Bringing Sex Into Focus

The Quest for Sexual Integrity | By Caroline J. Simon | Reviewed by Megan K. DePranza

Is it possible to see clearly in the midst of sexual confusion today? Caroline Simon believes it is, provided we take the trouble to submit ourselves for regular vision tests along the way. A valuable addition to any undergraduate course on human sexuality or sexual ethics, Bringing Sex into Focus offers tools and skills for evaluating the conflicting messages about sexuality proffered by contemporary culture, media, academia, and even conflicting Christian traditions. Simon is a philosopher, not an exegete, but writes in an accessible style that will benefit professors, students, pastors, and educated laypersons. Even more, the multiple lenses she offers for evaluating sexuality provide her readers with tools necessary for reading the Bible as well as interpreting their own sexual feelings and perspectives.

A seasoned educator and chaired professor at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, Simon is familiar with the anxieties of some college students (and even more parents) that undergrads will lose their own perspective amid the myriad options presented in the academy. Modeling the best kind of evangelical scholarship, she leads students through, rather than around, so-called “secular” approaches (romantic, expressive, plain sex, and sex as power) in ways that will help even those suspicious of Christian sexual mores to see the wisdom of the covenantal and procreative lenses. Writing as a Protestant, she presents the covenantal view as dominant, all the while modeling self-critique as she shows how this perspective can and should be enriched by other views: “We need to become more aware of lenses through which we and others are viewing sexuality, concentrating on our own eyes, lenses, and blind spots before presuming to diagnose others” (21).

With these tools, she launches into evaluations of marital sexuality, virginity, chastity, flirtation, seduction, homosexuality, casual sex, sexual consent, prostitution, pornography, and erotica. Particularly helpful is her use of virtue ethics, which provides a helpful and nuanced vision of sexual virtue as chastity and continence, in place of the simplistic, often harmful, idea of virginity as purity preserved or lost once and for all. This nuanced approach can be seen in her helpful evaluations of flirtation—a topic not typically covered in texts on sexual ethics, however needful. Similarly, her evaluations of homosexuality through the various lenses will help Christians think more critically and dialogue more compassionately with those with whom they disagree.

Simon assumes an egalitarian framework throughout the text, evaluating patriarchal constructions of marriage negatively through the lens of sex as power. Those looking for arguments against hierarchical complementarianism will need to look elsewhere, as will those looking for ethical counsel on divorce, remarriage, or masturbation. In this regard, another
concern from the vantage point of CBE’s faith statement is that she does not explicitly come
down against homosexuality, but presents multiple approaches by Christians and non-Christians
alike. For example, she argues that, from the procreative perspective, gay unions would not be
permissible, but, from the covenantal perspective, she acknowledges there are those who argue
against gay unions for many reasons with which CBE would agree, those who permit homosexual
unions as a concession (like divorce), and those who see gay unions as supported by a liberation
approach. Her discussion is fair and helpful, especially as an educational tool, but some with CBE
might want a more explicit teaching.

Simon admits that her book will not answer every possible question one may have about sex.
How can it in only 160 pages? Instead, she promises that readers will be more aware of their own
lenses and the lenses of others, thus, being better equipped for evaluating other questions they
will encounter. Even “more importantly,” she vows that readers will “be immunized against two
illusions that plague our society: the illusion that we can see sex through no lens at all, and the
illusion that sex can be our savior” (23).

She knows the stakes are high and that the issues are complicated, but does not despair. Even
these challenges can be used by God to refine us. She muses: “Is dimness on this issue and other
issues a result of the Fall? Or is this a disguised blessing? Could our divergent perspectives
become a resource for Christian discipleship? When you love those who love you, what credit is
that to you? When you love those who share your views on matters you think central to the faith,
what credit is that to you? You don’t need grace for that. We do need grace and mercy and
wisdom, and a life saturated with prayerful seeking, to live out our life together in light of our
very real disagreements” (115).

Despite the challenges, despite the disagreements, Simon presents the quest for sexual integrity,
for chastity, as the Christian ideal. Yet, even here, her critical gaze warns that “used foolishly,
ideals oppress people. We can use them to flail ourselves and bludgeon others.” On the other
hand, when “used wisely, ideals can keep us moving in the right direction” (160); “Chastity is not
grim resolve but, when fully developed, a joyful and highly useful virtue” (159). Such a virtue is
surely worth the quest.

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