

The Sacrament of the Covenant
November 2, 2008
Peter Hiett

*Lord Almighty,
I feel my temperature rising
Higher higher*

*Girl, girl, girl
You gonna set me on fire
My brain is flaming
I don't know which way to go*

*Your kisses lift me higher
Like the sweet song of a choir
You light my morning sky
With burning love*

*Ooh, ooh, ooh,
I feel my temperature rising
Help me, I'm flaming
I must be a hundred and nine
Burning, burning, burning
And nothing can cool me
I just might turn into smoke
But I feel fine*

*Cause your kisses lift me higher
Like a sweet song of a choir
And you light my morning sky
With burning love*

*Its coming closer
The flames are reaching my body
Please won't you help me
I feel like I'm slipping away
It's hard to breathe
And my chest is a-heaving*

*Lord almighty,
I'm burning a hole where I lay
Cause your kisses lift me higher
Like the sweet song of a choir*

*You light my morning sky
With burning love
With burning love
Ah, ah, burning love
I'm just a hunk, a hunk of burning love
Just a hunk, a hunk of burning love*

How does it make you feel to sing that song in the sanctuary, before the altar of the covenant, at the high point of worship? Think about it, breaking into groups of 4 or 5. Introduce yourselves and then share your answer.

Was singing that song good, bad, confusing? Are you ambivalent? Did it feel dangerous? Did it feel like playing with fire? Yeah, I agree.

Three thousand years ago, a high priest walked onto a raised platform in the center of a village. At the priest's side was a young woman dressed in a robe, beautiful... a virgin. Hundreds of peasant farmers gathered round. It was a spring higher holy day. Today the priest raised his voice, pronouncing "Whoever this year produces the best barley, oats and wheat, you will have her, take her, to the glory of God." As he lifted his arms, she dropped her robe. Sometimes they were sacrificed, but this time she danced luridly to the sound of drums. Hunger grew within the men of that crowd. They wanted her. When the dance was done, she was clothed and whisked from sight. Sacred prostitutes came to the front: male and female. The high priests assigned them partners from the crowd. Men left their wives to perform their duty to the glory of their god – Baal. Of course, that's not an exact account, but it is based upon historical evidence.

Baal was the Mesopotamian god of fertility. In Hebrew, the word means "possessor." Cultic prostitution was part of the worship of Baal.

Throughout history, religion has been closely associated with sexuality. It was certainly true in Biblical times. Andrew Greeley writes, "The most fundamental insight that primitive man had about sexuality is one that we frequently overlook or forget: that it is a raw, primal, basic power, over which we have only very limited control. Primitive man invariably viewed sexuality as sacred."

Well, I don't think it's just primitive man. In modern society, sex itself has become a religion, complete with high priests and priestesses. Dr. Kinsey, Dr. Freud, Dr. Ruth. Reverend Hefner.

Human religion is largely the way we control and understand mysteries. For much of history, the church has viewed sex as a rival religion, and we don't know what to do with this profound and powerful mystery.

According to Historian John Boswell, the church put so many restrictions on sexual activity in the Middle Ages that for all but 44 days a year, sexual relations between married couples were forbidden. It's no wonder that the Middle Ages were filled with roaming bands of stressed out barbarian thugs looking for a fight.

For much of history, the church has viewed sex as unclean. Many have believed that the knowledge of good and evil is sexual knowledge. So the first and original sin was sexual intercourse. And because the church viewed sex as bad, she adopted a strategy of repression and denial. But repression often leads to indulgence. “Don’t think about SEX, don’t think about SEX...” Which makes you think about sex. Then cover those thoughts in shame, so we live out of shame, and then everything is bad.

A few years ago, a woman at my last church wrote me a letter informing me that she was leaving due to “sexual references in sermons.” She said they made her “uncomfortable and grieved her spirit.” Ironically, I learned that she really struggled with promiscuity. Her strategy was repression. I think it lead to indulgence, and everything became bad.

One man used to always tell me dirty jokes in the parking lot at church, but get visibly upset when I’d mention sexuality in a sermon in the sanctuary.

At youth group I got the idea that sex was dirty and at best unimportant. And that’s why we should save it for the person we marry. (Now, we should save it for the one we marry, but is that why?)

So what is sex? Good? Bad? And should we sing “hunk, a hunk of burning love” in the sanctuary?

Recently, I was reading a popular Christian author, bemoaning how sex was like a religion for so many modern people. It’s obvious that he’s an evangelical protestant, for he writes about how strange it is when people in some churches take communion, “lovingly holding and distributing tiny bits of bread and drops of wine.” Then he writes, “In religion, simple things become infused with a greater meaning. They gain a fascination and an emotional importance far beyond their practical function, so it is with sex in our time: it has become a sacrament.”

You see, I think he’s saying that just as some people make such a big deal of “pieces of bread and drops of wine”, so in the same way we’ve made too much of sex. For sex is just body and blood... like communion is just bread and wine. Sex is just biology, but sadly “it’s gained a fascination and emotional importance far beyond its practical function.” He’s saying our problem is that folks make “too much of sex.” We turn it into a sacrament.

Let’s pray: Lord Jesus, I want to pray, because I know from my history that this topic stresses people out. And Lord God, I would like you to guard our hearts right now. I thank you for breathing on us. And I ask you to breathe your fire all around us. Send your fire around your city and let it be a fire in our midst that would burn away all of the lies of the evil one. And Lord Jesus, would you let us hear only you? Purify us and show us yourself. And help us understand these strange things that you’ve written into our very bodies. In your name, amen.

Genesis 1:26-28

“Then God said let us make Adam (man) in our image and likeness... So God created man in his own image – in the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply.””

Now it's not explicit. But I'm pretty sure that would involve some sort of sex. In fact, this is the very first commandment we read in scripture. The ancient Jews thought that it was the first law of Scripture.

In Genesis 2, scripture gets into details. Genesis 2:8: "The Lord God planted a garden in Eden." That means delight. It was a walled paradise garden, a safe place for good things to run wild.

In Genesis 2:18, God says "It is not good for the Adam to be alone." Yet Adam isn't really alone. He feels alone in the presence of God, the presence of love. I don't think that Adam (mankind) understands how God feels and what he wants... and what life in paradise is all about. You see, Adam is made for God. "God is our helper and we are His bride."

Genesis 2:21

"So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."

The New Testament tells us that this refers to Christ and the Church. Our marriage covenants are a picture of God's covenant with us in Christ.

And like a walled garden contains delight...

Like the stone temple contained the eternal fire...

Like our bodies of flesh contain Spirit...

... so a covenant contains a sacrament... a fire, a spiritual union of delight.

Next verse:

"And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed."

Well, I think that means sex. And that sex is profoundly, deeply, mysteriously good. Do you understand? This all happens before the fall. So sex isn't the cause of the fall, or the result of the fall... but more like a vestige of life from before the fall. A vestige of Eden bound in a covenant (like a walled garden). But is it only a vestige? Or more like a promise? What is sex now? And what is cleaving?

In biblical times, a couple would go through a wedding ceremony, then go to the wedding chamber, where the "friend of the bridegroom" stood outside the door. When the couple had consummated their marriage, the groom called to the "friend of the bridegroom", then he called to all the guests and they all partied for a week, for the covenant had been consummated.

When John the Baptist was told of Jesus baptizing his followers, John said "the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears Him, rejoices at the bridegroom's voice."

So what is sex in the covenant of marriage?

It's a communion that consummates the covenant. It's a sign and a seal. It's an outward expression of inward realities. It's a means of grace through which life is transmitted and fruit is born.

It's word made flesh, love made flesh and it's a mystery. "Mysterium" in Greek; "sacramentum" in Latin.

You see, what I just described is the theological definition of the word "sacrament." When you come to the communion table, you partake in the "sacrament of the covenant." It's a sign and a seal of that covenant. It's the outward expression of inward realities. It's a means of grace through which life is transmitted and fruit is born. It's word made flesh, it's love made flesh, it's a mystery of grace. It's the body and blood of your groom, which you receive into the most empty, restless and yearning parts of your soul. Parts which you once covered in shame, but which now receive eternal seed and bear the fruit of eternal life.

"Common bread and wine do gain a fascination and emotional importance far beyond their practical function" because Jesus is in them. So Scripture tells us that if you come to the table and fail to discern Christ's body and blood, the very thing meant to give you life... it can kill you. Not because it's bad, but because your perception is bad (that's something to ponder).

But you see, that author I quoted... he had an unbiblical view of sex, for I think he had an unbiblical view of communion. The modern problem is not that we've made too much of sex. Our problem is that we've made far too little of sex. I mean we don't discern the sacrament. Modern society has not turned sex into a sacrament, for it was made a sacrament from the beginning. Not a sacrament of our covenant with God, but a sacrament of the covenant of marriage.

But get this: Because the marriage covenant is to be a picture of God's covenant, the sacrament of the marriage covenant ought to be a picture of the sacrament of God's covenant. In other words, God made us male and female and gave us these urges and longings all so that we'd understand how God feels... what he wants ... and what life in the paradise of the Kingdom is all about.

Sex is an education.

A little girl was talking to her grandmother. She asked, "Grandma, how old are you?" The grandmother replied, "Now dear, you shouldn't ask people that question. Most grown-ups don't like to tell their age." The following day, the girl had another question. "Grandma, how much do you weigh?" Once again the grandmother replied, "Oh, honey, you shouldn't ask grown-ups how much they weigh. It isn't polite." The next day the little girl was back with a big smile on her face. She said, "Grandma, I know how old you are, you're sixty-two. And you weigh 140 pounds." The grandmother was a bit surprised and said, "My goodness, how do you know?" The girl smiled and said, "You left your driver's license on the table, and I read it." Grandmother said, "Oh, so that's how you found out." The girl said, "That's right, and I also saw on your driver's license that you flunked sex."

Well, I think the modern church gets an "F" in sex. I mean, we haven't discerned the body, we haven't discerned Christ's body, and we haven't discerned our own bodies.

And now I want you all to listen very closely. I'm certainly not saying that you have to have sex (as in sexual intercourse) to understand God. No one knew God better than Jesus, and he was single. Yet maybe you do need sex (as in male and female sexual feelings) to best understand God. Maybe you need frustrations and desires and loneliness and longing for communion to best understand God... how He feels and what He wants.

So if you're frustrated with this topic, I hope you realize that almost everybody is sexually frustrated.

- Some have been really hurt by sex and they're terrified at their own desires
- Some long for sexual relations but can't have them and they shouldn't have them
- Some long for the desire and ability to have it and mourn the fact that it's gone
- Some are frustrated because their desires are confused

For all of us it's so difficult to talk about because it taps into desires and longings that we can hardly bear. But you see, in all these things... in fulfillments and in longings and yearnings, God is telling us something about himself.

The sacrament of the covenant tells us something. Our sexuality is a sign. It's a message built into our bodies. The problem isn't that we make too much of the sign. The problem is that we make too little of what it's pointing to. And if we think it points to nothing, we think the sign is nothing... just some broken bread and wine... just biology. But a sacrament is far more than bread and wine... far more than biology.

A sacrament is a sign and a seal. A sacrament seals things. It takes two and makes them one. It consummates a covenant and seals it.

You know if you bump arms with another person nothing happens. That's because we don't wear our hearts on our sleeves. Actually, we wear our hearts somewhere else, so we cover that somewhere else and call it private. When two people join private parts, they fuse private hearts as well. Two become one. So to sleep around is to make a covenant and break a covenant (over and over). It's to fuse two hearts then tear them apart, fuse and tear... fuse and tear... until hearts are broken and hard. And lives are destroyed.

When Israel worshiped other gods, God didn't call it bad theology, He called it adultery. Do you understand? They didn't just disobey, they broke God's heart. "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" is God's broken heart.

So the broken heart of every lover in this world tells us about the broken heart of God. It tells us how God feels and what God wants.

Sacraments help us know things deeper than words. They put flesh on words. We all have feelings for which words fail. I think that's why there are so many words, so many songs and poems about romantic love. It's people trying to express things greater than words.

So guys I can't fully describe it. It's that passionate longing for a woman... That feeling that nothing else matters... That yearning that makes it seem worth absolutely everything to be with her, to be one with her, to be in her. And you think "No one understands. No one knows." But God knows. That's how He feels about you.

Isaiah 61:5

"As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you."

And women, you know that longing to be covered? That desire to be nurtured, cherished and filled... That yearning that makes it seem worth absolutely everything to receive him and be one with him. And you think “No words can describe...” Well, your very body describes it.

God wants you to know: He made you for Himself.

So the sacrament of the marriage covenant helps us understand what God wants in His covenant. He wants us. Even more He wants our weakness. He wants our incompleteness. This is shocking and weird, but He wants what we’re tempted to cover in shame.

The poet Yeates wrote “Love has pitched its tent in the place of excrement.” Isn’t that weird?

When a bride and groom make love, they are attracted to that very place of which they are most embarrassed and feel most shame... that place where their difference, incompleteness and need is exposed. Did you know that you are incomplete without God? Did you know that you need God? That you’re empty without God and that emptiness has expressed itself as sin? And did you know God’s word became flesh to meet you in that very place? Jesus is the Helper fit for you, His bride.

And I think He is aroused by the confession of sin, aroused by surrendered shame, aroused by His bride, who no longer hides... but stands before Him, broken and exposed in need. He longs to meet our need with Himself and He is grace in flesh, the Helper fit for us.

Do you see what I’m saying? God built the Gospel of Jesus the Christ into our very bodies from the foundation of the world. He built Eden into our flesh even before the fall in order that we’d long for home, even in the midst of our exile.

Great sex is a momentary taste of Eden. A taste, a picture, of life in the Kingdom.

You know, in this world, obeying God is usually not all that fun. Dying to myself is a drag. Losing my life is painful. Another person’s pleasure is often my sorrow. Their gain is my loss. So I want control. In this world, being humiliated, exposed and naked is not a joy. And obedience to another’s wishes is a drag. And bearing fruit is always hard work.

In this fallen world, God’s command is a huge burden, except for a few moments. A few moments in the sanctuary of my covenant, celebrating the sacrament of my covenant with Susan, my bride. For in moments of sexual ecstasy (ek-stasis) I die to myself, but live. I lose myself and then I’m found. I surrender control in joy. And Susan’s pleasure is actually my pleasure. Her gain is my gain. Being exposed and vulnerable is a delight. And obedience to her wishes is paradise. Like C.S. Lewis wrote, “Obedience is an erotic necessity.”

And then the most amazing thing of all – this is where babies come from. The most beautiful thing I could ever produce. You see, in those moments of sexual ecstasy, I fulfill the entire law: I love God, I love my neighbor, unconscious of myself and lost in joy.

So the sacrament of my covenant with Susan tells me how God feels and what He wants. And I think it’s meant to give me just a taste of life in the Kingdom, the consummated Kingdom. And it helps me understand what God is doing here and now.

Think with me for a moment. Has it ever occurred to you that the very same activity (sexual intercourse), the very same event is sometimes described as Heaven and sometimes describes as Hell? Sometimes love and sometimes hate? Sometimes ecstasy and sometimes rape?

The same event... the same event except for the intentions and perceptions of those involved. In fact, right now some of you are perceiving this message as good news, and some may perceive it as something closer to rape.

Why is that?

Well, God made Adam male and female. So they would complete each other, help each other and begin to understand how He completes us, helps us... GOD IS OUR HELPER.

But in the next chapter, Adam and Eve meet the snake. And they are tempted to complete themselves with something other than God. The snake rapes their hearts. He does not love them. He wants to possess them. The snake is the energy behind Baal the possessor.

See, in the absence of God we worship other gods. And these other gods use sex to possess our hearts and shut them down... Shut them down why? So that when the King of Glory appears, we will hide in shame. So that when He kisses our cheeks, it will feel like rape, and when he gives us his body and blood, we'll nail Him to the tree because we do not understand.

And yet even that is part of the plan. He said it: "And when I am lifted up (speaking of his cross). When I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw, I will romance all men unto myself."

All of history is His story, the story of the great romance. How Eve is romanced and redeemed by the ultimate Adam, Jesus the Christ. The Scriptures are packed with sexual imagery. The Song of Solomon is an erotic love poem. Israel is the picture of God's prostitute Bride who becomes the bride of Christ. Time itself comes to an end at the marriage supper of the Lamb and the bride of Christ calls out "Maranatha." "Come Lord Jesus."

History is the romance of God... through Jesus the Christ. So that when the King of Glory – our Helper – appears... We won't hide from his presence, but surrender to ecstasy. So we won't be burned by the fire, but we'll drink the fire. So we won't perceive his presence as rape, but we will love the glory of His appearing.

God says it this way through the prophet Hosea: Chapter 2, speaking of Israel:

"She went after her lovers and forgot me," declares the Lord. "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. And in that day," declares the Lord, "you will call me 'My Husband', and no longer will you call me 'My Baal'."

You see, we think that God, our Husband, is like Baal the Possessor. Satan tries to wed us to Baal the Possessor so we'll shut down our hearts, thinking Jesus our Helper is a possessor too. But Jesus will not rape us. He came to romance us. So He won't know us (in the Biblical sense) till we choose to

be known. And we can't truly know Him until we choose to surrender in faith, for if we don't surrender in faith, we perceive His presence as rape.

Then we trap ourselves in darkness and Hell, believing a lie that we bear in our very flesh. So you see, it really matters what you do with your sex life, for it's the great sign pointing to the Kingdom, and Satan wants to turn it into a sign pointing to trouble, pointing to Hell, and yet even there, your Bridegroom will pursue you.

Through Hosea God says:

"I will allure her; I will speak tenderly to her. The valley of trouble, I will make a door of Hope. And you will call me my husband and no longer my Baal... And I will betroth you to me in faithfulness and you shall know (really know) the Lord."

That's what God wants, that's what Life is in the Kingdom of life, and that's what God is doing in this world in space and time.

A few years ago, in a sermon, I shared how I thought God was preparing us all for this ecstatic communion to which sexuality was pointing. After the sermon, this woman, who is now a friend, sent me an e-mail. She described this incredible encounter with Jesus, where he appeared to her in a dorm room at a retreat center. He reminded her of several wounds and places of shame from her past, then she says the Holy Spirit filled each place with health and purity, and then she writes this:

When we were done Jesus was sitting by my side on the little twin bed. He had the sweetest smile, though the distinct features of his face were a little fuzzy. He leaned toward me and I kind of froze. I thought, "what the heck is He doing? Am I going mad or is He about to kiss me?" Which is kind of funny when you realize He knew what I was thinking.

Anyway, He leaned toward me and went into me. Just like you described it yesterday. He went right into me and I was filled with a joy and glory so overwhelming I pulled away in shock. He just chuckled at me while I cried and apologized for freaking out and He said, "That's okay, we have time."

Isn't that great? I love this line: "That's ok, we have time." You see, I think that's what "time is for." Time is for romancing our hearts so that we would surrender to God's grace in faith, and be filled with God for an eternity of joy. And because God has built the Gospel into our very bodies, He's using all these longings, desires, memories and hopes to reveal his intentions and transform your perceptions, so you would receive Him in ecstatic and eternal joy. The sacrament of the Covenant of marriage is a picture of the communion in the eternal covenant that is Heaven.

So we haven't made too much of sex. I think we've made too little of sex, which makes too little of what it points to. You see, our strategy is not repression or indulgence... our strategy is always worship. It is seeing God and worshipping God in everything... even in, especially in, our sexuality.

Ephesians 5:31: "Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined ... shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh," writes Paul. "This mystery, this mysterion (in Greek), this sacramentum (in Latin), this sacramentum is a profound one, and I am saying it refers to Christ and the Church."

Cleaving, joining, two-becoming-one-ing, refers to Christ and the Church. And that means every love song ever written was somehow about Jesus and us.

So does “Burning Love” belong in church? Does “Burning Love” belong in the sanctuary of the covenant?

What is God? He is love and He is fire. He is “a hunk of burning love”, longing to fill His temple, which is you.

So on the night he was betrayed, that night, when he was exposed, humiliated, broken by his bride, he took bread, and he broke it, saying, “This is my body. Take, eat, and do it in remembrance of me.” And in the same way, after supper, and having given thanks, he took the cup and he said, “This is the covenant (some say new covenant, Hebrews refers to it as the eternal covenant) in my blood. Shed for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you. Do it in remembrance of me.”

So I invite you to come to the table. Tear off a piece of bread, and dip it in the cup. Dark cups are wine, light cups are juice. They are both fire. They are both the grace and the love and the mercy of God. So when you come to the table, this is what you are doing: you are surrendering yourself, you are surrendering your emptiness, you are surrendering your need, you are surrendering your desires and your longings, you are surrendering all that you are... and asking Him to fill you. That’s what it is to be a Christian, to be a believer. And if you are worried about all your longings, and all your struggles, and all your incompleteness, and all your in this world... well just hang on to your seat... because very soon, very soon, He will come. And you will see Him. In Jesus Name, believe the Gospel.

You are His body in this world. And now you may be thinking to yourself, “Hey dude, I came forward and took that bread and wine, and it’s no big deal. It tasted like bread and wine, so I don’t know if I get it.” Well, you just hang in there and have faith. He really is here. He is romancing us, preparing us. And He gives us glimpses.

Several years ago I told you about my experience in Canada. Once I was literally pinned to the floor. I could not move. It felt like God was going to break my arms, and I was absolutely loving it. A million volts of electricity were shooting through my body, because the burning love was all over me, and I remember thinking to myself in absolutely joy and ecstasy, “God this is incredible, but if you turn it up any higher, I’ll die. I’ll be happy, but I’ll die.”

He is preparing you. And so now He gives you His word. He gives you His Spirit, but that’s not where it ends. Listen to Paul:

“That He may grant you to be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being. Why? So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may take strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

That’s big. Believe the Gospel. In Jesus name, Amen.