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So, What about That TGC Article on Sex?

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

Many of the most virulent critics seemed to object to any asymmetry between men and women in sexual intimacy.

In this episode, Kevin offers six reflections amid the firestorm surrounding an article by Joshua Butler for The Gospel Coalition.

Transcript

(music) Greetings and salutations. Welcome to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung.

I want to read my latest world article today. I debated whether or not to say anything about this latest internet kerfuffle. And the advice I got from most of the time, from most of the people around me, was that maybe it would be helpful to write something down, which I did, and then publish it at world opinions.

So hopefully, something in here maybe gives voice to thoughts you've had in your own head. And if nothing else, it helps the voices in my head go away. So this article is entitled So, What About That TGC Article on Sex? Six Thoughts Amid the Firestorm.

On March 1, The Gospel Coalition posted an article by Joshua Ryan Butler, a pastor in Arizona, and a fellow at the New Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics. The article, an excerpt from his forthcoming book Beautiful Union, immediately drew curious eyebrows and strong criticism for its sexualized description of the relationship between Christ and the Church, and for its description of the sexual relationship between husband and wife. In response to mounting criticism, TGC made the entire chapter available in order to provide more context for the controversial remarks.

But the digital wildfire was already out of control. In the end, Butler resigned as a fellow. He was removed from speaking at TGC's National Conference, and the online cohort based on his book was cancelled.

On March 5, TGC pulled the article and the chapter off the website, and issued an apology asking for forgiveness and expressing a desire to listen and learn from its critics. Many people have already weighed in on the controversy and I'm sure more articles are in the works. I don't have any genius to offer, but maybe there will be some small value in expressing what others may be thinking.

And as I said a moment ago, if nothing else writing this post will help the voices in my head go away. Six thoughts. One.

The article was off in two respects. First, and most importantly, it spoke of Christ's relationship to the Church in ways that were "lorted and specifically sexual" instead of generally "typological." I understand there's a long and ecumenical track record of pushing the allegorical envelope when it comes to the mystical union between Christ and the Church. What Butler was attempting to do was appropriate.

In my estimation, however, the language he employed was not. The sexual metaphor was pressed home in a way that was awkward at best and a violation of the Third Commandment at worst. As Old Testament scholar Meredith Klein observed decades ago, biblical anthropomorphism avoids "attributing to the holy one of Israel the erotic passions and sexual functions characteristic of the gods of pagan mythology." Two.

The article also took a misstep in combining spiritual language and sexual language to talk about marital intimacy between husband and wife. To be sure, there is a time for spiritual language and a time for explicitly sexual language. There is also a time to put the languages together, but very carefully.

There's a reason Paul speaks of our "unpresentable parts" when describing the Church as the body of Christ and each of us as members. If someone took Paul's metaphor and started naming Church members as "sexual body parts," the language wouldn't be exactly wrong, but it would be unwise and not keeping with biblical modesty and restraint. Yes, the prophets sometimes used shocking sexual language, I think Ezekiel, for example, but they were meaning to embarrass their sinful heroes, not to make a sensitive point of pastoral application.

This is an aside from the article here just a moment. I think that's a really important point, and I hope others will expound on it. The way in which the prophets use explicit sexual language is to embarrass and to shame sinners.

It says something about the normally veiled, restrained, modest way in which the Bible talks about sexual relations. Yes, there's a whole book song of Solomon that uses poetry and euphemism, so it's not that sex within marriage is dirty in any way, but it doesn't go to a voyeuristic. It doesn't speak in technical exact ways.

It's like the curtain is pulled shut when describing the sexual activity between husband

and wife. And the only time it's pulled open is to show with shame the kind of spiritual adultery and idolatry for which sex is sometimes a metaphor, so end of parentheses there. Three, as poorly expressed as some lines were, and editors should have helped him refine the language, it doesn't take a lot of charity to know what Butler was trying to communicate.

With a little help, he could have made almost the same exact points with much less heartache. For example, he could have said, "While we don't want to press the analogy too far or speak too graphically about sexual matters, we know that Christ loves his people deeply and intimately. He implants the seed of the word in the hearts of his people that they might bring forth new life." On the marriage relationship, he could have said, "While we don't want to describe marital intimacy in a way that centers the man in his experience, it is an undeniable biological reality that in sex the man enters and the woman receives." This is how Genesis often describes the sexual act.

The woman's openness and "hospitality" is not ultimately for the man, but for the potential human life that may come from their union. Four, I don't know Josh Butler, but everyone seems to speak highly of his character. It is obvious that he wants to be caring, sensitive, and helpful to the struggle.

Nowhere in the Exerited Chapter does he come close to advocating violence against women or subjugating women to the pleasure of men. The fact that people were negatively impacted by the article does not mean we have to agree with the most negative interpretations of the piece. We can be kind to genuinely hurting people without acquiescing to the most aggrieved, most offended, most perpetually outraged voices online.

Just because someone can take an article in the worst way possible does not mean that such a reading is a good or necessary take. Five, many of the most virulent critics seem to object to any asymmetry between men and women in sexual intimacy. Their concern was not with the language about Christ and the Church, but about husband and wife.

Yes, Butler did not word things as I would have said them. But was the underlying point he described not true? The man enters, the woman is entered, the man disperses seed, the woman receives. These are biological givens, according to God's design.

No amount of grievance and protestation can change these realities to mention them should not be considered harmful, hurtful, or dangerous. Six, the article was not good, the mob was worse. Butler did not deserve to be pilloried, the internet can be a cruel place, and the most sensorious persons can be those who think tearing down the quote powerful is the same as lifting up the weak.

Some of the loudest critics seemed intent on believing the worst about everyone involved in the whole fiasco. This is what happens all the time in polarized politics.

Democrats don't want Republicans to make good decisions, Republicans don't want Democrats to be careful, each side wants the other to make gaffes the bigger the better.

This ordeal quickly moved away from theological sharpening to pitchfork toting and axe-wielding. I fear that an apology for "hurt" without naming any identifiable sin sends the wrong message. It canceled Butler when it could have clarified the issues at stake and pointed out a better way.

The best cultural apologetics strike the right balance between clarity, compassion, and courage all the while without compromise or capitulation.

[Music]