



DIALOGUES

— ON —
SEXUALITY

SAMPLER

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DIALOGUES ON SEXUALITY

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SEX AND MARRIAGE

THE SEARCH FOR HOLY INTIMACY

DR. TINA SCHERMER SELLERS

I opened my email and saw the subject line: “Help! I thought I did it right, but it’s gone to hell!” I’d been traveling and speaking about ancient Hebrew sources of erotic wisdom and had a backlog of messages. But this one from a woman named Stacey jumped out at me.

Stacey wrote:

I heard you speak recently at a women’s conference. Your words resonated deeply with me—they stirred up old pain, but gave me new hope at the same time. I knew that what I’d been told about sex in my growing-up years was counterfeit, but your naming it has helped me believe my own knowing. I grew up focusing on everyone else, believing that if I took care of others and tried to be kind and good, everything would work out. I married Tyler, the nice Christian boy, when I was very young—but before long, I found myself accommodating him in every

way imaginable. Our sex life was all about making him feel good. I never thought about me. Sex was on his time, when he wanted it, how he wanted it. We were to a point where I would try to make him think that everything he was doing to me was making me feel good, just so he could feel good about himself. He didn't seem able to handle criticism or instruction.

Stacey went on to explain that about eight years into their marriage, she began to speak up more frequently to Tyler, trying to make space for her own opinions and desires. She quickly learned, however, that Tyler couldn't handle it without becoming defensive and withdrawing into depression. She wrote:

I'd revert into caretaking and try to bolster him. I needed his help running our family, and I couldn't afford for him to disappear physically and emotionally. But as I acquiesced into silence and accommodation, I would start to feel more and more empty inside, like I was becoming invisible even to myself, and I would eventually start to speak up again. Tyler and I were in a vicious cycle: I'd feel powerless, I'd speak out, Tyler would disappear into himself, I'd cave and try to shore up his emotions, so I'd feel trapped again, so I'd speak up—and around and around we'd go. The more times we went around that circle, the more unhappy I became, and our marriage slowly unraveled. We divorced just shy of our twelve-year anniversary. That was two years ago.

DIS-INTEGRATION AND THE BIRTH OF SHAME

Stacey's message pointed to something that countless others have experienced: the denial of our sexuality because we've been trained to separate our bodies from our being. Long before Jesus arrived on the scene, Aristotle and Plato cemented what has become known as the mind/body split, or mind/body dualism. They argued that the mind and the body, two different substances, occupied a hierarchical relationship in which the mind was the greater element and the

body more of a burden. This dualism has caused countless personal, relational, and theological problems for thousands of years, especially for women.

Because the experiences of birth and nurturing are intensely physical, it was assumed that women were mostly of the body and had less access to the mind and spirit. It followed, then, that women were only fully spiritual when connected with a man, who was of the mind. This was the beginning of the hierarchical arrangement we know today as patriarchy. It gave a framework by which men were thought of as the head over the baser, bodily women. And being bound to the body also meant that women were sources of men's sexual temptation. Therefore, women were seen as something to be controlled and resisted—mind over body. When men failed to live up to standards of sexual conduct, they blamed women as the cause.

This dis-integration of the human experience set the stage for the fourth-century Christian church, under Constantine's rule, to develop a distinctly sex-negative, woman-negative sexual ethic. Men, vying for position and power in the young church, demonstrated their spiritual prowess by denying the body and its natural desires for connection and pleasure, elevating the spiritual mind as master over the base body. It's important to understand that the "skill" of rejecting physical connection and pleasure had nothing to do with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It was based on the dis-integration of the human person—on severing the inherent oneness of mind and body, thereby disavowing a major part of the human experience.

Having aligned women with the physical, the church and culture paved the way for women to be reduced to sexual objects, all while the God-given human desire for connection and pleasure came to be seen by most people in authority as perverted and something to be conquered. Naturally, women became the holding space for that projected shame. Fast-forward a couple thousand years and we see the ways this patriarchal structure has evolved into the sexual and relational norms that permeate our culture, including American Christianity.

When the church began to deny physical connection and pleasure as a birthright of God's creation, it was the genesis of what would eventually become a system of deep interpersonal and sexual shame, a development that damaged the church's ability to absorb and reflect the love of God. Shame is the belief that one is unworthy of love and acceptance. In the church, that belief, when applied to sexual desire, created the conditions for people to feel unworthy of God's love and acceptance. By adopting a dualist view of the human person, the church led people to believe that they weren't God's beloved. In many cases, experiencing any form of sexual desire was seen as an example of human fallenness, something to be avoided whenever possible. Shame and pleasure—sexual pleasure in particular—became inextricably bound.

Shame is incredibly toxic on its own, but when it's connected to sexuality, sexual expression, and sexual desire, it can manifest as a sense of humiliation and disgust toward one's own body, and a belief in oneself as abnormal, inferior, and unworthy. It can teach people to suspect each other (shame toward the human body implies that one's partner is unworthy too), which dampens trust, communication, and intimacy. And shame runs deep. In Christian circles, shame and sex are so tied together that we often don't recognize the connection and pass the shame/sex dynamic down through generation after generation.

In my work as a therapist, I see the ways shame can develop across the lifespan, often beginning before a child can speak. For example, when toddlers excitedly share the pleasure-discovery of their penis or clitoris with someone, parents often rebuke them for doing so. Childhood experiences like this can settle in and fester in a child's memory over time, perhaps developing into an internal voice of self-criticism, undermining self-confidence in one's goodness or the goodness of those around them. And that leads to letters like the one I got from Stacey.

THE DESIRE DISCONNECT

Stacey's email highlights the effect of the mind/body split on the ways many Christians couples navigate sexuality within their marriage. I find that so many women enter marriage without a basic understanding of female sexual pleasure. If they've been taught anything at all, it typically centers on reproduction (periods and babies) and how men experience pleasure. Women often aren't aware that they can experience pleasure in sex or that they deserve to expect it for themselves. If they do venture into exploring pleasure on their own, there's usually someone nearby—a friend, a relative, a pastor giving a sermon—ready to call them a slut or worse. That leads women to hide their desires, especially from their male partners, afraid that the men will somehow feel threatened. In short, as unwitting heirs to the mind/body split, many women are drowning in sexual shame, immersed in centuries of misplaced patriarchal blame, afraid to feel the delicious power that lies just beneath the surface of their desires.

Interestingly, a big exception to that pattern can be found in same-sex relationships, for several reasons. For starters, same-sex relationships tend, as a rule, to feature people more or less evenly matched in their sexual development. I find that lesbian women tend to choose female partners who understand or misunderstand female sexuality to roughly the same degree as they do themselves, and men tend to understand or misunderstand equally as well. Given that lesbian and gay couples enter their relationships already willing to resist a structure that has told them for thousands of years how their sexual relationships ought to look, many feel a certain freedom to craft a sexual relationship the way they want, dispelling myths together, exploring and learning together, and sharing a remarkable sense of liberation. They often come into their relationships with a willingness to learn and to be creative.

Some heterosexual couples show an aptitude for thinking creatively too, in spite of the sexual shame that has permeated our culture