

Sexuality and Christian Women: A Literature Review

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James M. Harris III, Ph.D. (cand.), LPC  
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## Abstract

Human sexuality is a complex mixture of feelings, expectations, and experiences. Add personality, preference and public opinion and it is not surprising there is no complete definition of normal sexual behavior. Finally, if things weren't confounding enough, Christian's war between sexuality and spirituality. This collision causes many Christian women to struggle sexually. Within the church, sexuality has rarely been addressed and one finds answers more readily in the non-Christian world. These faulty solutions are cause for Christian women's sex lives to be unfulfilling and perhaps, troubling. This article is a review of the pertinent Christian literature on this topic for the counselor who needs to be aware of these complex underlying facets of Christian women and their sexuality.

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Considering the intricacies of the subject this literature review addresses four broad categories: physiological issues, normative data on Christian women's sexuality, relational sexuality, and practical application. It will also be noted that some of the books overlap on subjects. It is important that each of these main topics of experience not be viewed separately. For as stated eloquently in the preface of his wife's book, Walter Trobisch says, "It is the tendency of our time that these realms are treated separately by individual specialists, and thus are often torn apart...one cannot divide them up just as one cannot divide up the person experiencing them." Therefore, in order to help a woman become whole, we must view these topics in an interrelated light, "...just like the cog wheels of a delicate instrument" (Trobisch, 1972).

### The Joy of Being a Woman

Ingrid Trobisch is the daughter of missionary parents. She was a single, professional woman until her early thirties, then married and became the mother of five children. She and her husband were renowned missionaries throughout Africa and Europe. She writes with a gentle,

but fresh and friendly perspective of the issues of femininity and sexuality. “There is something sparkling and radiant about a woman or a man who does not deny their sexuality, but who pours it out in love to others”. (Trobisch, 1972, pg. xii). It is her belief that if a person is not able to live in peace with their body they do not live in peace with their Creator. Her book *The Joy of Being a Woman and What a Man Can Do* (1972) addresses the topic of physiology. It is a basic and easy to read book sprinkled throughout with poetic references to scripture.

Her foundation is based on joyful self-acceptance. This is the key that allows a woman to accept her body and her sexuality. When asked if women are pleased with their bodies they reply in a resounding chorus of “No!” and with the bombardment of secular media, the message women believe is, “If I had a body like that, I’d be satisfied” (Pintus & Dillow, 1999, pg. 55). Mrs. Trobisch challenges her readers to be courageous enough to accept all of themselves, both the limited and the outstanding. Only in doing so can the Christian woman experience the joy that comes with being a woman.

Secondly, she addresses the joy of a woman’s menstrual cycle. She challenges the Christian woman to become intimately familiar with her own body and its seasons of ovulation and fertility. Ideally, Mrs. Trobisch desires for mothers to talk openly and joyfully of this topic with their pre-teen daughters to help them understand the mystery of ovulation and “help to accept herself later on as a woman...[to] help her deal independently and responsibly with her fertility” (Trobisch, 1972, pg. 34). The book continues with insightful help on measuring ovulation and family planning.

*Joy* contains an open and insightful chapter on the female sexual response, orgasm and other matters pertaining to the sexual act. Using metaphor and example she paints a tasteful portrait for the Christian woman who has questions or needs instruction on function or

frustration. Speaking of being encircled, sheltered and at peace, she addresses the woman who demands love, the needs of her husband and the seldom-mentioned topic of female masturbation.

Mrs. Trobisch also includes chapters on pregnancy, birth, breast-feeding and menopause. While these chapters are not pertinent to the topic of this review, they too underscore the grace, tenderness and maturity in which she addresses the topic of joyful female sexuality with spiritual insight.

### Women Have Questions About Sex

Having obtained a basic understanding of the function and beauty of female sexuality. The next two books answer the questions women silently wonder about or ask only in private. Christian clinical psychologist, Dr. Archibald Hart and marriage and family therapists, Dr. Catherine Hart-Weber and Debra Taylor conducted *The National Survey of Christian Female Sexuality* of 2,000 Christian women. Their 100 question interview covered four sections: background information (age, marital status, medical and social history, religious upbringing and current practice), early sexual experiences (sex education, experiences and abuse), current sexual experiences (orgasm, masturbation and emotional and physical factors), and a narrative section where women were encouraged to describe ideal sexual experiences, what sex means to them and ask questions. From their research findings they co-authored the book *Secrets of Eve: Understanding the Mystery of Female Sexuality* (1998). They believe that

one of the most critical issues facing the church as we enter the twenty-first century is the whole issue of sexuality...Sexual distortions...myth and confusion abound. We have found unequivocal evidence that the main source of information available...comes from...the tainted world of secular, nonmoral sources (Hart, Hart-Weber, Taylor, 1998, pg. 6).

The purpose of *Secrets* is to discuss female sexuality in the Christian subculture, explore the causes of sexual problems (not just the problems themselves), and the origins of Christian women's sexual feelings and reactions. Through their research they found that the main question Christian women ask about sexuality is "What is normal?" By using the statistics and percentages of responses they try to show Christian women that by in large they are normal in their sexuality, there are myths that prevail in our culture and to help women regain biblical sexuality.

Initially, Hart, et al. begins with the basic observation that the heart of the matter is women do not feel their needs are appreciated. There is a mismatch between men and women in the areas of sexual drive, romantic desire and sexual satisfaction. They use charts and graphs to illuminate the distillation of the statistics and then provide open and biblical counsel to address problem issues. This combination of science and counseling is helpful to the reader.

The authors address the universal issues of body image, past experiences, hormonal influences and the crisis of timing. These are only some of the concerns that contribute to "roughly 75% of couples say that is difficult for them to...be together" (Hart, et al., 1998, pg. 113). They also address concerns over affairs and female sexual trauma. Again, their purpose is to dispel the myths surrounding these topics with open and frank discussion.

The final chapters address sex and the single, and sex education for girls. The current trend in singleness is that 49% of women in the United States are single. One contributor is the rising age of marriage. These women are not simply teenagers, but mature Christian women who struggle with the ideal goal of staying sexually pure or redeeming their sexual purity. When considering the topic of sex education the authors adamantly state, "You are *now*, and *always will be*, the greatest influence on your child's developing sexuality" (Hart, et al.1998, pg. 226).

Three appendixes are included along with a glossary of terms. Appendix I offers additional resources of books, videos and tapes the authors recommend, noted by Christian or non-Christian authors. Appendix II discusses *The National Survey of Christian Female Sexuality*, its limitations, and the creation of their survey and explanations of the results. Appendix III is the actual questionnaire in its entirety. In all, *Secrets of Eve*, reveals the many subtle influences on a woman's sexuality and encourages Christian women to be aware of them, celebrating them and harmonizing them with their husbands. They encourage women to look "invest time and energy into creating a romantic, beautiful, private environment conducive to...intimacy" (Hart, et al., 1998, pg. 69).

*Intimate Issues: Conversations Woman to Woman* also considers the questions Christian women have about sexuality. Authors Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus conducted a nationwide poll of over 1,000 women and distilled the information down to the 21 most asked questions. Little statistical information is given and there is no disclosure of the survey's construction or validity. However, the book is written in a girl-friend-like tone that is easy and enjoyable to read. Also included at the end of each chapter are questions and scriptural applications designed to stimulate more thought on the subject.

The first chapter, "What Does God Think About Sex?" is an eye opening and well written. It distinguishes between the voices of the world, sexual studies pioneers, church forefathers all of which have influenced the Christian view of sexuality. Many of these voices claim to explain God's thoughts, however, through these voices God's thoughts "have been so distorted that many women don't know what to believe. Some wonder if there is something wrong with them" (Dillow & Pintus, 1999, pg. 5). They address the internal fracture of the

Christian woman between being spiritual and being sensuous. They insist that God declares, “Be whole” by being clothed in His perspective.

Throughout the book they point to Shulamith, the bride of Solomon in the biblical book of the Song of Solomon. The examples of her words, actions, thoughts and plans are wonderfully applicable to the modern Christian woman and how she can experience a satisfying sexual life. Also borrowing from the same book they speak of sexuality in word pictures of a flowering garden as a poetic buffer for the woman who might be nervous with more graphic language. The chapters are divided into three sections: Simmering Questions, Smoldering Questions and Sizzling Hot Questions. Each chapter addresses one of the problems found in female sexuality and then gives both a scriptural and a practical view.

An excellent chapter on body image mentions not only the myth of unrealistic expectations and media models but also the satisfaction a woman should have being “fearfully and wonderfully made” according to Psalm 139. In the tone of trusted friends, Dillow and Pintus advise women to learn from observing God’s perspective and make the most of what God has given them. It is important to the authors that women find a balance between not neglecting their bodies in the area of improvement (such as exercise), and rejoicing in the body God gave them through pleasure with their husbands.

The 21 questions addressed are of the same tone as those in *Secrets of Eve*, such as differences in desire and timing. However, the authors cover other topics in intimate detail. Unusual for a book on female sexuality is a chapter on men and pornography. This is an issue for many Christian marriages and is addressed to the woman who has found herself in the “boxing ring with every negative emotion you’ve ever had. Anger, embarrassment, shock,

shame, disgust – and all their nasty cousins – take turns punching and slugging you, until you crumple to the floor in a heap” (Dillow & Pintus, 1999, pg. 148).

Another negative emotion discussed is guilt that might result from abortion, sexual fantasy, affairs, or past sexual abuse. Again, the authors address each topic from a both a scriptural and practical view along with recommendations for further counsel or ministry. The chapter on abortion is especially powerful four steps to healing. While some women might be able to complete this exercise on their own, it is advisable that they proceed through the instructions with a trusted friend or counselor. Dillow and Pintus recommend that women who must deal with this issue especially and prayerfully consider seeking out other support resources.

The Sizzling Hot chapters address topics rarely covered in religious literature, such as Christian women becoming passionate lovers, what is or is not appropriate sexually, and how Christian women can be both sensuous lovers and spiritual leaders.

The final question is asked by the authors but left for the reader to define, “What is it like to make love to me?” It is an excellent launching off point for the conclusion of the book which is a 12-week bible study recovering the chapters in greater depth with questions intended for both personal and group discussion. Dillow and Pintus do not claim that their book is the answer to all of women’s questions, only a starting point for Christian women to being on the journey to enjoying God’s gift of sexuality and becoming their husband’s Shulamith.

#### Number One Mate

In order for the sexual relationship of a couple to be healthy, Dr. Kevin Leman believes that all other aspects of their relationship must be healthy. He bases the book *Sex Begins in the Kitchen Because Love is an All-Day Affair* on the idea that “your mate ought to be the number-one priority in your life; that a good marital relationship is based upon pleasing each other, being

sensitive and tuned-in to each other's emotional – as well as – sexual needs” (Leman, 1999, pg. 14). Dr. Leman believes that intimate thoughts and feelings must be shared before bodily intimacy becomes satisfactory. He claims that most married couples live a “married-singles” lifestyle, going about their own plans, goals and agendas and the expectation for sex is intimacy squeezed in for a few minutes as needed. He says, “this is hardly the culmination of an entire day full of affection, consideration, love, and oneness” (Leman, 1999, pg. 14).

For the Christian woman who has questions or issues about her sexuality he advises that the first step is to decided how far she is committed. What changes is she willing to make in her own behavior to better her sexual life? Secondly, Dr. Leman reminds the reader that everything she might do or experience in life is filtered through sexuality – she is female. And while the sexes are equal, they are not the same. “A happy marriage is one in which both partners understand and accept those differences, and understand how to relate to each other *in spite of* the fact that they relate to the world differently” (Leman, 2000, pg. 17).

Many of the chapters in *Sex Begins* include exercises and examples based on couples that he has counseled with as a psychologist. He discusses some warning signs to alert a woman if her marriage is in trouble, discusses birth order and the tendency to express love in different ways, and cautions couples against dangerous and destructive games that married men and women play against each other. These chapters will help to enhance the couple relationship, which, according to Dr. Leman, enhances their sexual rapport. The chapter titles are humorous, “Women Are from Pluto and Men Are a Bit Goofy Too”, and the contents are funny, frank and challenging.

Using the previous chapters to underscore that building a relationship with your mate is of greatest importance he then asks a foundationally important question – where did the reader

learn about sex? In discussing the Locker room-and-Friends School of Learning he challenges the sexual mindset of “taking-from rather than giving-to experience” and we carry that through to our adult sexual focus of “what can I get for myself?” rather than “How much can I give to the other person?” (Lehman, 1999, pg 225).

These challenges bring to mind a question that women need to ask themselves in light of the sexuality. While it is true that she is a complex and multi-faceted creature, and there are issues that certainly need to be resolved, how much of a Christian woman’s sexual trouble is based on her own demands? Dr. Lehman challenges women to think from a different relational perspective. Rather than, “why didn’t he leave the seat down?” she needs to ask herself, “why didn’t I put the seat up?” His humor highlights other, not so simplistic examples of considering the other person (as Christ has asked us to do) rather than ourselves first. When combined with the same challenge he gives to men, the results are a giving and loving relationship in which intimate sexuality can flourish.

The final chapter is loosely based on the Promise Keepers movement idea, in that, as a couple, the readers make certain promises. Dr. Lemman lists what he calls The Ten Commitments. All ten are significant relationship builders based on his original challenge of what each will give in order to make their relationship healthy and full of enjoyment. According to Dr. Lemman, this will be the framework in which a Christian woman can find and enjoy the God-given gift of sexuality.

### Practical Application

There is only one expert on sexual matters and all Christians struggle to apply His answers into their intimate lives. Dr. Doug Rosenau, a psychologist and Christian sex therapist, is the author of *A Celebration of Sex: A Guide to Enjoying God’s*

*s Gift of Married Sexual Pleasure* and he writes “God has a fantastic formula for your sex life.

An Intimate Marriage + Mature Lovers = A Fulfilling Sex Life” (Rosenau, 1994, pg 1).

Sexuality does not create intimacy and the author challenges his readers to be willing to take the time and make the effort to develop both a strong marriage and a sexually pleasurable one.

The first chapters of the book lay the foundation of the importance of trusting companionship, communication, humor, and intimacy before sexuality is considered. Using passages from Song of Solomon, Dr. Rosenau describes what is needed to become the world’s greatest lover. The rest of the book is written in the tone of a mentor or sex therapist who is guiding couples through the intricacies of sex. Each chapter focuses on the biology of sex, with drawings of the male and female reproductive system. The book also contains some drawings of various sexual techniques for the uninitiated. He discusses the common hurdles of body image, sexual frustration, and irrational religious beliefs. The remainder of the book addresses important topics such as the difference between making love and having sex and the cues of sexuality. A number of chapters speak on the special sexual considerations of those with disabilities, effects of aging, sexual trauma and other more serious topics that stop intimacy.

Fantastic lovemaking is based on being a fantastic person. Attitudes are what count. True sexiness and a fantastic sex life depend first upon being a mature, sexy person...build into your mind and heart the following character traits possessed by all great lovers: playfulness, love, knowledge, honesty, creative romance and discipline. These guidelines, gleaned from the Bible will lead to great sex...but it will take some real effort to incorporate them into your life.

(Rosenau, 1994, pg. 25).

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