

Review: JAR1353

## DEFILING THE UNDEFILED

a book review of  
*Real Marriage:*  
*The Truth about Sex, Friendship, and Life Together*  
by Mark and Grace Driscoll

(Thomas Nelson, 2012)

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That Mark Driscoll has said something shocking will shock only those unfamiliar with Mark Driscoll. The pastor of Seattle's renowned Mars Hill Church employs an unapologetically bombastic communication style that has produced, over the years, such eyebrow-raising assertions as: (1) stay-at-home dads are worse than unbelievers;<sup>1</sup> (2) effeminate music leaders should be mocked on Facebook;<sup>2</sup> and (3) Jesus is a "prize fighter with a tattoo down his leg, a sword in His hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. That is a guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up."<sup>3</sup> So when he and his wife author a book on marriage including chapters on sex, one hardly expects pabulum, nor does one get it. *Real Marriage: The Truth about Sex, Friendship, and Life Together* has hit the bestseller lists, landed the Driscolls on interviews ranging from the ladies of *The View* to Piers Morgan, and generated a predictable level of controversy. And yet, on examination, the book's tone is restrained, even when tackling the most volatile of subjects, and most of its direction runs alongside, not counter to, mainstream evangelical standards. This, in sharp contrast to a number of Driscoll's public statements, suggests either a strong editorial hand overseeing the manuscript, or a welcomed toning-down of the pastor's rhetoric.

Still, portions of the book have bloggers and commentators buzzing, particularly a chapter titled "Can We \_\_\_\_?" in which the Driscolls discuss pros and cons of a number of sexual behaviors within marriage. This is ground zero of the book's controversy, a controversy enhanced by the stature of the author. He is, after all, a man pastoring a church in one of America's most gospel-resistant cities that has grown to fourteen locations, attended by more than fourteen thousand congregants. Driscoll's sermon podcasts are regularly rated #1 on iTunes. He's authored or coauthored fourteen books, including several accessible introductory books on Christian doctrine.<sup>4</sup> He also made an important contribution to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL on the

subject of the emerging church movement.<sup>5</sup> Considering Driscoll's accomplishments, international influence, and popularity among Christians, an examination of *Real Marriage's* most notable directives is all the more called for.

In fairness, the work is more about general marital issues than sex. Gender roles and responsibilities, communication, and respect are subjects *Real Marriage* devotes most of its pages to, and the average believer is not likely to find much offense or novelty in Driscoll's teaching on these matters. Chapter 10 changes all that, charging into bold questions about permissible versus forbidden sexual acts between husband and wife, questions legitimately raised but answered with explanations many will take issue with.

"Can We \_\_\_\_\_?" opens with the understatement that "the world has changed" and that "almost every married couple has a list of questions regarding what they can and cannot do,"<sup>6</sup> then formulates those questions by addressing masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, menstrual sex, role-playing, sex toys, birth control, and cosmetic surgery. Each subject is run through a three-part filter to help the reader assess the rightness or wrongness of it—*Is it lawful? Is it helpful? Is it enslaving?*—with answers offered by Driscoll in hopes of either encouraging, condemning, or allowing individual conscience to decide. It's a useful but limited tool, drawn from Paul's statement, "All things are lawful to me, but not all things are expedient. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Cor. 6:12, ASV). And it's in Driscoll's answers, not the questions he raises, that controversy really begins, especially regarding sex toys, role playing, cyber-sex, anal sex, and masturbation.

Regarding sex toys (objects or devices used to enhance sexual pleasure) Driscoll begins with an affirmative: "Sex toys can be beneficial to a marriage. They can heighten the pleasure for one or both partners."<sup>7</sup> He then offers a list of reasons why using such devices can be detrimental to a couple: the practice may develop into a solo, self-pleasuring habit; the "toy" may distract one partner's interest from the other; it may be employed too often at the expense of normal relations; the product is usually marketed through pornographic/adult oriented business, so purchases should be approached with caution.<sup>8</sup> In light of these legitimate concerns, offered by Driscoll himself, one wonders how he came to his initial conclusion that such objects can *ever* play a helpful role in the marriage bed.

His rationale for role-playing (partners pretending to be someone else while sexually engaging) follows a similar pattern. The Driscolls define it as "when one or both spouses assume roles to act out in character as part of their flirtation and lovemaking. For some couples, this includes not only essentially functioning like an actor or actress playing a role, but also dressing up to heighten the sense of fantasy."<sup>9</sup>

As with sex toys, Driscoll begins with commendation, noting that "role playing could be helpful to some, though not all, couples. Some couples with a good imagination find it fun. For example, a couple we know has a background in theater, and this is the kind of thing they find mutually fun. If one or both spouses are shy but want to be adventurous, this kind of fun play can help. With the desire to stay faithful

to each other for the entirety of their lives, admittedly things can get sexually predictable, and this kind of play can keep things interesting for a couple.”<sup>10</sup>

Aside from wondering how conversations with other couples regarding their private sexual practices could come so naturally, the reader’s also left pondering the virtue of donning a costume when wooing a spouse. Just when it seems the author is giving carte blanche to some pretty exotic practices, he steps in with cautionary statements, warning that role playing can be unhealthy if “you are fantasizing about anyone else during the role playing,” or if a partner “disassociates” during the interaction because of past sexual sins, or if the role playing is practiced too frequently at the expense of normal relations and thus is enslaving them.<sup>11</sup> As with the use of sex toys, a reader is left asking how role playing can ever be helpful when the objections to it, raised again by the author, seem so compelling. The very mention of cyber-sex in a Christian book underscores the Driscolls’ assertion that we’re living in new times, indeed. *Real Marriage* defines it as “when a couple communicates sexually through technology, including phone, photo, video, e-mail, chat and video conferencing.”<sup>12</sup> To their credit, when addressing this, the Driscolls draw unambiguous lines about any form of sexual expression apart from marriage; indeed, clarity regarding the Bible’s prohibitions against adultery, homosexuality, pornography, incest, rape/coercion, prostitution, and fornication is found throughout the book, and in a time when some Christian authors are reluctant to take a stand on these issues, the Driscolls’ comments are appreciated.

Cybersex, then, is out of the question between unmarried people but “cybersex with one’s spouse is permissible.”<sup>13</sup> Explaining why it may be “beneficial” to a marriage, Driscoll notes that “it allows couples to be intimate throughout the course of a day when they are separated because of such things as work, or to continue some semblance of a sex life when they cannot be physically together.”<sup>14</sup> While cautioning against allowing shared electronic images to become public, or against the possible stumbling of someone who’s “sinned” in this area in the past, the practice is given a relatively clean bill of health.

The book also deems anal sex permissible because of the enjoyment some women and men find in it (though warnings are rightfully given regarding associated health risks),<sup>15</sup> and masturbation in the spouse’s presence is commended as both a sensation heightener and a form of instructing your partner on how better to please you.<sup>16</sup> Caution is provided regarding both, and the authors note that many couples can’t practice them in good faith without becoming enslaved by them. Thus conscience violation over, or addiction to, the behaviors is seen as the problem, but not the behaviors themselves.

At this point a discerning reader is likely to experience queasiness, objecting viscerally to the Driscolls’ observations, but perhaps uncertain if the objection comes from prudishness or genuine concerns. There are, after all, no Bible verses answering *Thou Shalt Not* to the practices named so far, both for obvious reasons (cybersex didn’t exist when Scripture was written) and less obvious ones. But objections to them arise

less from prohibitions and more from the biblical concept of marital intimacy; specifically, the concept of marital union as an ordained physical expression of God's relationship to His people. And when *Real Marriage* is read in light of this, it falls short.

Indeed, though scriptural insofar as it goes, the *Is it lawful/helpful/enslaving?* grid Driscoll runs these actions through to legitimize or negate them does not ask the most fundamental question: *Is it in harmony with what marriage is about?* Matthew Lee Anderson of *Mere Orthodoxy* commented on this shortcoming by noting: "The problem is that liberty for the Christian doesn't simply mean doing whatever comes to mind in the bedroom provided both folks agree to it. It needs an order—a specific theological category."<sup>17</sup> Here Denny Burke, associate professor of biblical studies at Boyce College, is more succinct: "Paul's question is not 'Is it lawful?' but 'Does it glorify God with my body?'"<sup>18</sup> And Mike Leake of SBC Voices adds: "I do not see this book as really applying the gospel. Marriage as a picture of the gospel seems to take a back seat to pleasurable sex."<sup>19</sup>

Since Paul declared that we're to glorify God in our bodies (1 Cor. 6:20) and that marriage is an expression of Christ's relation to His church (Eph. 5:32), and since the concept of marital oneness representing God's union with His people runs throughout Scripture (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 3:8; Rev. 19:7; 21:2), the inescapable conclusion—and, in fact, the context and standard by which marital practices should be regarded—is that sexual union within marriage should glorify God by accurately representing His union with His own. Here Burke's critique of *Real Marriage* is apt: "The deepest meaning of marriage and indeed of the sexual union is to signify another marriage—Christ's marriage to His church. In Ephesians 5 we learn that every marriage from Adam and Eve until now exists ultimately to give an enacted parable of Christ's covenant love for His bride. *All the other purposes for the sexual union are subordinate to the ultimate end of glorifying God*" (emphasis added).<sup>20</sup>

Revisiting what Driscoll allows with this understanding, we see God's relation to His people is in spirit and truth (John 4:24), precluding role-playing and fantasy. Glorification of God surely includes fidelity to created intent. The unifying fit of male and female genitalia are glaringly obvious, and digital or oral stimulation of the genitals, provided both parties are comfortable with and desirous of the practices, seems a legitimate and loving form of reciprocity. Conversely, the rectum, whose intended excretory function is likewise obvious, can hardly be viewed as a receptacle of life-giving seed. And since intimacy with Him trumps intensity of experience in importance (Deut. 6:5; John 15:4; Phil. 3:10), the fact a behavior delivers high pleasure cannot of itself legitimize the behavior. One wonders, then, how sex toys or masturbation fit the concept of sacred union, since both enhance the individual's pleasure apart from unity with the other. Here the priorities of *Real Marriage* seem the most askew, because the quality of the union meant to represent Christ and His church should be judged by the oneness experienced by both, not just the pleasure. The fact that something delivers high impact is of little importance if it does not also bring a couple genuinely closer.

But when true intimacy is expressed and celebrated, no gadgets or fantasies involved, then the physical, emotional, and spiritual come together joyously in what is a foretaste of the final consummation, when we see Him face to face and bride and Bridegroom are finally and eternally united. Peter Dray of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship alludes to this when he refers to sex between man and woman as a “parable,” explaining that “the more that we experience sex as it was designed to be experienced, the more we understand what God is like and how He wants to relate to us. God wants us to enjoy sex within marriage—because it’s such a powerful illustration of what He’s like and how He wants to relate to us.”<sup>21</sup>

The God who created marriage as surely as He created humanity is not anti-sex. He is, in fact, its author and prime champion, having established it from the beginning and provided guidance for its maximum benefit and, yes, its enjoyment. “Marriage,” the author of Hebrews tells, “is honorable in all things, and the bed undefiled” (Heb. 13:4). We commend any effort to strengthen what God has called *good*, but, in so doing, let what is undefiled remain undefiled.

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## NOTES

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