

*Book Review**Faithful: A Theology of Sex*

Beth Felker Jones, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 112 pages.



Reviewed by AARON SIRONI

Toward the end of my final semester of college, I prayerfully whispered, “God, if I could help couples struggling in marriage, I would love to do that.” About to complete a degree in psychology, I had no idea what the answer to this prayer would entail. After a year of working with children and their families, I enrolled in a marriage and family therapy graduate program. Near the end of this degree, I was required to take a sex therapy course that was populated by (mostly unmarried) graduate students and taught by a sociology professor on the cusp of retirement. Somehow, we survived the course without asking too many questions and by avoiding too much eye contact and in-depth discussion. If nothing else, we “professionals” learned that talking about sexual intimacy was very difficult.

Soon I was in full-time counseling ministry. I was gaining invaluable experience—learning from the very couples who came to me in marital distress and learning from others who were far more experienced than me. At some point, I threw away my rarely-referenced sex therapy textbooks and class notes. Experience had taught me that couples rarely spoke of sexual difficulties. Sure, there were times, often to the chagrin

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of one spouse, that a brave soul would broach the subject. But this wasn't every couple, and often it was a person chronically frustrated by their differences in sexual desire. Maybe it really wasn't necessary for us to discuss sex directly—a topic so difficult and uncomfortable for couples to talk about.

What compounded this was that I brought a deeply held, but false, assumption into marriage counseling. I thought that as couples grew in areas such as communication, reconciling conflict, and trust, it naturally and automatically translated into growth in their sexual relationship. Therefore, unless there were medically related or complex sexual problems, it would rarely be necessary to address sexual intimacy directly. When I consulted with other seasoned marriage counselors, this seemed to be the conventional wisdom.

However, marriage researchers have recently shed light on the importance of helping couples communicate in this delicate area. There is a problem, though. Both counselors *and* couples avoid talking about sexual intimacy in counseling. In private, counselors disclose their discomfort and perceived incompetence in this area, and couples are reluctant to ask for their help. And contrary to my assumptions, researchers also discovered that even when couples make significant gains in counseling, many continue to struggle with sexual difficulties. General marriage improvement does *not* automatically translate into improvements in this aspect of their relationship. When counselors fail to address sexual intimacy *directly*, sexual problems often remain. And without an invitation from the counselor, couples will not often break the ice on this important topic. This revealed a blind spot in the broader counseling field and my own counseling ministry.

As someone who now trains students in marriage counseling, I am deeply committed to helping newer counselors avoid the mistakes I have made. So, I have delved back into the literature in search of resources. Assigning trustworthy reading material can help couples open communication and gain insight into their challenges. I have read everything from *New York Times* bestsellers to classic sex therapy textbooks—and there are few I wholeheartedly recommend.

Not surprisingly, the sex therapy field reflects the cultural swing in contemporary sexual ethics. Modern authors emphasize the right to

achieve sexual pleasure and unlock each person's unique sexual potential in whatever relationship they choose to have. But Christians know things these secular writers do not. Writing over seventy years ago, C. S. Lewis described a key problem that persists today when unbelievers consider sexual pleasure unmoored from God's good intentions and boundaries for sex.

The Christian attitude does not mean that there is anything wrong about sexual pleasure, any more than about the pleasure of eating. It means that you must not isolate that pleasure and try to get it by itself, any more than you ought to try to get the pleasures of taste without swallowing and digesting, by chewing things and spitting them out again.¹

In contrast to the Christian perspective, secular authors capitalize upon the pleasurable aspects and techniques while altogether neglecting and ignoring God's gracious purposes and parameters for sex. Extending Lewis's analogy, the secular view separates and emphasizes the *taste* of sex while neglecting the importance of the nourishment that comes from it. Detached from God's good design, sex is diminished and corrupted and becomes in a sense poisonous—harmful to both spouses and to their marriage. Apart from lifelong security and exclusive, self-giving love, sex does not bring the relational nourishment, communion, and pleasure that God intends for a husband and wife.

For some time, I have searched for theologically sound resources to give to counselors and couples as a way into this difficult and delicate conversation. I have found one! *Faithful: A Theology of Sex* by Beth Felker Jones (PhD, Duke University) develops a rich and practical theology of sex and encourages conversation. Jones writes without offensive or uncomfortable sexual descriptions. She speaks of God's good intentions for sex in ways that cause no one to blush and that make this book an accessible resource to give to singles and engaged couples looking for a sane and grounded perspective. In addition, I would not hesitate to recommend this book to married couples who have struggled in this area

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 105.

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The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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