

## **The Rape of Solomon's Song Part 1**

Tuesday, Apr 14, 2009

By John MacArthur

Apparently the shortest route to relevance in church ministry right now is for the pastor to talk about sex in garishly explicit terms during the Sunday morning service. If he can shock parishioners with crude words and sophomoric humor, so much the better. The defenders of this trend solemnly inform us that without such a strategy it is well-nigh impossible to connect with today's "culture." (In contemporary evangelicalism that term has become a convenient label for just about everything that is uncultured and uncouth.)

Sermons about sex have suddenly become a bigger fad in the evangelical world than the prayer of Jabez ever was. Everywhere, it seems, churches are featuring special series on the subject. Some of them advertise with suggestive billboards purposely designed to offend their communities' conservative sensibilities.

Quite a few pastors have earned widespread media coverage by issuing "sex challenges" to church members. These are schemes that make daily sex obligatory for married couples over a specified time—usually between seven and forty days. (How people are made accountable for this is a question I'm afraid to raise.)

I would be the last to suggest that preachers should totally avoid the topic of sex. Scripture has quite a lot to say about the subject, starting with God's first words to Adam and Eve ("Be fruitful and multiply"—Genesis 1:22). God's law has numerous commands that govern sexual behavior, and the New Testament repeatedly reaffirms the Old Testament standard of sexual purity. Finally, in the closing chapters of Scripture we are told that sexually immoral people will be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 21:8). So there's simply no way to preach the whole counsel of God without mentioning sex.

But the language Scripture employs when dealing with the physical relationship between husband and wife is always careful—often plain, sometimes poetic, usually delicate, frequently muted by

euphemisms, and never fully explicit. There is no hint of sophomoric lewdness in the Bible, even when the prophet's clear purpose is to shock (such as when Ezekiel 23:20 likens Israel's apostasy to an act of gross fornication motivated by the lust of bestiality). When an act of adultery is part of the narrative (such as David's sin with Bathsheba), it is never described in way that would gratify a lascivious imagination or arouse lustful thoughts.

The message of Scripture regarding sex is simple and consistent throughout: total physical intimacy within marriage is pure and ought to be enjoyed (Hebrews 13:4); but remove the marriage covenant from the equation and all sexual activity (including that which occurs only in the imagination) is nothing but fornication, a serious sin that is especially defiling and shameful—so much so that merely talking about it inappropriately is a disgrace (Ephesians 5:12).

Above all, Scripture never stoops to the lurid level of contemporary sex education. The Bible has no counterpart to the Hindu Kama Sutra (an ancient Sanskrit sex manual supposedly transmitted by Hindu deities.) Nothing in Scripture gives any vivid how-to instructions regarding the physical relationship within marriage.

That includes the Song of Solomon.

In fact, Solomon's love-poem epitomizes the exact opposite approach. It is, of course, a lengthy poem about courtship and marital love. It is filled with euphemisms and word pictures. Its whole point is gently, subtly, and elegantly to express the emotional and physical intimacy of marital love—in language suitable for any audience.

But it has become popular in certain circles to employ extremely graphic descriptions of physical intimacy as a way of expounding on the euphemisms in Solomon's poem. As this trend develops, each new speaker seems to find something more shocking in the metaphors than any of his predecessors ever imagined.

Thus we are told that the Shulammitte's poetic language invoking the delights of an apple tree (Song 2:3) is a metaphor for oral sex. The comfort and delight of a simple embrace (2:6) is not what it seems to be at all. Apparently it's impossible to describe what that

verse really means without mentioning certain unmentionable body parts.

We're assured moreover that the shocking hidden meanings of these texts aren't merely descriptive; they are prescriptive. The secret gnosis of Solomon's Song portray obligatory acts wives must do if this is what satisfies their husbands, regardless of the wife's own desire or conscience. I was recently given a recording of one of these messages, where the speaker said, "Ladies, let me assure you of this: if you think you're being dirty, he's pretty happy."

Such pronouncements are usually made amid raucous laughter, but evidently we are expected to take them seriously. When the laughter died away, that speaker added, "Jesus Christ commands you to do this."

That approach is not exegesis; it is exploitation. It is contrary to the literary style of the book itself. It is spiritually tantamount to an act of rape. It tears the beautiful poetic dress off Song of Solomon, strips that portion of Scripture of its dignity, and holds it up to be laughed at and leered at in a carnal way.

Mark Driscoll has boldly led the parade down this carnal path. He is by far the best-known and most prolific popular proponent of handling the Song of Solomon that way. He has said repeatedly that this is his favorite passage of Scripture, and he has come back to it again and again in recent years, culminating in a highly publicized series released on video via the Internet last year.

I keep encountering young pastors who are now following that same example, and I'm rather surprised that the trend has been so well received in the church with practically no significant critics raising any serious objections. So we're going to analyze and critique this approach to Song of Solomon over the next couple of days, including a look at some specific examples where the line of propriety has clearly been breached.

Posted online here:

<http://www.shepherdsfellowship.org/pulpit/Posts.aspx?ID=4168>

---

## **The Rape of Solomon's Song (Part 2)**

Wednesday, Apr 15, 2009

By John MacArthur

It's frankly hard to think of a more appalling misuse of Scripture than turning the Song of Solomon into soft porn. When people can no longer read that portion of Scripture without pornographic imagery entering their minds, the beauty of the book has been corrupted, its description of righteous love perverted, and its role in sanctifying and elevating the marriage relationship deflected. That preachers would do this in public worship services is unconscionable.

Song of Solomon is deliberately veiled in poetic euphemisms that are beautiful by any measure. Some of the imagery is fairly obvious, some highly debatable. In many places the meaning is indistinct enough to permit a great deal of hermeneutical imagination, and wisdom would seem to teach that here—especially here—it is best for the preacher not to be a lot more explicit than the Holy Spirit was.

And let's face it: overall, the Song is about as far from explicit as the writer can get.

Moreover, since the symbolism is obviously about passion, romance, love, desire, and tenderness, its ambiguity serves a deliberate purpose: it speaks in secret terms about that which should be kept secret. The language is clearly designed to communicate intimate affection privately through veiled, confidential, almost clandestine terms.

This is a vital point: The style of communication between these two lovers beautifully conceals all but the most essential meaning of their love songs in a way that guards the deeply personal (and divinely intended) privacy of the marriage bed.

Song of Solomon is incredibly beautiful precisely because it is so carefully veiled. It is a perfect description of the wonderful, tender, intimate discovery that God designed to take place between a young man and his bride in a place of secrecy. We are not told in

vivid terms what all the metaphors mean, because the beauty of marital passion is in the eye of the beholder—where it should stay.

Tom Gledhill wisely sums up this point in his IVP commentary on Song of Solomon (pp. 29–31):

To unpack metaphors and unwrap euphemisms [in Song of Solomon] may mean that our thoughts spiral out of control, and we end up by committing adultery in our imaginations. So if the interpretation of Scripture proves to be a stumbling block, and a cause of offence to some who believe, what then? . . . Once a particular line of interpretation has been suggested, it is difficult to avoid seeing explicit sexual allusions everywhere, until the whole work becomes saturated in references to genitalia, intercourse and explicit sex.

. . . The New Testament answer is very clear and straightforward. Jesus said, 'If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out . . . It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.' In other words, we are not to walk into temptation open eyed when we know our particular areas of weakness .

. . . The language we use to describe various parts of the human anatomy (what the Apostle Paul describes as our 'unpresentable parts') is a matter for delicate sensitivity . . . . When [inappropriately explicit] words are used in verbal discourse, a profound disorientation takes place in the hearer, which has a tendency to block off to a large degree any further capacity for rational discussion. They act, so to speak, as verbal hand grenades. Their use is a terrorist activity, causing wanton destruction.

Tremper Longman III says this about preachers and commentators who interpret the Song's poetic imagery in overtly explicit ways: "[Their] free association with the images of the Song is so prevalent that we learn far more about the interpreters than we do about the text" (NICOT, p. 14).

Consider, for instance, the following passage from Song of Solomon 4:12–16. Here Solomon depicts his bride with a complex metaphor employing flowery symbols, and she responds by echoing the imagery:

A garden locked is my sister, my bride,  
A rock garden locked, a spring sealed up.  
Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates  
With choice fruits, henna with nard plants,  
Nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,  
With all the trees of frankincense,  
Myrrh and aloes, along with all the finest spices.  
You are a garden spring,  
A well of fresh water,  
And streams flowing from Lebanon."  
Awake, O north wind,  
And come, wind of the south;  
Make my garden breathe out fragrance,  
Let its spices be wafted abroad.  
May my beloved come into his garden  
And eat its choice fruits!"

Solomon thus describes his bride as a locked, gated garden. To him, she is a pleasant place full of charming fragrances and soothing substances. The word-picture he paints is beautiful on every level. The details ("choice fruits, henna with nard plants, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon . . . trees of frankincense, myrrh," etc.) may or may not have specific meanings that would have been known to the bride.

All a careful interpreter can say with certainty is that Solomon finds his bride pleasurable to all his sensory perceptions. He therefore likens her to the most pleasant and beautiful imagery he can think of—ointments and fragrances and visual delights—all concentrated together in one well-cultivated spot. A garden. The garden is "locked," which, again, underscores the intimate privacy of pure marital love. Nothing requires the exegete to take it any further than that. Scripture itself doesn't go further than that.

"It's frank but not crass," Mark Driscoll told a Sunday congregation in Scotland just less than 18 months ago. But then he continued by paraphrasing Solomon in a way that was totally crass and not even remotely close to what the Holy Spirit intended. (A CD copy of that shocking message, entitled *Sex: A Study of the Good Bits of Song of Solomon* was recently sent to me by some deeply offended and

concerned Christians in the UK. It is primarily the reason I'm doing this series.)

In Driscoll's mind, it's not the bride herself who is a garden, but a specific part of her anatomy. As he re-imagines the passage, it is not a poem about the delightful privacy the marriage partners enjoy; it's a sneaky way of openly exposing that intimacy for all to see.

In essence, he treats Song of Solomon like the old urban legend about the lyrics to "Louie, Louie." Only those with the secret knowledge can really understand it; and therefore its true meaning must be something dirty.

That approach caters to prurient ears. It is hard to see it as anything other than sheer exhibitionism. Worst of all, it turns the whole purpose of Song of Solomon on its head.

Tremper Longman was right: eisegesis like that reveals nothing about the book but everything about the interpreter.

Posted online here:

<http://www.shepherdsfellowship.org/pulpit/Posts.aspx?ID=4169>

---

## The Rape of Solomon's Song Part 3

Thursday, Apr 16, 2009

By John MacArthur

*[Editor's Note: Readers should be warned that this article contains offensive material. Nonetheless, it is included here for the sake of substantiating the thesis of this article.]*

I emphatically agree with those who say the Song of Solomon is not mere allegory. It is best understood when we take it at face value, like any other text of Scripture. Many interpreters whom I otherwise hold in high esteem (including Spurgeon and most of the Puritans) have unfortunately done more to confuse than clarify the Song's message by treating it in a purely allegorical fashion that eliminates its primary meaning.

Solomon's Song is, as I've said from the outset, a love poem between Solomon and his bride, celebrating their mutual love for one another, including the delights of the marriage bed. To interpret this—or any other portion of Scripture—in a purely allegorical fashion is to treat the interpreter's own imagination as more authoritative than the plain meaning of the text.

However, those who pretend to know the meanings of poetic symbols that are not clearly identifiable from the text itself commit the very same error. Their speculation is likewise a way of exalting their own imaginations to a higher level of authority than the plain sense of the text.

That's a particular problem when the interpreter sees a mandate for oral sex in the simple metaphor of a fruit tree or imagines that the best way to contextualize and illustrate portions of the text is by verbally undressing his own wife in order to make the point as vivid as possible. In such a case, not only has the speaker given far too much weight to his own speculative imagination; he has given a fairly clear signal that his imagination is not altogether pure (Luke 6:45).

And that is a far more serious problem than merely allegorizing the text.

By no means do I want to minimize the dangers of allegorizing the text. That approach to hermeneutics is full of mischief, even in the hands of pure-minded men who are generally sound in their doctrine. I don't approve of allegorical flights of fancy, especially with a text like Song of Solomon, which poses enough difficulties with the obvious built-in metaphors and poetic language it features.

Allegorizers of the Song of Solomon generally see it as an expression of tender mutual love between Christ and His church. Most of them would say that Christ is represented by the voice of Solomon; the church is represented by the voice of the Shulamite. Some interpreters go further yet and imagine they hear three or more voices speaking out of the text. (Invariably those who multiply the voices try to make the verses fit some complex libretto that arises more out of their own personal agenda than from the text itself.)

Still, regardless of how many voices are heard and who is supposedly speaking, nearly all who allegorize this poem see it as a canticle of love between Christ and the church. It's probably fair to say that this allegorical view focusing on Christ and the church has been the dominant interpretation of the poem throughout church history.

That, of course, doesn't make it right. I happen to think it is not the correct approach to interpreting this text. But it's not a view that ought to be dismissed with vulgar contempt—especially with a coarse joke attributing homosexual behavior to Christ.

If you have heard any of Mark Driscoll's teaching on the Song of Solomon, you have surely heard his joke in that vein. For example, **in the sermon that prompted me to write these articles**<sup>1</sup>, Driscoll says, "Some have allegorized this book, and in so doing, they have destroyed it. They have destroyed it. They will say that it is an allegory between Jesus and his bride the church. Which if true, is weird. Because Jesus is having sex with me and puts his hand up my shirt. And that feels weird. I love Jesus, but not in that way."

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.destinyedinburgh.com/m3uPage.aspx?mp3=Sex,\\_a\\_study\\_of\\_the\\_good\\_bits\\_from\\_Song\\_of\\_Solomon\\_by\\_Mark\\_Driscoll.mp3](http://www.destinyedinburgh.com/m3uPage.aspx?mp3=Sex,_a_study_of_the_good_bits_from_Song_of_Solomon_by_Mark_Driscoll.mp3)

Driscoll has said almost the exact same thing in at least three other sermons. For example: "Jesus keeps making out with me and touching me in inappropriate places." "Now I'm gay, or highly troubled, or both." "As a guy, I do not feel comfortable with Jesus, like you know, kissing me and touching me and taking me to bed. Okay? I feel sort of very homo-erotic about that kind of view of Song of Solomon."

Even in his most recent Peasant Princess series, he repeats a version of that very same joke:

Now what happens is some say "Well, we do believe in the book [of Song of Solomon], and we will teach it, but we're gonna teach it allegorically." And there's a literal and an allegorical interpretation. They'll say, "Well the allegorical interpretation, it's not between a husband and a wife, Song of Solomon, love and romance and intimacy; what it is, it's about us and Jesus." Really? I hope not. [Laughter from crowd] If I get to heaven and this goes down, I don't know what I'm gonna do. I mean it's gonna be a bad day. Right? I mean seriously. You dudes know what I'm talking about. You're like, "No, I'm not doing that. You know I'm not doing that. I love Him [Jesus] but not like that." [Laughter from crowd]

Driscoll blew off criticism about that kind of joking by claiming it's not blasphemy because it has nothing to do with the "real" Jesus. He says he is simply making fun of a false notion about Jesus. And he continues making the joke. Here's the problem with that: Scripture clearly teaches that the love between a husband and wife in all its aspects is a metaphor for Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:31-32).

Thus even a non-allegorical interpretation of Song of Solomon, (simply taking the love-song between Solomon and the Shulamite at face value) ultimately points us to Christ and his love for the church. The text ought to be handled by the preacher accordingly, not as an excuse to bathe in the gutter of our culture's easygoing obsession with crude sex-talk and graphic sexual imagery.

Some who have commented on these articles have suggested that I ought to give a full exposition of Solomon's Song rather than merely critiquing the bad interpreters and decrying the contemporary church's fixation with sex.

That would require a long series, and I'd prefer not to devote weeks of time on this blog to a topic that I have raised only in order to make a simple, single-pointed admonition. But those wondering what my exposition of Solomon's Song would be like will find full notes on the text in The MacArthur Study Bible.

Those notes should be a sufficient answer to the commenter who pretended to wonder if I am saying it would be better not to comment on Song of Solomon at all.

Of course that is not what I am saying, nor can anyone claim that I have even implied anything of the sort—without twisting my words or putting their words in my mouth. (That literally happened in a string of comments at another blog where this issue was under discussion. An early commenter accused me of opposing line-by-line exposition of the Song. Halfway down the comments, people were putting that claim in quotation marks, attributing it to me.)

What I am saying is that the bounds of propriety—especially when dealing with subjects like sex—should be set by whatever text we are dealing with. To interpret beautiful poetry by translating it into scurrilous soft-porn is to corrupt the most fundamental intent of the text.

This is nowhere near as difficult to grasp as some are pretending, but perhaps a simple parallel will suffice: There are other private body functions and "less honorable" or "unpresentable" body parts (1 Corinthians 12:23). We find these mentioned or alluded to at times in Scripture without ever being too specific. We all would be rightly offended if the preacher gave a long, descriptive discourse or how-to instructions in the Sunday worship service, outlining these "unpresentable" things.

For stronger reasons than simple modesty, certain acts involving fornication, autoeroticism, and other things people commonly "do in secret" are shameful to talk about in any public context (Ephesians 5:12), much less a church service. They may be suitable subjects for a private counseling session, or the doctor's office, or a college biology lecture, but they are not fitting topics for a worship service where God should be glorified, Christ should be uplifted, women should be shown respect, children's innocence should be

guarded, and single people's prurient curiosities should not unnecessarily be enflamed.

When a speaker deliberately arouses lusts that cannot possibly be righteously fulfilled in unmarried college students, or when his personal illustrations fail to guard the privacy and honor of his own wife, that is far worse than merely inappropriate. When done repeatedly and with the demeanor of an immature bad-boy, such a practice reflects a major character defect that is spiritually disqualifying. Any man who makes such things the main trademark of his style is quite simply not above reproach.

As recently as a decade ago, that point of view would not have raised a peep of controversy.

The fact that it is so controversial now is simply more proof that evangelicals have become too much like the world, and too comfortable with the evil characteristics of our culture.

Tomorrow, Lord willing, I'll post the final installment in this series. Several questions have come up repeatedly from people who have commented on these articles, and in tomorrow's final installment, I want to answer as many of them as possible.

Posted online here:

<http://www.shepherdsfellowship.org/pulpit/Posts.aspx?ID=4172>

---

## **The Rape of Solomon's Song (Part 4--conclusion)**

Friday, Apr 17, 2009

Before we close this brief series, I promised to answer as many questions as possible from people who have commented here, via e-mail, through Twitter, and at Challies.com.

I first want to thank Tim Challies for his courage in hosting a discussion about this topic. The very mention of propriety and language obviously stirs contemporary evangelical passions—and not necessarily in a way that is helpful. It's not easy to find forums on the Internet where such a volatile matter can be openly discussed with profit. And because of some of the very problems this series has addressed, even Christian forums aren't always safe havens from profanity and grossly carnal behavior. I'm grateful to Tim for sponsoring a more dignified level of dialogue.

I resounded with the utter shock Tim expressed when he was exposed to some of the material from Driscoll's Scotland sermon (the message that sparked this blog series). After reading some of Driscoll's outrageous statements, Tim reacted the way any pure-minded Christian would react:

I have a real problem with anyone interpreting Song of Solomon like that . . . . To be honest, words fail me when I even try to explain myself—when I try to explain how I just cannot even conceive of Song of Solomon like that. The poetic nature of the Song is entirely eroded when we assign such meaning to it: such specific meaning. And I think as well of what it may do to a couple to be able to say “Look, this specific sex act is mandated in Scripture. So let's do it.” That may be said to a spouse who has no desire to do that act or who even finds it distasteful. And yet with our interpretation of Song of Solomon, which we really have no way of proving (at least beyond a reasonable doubt) we are potentially bludgeoning an unwilling partner into doing something. I just ... again, words really fail me here.

Tim, you were right to be shocked. The most shocking thing to me is that some people do not seem to be shocked at all. What would easily receive an NC-17 rating by the world is being heralded and defended by some in the church.

I should explain that I don't use the Internet directly; I don't even own a computer or have an Internet connection in my home. I'm totally dependent on staff and pastoral interns who print material that I need to read and make sure I get it.

So for those who perhaps expected that I would interact with their comments in real time on the blog, I simply have no easy means of doing that. I scan comments when I receive them—which usually isn't until the next day—but I cannot answer blog-comments directly, nor would I be able to devote my time to Internet forums even if I were connected.

But I do want to take this opportunity to reply to the most frequently asked questions from the past few days. Virtually all the questions and criticisms that have been raised can be grouped in two categories. A few are questions and observations about the proper interpretation of Song of Solomon. Virtually all the rest have to do with my criticism of Mark Driscoll.

I'll answer several questions from the first category, and summarize my answers to the second category in two final answers.

\* \* \* \* \*

**1. Can we "give the sense," when we preach poetry without doing, verse-by-verse, precept-by-precept exposition? Or is it better to just leave it "carefully veiled," as MacArthur writes?**

The question misconstrues what I said. I have never suggested that the clear meaning of any text ought to be "carefully veiled." I pointed out that some things in Scripture are carefully veiled, and we should not impose our own speculative interpretations on them.

In other words, I'm urging pastors to deal with what the text says, and steer clear of imposing gnostic-style secret meanings on ideas that are deliberately left obscure or totally hidden by the Holy Spirit.

I'm saying nothing more than I would say about speculative interpretations of any part of Scripture: it's unwise. No, it's seriously dangerous. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us . . ." (Deut. 29:29).

I'm also saying that the way the Spirit discussed the holy intimacy and privacy of marital love is antithetical to the sort of crass, graphic pseudo-interpretations some contemporary evangelicals seem to crave.

\* \* \* \* \*

**2. Song of Solomon is a very explicit erotic book. How can you possibly argue that this book of the Bible, which is God's Holy Word, is anything but "fully explicit"? Isn't it a denial of the obvious to claim that the Song of Solomon is not a pretty graphic description of sex?**

explicit -- ek ● SPLIS ● it -- Distinctly expressing all that is meant; leaving nothing merely implied or suggested; unambiguous

Since there is not one explicit mention of a reproductive body part or sexual act in Song of Solomon, no credible commentator on the Song would ever make such a claim about that book. Furthermore (and this is the key point of the whole discussion) Song of Solomon is not "erotic" literature in any sense—i.e., it is not intended to arouse readers sexually. Clearly it should never be preached in a way that has that effect. That is so obvious a point that only an exploiter of the book would ignore it for prurient interests.

\* \* \* \* \*

**3. Do you not see a distinction between metaphor and euphemism?**

Of course. But sometimes a metaphor is also a euphemism, and that is clearly the case with some of the disputed imagery in Song of Solomon. There is no exegetical way to decide what the various jewels, flowers, scents, oils, and other sensual pleasures named in the poem represented in the author's mind. He purposely leaves them vague. The symbols are therefore not necessarily meant to have any one-to-one relationship with corresponding realities; rather they are general emblems of beauty and desire. Solomon uses the symbolism instead of saying anything explicit—which (by definition) makes these metaphors euphemistic, too.

Along these lines, Richard Hess, on pp. 34–35 of his Baker Old Testament Commentary, notes the danger of reading too much into the Song’s beautiful metaphors:

The metaphor of the Song is the richest of any book in the Bible. It is, however, not intended to provide a simple one-to-one correspondence. In fact, interpreters are most likely to go astray into absurdities when they attempt to match things up where they are not explicit. . . . The best interpretation is to remain sensitive to the language of imagery and attempt to follow its contours without imposing too much demand on specifics of interpretation. . . . The Song does not entertain its readers with prurient expositions nor educate them as a sex manual.

\* \* \* \* \*

**4. Could it be that your scruples about graphic descriptions of sexual acts are cultural and generational? Perhaps the culture in which you minister isn't as uninhibited as the subcultures other preachers are trying to reach.**

Sex is not something new in the postmodern era. Every culture and every generation has dealt with the same obsessions and perversions as today—though not always with the same unbridled self-indulgence our culture encourages. Every Christian has always faced the same lusts and temptations that assault us: "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man" (1 Corinthians 10:13). Those who think pornography and unrestrained debauchery weren't commonplace in the pre-Internet era ought to visit the ruins of Pompeii and see what life was like in the culture of Rome during the apostle Paul's generation.

Paul ministered in cultures that were far less “inhibited” than ours. Yet when he found it necessary to deal with sexual topics—whether giving positive instruction about the marriage relationship or a negative exhortation about sexual sins—he never spoke in sexually graphic terms.

Moreover, what was sinful in Paul's era is still sinful in our porn-saturated culture. And Paul's strategy for reaching Corinth (one of the most sexually perverted subcultures ever known) is the same strategy we ought to be using today. That includes some careful,

dignified, authentically biblical teaching on sexual issues (cf. 1 Corinthians 7). But holiness, not how-to advice on sex, is the heart of what pastors ought to be teaching about sex (especially in a sex-addicted culture). And our teaching on the subject must be done with grace, dignity, and sanctification, not in the manner of blue comedy.

The truth is that God's Word never gives specific instruction about the details of a married couple's personal preferences in their sex life. Sermons that pretend to find such instruction, like the sexual preoccupation demonstrated in these assaults on the Song of Solomon, are more damaging than helpful—because they elevate the imagination of the preacher to a higher position of prominence and authority than the true revelation of God.

Neither Paul nor any other legitimate church leader in 2000 years has ever found it necessary (or even helpful) to use streetwise sex education—not as an evangelistic strategy, and certainly not as a means to sanctification for people already overwhelmed with sex-talk from a corrupt culture. Adopting the world's obsession with sex and filthy talk cannot possibly have a sanctifying effect, because the strategy itself is unholy.

The notion that degenerate subcultures and sexually-addicted people cannot be reached without "learning to speak their language" is an absolute fallacy. Grace Church is seven miles from Hollywood, in the heart of Southern California, in a carnal, pleasure-mad culture well-known worldwide for everything but healthy spiritual values. No city in America is more "unchurched" than our valley, which houses more than three million people. The people of Grace church are reaching friends and neighbors in every imaginable subculture—from ex-cons to ex-Catholics to people in the entertainment industry. We baptize new believers virtually every Sunday night. It is neither necessary nor helpful to inject explicit sexual references into the conversation in order to reach people from such a culture. God draws them to Christ through the gospel.

\* \* \* \* \*

**5. You titled your articles "The rape of Song of Solomon." If you object so much to strong language and sexual themes, doesn't that seem over the top?**

One of the fundamental problems with this whole discussion is a refusal by many to acknowledge the crucial (and elementary) distinction between strong language and obscene language. Mark Driscoll himself contributed to this confusion by blending and blurring the two issues in his message last fall at the Desiring God Conference.

Scripture condemns heretics in powerful, sometimes indelicate, terms (e.g., Galatians 5:12). But the Bible is never smutty, and the strong language in Scripture certainly doesn't make profane language or filthy joking acceptable (Ephesians 5:4).

In the first article of the series, I explained why the title is fitting. If someone thinks it is an example of what I have decried, that person hasn't understood what I am saying at all. Rape is an act of forced violation; and this treatment of Solomon's Song is a molestation of the book, tearing off its God-designed veil, publicly defiling its purity, and holding it up for leering and laughter.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **6. Was Driscoll's sermon really as bad as you say? Aren't you overreacting to what is ultimately just a difference in style?**

During the Downgrade Controversy, Charles Spurgeon was essentially accused of the same thing—a misrepresentation of the facts and an overreaction to the issues. Here is what Spurgeon said in response to his critics:

The controversy which has arisen out of our previous articles is very wide in its range. Different minds will have their own opinions as to the manner in which the combatants have behaved themselves; for our own part we are content to let a thousand personal matters pass by unheeded. What does it matter what sarcasms or pleasantries may have been uttered at our expense? The dust of battle will blow away in due time; for the present the chief concern is to keep the standard in its place, and bear up against the rush of the foe.

Our warning was intended to call attention to an evil which we thought was apparent to all: we never dreamed that "the previous

question" would be raised, and that a company of esteemed friends would rush in between the combatants, and declare that there was no cause for war, but that our motto might continue to be "Peace, peace!" Yet such has been the case, and in many quarters the main question has been, not "How can we remove the evil?" but, "Is there any evil to remove?" No end of letters have been written with this as their theme—"Are the charges made by Mr. Spurgeon at all true?" Setting aside the question of our own veracity, we could have no objection to the most searching discussion of the matter. By all means let the truth be known.

In the spirit of Charles Spurgeon, then, I feel there is no other course of action than to let the truth be known. **This link**<sup>2</sup> (which someone emailed to me yesterday) will take you to some of the things Mark Driscoll has said about Song of Solomon. My preference would be not to link to these things at all (there is, in fact, much more that I could link to), and I would warn that the content is highly offensive (especially since it was preached in a Sunday worship service where children, teenagers, and young singles were present). But, as Paul told the Corinthians, sometimes it is necessary to bear with a little foolishness in order that the truth might be known.

The New Testament could not be more clear. The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart (Matthew 12:34). And those who teach publicly are held to a higher level of accountability (James 3:1). Pastors, in particular, are to be models of purity (1 Tim. 4:12), above reproach both within the church and without (1 Tim. 3:2-7). Purity in doctrine, purity in life, and purity in speech are all part of the biblical qualifications for those who would be God's spokesmen.

**Ephesians 4:29** Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

**Ephesians 5:4-5** There must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or

---

<sup>2</sup> [https://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=dg4fc37g\\_6fjdd38c8&hl=en](https://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=dg4fc37g_6fjdd38c8&hl=en)

covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

**1 Thessalonians 4:7** For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.

**Titus 2:6-8** Likewise urge the young men to be sensible; in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us.

That's why I am making such an issue of this. Because the New Testament makes an issue of it. It is not simply a difference of opinion, generation, preference, style, or methodology. It is an issue that arises from clear New Testament mandates related to the character of an elder. If anything, I don't think I have reacted strongly enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

**7. Why did you single out Driscoll and connect him with the "sex challenges"? Why call him out publicly? He has already repented of his unguarded speech, and he is being privately disciplined by men like John Piper and C. J. Mahaney, who keep him accountable. Did you consult them before calling Driscoll out by name? If the problem is as serious as you claim, why haven't they said something publicly about it?**

In the sermon that prompted this series, Mark Driscoll (speaking specifically to wives in the congregation) made several comments that were far, far worse than the seamiest sex challenges. Furthermore, Driscoll's edicts to married women were not mere "challenges" but directives buttressed with the claim that "Jesus Christ commands you to do [this]." That material has been online and freely circulated for more than a year. But you'll be hard pressed to find even a single Web forum where anyone has demanded that Driscoll explain why he feels free to say such things publicly.

I am pointing out something that should not be the least bit controversial: pastors are not free to talk like that. In response, a flood of angry young men, including several pastors and seminary students—not one of whom has ever attempted a private conversation with me about this topic—have felt free to post insults and public rebukes in a public forum, declaring emphatically (with no obvious awareness of the irony) that they don't believe such things should be handled in public forums.

(To be clear: I'm not suggesting that anyone needs to contact me privately about public remarks I have made. Quite the contrary. But those who insist such disagreements should be handled privately reveal the hypocrisy of that claim when they use a public forum to berate and accuse a pastor whom they disagree with.)

When 1 Timothy 5:20 says, "Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all," it is talking about elders in particular. Those in public ministry must be rebuked publicly when their sin is repeated, and public, and confirmed by multiple witnesses.

Nevertheless, I have written Mark privately with my concerns. He rejected my counsel. As a matter of fact, he preached the sermon I have been quoting from seven weeks after receiving my private letter encouraging him to take seriously the standard of holiness Scripture holds pastors to. Here is a small selection from the six-page letter I sent him:

[Y]ou can[not] make a biblical case for Christians to embrace worldly fads—especially when those fads are diametrically at odds with the wholesome speech, pure mind, and chaste behavior that God calls us to display. At its core, this is about ideology. No matter how culture changes, the truth never does. But the more the church accommodates the baser elements of the culture, the more she will inevitably compromise her message. We must not betray our words through our actions; we must be in the world but not of it. . . . It's vital that you not send one message about the importance of sound doctrine and a totally different message about the importance of sound speech and irreproachable pure-mindedness.

Mark Driscoll's response to that admonition and the things he has said since have only magnified my concern.

Mark did indeed express regret a few years ago over the reputation his tongue has earned him. Yet no substantive change is observable. Just a few weeks ago, in an angry diatribe leveled at men in his congregation, Driscoll once again threw in a totally unnecessary expletive. A few weeks before that, he made a public mockery of Ecclesiastes 9:10 (something he has done repeatedly), by making a joke of it on national television. So here are two more inappropriate Driscoll videos being passed around by young people and college students for whom I bear some pastoral responsibility. In their immaturity, they typically think it's wonderfully cool and transparent for a pastor to talk like that. And they feel free to curse and joke in a similar manner in more casual settings.

It is past time for the issue to be dealt with publicly.

Finally, it seriously overstates the involvement of John Piper and C. J. Mahaney to say they are "discipling" Mark Driscoll. In the first place, the idea that a grown man already in public ministry and constantly in the national spotlight needs space to be "mentored" before it's fair to subject his public actions to biblical scrutiny seems to put the whole process backward. These problems have been talked about in both public and private contexts for at least three or four years. At some point the plea that this is a maturity issue and Mark Driscoll just needs time to mature wears thin. In the meantime, the media is having a field day writing stories that suggest trashy talk is one of the hallmarks of the "New Calvinism;" and countless students whom I love and am personally acquainted with are being led into similar carnal behavior by imitating Mark Driscoll's speech and lifestyle. Enough is enough.

Yes, I did inform John Piper and C. J. Mahaney of my concerns about this material several weeks ago. I itemized all of these issues in much more thorough detail than I have written about them here, and I expressly told them I was preparing this series of articles for the blog.

To those asking why pastors Piper and Mahaney (and others in positions of key leadership) haven't publicly expressed similar concerns of their own, that is not a question for me. I hope you will write and ask them.

Posted online here:

<http://www.shepherdsfellowship.org/pulpit/Posts.aspx?ID=4174>

---