into our entire body-soul personality and allowing the Spirit to guide what we do with our bodies. In this way, even our bodies “pass over” from death to life: “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you” (Rom. 8:11).