

**GOD'S DESIGN
AND WHY IT MATTERS**

RETHINKING

SEX

UAL

ITY

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Discussion Questions
Inside

DR. JULI SLATTERY

foreword by **GARY THOMAS**, author of *Sacred Marriage*

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DR. JULI SLATTERY



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RETHINKING SEXUALITY

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To Mom and Dad.

I can't thank you enough for the many ways you have taught me to love God and His Word. Our Father plants small seeds and uses them to bear much fruit. "To raise a heritage that will reflect God's glory on earth."

All my love,
Juli

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Foreword

“One day it dawned on me. We have been sexually disciplined by the world.”

As a pastor in the nation’s fourth largest city, and as one who has worked with numerous premarital couples, I couldn’t agree more with Dr. Juli Slattery’s comments. Indeed, any honest observer must realize that there seems to be a concerted effort in most forms of entertainment and the media to promote an image and purpose of sexuality that is radically at odds with biblical teaching and historic Christian practice.

Juli’s awakening to this ethical challenge has become our gain because, in response, she has written a very courageous book about the need to pioneer an important new work under the bold moniker “sexual discipleship.” She writes, “Although sexuality presents an enormous challenge to Christians and to the world at large, *it is not a problem to be solved but a territory to be reclaimed.*”

You might recall that as Gentiles mixed with Jews in the first century, the early church had to decide which ethical issues were most important for Jews and Gentiles alike to follow. These issues had to span cultural differences because the gospel was created to be a worldwide influence. Accordingly, the apostles stripped ethical obligations down to only a very few commands. Here’s what they came up with: “Abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20, ESV).

About the only one of those points most relevant today is sexual immorality, and yet this is precisely the arena in which Christians seem to be more muddled, more confused, more at odds with one another, and, frankly, so much in the throes of disobedience. Which means sexual

discipleship isn't a peripheral "controversy." It goes to the very heart and birth of our faith and beliefs. If we veer off course, sexually speaking, we will not be the unique people God has called us to be.

Dr. Juli Slattery is exactly the right person to lead the way in reclaiming this land. She seems uniquely gifted by God to write this book and champion this cause. Her compassion and empathy cover each page. She is a living embodiment of the "grace and truth" principle she espouses—bold and unstinting with truth, yet quick and generous with grace and understanding.

As you'll read in this book, Philip Yancey once said, "I know of no greater failure among Christians than in presenting a persuasive approach to sexuality." Thank God for calling and equipping Dr. Juli Slattery to restake a claim so essential to who we are and to what we believe as the Christ-following people of God.

—Gary Thomas
Author of *Sacred Marriage*

Who This Book Is For

I wrote this book for Christians who are at some level aware of the pain and confusion represented by sexuality.

It's for parents, teachers, pastors, lay leaders, and others who want to use their influence and relationships to direct people toward God's love and truth.

It's for those who have no clue how to respond to the flood of opinions about sexuality that come across their social media feed.

It's for those who can't sleep at night because they sense the sexual struggles of their children and have no idea how to help.

It's for those who are wading through their own healing journey of restoring shattered innocence.

Thank you for picking up this book. It means that you care, that you are a seeker of Truth. May we find Him as we journey together.

PART 1

A NEW PARADIGM

Sexual Discipleship

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Why We Have to Rethink Sexuality

Few things are more terrifying than being completely lost and alone.

When we first moved to Colorado Springs, my husband and I were determined to take advantage of the natural beauty. One evening after work, Mike and I got someone to watch the kids, and we set out to conquer Eagle Peak, a challenging hike on the US Air Force Academy base. It was summer, so we were confident that we could hit the summit and be back in our car by sunset.

Eagle Peak proved more challenging than we anticipated, and we reached the summit with little sunlight left in the day. Mike wanted to enjoy the beautiful view at the top for a few minutes, but I was worried about hiking in the dark, so I got a head start on my descent. Unfortunately, I took the wrong trail.

The evening turned out to be one of the most stressful adventures of my life. Mike headed down the right path, assuming that he would quickly catch up to me. I was left to navigate the mountain by myself in the dark, ill prepared, with no guide and no experience. There were moments of that evening when I wondered whether I would ever see my husband and children again.

By God's grace, I reached the trailhead a few hours later, where my frantic husband was waiting for me. He had Air Force personnel preparing for a search and rescue mission, ready with a helicopter.

While not as tangible as being lost in the dark, the journey of sexuality can be just as lonely and terrifying.

It can be a journey of shame from sexual choices and struggles.

A journey of confusion: *What does God really say about sexuality?*

A journey of division as church families are torn apart by disagreements about sexual issues.

A journey of despair as you watch a loved one trapped in addiction.

A journey of conflict as a husband and wife encounter sexual difficulty.

There seems to be no reliable guide or discernible path toward truth in the middle of this darkness. We feel wholly unprepared to navigate the unfamiliar questions and challenges of sexuality in the twenty-first century.

I believe that God is a "search and rescue" God. His truth is a light in the darkness, and He brings along men and women to guide us when we aren't sure how to find our way home. I pray that this book is one such guide.

Our sexuality is a tremendous gift from God. However, we rarely see it as a gift because it has been so twisted and tainted in our personal experiences and our culture. There is perhaps no aspect of humanity that represents more pain and shame than sexuality.

Once, when I was speaking at a Christian university, a young engaged couple waited to talk privately with me afterward. "Dr. Slattery, how do we invite God to begin restoring us sexually? We are getting married in four months, and we both have a bunch of junk in our past." It turns out that the young man was a pastor's kid and the young woman had grown up on the mission field. Both had come from loving, conser-

vative families, and both were raised in a church culture that never talked about sex, outside of traditional purity retreats.

The young man spoke about being involved in pornography, and the young woman shared that she had been sexually abused by a cousin. They didn't feel safe talking about these experiences with their parents or anyone in their church families. Before they met each other, both had engaged in self-destructive behaviors (cutting and disordered eating) to try to purge the guilt and shame they felt about their sexual brokenness. Now they carried additional shame for having sex with each other before saying "I do."

Here they stood, their faces so young and innocent, yet their lives and future marriage marred by sexual wounds. They had been raised in the "ideal" Christian culture, with devoted Christian parents. Yes, God can redeem the stories of these young people. His truth can replace lies and bring healing. But how have we as their parents, mentors, and educators failed in helping them navigate such pain and struggle?

I could tell you plenty of stories from people just like these two. Some young, some old. Some male, some female. Some married, some single. People searching for truth about sexuality and wondering whether God can meet them in such a private journey.

For far too long, Christianity has not represented a safe place for pilgrims to find help related to sexuality. Ironically, everyone seems to be talking about sex but rarely within the context of home and church. It's time to change that, and it starts with you and me.

The idea of engaging in sexual conversations is a bit overwhelming! Sexual topics are controversial, vulnerable, and potentially painful. So, naturally, we don't want to "go there." I vividly remember the first time I spoke publicly (and reluctantly) on the topic of sexuality. The year was 2002, and I was speaking at a women's conference. I can still picture the room and feel the heat on my face as I talked about the importance of

sexual intimacy in marriage and about all the ways it can get derailed. The women were absolutely silent. As their eyes bored into me, I began to break out in hives. Even as I spoke, I silently prayed, *God, I must have heard You wrong. I will never speak on sex again. Just please get me through the next thirty-five minutes.*

As soon as I finished speaking, women began lining up to talk to me. They shared stories of pain, ranging from porn addictions to secret affairs to memories of past sexual abuse. As I talked and prayed with them, my silent prayers changed. *God, I'm so sorry. I had no idea that there was this much pain in this room. Thank You for making this a safe place for women to learn and get help.* I realized that I had been contributing to the problem. I had bought into the belief that God is squeamish about our sexual questions and problems.

Christians have a long history of avoiding and mishandling topics of sexuality. For generations, we simply didn't talk about things such as sexual addiction, sexual abuse, sexual dysfunction, or even sexual pleasure in marriage. People were left to navigate this terrain on their own or seek help from modern psychology.

When the church has addressed these questions, it's too often been with a judgmental, condemning tone. The focus has been on compelling teenagers to stay virgins and exposing the many ways sexuality translates into sin. Because we tend to address sexuality with this problem-solving approach, we divide people into categories of virgins and sinners, sexually whole and sexually broken. If you found yourself in the wrong category, church was the last place you wanted to seek help.

In today's world, we are unable to ignore the sexual pain and questions around us. And let's be honest: the culture seems to be a more compelling and consistent guide than the church. Ask Christians their views on issues such as sexual orientation, cohabitation, sexual healing, and masturbation, and you will likely get confused stares or conflicting

statements of what the Bible actually says. The world is watching and laughing as Christians who worship the same God and read the same Bible can't agree on God's intention for sexuality. We can't guide others if we ourselves are lost.

Although sexuality presents an enormous challenge to Christians and to the world at large, *it is not a problem to be solved but a territory to be reclaimed*. The culture has captured the conversation of sexuality with a persuasive narrative, while Christians seem stifled with an outdated list of sexual dos and don'ts. We will never combat the growing confusion and pain of sexuality by swatting at the issues of pornography, premarital sex, same-sex attraction, sex trafficking, sexual harassment in the workplace, and abuse. Each of these problems is a devastating by-product of a larger tragedy: we don't understand sexuality within the context of the Christian narrative and the call to follow Jesus. As a result, Christian leaders and parents are at a loss as to how to navigate the growing chorus of sexual pain and chaos.

Respected author and Christian leader Philip Yancey stated, "I know of no greater failure among Christians than in presenting a persuasive approach to sexuality."¹ We worship a God who created sex for a purpose and has communicated His design both in creation and through His Word. The Bible tells us that we have everything we need to live a life of godliness through Christ Jesus.² I believe that includes our sexuality. However, God's truth won't make a difference in this area of our lives unless we change our approach and begin reclaiming the lost territory of sexuality.

TIME TO SPEAK UP

Sociologists Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker commented on the most common parental approach to the topic of sex: "American parents just

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can't bring themselves to have an ongoing dialogue about sexuality with their teenage or young-adult children. Parents much prefer a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy: We hope our kids won't ask us about what we did, so we won't have to tell them. And in return, we won't ask them about what they're doing."³

This strategy isn't just what's used in homes; it's also predominant within the church. Pastors and leaders don't bring up the topic, hoping that you won't either. I believe this is beginning to change, but historically Christians have just avoided talking about sex. I've been told that "these conversations don't belong in the church." If not the church, where do they belong? Sadly, because of this stance, sexual conversations are happening everywhere *except* the church.

Our silence on sex reinforces the belief that sexuality is dirty and ungodly. People conclude that God has little or nothing to say about our sexuality. Silence teaches us to hold on to our secret struggles and questions, which results in isolation and shame.

I hear from many Christians who long for the church to break this silence. Here's a portion of an email I recently received:

A dear friend of mine shared with me about your ministry.

I had been praying since 2011. . . . Asking God some hard questions and believing that He was going to raise a woman to speak out loud about sexuality and marriage bed issues to not only the "church" but to the world! Why was I praying this?

Difficult betrayal and spiritual/sexual abuse had been occurring in my "Christian marriage" and I as a woman had nowhere to turn. There were no blogs or conferences. . . . I sensed the Christian ministry world was silent on these things. I had gone to my church for counsel and was absolutely devastated by the "guidance" I was given. So I turned to the skies as

I was walking out into the church parking lot and asked, “What do You say, Lord”? He brought the chapter Isaiah 61 to my spirit. He would set my “captive” world free!

Freedom is now what I walk in every day because of God’s truths, healing, and His justice! I lean on the Word and His healing nature and character, yet my story of healing was not about my church’s influence in my healing journey. [The church] was silent, shaming and isolating. This prompted me to begin praying. *God, who will You raise up? Who will be a mouthpiece to women?* . . . I knew I was not alone. When God had me share my journey, my struggles . . . Wow, women began to talk. . . . A lot of them!

Believe me, I understand the appeal of silence on sex. I’m the mom of three sons. Even with my degrees and counseling experience, I have often found it awkward to address sexual topics with my kids. They don’t blush when there is a sexually charged commercial during a football game, but they blush when I bring up sex.

Now I find myself running a ministry, Authentic Intimacy, with the mission of reclaiming God’s design for sexuality. My job is to write, speak, and teach about biblical sexuality. Me, that girl who could barely say the word *sex* without turning five shades of red. Me, a woman who for many years of my marriage actively avoided sex within the one context God said I should pursue it. Little ol’ peacemaking me, who never wanted to say something that might offend someone else.

This wasn’t a calling I willingly signed up for. But I began to see that in every church on this planet, men and women silently struggle with temptation, shame, trauma, and confusion. They stay silent because we stay silent. Our silence tells them that God must be indifferent or too holy to care about their sexual temptations, their sexual pain, their terrifying

memories, and their tormenting shame. If these questions and issues are too troubling for the church to address, many assume they also must be too great for God to handle.

God did not take the high road, avoiding difficult and controversial topics. In our efforts to reflect Him on earth, neither should we. He was not shy about addressing sexuality. In fact, the Bible is quite a sexual book. It includes

- an explicit endorsement of sexual pleasure in marriage (Song of Songs)
- references to prostitution (Genesis 38 and Judges 16), incest (2 Samuel 13), and orgies (Genesis 19)
- instructions on avoiding sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:12–20)
- parental teaching on how to steward sexuality (Proverbs 5)
- hope for healing and redemption from sexual brokenness (Psalm 34:18; Luke 7:36–50; John 4:1–42)
- detailed metaphors of spiritual adultery and prostitution (Ezekiel 16 and the book of Hosea)⁴

God has something to reveal to His church; He has truths in His Word that can bring hope and healing. We must be His ambassadors to take this truth to a hurting world.

SEX EDUCATION ISN'T ENOUGH

Some churches are recognizing the need to address sexual issues and are providing educational opportunities related to sexuality. They may offer a marriage course for struggling couples or have a men's group addressing pornography. Their youth groups set aside a few weeks to address dating and sex.

While a sexual education response to people's confusion and ques-

tions around sexuality is certainly better than silence and judgment, it still pales in comparison with the world's aggressive messages. When we educate someone on a topic, this education takes place for a specific period of time. The parameters of the class are well defined. The limitations of education are clear when we think of all the information we have forgotten from years of formal instruction.

For example, my first language is English. I think in English and know most of the slang of my English-speaking American culture. To graduate from college, I needed to learn a foreign language, so I took three years of Spanish. This language was foreign indeed. I studied and memorized and even passed the exam, but now, three decades later, I remember little. When class was over, I forgot most of what I learned and moved on to everyday life. Despite the courses I took in Spanish, I was a long way from being fluent. Fluency means being able to think in that language, not simply responding with memorized phrases and questions. People rarely become fluent through an educational model. Fluent thought and speech usually come through immersion in an environment that consistently reinforces and models the language for us.

The danger of an educational model is that it reduces complex issues to a five-week course. We think we are experts when we read the book, memorize some stats, and prepare for the test. When we have been “educated” in what the Bible has to say about sexuality, we know how to spit out answers only to questions we have been prepared to answer. We might be able to show someone a verse about avoiding sexual immorality, but we can't explain the larger issue of why God cares about sex in the first place.

This simplistic understanding of sexuality is also what leads to legalism and judgmental attitudes. Historically, we have just taught a list of sexual dos and don'ts. Those who appeared to be obeying the list were seen as morally and spiritually superior to those who were not. Some sexual sins (such as using sex to control or manipulate your spouse) were

accepted, while other sexual sins have been preached against with “fire and brimstone.” The sexual crisis of our day is not the LGBTQ agenda or even the widespread use of porn. Those are simply the most obvious symptoms of the greater challenge: embracing God’s design for our sexuality.

Human sexuality is an extremely complicated aspect of our nature. God’s design, the many ways we have been affected by sexual sin and brokenness, and how our sexuality is redeemed—we cannot fully grasp these matters with an educational or problem-solving approach.

WE CAN’T SEPARATE SEX AND GOD

Here is an excerpt from a blog post that demonstrates the harmful fallout of the church’s incomplete teaching on sexuality:

At the age of 10, I took a pledge at my church alongside a group of other girls to remain a virgin until marriage. . . .

The church taught me that sex was for married people. Extramarital sex was sinful and dirty and I would go to Hell if I did it. . . .

[My virginity] became my entire identity by the time I hit my teen years. When I met my then boyfriend—now husband, I told him right away that I was saving myself for marriage and he was fine with that because it was my body, my choice and he loved me.

We were together for six years before we got married. Any time we did anything remotely sexual, guilt overwhelmed me. . . .

I lost my virginity on my wedding night, with my husband, just as I had promised that day when I was 10 years old. I stood in the hotel bathroom beforehand, wearing my white lingerie, thinking, “I made it. I’m a good Christian.” There was no chorus

of angels, no shining light from Heaven. It was just me and my husband in a dark room, fumbling with a condom and a bottle of lube for the first time.

Sex hurt. I knew it would. Everyone told me it would be uncomfortable the first time. What they didn't tell me is that I would be back in the bathroom afterward, crying quietly for reasons I didn't yet comprehend. . . .

I don't go to church anymore, nor am I religious. As I started to heal, I realized that I couldn't figure out how to be both religious and sexual at the same time. I chose sex. . . .

I'm now thoroughly convinced that the entire concept of virginity is used to control female sexuality. If I could go back, I would not wait. I would have sex with my then-boyfriend-now-husband and I wouldn't go to hell for it.⁵

While this young woman got the message to save sex for marriage, she had no context of how to understand sexuality within the larger story of God's love and redemption. As a result, she not only rejected the value of purity, but she also concluded that she could not trust God in any area of her life.

As this story illustrates, sexual issues are ultimately spiritual issues. When our sexuality is confusing, God becomes confusing. When the body of Christ is not willing to engage in these conversations, we allow the Enemy to build strongholds in people's lives. Their most private temptations, struggles, pain, disappointment, and shame represent their doubts about, resentment toward, and mistrust of the character of God.

I know of no issue that more effectively cuts to the quick of our beliefs about God. To the extent that we refuse to talk about tough sexual issues, we allow culture to define God's character and truth on sexuality. Here are a few examples:

Breana was sexually abused from the time she was a little girl. When she turned eighteen and escaped her childhood home, Breana went from one boyfriend to the next, each relationship becoming sexual sooner. In her twenties, Breana had two unwanted pregnancies that ended in abortion. When she was thirty-one, she found herself desperate enough to go to church with a coworker. She heard that Jesus loves her and has the power to forgive all her sins. That day, Breana became a new creation in Christ. She eventually met and married a Christian man, only to find that her past still haunted her. As Breana grew in her faith, she was confronted with memories and questions. *If God really loves me, why did He allow those terrible things to happen when I was a child? If Jesus died to save me from my sins, why do I still feel so shameful about my sexuality? Am I really forgiven?*

Seth knew he was different from the time he was a little boy. He didn't like sports, and he preferred the company of his sisters and mom. Because he was a sensitive and shy kid, his school-mates began calling him gay in the second grade. As Seth reached puberty, he wondered whether he was "normal." He wasn't drawn to girls the way the other guys were. Growing up in a strong Christian family, Seth never told his parents that he wondered whether he were gay. Now, as a twenty-year-old, Seth is wrestling with whether God accepts him with his sexual orientation. Was he born gay? How could a loving God create him with these desires and then tell him he can never fulfill them?

Nate is a committed Christian who longs for sexual intimacy in his marriage. Yet his wife, Tina, wants nothing to do with sex because of the trauma of her past. Every sexual advance is treated

as a violation of her personal space. Nate wonders, *Why, God, would You allow me to be so lonely and isolated in my marriage? Why can't I reach my wife? Will we live the next forty years like this? What am I supposed to do with my sexual feelings and desires?*

When we have permission to speak our pain out loud, we become desperate to *know* the truth about God. Does He really love me? Can I trust His Word? Can He truly forgive me and change my heart? Is He really God?

Christians have allowed the world to define sexuality, sexual brokenness, and sexual wholeness for far too long. To the extent that we chicken out of this conversation or provide simplistic answers to complicated questions, we add to the confusion.

Sadly, more people seek sexual truth from secular psychologists and mental health counselors than they do from Christian leaders. Many pastors and lay leaders don't know how to address complicated questions, such as the impact of sexual trauma on marriage or how a person can fight sexual addiction. Even with the intention to help, they may feel overwhelmed when addressing topics for which they have no training or that they are struggling with themselves.

We need to tell the world that God cares about our sexual pain, that His wisdom extends into and through our sexuality. When we speak His truth, people are set free! I am privileged to see tears in a woman's eyes when she finally has a safe, God-honoring place to confess sins, express pain, and ask questions. I am able to witness the relief in her face when she realizes that she is not alone, that others are struggling just as she is, and that there is hope for healing and redemption. I see her relief when she recognizes that her passions and even her pain have an eternal purpose. Every person who worships God should experience what I witness through the ministry of Authentic Intimacy.

Throughout this book, I will challenge your paradigm of sexuality. My intent is to teach you how to think biblically about sexuality. Remember that a paradigm shift can't simply stay in your head. It must also influence how you live and how you interact with people around you. When we focus only on theology and truth, we become judgmental and even hypocritical. God wants His truth to transform our hearts and His love to shape how we reach the hurting.

A tidal wave of sexual confusion and brokenness has swept over us, but this is just the beginning. The percentages of those addicted, traumatized, confused, and in bondage will exponentially increase in the days to come. A devastating tsunami of sexual abuse, addiction, shattered identity, and shame is on the way. The body of Christ is in desperate need of mature Christians who are rooted in both God's unchanging truth about sexuality and His life-changing love toward humanity. I'm asking you to be among them.

We don't have to stay silent or stunted in how we address sexuality. There is another way: an all-out effort to reclaim the lost ground of sexuality. It's a model I call sexual discipleship.

Where is the clear voice speaking to the crucial issues of the day with distinctively biblical, Christian answers? With tears we must say that largely it is not there and that a large segment of the evangelical world has become seduced by the world spirit of this present age. And more than this, we can expect the future to be a further disaster if the evangelical world does not take a stand for biblical truth and morality in the full spectrum of life.

—Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*