

GENDER STUDIES IN REVIEW

A Review of Denny Burk, *What is the Meaning of Sex?*
Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013. 262 pp. \$17.99.

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A number of years ago I had the opportunity to hear the Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft speak on the topic, “Will there be sex in heaven?” Judging by audience reaction at the lecture, Kreeft’s talk was disappointing to most who attended, for the title of his talk was a bit of a gimmick—that is, his topic was not sexual intercourse, but sexual gender. When I received a copy of Denny Burk’s new book, *What is the Meaning of Sex?*, my mind went back to Kreeft’s lecture, as I wondered if Burk’s book was about intercourse or about gender. As it turns out, this volume is about intercourse, gender, and much, much more.

Denny Burk is well known to many readers of this journal, as he currently serves as the editor of *The Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. Additionally, Burk is professor of biblical studies at Boyce College, and associate pastor of Kenwood Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. Burk’s extensive speaking and previous writings on gender, marriage, parenting, and sexuality make him well qualified to write a book on the meaning of sex.

The general purpose of this book is easily inferred from its title—that is, Burk writes to answer the question, *What is the Meaning of Sex?* However, more specifically, in Burk’s own words, “This book is an attempt to show from the Bible what the meaning of sex is and thereby how we ought to order our sexual lives under God” (12). The answer to the question of the meaning of sex that Burk provides—indeed, it resounds like a mantra throughout his entire book—is that sex exists to glorify God. In saying this, Burk is speak-

ing both about sex in the sense of intercourse, as well as gender. In fact, intercourse and gender are really not separate fields of study, as what an individual believes about one will necessarily impact the other, along with a host of other related topics. This is what Burk means when he writes that this book aims to show “how we ought to order our sexual lives under God.”

Structurally, *What is the Meaning of Sex?* consists of eight chapters. The range of issues Burk manages to cover is impressive, including abortion, adultery, birth control, celibacy, divorce, homosexuality, incest, marriage, masturbation, polygamy, sex toys, and singleness, among many others. Chapter 1 is foundational in nature as it focuses on glorifying God in one’s body through a study of 1 Corinthians 6:12–20. The focus of chapter 2 is hermeneutics, where Burk challenges the idea that Jesus and Paul had divergent ethics of sex. Chapter 3 studies the covenantal nature of marriage. In chapter 4 Burk focuses on the ethics of sexual intercourse, as well as tackling the difficult issue of divorce. Chapter 5 contains an excellent discussion of birth control and family planning, including an analysis of popular methods of contraception. The topic of chapter 6 is manhood and womanhood, as biblical gender roles are explained. Chapter 7 gives an excellent discussion of homosexuality, including a call for compassionate ministry to those who struggle with this temptation. Finally, chapter 8 contains a discussion of singleness, as well as drawing the book to a synthesis and conclusion.

Identifying strengths and positive aspects of

What is the Meaning of Sex? is not hard. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any Christian reading this book and walking away disappointed. This book is on a topic that is relevant to everyone, in one way or another, and it is written in such a clear, conversational tone that even teenagers in a youth group could read this book with ease. At the same time, this volume is so well researched that seminary students could use this book in an academic environment. Moreover, upon reading *What is the Meaning of Sex?* the one word that encapsulates the entire text is “biblical.” In his discussions, explanations, and arguments Burk is continually interacting with, appealing to, and explaining Scripture. Judging from the small print scriptural index appended to this volume, I would estimate Burk makes more than 500 biblical references. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why this book is so relevant and practical.

Because this volume is so biblical, it is difficult to find many faults with it. However, allow me to indulge in two minor quibbles. First, I wish this 262-page book were shorter, perhaps about half of its current length. Of course, this is not a content-related critique, but I mention the length of the text because a book this good would find its way into the hands of more people if it were shorter. In his defense, Burk notes in the preface that his original intention was to write a shorter text, but as often happens, the book took on a life of its own.

A second quibble is that in explaining the subordinate purposes of sex in this volume, Burk adopts Hollinger’s rubric of consummation, procreation, love, and pleasure.¹ While this is helpful, I believe Hollinger’s list to be incomplete. To it I would add companionship, avoidance of sexual sin, depiction of the Trinitarian relationship, and communication of certain dynamics of the Christ/Church relationship. To be sure, Burk would affirm these additional purposes, and he does discuss them in the narrative of his text; however, I believe they could be better emphasized if specifically identified as subordinate purposes.

In summary, then, *What is the Meaning of Sex?* is an excellent book—one of the best I have read in the field in a very long time. Indeed, I believe

this book will become the standard textbook in the field over the next few years. I plan on using this book in both my church and my seminary classes. This book ought to find its way on to the bookshelf of layperson, student, and pastor alike.

ENDNOTES

¹Dennis P. Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).