
Christian Sexual Ethics in an Age of Individualism

BY JULIE MORRIS

On the surface the three books reviewed here are about sexual behavior, but on a deeper level they address healthy and holy relationships with self, others, and God. The authors care deeply about community and intimacy and about how to cultivate them in a culture that promotes disposable relationships.

The victim of a highly publicized sexual assault at Stanford University wrote an open letter to her attacker, Brock Allen Turner, in which she described the psychological terror, fear, and isolation she had experienced since the attack.[†] She also expressed incredulity that at no point in the trial proceedings did her attacker express regret or even acknowledge that he had assaulted her, despite the unanimous decision to convict him on three counts of sexual assault. The judge had sentenced Turner to below the minimum requirement of the law, stating that he feared a longer sentence would have a “severe impact” on the attacker’s life.

Much could be said about what this case teaches us about rape culture, about whose bodies or futures matter, and about shame and victim-blame. This case, and thousands like it, indicate a vital need for more fulsome conversations about sex, bodies, and what constitutes sexually ethical behavior.

What would it look like for us to take conversations about sex and the body as an integral part of our moral and spiritual formation in the Church? What do our sexual bodies say about God, and vice versa? These are not new questions, of course, but they are becoming more critical for us to ask as family structures and cultural ethics continue to shift and as cases of sexual assault proliferate within our society.



In his book *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015, 160 pp., \$14.99), Wesley Hill addresses our questions about sexual ethics by focusing on singleness and platonic intimacy outside of marriage. He tells the story of developing and finding friendship within a culture that perpetuates short-term, disposable relationships. As someone who believes he is called to celibacy as a Christian homosexual, Hill vividly describes his struggle to find deeply fulfilling relationships within the Church and his subsequent journey to develop lifelong, committed friendships.

Hill observes that marriage has become the only place our culture imagines such deeply meaningful relationships can exist. Historically, however, marriage was not the only or even primary location for platonic intimacy. For instance, in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus reimagines friendship and familial relationships through relationship with him. Once when he was teaching a crowd, his mother and brothers arrived and called for him. Jesus replied with the rhetorical question, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” and said of the disciples sitting around him, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:31-35, cf. Matthew 12:46-50, Luke 8:19-21). Hill interprets this passage as a promise: “You *will* have close relationships if you follow me, Jesus seems to say. They will just look different from what you originally envisioned” (56).

That story is not the only place the Bible speaks about committed relationships. Hill provides a quick but thorough analysis of friendships within the Bible, and then he draws on these deep biblical resources to create space for committed friendship or, using his term, “spiritual friendship.” Beyond the Bible, the rich Christian tradition provides other examples of what this may practically look like; Hill finds the ceremony of “brother-making” vastly helpful when trying to think through how spiritual friendship functions.

Hill offers a much needed, beautifully written appeal for deep and meaningful friendships that are intentionally nonromantic. Though Hill writes from the specific theological position of a homosexual Christian who believes homosexuals should be celibate, his book will inspire other Christians who are struggling to navigate desire and find intimacy in a Christian culture that says little that is helpful about either. Hill is approachable and charitable, both toward himself and others. *Spiritual Friendship* is an incredibly important contribution to a gaping hole in the Church’s understanding of singleness as well as its limited vision of relational intimacy.



While Hill’s account is deeply personal, Dale S. Kuehne’s *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship Beyond an Age of Individualism* (Grand Rapids,

MI: Baker Academic, 2009, 240 pp., \$20.00) approaches the above questions historically, using evidence from the past and present to build constructive suggestions for the future of sexual ethics. Kuehne addresses large questions about the meaning of sexual relationships and their role in helping humans thrive through an analysis of human history and philosophy, engaging such figures as Aristotle, Hume, and Nietzsche. In three sections of his book, Kuehne explores sexual ethics in the past (what he terms the “tWorld” or “traditional world”), the current approach to sexual ethics (in the “iWorld” or “individual world”), and where sexual ethics can and should go (the “rWorld” or “relational world”).

According to Kuehne’s reading of history, marriage and the extended family were the foundation of the traditional world. Marriage between one man and one woman was the location for desire, sexuality, and societal stability. Citing cultural references like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, Kuehne argues that the traditional world understood the value and importance of family as the cornerstone of society. Additionally, the traditional world offered stability and an incredible opportunity for relational fulfillment. With the rise of nihilism, the rejection of all moral principles, and the growing impact of philosophical liberalism (which “contends that reason can expand our freedom over the world of tradition and convention” [50]) in the 1960s, however, relationships took a sharp turn toward individualism.

Individualism, or the iWorld, removed people from the stability of both marriage and the family structure. As individuals could make choices about what was good or right for their own lives, marriage was no longer expected to last a lifetime. Consequently, the nuclear family also lost its stability, becoming more fluid as families separated and rejoined with other families. For Kuehne, the iWorld may have gained some individual freedoms, but it was at the cost of meaningful relationships. As a way forward, Kuehne suggests people move beyond the tWorld and iWorld toward the rWorld, or “relational world.”

Kuehne offers an interpretation of the biblical creation story as an example of what it might look like to build a relational world rather than an individual one. Asserting that God created human beings as relational creatures, Kuehne concludes that we need meaningful, lasting relationships in order to

Wesley Hill offers a beautifully written appeal for deep and meaningful friendships that are intentionally nonromantic. It will inspire Christians struggling to navigate desire and find intimacy in a Christian culture that says little that is helpful about either.

flourish. He then points to Adam and Eve as evidence that family is necessary for fulfillment.

Sex and the iWorld exhorts readers to rearrange their priorities by placing relationship and family over personal freedom. While Kuehne's message is important, it does fall a bit flat at times. For instance, it does not answer questions like how we understand human flourishing for people who have lost their families or for those who are victims of abuse by family members. How does someone like Wesley Hill, for whom the creation of a nuclear family is not possible, fit into this picture? Furthermore, Kuehne does not offer insight into how to evaluate situations in which individual freedom and relational stability come into conflict (as is the all-too-common case of women being praised for staying with abusive husbands).

Interestingly, Kuehn also cites the 1960s as the moment when individualism took hold, but does not offer the reader his interpretation of the Civil Rights movement or the great strides feminism made at that time. How do we interpret this overthrowing of oppression in light of Kuehne's interpretation of history? As Kuehne has made it clear that he hopes to open up conversations about sexual ethics, perhaps readers should not only keep these questions in mind as they engage his text, but also seek out companion texts or articles to read alongside Kuehne's work.



Though she responds to slightly different questions, Beth Felker Jones's *Faithful: A Theology of Sex* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015, 112 pp., \$11.99) is a challenging and thought-provoking companion to Kuehne.

Beth Felker Jones offers a rich yet conversational argument for why sex matters and how Christians should develop robust understandings of sex, intimacy, and the body. Though this is a slim volume in the "Ordinary Theology Series," Jones has contributed an important book on the theology of sex. She dives into surprisingly deep territory, covering topics like desire, radical faithfulness, and sex-gone-wrong.

Beginning with a strong argument for the goodness of sex and sexual desire, Jones develops a rich account of the reality and meaningfulness of sex in a culture that would rather dismiss it as recreation or personal life choices. At a time when most people seem to prefer keeping sex private, Jones argues that sex matters to God because bodies matter to God. As with the rest of creation, however, sex has been affected by the Fall. Thus, there is both sex that is ordered toward God and sex that is disordered. Though it may sound strange at first, Jones draws sex right into the believer's relationship with God. Believers are to demonstrate God's faithfulness to them in the way they have sex.

Jones demonstrates a vast knowledge of history and theology as she treats complex theological matters with a light tone and easy-to-follow

writing. *Faithful* is a meaningful read that will likely spark much-needed conversations among believers. Writing with grace and attention to questions surrounding sexism and gender, Jones is an author whose work deserves attention.



Each of the three books reviewed here offers an important contribution to Christian thought surrounding sexual ethics. While at the surface these authors write about sexual behavior, at a deeper level they deal with healthy and holy relationships with the self, with others, and with God. Hill, Kuehne, and Jones care deeply about community and intimacy and about how to cultivate them within a culture that promotes individualism and disposable relationships.

Reading a few books on sexual ethics will not eliminate rape or sexual assault within our culture, but it may affect how we respond to such tragic events. It may affect how seriously we take conversations about consent and appropriate manifestations of desire because we understand that what happens to bodies and what we do with them matters deeply to persons and to God. Ideally, attending to issues surrounding chastity will form people who realize that chastity is not just about being pure, it is about how we think about bodies.

NOTE

† After the victim read the letter as a courtroom statement, she supplied a copy of the letter to *BuzzFeeds News*. See Katie J. M. Baker, "Here Is the Powerful Letter the Stanford Victim Read Aloud to Her Attacker," *BuzzFeed News* (June 3, 2016), www.buzzfeed.com/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra?utm_term=.uv-LeDEWnW#.fuAp67VZV (accessed August 22, 2016).



JULIE MORRIS

is a Ph.D. candidate in theology at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.