

## Who Wrote the Book on Love?

Who wrote the book of Love? That's not just the title of a great old fifties rock & roll classic by the Monotones, it's a question lovers have contemplated for as long as love has complicated our lives. Where are the instructions; where is the owners manual? Or, perhaps more to the point, which instructions should one follow, there are so many and they don't agree. People have a love hate relationship with "Love." Everyone's looking for it, but as the song says, they're looking for it in all the wrong places. The world is in love with love. The Beatles tell us "All You Need is Love." Perhaps. Other songs suggest love isn't so easy: *If Love Were Oil, I'd Be A Quart Low; I Liked You Better Before I Knew You So Well; How Can I Miss You If You Won't Go Away; Still Miss You Baby, But My Aim Is Getting Better; You're the Reason Our Kids Are So Ugly.*

Someone has written the book of love and you can find it in the Bible. Of course the Bible itself is all about love. But I'm talking about that particular kind of love we call romantic love, sexual love, what the Greeks call Eros from which we get the word erotic. That is the kind of love referred to in the book of the Bible called *Song of Songs* which is a Love Song or a love poem. In this song we find something of the mind of God revealed concerning his gift of sexual love to his children. Of course *Song of Songs* doesn't address every issue about relationships and love, but it does give insight on some very important truths, truths never more needed, both in the world and in the church.

Not surprisingly there are questions about who wrote *Song of Songs*. In the first verse we are told that this is "Solomon's Song of Songs." That doesn't

tell us much really. The original Hebrew can mean this is a song written by Solomon or a song written for Solomon or even a song written and dedicated to Solomon. Some scholars doubt Solomon wrote it at all because Solomon's life was hardly exemplary in this area with his 700 queens and 300 concubines. We're told in 1 Kings 11:1-4, reading from The Message Version, *King Solomon was obsessed with women. Pharaoh's daughter was only the first of the many foreign women he loved—Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite. He took them from the surrounding pagan nations of which GOD had clearly warned Israel, "You must not marry them; they'll seduce you into infatuations with their gods." Solomon fell in love with them anyway, refusing to give them up. He had seven hundred royal wives and three hundred concubines, a thousand women in all! And they did seduce him away from God.*

*Song of Songs* on the other hand is a tribute to the love of one man exclusively for one woman, quite a contrast to the actual behavior of Solomon. Perhaps Solomon wrote it early in his life before his obsession with women developed, or perhaps late in his life as he reflects back on his life and, not unlike Ecclesiastes, sees the vanity of so many of his life choices. In the final analysis, the author's identity is not as important as the book's message. What is the message of the *Song of Songs*? That question has been debated even more than who wrote it. Historically (at least early church history) the majority opinion was *Song of Songs* was an allegory. An allegory is a story or poem where each character or event is symbolic of an idea or concept. The story is not literal but an elaborate word picture of some great truths.

Many Jews said it was an allegory of God and Israel. Christians argued it was a picture of God and the Church or Christ and Church or even Christ and the individual believer. The scriptures often use the love relationship between a man and a woman to describe God's relationship with man. In Ezekiel 16 we read of Israel described as a woman who God courted and loved and who was ultimately unfaithful to him. In Hosea chapters 1-3 there is a passage very similar to *Ezekiel* 16 describing Israel as God's unfaithful wife. In the New Testament there are pictures of Jesus as the Bridegroom and the Church as the bride in *Matthew* 9, *Ephesians* 5 and *Revelation* 19.

Whether or not one interprets the book as an allegory, there are certainly some general spiritual lessons from the *Song of Songs* that apply to our relationship with God. For example, God's love for us and ours for him should be passionate and exclusive. But there are problems with interpreting *Song of Songs* as an allegory. Allegories are usually clearly understood as allegories. *Pilgrim's Progress* is perhaps the world's best-known allegory and it is obviously allegorical. The main character is Christian from his hometown *City of Destruction*. He is on a journey to *Celestial City* following the directions given him by *Evangelist*. Along the way he has several traveling companions, helpful ones named *Faithful* and *Hopeful*, others not so helpful named *Pliable*, *Obstinate* and *Ignorance*. Well, you get the idea. Allegories are pretty obvious. In the *Ezekiel* and *Hosea* passages, it's obvious that the picture is only a picture of Israel. In the New Testament passages referring to Christians as the bride, the context is very clear that the reference to Jesus as a bridegroom is being used as

a picture of relationship to the Church. *Song of Songs* is different. No where is there any suggestion that this is anything other than what it appears to be, a love poem written in celebration of the romantic love between a man and a woman

The basic rule of interpreting scripture is this. What would it mean to the people it was written to. Whatever else it might mean, it must make sense to them. And frankly, it is a little hard to believe anyone would read *Song of Songs* and think it anything other than a love song describing the passionate love between a man and a woman. The problem with those who have allegorized this book is that it has led to some pretty fanciful interpretations usually as attempts to explain away the more sexually explicit material in the book. For example chapter 1 verse 13 says, “*My beloved to me is like a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts.*” The early church father Hippolytus interpreted the two breasts as referring to the Old and New testaments. Hundreds of years later in the 1700s John Wesley would teach that the literal interpretation of the *Song of Solomon* was indecent; it just couldn’t possibly be true. He shared Hippolytus’ previously mentioned interpretation and added that the kiss of the man referred to the incarnation of Christ, the cheeks of the bride referred to Christian good works and the woman’s hair which was like a flock of goats referred to all the nations that had been converted to Christianity.

Allegorical interpretations of the Bible seems a little bizarre to us today. It is hard for us to understand why they were so popular. But in the case of the *Song of Songs* they were more than popular. In 550 A.D. the allegorical interpretation was the only legal interpretation allowed by the church authorities.

Preaching a literal interpretation of the book would get you in jail. In the 1500s, those who preached a literal version had to face the Church Inquisition. Why such harsh sanctions? One reason is the early church fathers were overly influenced by the Greek ideals of separating the physical from the spiritual. Because the body is physical it had no spiritual value, in fact it was evil. For this reason most church fathers taught the immortality of soul, a Greek philosophy rather than the more biblical teaching of the resurrection of the physical body. “Platonic” relationships were encouraged, relationships that did not include any physical component. Now you know where the term “platonic relationship” comes from.

Throughout history the Church has always struggled avoiding extremes, trying to be “In the world but not of it.” On the one hand the church is rightly concerned with the idolatry of being in the world and of it, worshipping the gifts of creation more than the creator who gave them. On the other hand the Church has tried not to be a cult, not being in the world at all, escaping the world. But not being in the world rejects all the gifts the creator of this world gave to us.

In the early years of the church, a great many church fathers did not believe that sex was one of those gifts. Sex was considered impure and unholy. Church father Augustine said that sex was a necessary evil for procreation, but not to be enjoyed and that before the fall sex was not even a part of the relationship between Adam and Eve. It is not clear how Augustine thought Adam and Eve would obey God’s command to be fruitful and multiply. Augustine later adjusted his views to concede that Adam and Eve must have

been sexually active but he was quite convinced there was no passion or pleasure or physical desire of any kind involved. Because of such views many in the Church taught that the highest expression of spirituality is celibacy.

Well that may have been the view of the Church but is that really the mind of God? Does the Bible teach that God thinks sex is impure or unholy? I think not! A fair reading of the scriptures suggests human sexuality is very much a part of the original creation, which God called “good.” *Proverbs 5:15-20* contrasts the relationship with a prostitute and with one’s wife. The passage doesn’t condemn sexual pleasure between a man and a woman; it condemns the illicit sexual relationship between a man and a prostitute. A man is to find delight in the wife of his youth and to let her satisfy him, not a prostitute.

So “Who wrote the Book on Love?” I believe God did! And particularly the book God had a hand in writing is *Song of Songs*! God has not left us without guidance concerning this aspect of life about which every man and every woman has been both deeply fascinated and desperately frustrated. The *Song of Songs* does not address every truth about love and sex. It’s not a textbook; it’s not a letter written to young couples. It’s a divinely inspired love song. And if we were to fully understand the original language we would see that it is filled with passionate, sensual, graphic even erotic lyrics. Undoubtedly there are some who wish God hadn’t inspired such a book to be written, but apparently he did. It reminds me of the story of the lady who wasn’t too comfortable when she heard that Jesus turned the water into wine. When

confronted with the biblical text she said, “Well yes, I know he did it, but I would’ve thought better of him if he hadn’t.”

And the fact that God included this passionate love poem in the sacred book is evidence of two powerful truths that are much needed today by both the Church and World. To the Church the message is, “Receive the Gift! Marital love, and the sexual relationship which belongs exclusively to it, is a gift to be celebrated, not a necessary evil to be ashamed of or a duty to be grudgingly obeyed. To the World the message is, “Acknowledge the Giver! The love between a man and a woman is a gift from God; he designed us for that relationship and his Word is filled with instruction to enrich that relationship. We haven’t time to explore this book in detail, but I do want to observe two important truths this love poem emphasizes.

The *Song of Songs* displays God’s desire that lovers cherish and desire one another. Romantic love must not go unattended or neglected. In this poem Love is described repeatedly as a garden. I don’t know much about gardening. But I do know that gardens don’t just grow by themselves. They must be tended. Love fades when lovers feel undesired, untended, neglected. Desire is cultivated by words and compliments. Notice how these lovers talk about each other. The woman remarks, *How handsome you are, how charming. My lover is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among 10,000. His hair is wavy... His arms are rods of gold, his body is polished ivory.* Of course each wife will have to come up with her own list. Best of all she says, *This is my lover, my friend.*

The man is not to be outdone. He has much to say about his lover as well. *You are a mare harnessed to one of the chariots. Your hair is like a flock of goats; your teeth are like a flock of sheep. Your stomach is like a pile of wheat.* Men have always had more trouble with words!! Actually these words make sense in context and they are complimentary. Here's a good line any husband could use profitably. *All beautiful you are my darling; there is no flaw in you.* An attitude that expresses such desire and appreciation builds a sense of esteem and security, a feeling of worth. This man's love enables his beloved to say, *I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. I am my lover's and he is mine.*

My experience in ministry and counseling is that women very often see themselves as ugly, undesirable, flawed, untended gardens. God gives men the gift to make women feel beautiful, but also the ability to devastate, crush a woman's perception of herself. Men on the other hand often feel unimportant, a failure. God gives women the gift to help men feel significant, competent; they can also cripple his confidence. A romantic love that cherishes one another is a blessing beyond measure; nothing destroys it faster than a critical or harsh spirit. Song of Songs encourages us to tend the garden of our love so that it flourishes.

If the message to the Church is to receive the gift, the message to the world is to acknowledge the giver. Romantic love should be received with reverence; it is God's gift; we should honor God with it. And we honor God by recognizing that this love relationship is reserved for lovers who are exclusively committed to each other. *I am my beloved and he is mine.* Sexual love is "holy" which means it is set apart, sacred, not something common to be shared

by all. When it is treated with this kind of reverence, it becomes what God intended, a way for two lovers to be intimate. Scripture speaks of sexual love with the phrase, “to know each other.” Sexuality is meant to be an exclusive language shared only by two. Until that relationship is found and committed to, sexual love is wrong; it is hurtful and should not be encouraged or pursued between two people. Often repeated in the Song is the phrase, “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.” This passion, which so powerfully blesses committed lovers, can just as powerfully devastate casual lovers.

Our culture today does not respect this power; it sees sexual relationships as perfectly fine between consenting adults. It would be difficult to find a single character in any television show or movie that treats sex with reverence. I have many favorite shows on television: NCIS, the Mentalist, Perception. One reason I like these shows is that, for the most part, they promote good values and provoke thoughtful consideration about life. But one thing about every one of them that saddens me is that every character, even characters seen otherwise as wise and virtuous, treat sex as a casual amusement rather than a sacred trust. Pre-marital, even at times extra-marital sex is treated as normal and acceptable. That is foolishness. Our culture is just stupid about this. It reminds me of the foolishness I saw years ago in a little boy. After the 1970 tornado devastated Lubbock’s downtown, several went to help clean things up including a work crew from the Lubbock State School. Gene Booth worked at the school and took a crew of these kids to help haul tree limbs and trash off. As they were working Gene looked up and saw that one of his boys was standing right were a

tree that was being cut was about to come crashing down. Gene yelled at the boy, “Get out of the way!” But the boy simply stood there, defiantly. The tree crashed down on top of him, the large massive branches barely missing him. The boy, engulfed by the limbs and branched suffered nothing but a slightly skinned nose. Relieved that the boy was not seriously injured, or even killed, Gene quickly became angry and shouted at the boy. “Why didn’t you move when I told you to?” To which the very simple little boy said, “I’m not afraid of that ole tree.” That tree could have snapped him in two. Foolishness.

Our culture has become similarly foolish, dangerously irreverent about sexuality. For far too many people sex is nothing more than an appetite, which of course makes a lover little more than a meal to be enjoyed. And after a few gluttonous feasts, the appetite grows and becomes increasingly more exotic, more perverse. Far too many people see sex as merely recreation, which of course makes a lover little more than a practice partner whose only value is to improve one’s game. Such recreational lovers emphasize the act of love not love itself; seeking merely to improve their technique, skill and move up in the “ranking.” Many see sex as a conquest, which makes a lover an adversary to take captive and defeat, inevitably leading to various forms of mistreatment and abuse. How different the picture is for Christians, or at least should be, who see sex as a holy union, which makes a lover a part of us, forever, one flesh.

We often hear these days of how liberated our culture is sexually, but that is a lie. People are just as mixed up and dysfunctional today as they ever were. The “Love Songs” our culture writes are still filled with lyrics that speak of the

inability of men and women to understand how to love each other. This wondrous gift which God himself created and gave to his creation is but one of the multitude of delights God desires for us to enjoy. But there are two ways to destroy a gift, rob it of its delight: You can reject it, refuse to recognize it as a gift and refuse to delight in receiving it. That has too often been the mistake of Church. Or on the other hand, you can worship the gift and ignore the giver, which is more typically the mistake of the world. God's people are called to be salt and light to the world. To illuminate what is good in this world and then dedicating ourselves to preserving that good for the world. By being faithful lovers who cherish our beloved, we illuminate that kind of love that God desires all lovers to know. If we do not illuminate it, this world will eliminate it. Just this year a CNN news article entitled "Monogamy is Unnatural" states, "It's time for our culture to wake up and smell the sex pheromones: monogamy is not natural for many, or probably even most, humans." Perhaps in a fallen world it is true that sexual faithfulness is not natural. All the more reason why God's lovers must show the world a compelling picture of true love and true lovers.

Song of Songs is part of the wisdom literature of the Bible, scripture that instructs us on how to live wisely in this world. In particular Song of Songs encourages us, enlightens us to be lovers who with thanksgiving and joy receive God's gift of romantic love, reveling in its delightfulness and reverencing its holiness. May our love life reflect the wisdom of God's Word.