

Sex and the gospel, a better story

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Date: 28 October 2017

Preacher: Glynn Harrison

[0 : 00] And we're delighted today to welcome Glyn Harrison, formerly the professor and head of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Bristol.

He was also a consultant psychiatrist in that context. And Glyn now speaks very widely on issues that are interfaced between Christian faith and psychology, neuroscience and psychiatry.

That's a bit of a mouthful, isn't it? And Glyn and his wife Louise are members of Emanuel Church in Bristol, which is a church plant from Christ Church Clifton. And he's also the author of this book, A Better Story, God, Sex and Human Flourishing.

And there are copies of this book available down in the bookstore. Before I invite Glyn to come and speak, we're going to pray together. Let's pray. Our great God and heavenly Father, we thank you for the ministry that you've given to Glyn.

And we pray that you will use him today to encourage, equip and envision us. Be Glyn's help as he speaks and honour the Lord Jesus through him.

[1 : 15] We ask in the Saviour's name. Amen. Colin, thank you very much.

It's great to be back in Scotland. I first came here as an 18-year-old to study medicine at Dundee University, where two wonderful things happened.

First and perhaps most, well, anyway, two wonderful things happened. I met my wife, Louise, and we were married, and Louise is here with me today.

And the second thing that happened was that I fell under the spell of some wonderful Bible teachers, and the whole area of expository ministry came alive for me in a way I had never really known before.

And that was thanks to the ministry of people like James Philip, William's father. And it's just wonderful to be here and to notice a room through there, the William Still room.

[2 : 25] He married us, too. And even more wonderful, it's so good to see the legacy of their work continuing to unfold here today with us.

So thank you so much, William, for inviting me along. It's just great to be with you, and thank you for letting me share. I'd like to build with some verses of Scripture on those verses that William so helpfully opened up with us a moment ago.

If you'd like to turn with me to Genesis chapter 1, just a very brief reading, which we'll use to anchor our thoughts as we go through our sessions this morning.

Genesis chapter 1, verse 26. Genesis chapter 1, verse 26.

So God created mankind in His own image. In the image of God, He created them. Male and female, He created them.

[3 : 59] God blessed them and said to them, Be fruitful and increase in number. Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

And then verse 31. God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day.

Well, the sexual revolution. I think we need to begin by acknowledging that we've always found it somewhat difficult to talk about this whole area of sex, haven't we?

I remember when I was a little chap of about nine or ten, discerning one day there was a word which might embarrass my grandmother.

And so I said to her, Granny, what does the word pregnant mean?

[5 : 16] And do you know what she said? She said, I don't know. She'd had given birth to two children, and she didn't know what the word pregnant meant.

But with her slightly flushed appearance and the aversion of her eyes, I knew that she did know. And I knew that she knew because I knew what being pregnant meant.

And yet, something in the culture meant she could not tell me. And that's a little window into the culture of shame and ignorance and fear that has shrouded this whole area for many of us Christians over decades, perhaps over centuries.

And like many other little girls and boys, I came into puberty as my body broke into life with desire and sexuality in ignorance and fear, shame.

And of course, things have moved on a little since then. But how many of us here today, and I'm sure there will be people who can say yes to it, but how many of us really could say that it was our Christian home or our church was the place where we learned under God about the essential goodness of our erotic desires?

[6 : 52] Now, why many of us say that? If Bible teaching about sex and our sexuality and relationships were a food, most of us have been brought up on the starvation diet.

Now, I want you to hold that picture of that little boy. We'll be returning to him once or twice while we talk about this. Or little girl in your mind for a few moments.

Because around the same time that I was questioning my poor grandmother in the 50s, over in the States, Hugh Hefner, who died a few weeks ago, incidentally, Hugh Hefner launched the first ever mass market girly magazine.

And it was called Playboy. And looking back on the launch of his magazine, years and years later, in an interview, Hefner said that one of the reasons he founded that magazine was because, he said, quote, of the hurt and hypocrisy of my religious upbringing.

Well, enough of hurt and hypocrisy, he was saying. He finished with the starvation diet. From now, it was going to be fast food. And think about this.

[8 : 11] People are offered starvation diet or a fast food diet. What do you think they're going to choose? And so, a revolution was born amongst the most profound and far-reaching social and cultural revolutions in recent history and a revolution in which we, today, are immersed right now.

It was a revolution that promised freedom to little boys like me. Freedom from ignorance and fear and shame. It was a divorce, it was a revolution that promised freedom from promises.

And so, divorce rates, you can see here, rocketed six-fold from 60s, early 60s through to the early 80s. Freedom from promises. As people married less and marriage rates, these are just the number of people getting married, these are the number, raw numbers of divorce, as the number of people getting married went into free fall from about the same period.

We claim freedom from commitment. In the redefinition of marriage, we claim the freedom from authority. And in gender theory and the rise of transgender, we freed ourselves from nature herself.

self, we get to make the rules. Autonomy, auto nomos, the self makes its own law, nomos. Freedom.

[9 : 56] And in just a few decades, centuries-old Christian convictions about marriage and family effectively have collapsed. And friends, the reality we have to face is that a majority of people out there either don't care or think good riddance.

How about you? But as I look at the speed and the scale of this revolution that continues to unfold around us, I find myself asking, what is the secret of its power?

The political theorist Joseph Nye talks about two types of power. And you may not have heard his name, but you'll have heard of the types of power. He talks about hard power and soft power.

Hard power is getting what you want by coercion. You send in the troops. And the activists of this revolution know how to deploy hard power.

And if you are on the receiving end of it, it hurts. But nevertheless, I want to contend with you this morning that the real secret of this revolution isn't hard power.

[11 : 12] It's soft power. Soft power, the ability to get what you want using attraction. you say, well, what kind of soft power?

I want to suggest three kinds. The power of new ideas, the power of a compelling moral vision, and the power of story.

Let's look at those one by one, shall we? The power of new ideas. The sexual revolution came along with exciting new ideas. Not those old Psalm 8, Genesis 1 type ideas, but new ideas about what it means to be human.

And of course, who am I? What is it to be human is one of the most profound and far-reaching questions you will ever ask about your life. And the sexual revolution came along and it said, look inside yourself for the answer to that question.

It gave us, in its ideology, something called expressive individualism. Expressive individualism, it's a term coined by the sociologist Robert Bellah about half a century ago.

[12 : 28] And it's the look inside yourself mantra that is everywhere around us. Free yourself from external authorities. Turn in and then express.

Express, you see? Expressive. Express. Live out the truth of who you are truly inside.

And so, expressive individualism sets before us the picture of the unencumbered self. A self unburdened by what's gone before, by tradition, authority, dogma, vicars, ministers, bibles, grannies, these people who loaded their expectations onto us are self set free.

And so powerful is this ideology in our culture today that the term I identify as, have you heard that? I identify as, has become one of the defining motifs of our age.

Power of ideas. But then second, the power of moral vision. And I think it was this revolution's moral vision that perhaps caught traditionalists off guard more than anything else.

[13 : 51] When it comes to questions of morality, you see, traditionalists had been accustomed to occupying the moral high ground. We were the home team.

And we could call out the evils of pornography and broken homes and sleeping around because it fed into a broad public moral consensus that we aligned with.

So when this revolution came along, many traditionalists, we thought it would be business as usual. We screw up our nose. But far from unveiling a Dantean nightmare of debauchery, this revolution cast a moral vision of authenticity, of sincerity, of honesty, being who you really are.

And it cast us as the immoral, the hypocrites, the judgmentalists, the people who like pushing, the little people who don't fit your straightjacketing rules to the edge and outside where they go hungry and you don't care.

And for the first time in centuries, traditional Christians are having to come to terms with the reality. And now that they're awaiting, it's they who are viewed as immoral.

[15 : 23] And that's hard, isn't it? And so the ideology of expressive individualism comes freighted with virtue. The virtues of authenticity, sincerity, candor.

Virtues which, when practiced, like virtue itself, even in the Aristotle sense, produce freedom, flourishing, fairness. So let me give you an example of how this moral vision works.

Take some of the characters you might see in a gay pride march, much as this. You see, now on the face of it, to traditional Christians, this looks easy. Faced with explicit images of sexual fluidity like this, we wrinkle up our noses, they talk about AIDS, and we hold another seminar on pornography.

People aren't listening to our language anymore, friends. Today, images even like this portray moral purpose.

They say, you continue in your hypocritical shame culture with the sexual abuse in your churches and the hidden pornography. Oh, and have you seen the rates of divorce that go among you?

[16 : 43] Well, you pick off the little people on the outside, the gays, and the transgender people, and you push them out. Well, you stay in that world if you want to.

But this is who I am. And you better get used to it. And by the way, look at us, folks. We're smiling. We're happy.

You've been in a church lately? See? Now, you take some new ideas like that and a moral vision like this and stir them together with great stories and put them into narratives with attractive actors and role models and you have got a revolution on your hand.

A revolution with a bold, overarching narrative of freedom. A plot line that centers around how the little people, the outsiders, the despised, the unwanted, found the courage, the bravery to stand up and be themselves, to throw off the suffocating blanket of religion and tradition and shame and claim the courage to be free.

And that master narrative of freedom is told and retold over and over again, isn't it? All the time in movies and rom-coms and sitcoms.

[18 : 17] Disney. And in sitcoms like Friends and Will and Grace, they make us laugh. And in movies like The Magdalene Sisters or Brokeback Mountain or The Imitation Game, they make us cry.

And it's everywhere in the airwaves too, isn't it? In songs of love and romance, it comes down our headphones. I am my own experiment, Madonna sings.

I am my own work of art, freedom. And how did traditionalist Christians respond to this inspiring story of freedom with facts, with rules?

And often when our leaders do feel compelled to say something, it reads more like the terms and conditions of a software upgrade. than a vision for human flourishing, doesn't it?

And I'm speaking as an Anglican here. And I'm speaking of our bishops. But as the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor says, you can't respond to a great story with facts.

[19 : 42] You need to tell a different story. And that's our question. What is it? What is it?

Now, let's pause for a moment and look back over this brief cultural analysis I've just taken us through. And I hope some of you are thinking, well, what you have just presented is a simple, in fact, I'd call it a simplistic analysis of a cultural change.

It is hugely more complicated than that. And I want to say to you, well, I agree, of course it is. If you're an economist here today, you'll think, if you want to explain this sexual revolution, you need to look at the economic forces at play.

In the post-war period, the rising prosperity, the economic freedoms this brought to women. Women became financially independent. Benefit system itself gave women an independence from men that they'd never had before.

And so, of course, divorce rates rose because women had the freedom to get out from this oppressor. Women no longer needed men, or at least not in the same way as before.

[21 : 03] So that might be an economist's take at a simple level. Alternatively, if we've got a public health specialist here, he'd stand up and say, well, that's interesting, but I'll tell you what's responsible for this revolution. You have to forgive that, but I'm in Scotland.

You're allowed a little excitement, aren't you? A public health specialist, I'll tell you what's responsible for this revolution, he'd say. It was the pill.

At a stroke, we uncoupled sex from its consequences, childbearing. And so, cohabitation rose. And sex outside marriage rose.

There are numerous complex factors weaving together and in play if we want to carry out a proper cultural analysis. Of course there is. But here's my point.

The genius of this revolution, the secret of its power, lies in its ability to reduce all of this complexity to one simple, popular narrative of freedom.

[22 : 08] freedom. A narrative that has populated and reshaped the cultural icons of our age. A narrative that's worked its way into the everyday conversations with the level, the way people talk to one another so that the tone today is that well, everybody believes this, don't they?

a narrative that's so compelling. It makes people feel, never mind about think, it makes them feel, I want this to be true.

Now let's return to this picture of this little boy standing, this Christian young man here. Or young women growing into puberty because they are immersed in this culture.

we are immersed in this culture. It's on his screens, it comes down his earphones, it shapes his world.

And he looks to the leaders, he respects and he can smell our fear. The good communicators, he longs to get up and say something, seem to be keeping their heads down.

[23 : 24] And the people who do sometimes get out there and say something, you wish they'd stayed at home because it sounds a bit mean and it sounds if we don't like people sometimes.

And standing alone here, he's got a good idea of what we're against. But he dreads being asked, but what are you for? What are you for?

people? And that's the dilemma we face. Well, I want to ask you a question just now.

What would be nice would be to break at this point and have a bit of discussion together. We're a bit too many to do that. So, the question is just this. It's, how am I feeling right now?

How do you just think about it for a moment? Reflect. How am I feeling right now? I was speaking at a conference of ministers once.

[24 : 39] A guy put up his hand, he said, well, I hope what's coming next is good. Because I'm depressed. I'm depressed. And it's really interesting if you go around with a mic and ask people.

People say, think of last week, people say, I'm frightened, if I'm honest. I don't know where this is going. I feel crushed by the force and the power of this thing.

Angry, others say. I'm angry at the camouflage that's going on here, the reality behind this so-called story of freedom.

and I'm angry at that. I'm angry with ourselves that we've let it get this far. I'm worried. I'm perplexed.

So how are you feeling? And that's the power of this revolution, its ability to make us feel things as well as think things.

[25 : 52] things. So, having briefly surveyed the cultural landscape, I want to ask you to come on a journey with me for the second half of this talk.

And the journey is this. If Bible-believing Christians do have a different story to tell, a better story, what does it look like?

Where do we begin? How do we shape it? So let's go on that journey together, shall we? I don't know, I'm going to have a stab at it. I don't know whether it's any good, whether you'll think it, I'm hoping that some here will be able to do something better.

But here's what I think. I think it might look a bit like this. I think our story is rooted as William so helpfully laid the foundations for in two big truths that have been revealed to us as Christians.

The truth of who God is and the truth about who we are. Those are our starting points. The truth about who God is and the truth about who we are.

[27 : 09] Now, when we turn to our Bibles, who is this God that we encounter? We encounter him in those opening chapters of Genesis as the ruler of the spheres, the creator, the lord of space and time, the master of the universe, don't we?

But here's the thing. As the story unfolds, very quickly another characteristic of God appears and it becomes a defining characteristic of this God.

He is a lover. He loves. He loves. He loves. He loves. He loves. And as the story unfolds, we learn the different facets to his love.

We learn that it's like a mother bear for a cub. It's like a shepherd for his sheep. It's like a king for his subjects.

It's like a father for his son. But the picture that emerges most enduringly perhaps is that of a husband for his wife.

[28 : 23] For Isaiah says 62 verse 5, your maker is your husband, he says to the people of God. As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

It's your husband. He loves you. Just like a husband. The lights over his bride. The prophets characterized Israel's idolatry as adultery, didn't they?

But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me, says the Lord. Jeremiah 3.20 You sense the hurt, the distress, the dismay in his voice.

So, what is his love being compared to here? It is likened to the desire, including the sexual desire, of a husband, for his wife.

Ezekiel 16, later I pass by, God says, and when I looked at you, Israel, and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you.

[29 : 41] Your breasts had formed and your hair had grown and you became mine. Union with God.

Union with Christ, lover of our souls, the pursuer, the one who wants us.

God. And this one flesh imagery, which kind of makes us feel a bit uncomfortable, even our title, God, sex, we don't put those two words in the same bracket normally, but here they are, one flesh imagery, used of the love of God for his people.

And it threads its way from the Old Testament into the New. the last and the greatest of the prophets, John, what does he see? He speaks of his joy at last, hearing the voice of the bridegroom who comes.

Do you remember? And the whole of human history, Revelation tells us, is moving to the wedding feast of the lamb.

[31 : 04] And indeed, Paul, the apostle, says this whole one flesh thing refers to Christ and his people, the church.

And it's a great mystery, he says. Now remember, the way the Bible uses the word mystery, mystery doesn't mean puzzle, it doesn't mean it's a head scratcher, entirely, but it is, but it doesn't just mean it's a puzzle, it means this is something bigger than our reason can fully grasp.

It's beyond our calculation, it's beyond what we can entirely grasp, but it's so big it fires the imagination that God loves us, that Christ loves his church, as a woman and a man come together and they long for each other.

And so the mystery is that this young couple getting married here points to that, the love of God for his people.

Or rather, here's the thing, that, the overarching narrative of the Bible, of God's saving love, dying for his bride, points to this couple walking down the aisle, giving themselves to each other, because God has etched the central drama of the gospel into human flesh.

[32 : 42] Christ and when a couple get married, they put the gospel on display in flesh and blood. Christ and the church.

Don't ever look at a married couple in the same way again. Don't look at a couple celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary in the same way again.

There's something wonderful about weddings, isn't there, because it's promises being made. There's something even more wonderful about 50th golden wedding act, because it's about promises being kept. And it's promises being kept that iconize the glory of the faithfulness of God more than anything else.

Because he's a promise keeper. He's a God who sticks to us closer than a brother. Why? Because he is our lover, the lover of our souls.

God is. And so we've looked at something of the big truth of who God is, but I said there were two things that shape our story. The second thing is the truth about who we are.

[33 : 52] And what we learned, didn't we, was that we are image bearers. Then God said, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness.

We bear the image of God. we are like him. We possess striking similarities to our creator.

We're like him. And I hope you can see at once, this has a profound impact on the Christian concept of identity. For us, identity isn't something we discover.

It's something that's revealed. For us, identity isn't something that's chosen. it's something that's given. It isn't something that you make up once you've gone on some search within.

It's something that God reveals to us in the person of Christ who came for his people to give his life for them, to restore his image in men once again and women.

[35 : 00] God's being. And for Christians, you see, image bearers. This is who we truly are. Be yourself. This is who we are.

Image bearers. People who are learning to live in harmony with our design. Who are learning to be God's creatures all over again. That is our identity.

humanity. So what does it mean to be an image? It means to be like God. Well, what did we learn about God? Well, we learned he is a ruler. Didn't we? William brought this out.

So we rule. And we see this beautifully in Genesis 1 26, that verse. Let me read it. Then God said, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, like us, like us.

What? So that they can sit there and compute the world and analyze it? No. So that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky.

[36 : 11] As he rules, so that they may rule. in his image. We're designed to be God like. And so we send rockets into space.

We invent antibiotics. We harness wind power. We bring a stage to life with the most exotic dance you have seen.

We light up the sky. We make software. We order our world. We sweep our streets. We clean up after ourselves.

We create order. We create art, beauty, image bearers of God. But then verse 27, male and female, he created them.

Why? To make life more interesting? No. To be lovers. Because God is a lover. we're rulers.

[37 : 13] We're lovers. And then verse 28, and God blessed them male and female and said, be fruitful, increase in number, make more image bearers.

Why? Because making fruitful life giving love, love that brings life, is to be like him. He is a life giver and he has given us the ability to create.

life through sex. And we're called to be fruitful as he is fruitful. So, what does it mean to bear the image of God in our sexuality?

Well, his love is tender and passionate, so when in the gift of marriage we seek to love another tenderly, passionately, we're like him. His love is covenantal and faithful.

And so in the gift of marriage we bind ourselves to the person we love in promises that say for better for worse. I will be faithful to you like he is. You see?

[38 : 19] His love is fruitful and so in the gift of marriage we enter into a one flesh union, ordered toward children. Because he's fruitful. being a lover is part of our sexuality is part of our being made in the image of God.

Have you thought about that? Now we must break, but I just want to stop with the question that's hanging in the room. What about single people you're thinking?

Now of course it's not easy to live in harmony with our design. This is a fallen world we're in.

The catastrophe of the fall ricocheted through every facet of humanity and the image of God in man is marred and corrupted. And today our loves, our marriages, our sex lives, like all creation, subject to frustration, of being held back by the groans of the fall and so marriages come under strain, sex, often a disappointment, not all it's cracked up to be.

Not all marriages can have children. There'll be pain in this room. And also beside the effects of the fall, as Jesus himself said, a single man, like Paul, like John, the greatest of the prophets, single men, not all can or should be married.

[39 : 59] And Colin will be dealing with this in more detail later, but for some it just doesn't work out and it's a hard thing. Others because of same-sex desire and since the earliest days.

the tug is towards someone of their own sex. And it's not something they've chosen, it's something they experience. And it's part of the fallenness of our world and it's hard.

Just like the couple here who love to have kids and the couple who are struggling in their marriage. We struggle in different ways in our being made sexual because we're broken in the fall.

But then there are others who forego this way of life as did Paul for the joy of undistracted service for the kingdom. The gift being single to serve him.

And there are all kinds of situations in which we struggle to live in harmony with our design. But I want to finish by saying this. we're all called in our different ways, married or single, to say yes to the life giving goodness of God's plan.

[41 : 20] Whether you're a married person who says no to an affair because his love isn't like that. He doesn't have an affair. He doesn't go off with someone else. He binds himself to you in covenant.

Or if you're a single person who says no to a one night stand or no to sex outside marriage. Because his love is a faithful love and so will yours be.

Both the married person and the single person equally in their bodies bear witness to what marriage is. One in their committed faithfulness, the other in their abstinence.

Both are saying this is what his love's like so this is how I live my sexuality. But if you're single today, I just want to say you're not asexual.

You're sexual. But when you say no in your sexuality, you're saying yes to God's ways. And he loves you for that and you need to know it.

[42 : 26] And if you're here struggling in your marriage and it's really tough and if people knew and you're saying no to the temptations, you're saying yes to God's ways.

Both are pointing to what marriage is as the great symbol of divine love which is always faithful and it's always passionate because that's the kind of love he has.

Now how do we take that story and tell it to this chap here? That's what we're going to talk about in our second session and think about together a little more.

Can I just pray briefly and then apologies for going over there and we'll break for coffee. Lord thank you so much for your word.

Thank you for this. Thank you for challenging us with this this morning to get our heads around it to think differently. And we pray that your spirit will come and give us all the help we need to respond to what you're calling us to do and to be.

[43 : 41] In Jesus name. Amen. Our gracious father we thank you for our brother Glenn.

We thank you for the sharp mind that you've given him. We thank you Lord for the way in which he has diligently given himself to listening to you and to speaking in to our world to our culture to our society in powerful ways in biblical ways with great clarity.

And we ask that fresh unction of your spirit upon him as he comes to continue to lead us in this session now. In Jesus name. Amen. Thank you so much and thank you again for bearing with me there as I got into a muddle with my timing.

I somehow thought I'd been going an hour and five minutes when in fact it was 35 minutes. minutes. But I thought this explains why they're looking so bored and tired.

I've been going for an hour and five minutes but there we are. So hopefully we'll have some longer time at the end just to take some questions and answers. And as I suggested a number of these issues will be picked up in the seminars this afternoon.

[45 : 14] so it's wonderful to have Rob here and Sharon and Colin taking up some of the questions that this central narrative that we're looking for throws up and dealing with them in a bit more detail.

But I do want to stay focused on what the big story is because the danger, the trap that we keep falling into is to be drawn into the hot button issues without knowing what the main line is, you see.

And we need to work together to reconstitute and then re-embody amongst ourselves a positive story of what God's vision for our being made sexual is.

And we began, if you remember, that first session by suggesting that the central narrative of our culture today and the revolution it's going through is a kind of freedom.

freedom. The freedom to be who you truly are. Expressive individualism and so on. Have you noticed, though, over the last half hour that the Christian story is also driven by a narrative of freedom?

[46 : 30] The freedom of being who you truly are. And so, the story that we're looking for is God's big story of freedom.

It's a story in which we went looking inside ourselves as well. And what did we find? We found the shifting sands of insecurity and doubt. I don't know about you.

When I look inside myself, I don't find some wonderful thing to be released. I find sin. And I find awkwardness and deceit. And I find instability.

And my soul cries out, will someone name me from beyond myself? Will somebody out there tell me who I am? And our story is that we heard yes in reply to that.

For my sheep hear my voice. And God names us image bearers. Indeed, he transfigures in the New Testament. The whole idea of being an image bearer.

[47 : 33] We don't just bear the image of God. We bear the image of his son, Jesus. And that is who we truly are. And that is our story.

And it's getting harder and harder in our culture today to stand up and say, this is who I am. And I want to say, friends, brave, men and women who are same sex attracted, who are gay, have been marching the streets for decades now through some of the roughest areas in the world.

In Moscow, and in parts of Africa, string you up. And they've marched because they've been convinced by their story of freedom and they've had the courage to say, this is who I am.

Now we as Christians, now it's our turn. Who are we? Do we have the courage to say, and this is who we are? I don't know whether you've heard of the Silas and Martyrs.

The Silas and Martyrs, about 180 AD, in Carthage, Carthage in North Africa. There were 12 of them hauled in before the Roman governor, Saturninus.

[48 : 54] And he was actually not a bad man. He wanted to let them free. All they had to do was bow the knee to Caesar as God and Lord. And a young woman stepped forward from the 12, and she said, I want to be what I am.

I am a Christian, and that is who I am. Striking similarity to our culture's narrative.

Courage to be who you are. And that young woman, along with her 11 comrades, was taken out and hacked down with a sword. And friends, what I want to suggest to you is now it's our turn in history.

And this is where the rubber hits the road for us. And we dearly wish it was something else, wouldn't we? Please, Lord, let it be something else that we're tested on because we struggle with this.

And we don't want to appear mean. And we want to make sure that our churches are places of welcome. Whatever your background, your sexual orientation, your sexual interest, whatever, we want our churches to be places of welcome.

[50 : 16] And so we say, Lord, this is such a minefield, but this is where the rubber hits the road for us. And what God is saying to us, where do you stand? And martyrs through history have been willing to say, this is who I am.

And maybe humbly, we need to stand and say, this is who we are. We are Christians, image bearers, made to live in harmony with our design.

And our story is as broken up as that design has become through our fall, in the saving grace of Christ. We are learning to live again in harmony with our design.

And some of us struggle with same-sex attraction, some of us struggle with being gendered, and we have a sense of dissonance between our body and our feelings, and it's a struggle.

And others of us are in difficult marriages, and others of us are, we just love to be married. We'd love somebody to take an interest in us, and they don't. And all of us, we're struggling in different ways, but we're all in God's grace, learning to be his creatures all over again.

[51 : 28] And I promise you, Jesus said, this is the way of life, not death. I have come that you may have life flourishing, that you'll be more, not less.

And so can we sing a better song, can we tell a better story? You know there's a Greek myth about the sirens.

Do you remember the sirens? The sirens were, I always used to think they were mermaid like creatures, but I looked it up and they were actually bird like creatures who hovered and then sat on the rocks, and they were beautiful women with the most beautiful voices, the siren voices.

And passing sailors, when they heard the sound of the voices, were lured, were pulled, it hooked their desire, it pulled in their desires, onto the rocks where they were shipwrecked.

And there was a king, in Greek mythology called King, in the myth there's King Odysseus, and he wants to hear because he's heard it sound so beautiful, and so you know the story, King Odysseus tells his men to strap him to the mast.

[52 : 44] And he tells his men to block their ears with wax, and then they will row past the peninsula where the sirens are. And as they near it, he hears the voice, the alluring, the seductive, beautiful singing, and he's drawn to it.

But his men can't hear, and they carry on rowing. And he's told his men, no matter what I say, you keep rowing, right? But when he hears the sound, he shouts to his men, let me free.

He pleads with them, he orders them, he rages at them, they keep on rowing because he was strapped to the mast. And that is one way in which we can resist this culture, keep ourselves strapped to the mast, have more pornography seminars, more about what we're against, more fear amongst us.

Then there's another story, of Orpheus. And Orpheus was known as the greatest musician in the world. And Orpheus went past the sirens and he and his men fell under the spell of the sirens and they begin to be drawn toward the rocks.

And Orpheus gets his lyre out and he begins to sing. And because his singing is so beautiful, his voice drowns out the sirens, you see.

[54 : 06] He sings a better song. Now, back to our boy here. Are we going to help him? Strapping himself to the mast for the next 25, 30 years?

Or are we going to help him sing a better song? That's what we want to do, isn't it? Tell a better story. And this means rebuilding our communities around what the gospel is for, as well as what the gospel is.

Let's be clear. What we're talking about today isn't what the gospel is. The gospel is the glory of the cross of Christ. But don't forget what the gospel is for.

The gospel is for holiness. It's for the restoration of all things in Christ, including those made in his image. And part of what the gospel is for is that we create communities and families that embody holiness and God's ways.

And that show to the world how in the long run his ways are good. They're good. And we've been so used to being the home team for so long, we've forgotten how to defend these convictions and ways of life.

[55 : 29] And we slid into easy divorce patterns in the 60s and 70s with the rest of culture. And God is calling us back now to revisit our deepest convictions and to make them flesh once again in our communities.

And so this chap here, he doesn't need to just hear it from us, he needs to see it in us. He needs to be part of a family in which dad cares about the moral formation of his son as well as mum.

In which mum and dad at age six wake up to the fact that the culture out there wants his heart. And it's going to make a bid for his heart and it knows how to make him feel that he wants what it offers.

And so at the age of six onwards, they begin to think, how do we make sure we in this family are the key source of his moral formation? Not just by strapping himself to the mass, but by giving him a picture of why he's been made sexual, what that looks like, how he honors God in his body.

It means that in our communities we build our convictions, we celebrate a marriage as we've never celebrated it before.

[56 : 51] We've got opportunities to reinvent the way we do marriages. Why have we picked some of those habits off the shelf of middle class tradition? Why does the bride never get to say anything traditionally?

She'll sit there. She's made in the image of God. She's beautiful. She's intelligent. She's glorious. She doesn't have to be sit there and be commented on by drunken best men.

What an opportunity for us to iconize the image of God. Male, female, he created them as a man and woman come together and we see in flesh and blood the glory of the gospel in the giving of their love.

And we say this, it points to that, but more than that, that creates this for God has etched into our lives and the whole community comes together to support this couple and to support their kids.

And one of the most wonderful sights is seeing students coming in and they've been looking after your kids in their moral formation. And as we gather together in communities, we see our single people as people who in their bodies, their gracious gracefulness, show a commitment to the faithfulness of God.

[58 : 14] In their no, they say yes to the ways of God. And we scratch our heads and we say, how do we make sure our families have got leaky edges so that single people too give as well as receive in our family and our community because we need each other.

All of this means, friends, as we begin to re-embody this gospel, what it's for as well as what it is, as we re-embody, as we embark on this journey that God has called us to rethink and recommit ourselves to, we do have to defend our convictions in a hostile society.

You know, the sociologist, Peter Berger, anyone heard of Peter Berger? Very well-known sociologist. Peter Berger talked about cognitive minorities and one of his research interests was minority groups in a society and he said, why is it some groups with dissonant beliefs, with a different belief set, why is it some survive and others don't, they collapse?

The difference, he said, is that the ones who survive take active measures to sustain their convictions in the face of the wider culture. They teach them, they live them, they embody them, they have role models that put on display to the younger people what this looks like, you see.

And he cites psychological experiments which show just how vulnerable we are. As human beings, we don't like being surrounded by people who believe different to us. You know, famous experiment, Ash, Solomon Ash, in the 50s, if you line up 10 people and you tell the poor guy on the end here, you say, you're 10 subjects here, and what I want you to do is just tell me which of those three lines at the end is the biggest.

[60 : 31] It's obviously B. Anyone can see it. B is the longest line. And he thinks you're all subjects. And then the person at the top end says A. And the next one says A.

And the next one says A. And the next one says A. And the next one says A. A. They're all stooges. They're accomplices of the experimenter.

He is the subject. 69% of people who take part in the experimental series at one point at least said A.

Because we find it hard as human beings to swim against the tide. And if we leave our young people to swim against the tide, they will turn.

It's too strong. And the first people to leave the cognitive minority said they're the more feelingsy type. Because they don't like feeling different from other people.

[61 : 36] And that leaves the more black and white personality types. You see? And the empathic types who are left look around at their new friends and they say I don't like you. You seem a bit mean.

And so they begin to leave as well. And in the end he says you become an authoritarian rump or you implode. And that's always the danger for us and so we have to create communities that sustain our convictions.

And not only teach them but show them to the world, yes, but first to ourselves, to each other, as we try to sing a better song.

so as we begin to tell this story to each other, what might that begin to look like? After we've worked together a bit more at being like, acting like a minority to make sure we survive as a minority in this culture, how can we begin to relate our story of freedom to the story of freedom in the world around us?

How do we tell our story in ways that might win hearts as well as minds? Well, I want to suggest four words which will help us think about our posture, that is, our psychological approach to this whole area.

[63 : 05] As we look at our culture around us, and as we look into our own hearts and the fears and our own young people and our own older people, as we wonder, have we got this right?

Do we have the truth? Is it time to change our belief? These four words, I suggest, should shape our posture, the way we approach it. We don't have to say the words, but they should be in our hearts.

Sorry, thank you, please, and never. Sorry, thank you, please, and never.

And I want to begin with the word sorry. Some of you won't like this, but I'm going to do it anyway. We do need to be ready to say sorry to our culture sometimes.

We let you down. Our gospel promises freedom, flourishing, and in this big area of sex, relationships, too often we're offered silence and shame, and we're sorry.

[64 : 11] We're sorry we did that. We didn't tolerate the gays out there, but we've been silently tolerating the pornography in here. And we didn't tolerate the transgender out there, but we often took a relaxed view to divorce in here, and we're sorry about that.

Sometimes some of us have been bigoted, and we've condemned in others. Jesus says you do not condemn, God judges. And we need to say sorry when we've done that.

I honestly, one of our pastors is same-sex attracted. What a gift to us, Ed Shaw. You may have seen his book. I just feel Ed is a wonderful gift.

I don't feel in any sense bigoted to same-sex attracted people myself, but sometimes when I hear some of the things Christians have said to people who are same-sex attracted, or written, or they've shown me an email, and I won't say a Christian wrote that to you.

Well, I won't say I'm a Christian, and I won't say I'm sorry, because that is a violation of the way of Christ, of the gospel.

[65 : 27] And so we need to be ready for that, not big public, if we start saying sorry for church history, we'll be, we'll never stop. So I'm not one for big public statements, anything like that.

This is about the posture of our heart, which starts with humility, which is premised on the scripture, before you pick the speck out of your brother's eye, make sure there isn't a plank in your own.

And where there has, say sorry. And we're already building bridges then, with our culture. And then thank you.

You say, well, what have we got to say thank you for? Thank you for not letting us brush this stuff under the carpet. Thank you for not going away. Thank you for keep asking us, not just what we're against, but what we're for.

Thank you for forcing us to go back to our Bibles and say, what do we believe? And then please, can we share with you what we found when we did that?

[66 : 27] Here's our story. Can we have a conversation about that? And what I suggest we do as we try to relate, first of all, to our own hearts, but then to our culture, what I suggest we do is any critique we make, we make in terms of its promises, first of all, rather than our assessments.

This is a culture, friends, that promise freedom, flourishing, fairness, having said sorry, look, we broke some of our promises, we made big promises, Jesus said, I've come that you may have life, except in sex, and this, we broke some of that, and we want to say sorry, but now having done that, can we look at some of your promises, in your story, this story of freedom and flourishing, fairness, can we have a conversation about that, please?

and if we can draw people in this way, and if we can do it in a gracious way, who should we model ourselves on?

Do you remember Paul? What did he do at Acts 17? We read that in Acts 17 he went around Athens that morning and we read he was greatly disturbed at the idolatry he found and we wonder was he writing Romans 1 in his head as he went around they exchanged the glory of the invisible God for creatures that crawl and worship them and he was disturbed by it and he went around and eventually he has an opportunity they put him up at the Areopagus and they say now tell us what you want to say what does Paul do?

Does he let them have Romans one? Does he call out their idolatry and blame them as idolaters? It's very interesting what he does he says men of Athens I see that you are very religious for as I walked around this morning I saw a God to this and a God to that and then I came across to an unknown God and it is he of whom I want to speak you see what Paul did there he doesn't move in with condemnation he appeals to their spiritual longings he says why are you worshipping these things because we're all worshippers I see that you're very religious that's what we are now let's have a conversation about that because it is here who I want to speak now so he draws in his listeners can we do the same in our culture look we're both talking about freedom anyone here not for freedom that's our game that's our story isn't it we're both talking about flourishing who wants to beat people down and see little people the gospel is about whosoever will may come this is our gospel we all want fairness he is a

[69 : 40] God of justice so we share those fundamental human longings with our culture we have a very different story about how to get there and what those words mean please can we talk about that because you see we we look at this culture and it promises freedom has expressive individualism delivered the freedoms it promised it sounds good what's it mean it's a slogan nobody knows what it don't be don't be don't be fooled it doesn't mean anything look inside what do you I don't invite you if I look inside myself I find shifting sands of doubt and insecurity I find a wicked mood one morning and I find I'm really happy the next I've yet to come across some real me waiting to get out I find deceit and I find sin for which

I found a saviour has today's slogan to look inside yourself brought the freedoms it promised we've owned up some of our failures certainly not in the sphere of mental health identity related issues such as self-harm seem to be on the increase they're not going away this is a sham and we almost were taken in this modern project of self definition what does it do it burdens people friends with a project of endless self-making that is open ended and we already know from the fizzling self-esteem movement what happens when we try to identify our own worth don't we you know the self-esteem movement it addresses the big question of where do you get your worth from and it quite rightly says if you state your worth on your job what happens when you're outside of a job if you state your worth on your looks what happens when you get older no no the self-esteem you need to state your worth on something more and what is it you say what your worth is you assert it that's the premise of the self-esteem movement that you as an individual declare or assert your worth from within it's a form of expressive individualism in its popular sense so all this stuff

I love me I'm powerful unlimited certain strong I attract positive people and events into my life now I am special you know one study found that 50% of North Americans use slogans like these at least once a week in fact another study said and what happens when they do and what they did was they set up a randomized controlled trial and there were three groups like this the sample was divided into three this group were given a bunch of cards with those statements on I attract people into my life now I'm special you see and they were told to have a little selfie quiet time 20 minutes a day focus positively on those statements this group were told to meditate on how these statements are true of me and how they're not true of me so it's more an evaluation the third group were told to do nothing at all now when this was at the University of Ontario it's a nice study when they followed them up three months later six months later two points what did they find well the people in this group who had low self-esteem at the beginning of the study felt worse at the end of the study why because it's hard to believe your own propaganda and the authors conclude that these self-affirming statements seem to help people already feel good about themselves to feel a teeny weeny bit better but they backfire for the people who need them most now this is it friends if the self struggles to define its own worth how for goodness sake will it define its own meaning its own nature our souls cry out please name me and tell me who

I am and that is the gift of the gospel and so this modern project of be yourself is a king has no clothes on project that we need to graciously expose its shifting sand its propaganda and in the Christian story we just say in conversation in our story the self isn't found in endless self making it's not a choice it's a gift it offers a kind of freedom found in learning to be God's creature and I'm not going to suggest we say that that journey isn't tough we were talking about it earlier on it's a tough journey learning to be God's creature to bear his image well we slip and slide every day but that is the destiny to which God calls us and that is who we are so that's freedom then there's flourishing how's that project going in our culture well you'd think at least the sexual revolution has produced more sex wouldn't you isn't that what it's about you take off the brakes people are then free certainly was in the 60s 70s well what's been happening to our sex lives not your sex lives sex lives in culture well professor Spiegelhalter who's professor of statistics at Oxford and with a name like that you feel it must be correct what I'm about to tell you professor Spiegelhalter just collated so he's got a very good book called sex by numbers and it's a very good book he's a statistician it's a very fair assessment of how hard it is to get at what is going on in people's sex lives because we don't tend to tell the truth but the best evidence suggests that this is what's been happening to our sex lives over the past 30 years ok more this is the average frequency of people having sexual intercourse in the last four weeks in the age band 16 to 44 not old is ok the median average frequency it's a kind of an average median of sex in the last four weeks 1990 five times a month men and women 2000 four times a month 2010 three times a month why

Professor Spiegelhalter says if we carry on like this no one will be having any sex at all by the year 2040 now as a statistician he knows you never extrapolate graphs and as a human being he also says and I doubt very much that that will be the case but isn't it odd that a revolution that offers more delivers less and I'm reminded of what idols always do they offer more and more they appeal to our good desires but they offer a disordered solution to them and they offer more and more but deliver less and less until in the end they have everything and you have nothing that is idolatry and that is when we make sex an idol the disorderedness of it leaves us unsatisfied and that is what our culture is struggling to come to terms with so we need more agony ants we need more programs about sex endless talk but meanwhile our sex lives there isn't enough imagination about what sex is for what it is to sustain it in the revolution now in our story that is not true in our story our desires our sexual desires are good given by

[78 : 52] God in the end they point us like all our desires appetite our desires for control all our desires our love of beauty all of these things will be satisfied in Christ including our sexual desires all point to the end of all things which is Christ the end of all desire but also it's one of the wonderful ways in which we put on display to the world what God's like his love is faithful fruitful passionate and in our fellowships we support one another in that reality that's our story and it doesn't sound very good you know I've spoken to students they say well I still don't think this sounds like a better story what you're telling me friends the gospel never has sounded like a better story in the sense that it's an easier option it's a cross and when Jesus said self-denial is the route to flourishing it's true of this area sex as in other areas and we have to now this is where the rubber hits the road today and we have to prove the cross and the calling of the cross which is that we flourish by way of self-sacrifice and not self-fulfillment and that's our story if you believe that in your heart people begin to believe it as we share our story and then finally there's fairness and our culture's on something when it talks about fairness isn't it

God is fair he's a God of justice people still even though the image of God is defaced they still sense there's something right about justice and fairness so there aren't something when they speak of fairness but remember what the sexual revolution means if you're a kid today if you're a child today if you're a child like this little chap here it may have delivered a kind of freedom and justice for some this revolution but what has it delivered for little chaps like him nearly one half of marriages kids are born sorry nearly one half of children born are born outside of wedlock those married those liaisons are inherently less stable if you're a kid and this is data from the marriage foundation if you're a kid and your parents got married before you were born perhaps most of us here the chances today of their being separated ten years later is about 25% if you were born and your parents got married after you were born at some point the chances of them being separated ten years later rocket to 50% if you get born and you look around and your parents are not married and they never get married your chances of them separating are two thirds at ten years and this is a kind of fairness that's delivered to the most vulnerable in society and we've got to ask ourselves does this talk of fairness produce freedom and fairness for adults but it visits injustice and structural inequalities on the most vulnerable of all our kids only one half of children reach the age of 16 with both parents in the home this breaks the heart of God

Paul walking around amongst our idols today he would be greatly disturbed to see what was being done to our kids because God loves kids and there's nothing better for kids psychological development than the stability of a home in which two biological parents bound to one another in promises love that child and provide the stable upbringing she or he wants and report let me summarize the data report from this is a joint report from Princeton University and the Brookings Institute 2015 in which they looked at it was an overview of all the data these are secular institutions this isn't some Christian institution and this was their conclusion reams of social science and medical research convincingly show that children who are raised by their married biological parents enjoy better physical cognitive and emotional outcomes on average than children who are raised in other circumstances quite simply kids love the stability of a man and woman married to one another and who keep their promises and we have a generation of kids do you know one study showed that in early 1990 a cohort of children born over two years actually I'll skip that one because it's going to take me too long but we are visiting inequalities on our kids think about it if you're a youngster and you come into the world and there seem to be two people around and they're there constantly for the first few weeks and they seem to love you very much and they pick you up you don't have language so you can't yet describe in your own head these experiences so it's a world of feelings and impressions but then one of them disappears and as the weeks and months pass by a new person arrives with this person and he picks you up now and then he puts you and he seems to love you and know you and he shakes you around and you don't know who he is but you begin to like him and you drawn to him because he's there for you regularly and then suddenly he's gone and this person's still there and they seem a regular part of your life but the weeks and months pass by and you're saying mama and dada except you're saying mama and then a new person arrives and he picks you up now and he seems to be smiles and then there's an old couple in the background who seem to be something about grandparents and these are adoption parents and they pick you up this old couple and who are they and they seem to know you now this is not the basis on which you build a secure sense of self that can trust the world because if you spend the first two years of your life not wondering who's going to be there next for you you will develop a posture to the world that is distrustful with all of the attachment problems this breaks

God's heart and it's unfair on our kids and let's be clear by the way what these data mean the word is on average these are average better outcomes so you might be a single mum here and there will be single mums who do a great job far better than two biological parents who are drunk half the time so these are on average so anybody who's not had this ideal and none of us have the ideal in some senses not really ideal we've all got baggage haven't we from our families and families are challenging as well but on average overall this is God's plan and what E.O.

Backer in his book does when children became people the early rise of Christianity what he does is he shows how it was Christians who brought the whole idea of children as people into Greco-Roman culture they were just at the bottom of the heap nobody thought it bothered about kids much we were in the Getty museum Louise and I a couple of years back and it said there are very few artifacts of children because in that culture nobody thought they were very important you see why do you think the disciples assumed that Jesus wouldn't want to see because they had been heavily influenced by Greco-Roman culture at the time Jesus he is the rabbi he wouldn't want to see kids for goodness sake they are the bottom of the heap and it was our God who cuts through the people and he says bring the children to me for of such is the kingdom of heaven and I tell you unless you become like one of these the very lowest in society you cannot enter the kingdom of God and God loves children because he always loves the lowest and the early Christians remembered how

[88 : 38] God's heart burned against child sacrifice in the Old Testament and the judgment he visited on those who entered into it and they began to incarnate a new way of life and they brought their children for dedication or for baptism and they put children at the center of their families and they bound themselves together and very quickly they banned abortion and they honored God in their bodies and the pagans looked in and they saw it and in the end they liked what they saw God's calling us in our communities to create a kind of fairness all over again because you see the promises of marriage whether you're married or not build a culture of promise keeping they build what the sociologists would call social capacity but they also build what I'd call moral capacity they develop a culture of promise keeping of standing by your undertakings the genius of Christian marriage is that it binds men to their responsibilities for the children they bring into the world and it's

God's gift and so in our culture we say what's fair for me we say well I hear that and God God is a God who respects our rights and he loves us whatever we are and you need to know that but listen in our story about fairness it's about my duties toward others as well as my rights to myself that's why our students look after our kids that's why the fathers are beginning to get themselves schooled up with how they take responsibility along with the mothers for the moral formation of our kids because our kids mean a lot to us because God loves them so we've got a story about fairness but it's a story that's seen through the lens of duties and not just rights but in our individualistic culture it's about my rights no no we say no in our story it's about our duties to one another to protect the vulnerable and the weakest as Catholic intellectual

Robert George put it marriage is the original and best department of health education and welfare so it is thank God for government and for education which works to supplement that but nothing can take the place of a mum and dad who love each other in promises of marriage so I'm just about through and I want to finish with just this last paragraph on the face of it I don't know about you as we think about reincarnating the story amongst ourselves crumbs look around us are we capable of this look at the strength of this revolution look at the icons it's got and the actors and the role models and its control of the media and then look around here are we capable isn't it all a bit of a pipe dream well we've been here before 2000 years ago the belief that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead inspired a little group of ordinary people like us friends often persecuted to create a culture what the gospel is for in terms of the way they treated women and the sexually exploited and the slaves and the poor and children a culture that was so attractive that by the end of the fourth century an empire an entire empire stood on the verge of faith because

Christ was at the center and of course many questions will remain in our seminars this afternoon but for the sake of the gospel for the life of the world this is a story we've got to start telling one another all over again and I just want to finish with that last word never we've got to be prepared to say we will never give it up we will never never give it up because it was earned in the cross of Christ it's given for the life of the world not just us marriage is for everybody the goods of marriage are for everybody speaking of those goods isn't the gospel but it puts on display in our communities what the gospel achieves that's what God's calling us to now and that's why we've got to say sometimes sorry sometimes thank you sometimes please can we begin to have a conversation but always underpinned by never we will never give this up because it's the gospel that brings life all happy enough love after the world on so if on side there are no before you

I I want her to it I I want I I what Are you the