

pope. Having been raised Catholic but evangelized largely by Protestant believers during his college years, West is fluent in both languages, so to speak, which makes him the perfect candidate to write this book. In his introduction, West mentions the debt of gratitude he feels toward his Protestant brothers and sisters for inspiring him with their commitment to Christ and their love for God's Word. As you enter more and more into this study of God's Word, you will surely agree with me that we also owe him our gratitude for making John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* accessible and relatable to the whole body of Christ.

INTRODUCTION

There is really no way to overstate the profound impact [the *Theology of the Body* has] had on my mind and my soul. It helped me see how profound Christianity is in answering the deepest questions we all have about who we are and how we are called to relate to others and to God . . . by showing how the physical and spiritual are united in a profound way in our Lord Jesus Christ.

—Glenn Stanton

I gave my life to Jesus when I was twenty years old. I had been raised a Catholic and did the "Catholic thing" growing up. Unfortunately, like so many other Catholics, I hadn't had an interior conversion to Christ. Jesus was a religious "idea" to me, a historical figure, and, I suppose, a holy teacher (whatever that meant). But I didn't know him personally as my Savior until, largely through the influence of Protestant teachers and preachers, I started studying the Bible in my college years and experienced a dramatic conversion of heart.

Without a doubt, as strange as this may seem to some, the force that compelled me on my search for Christ was the swirling, maddening, tumultuous conundrum of sex. Let me explain.

Desire—eros, or erotic desire, to be more specific—kicked in pretty early in my life. I was often overwhelmed by a gnawing hunger and thirst I didn't know how to handle. God bless my parents and my Catholic school teachers—they all tried—but people can't give what they don't have. No one had formed them in the true beauty and splendor of God's plan for erotic desire, so they couldn't form me. I was given the traditional biblical "rules" about sex, and my teachers did their best to instill a fear in me of breaking them, but I was never given the "why" behind the "what" of sexual morality.

Okay, those are the rules I shouldn't break, but what the heck am I supposed to do with this crazy desire inside me? The basic message in the air was that sexual desire itself was "dirty" or "bad" and needed to be repressed or otherwise squelched. To put an image to the experience, it seemed the only thing my "Christian" upbringing had to offer me in my hunger was a starvation diet. Eventually the hunger became so intense that it trumped all fear of breaking the rules. As I wrote in my book *Fill These Hearts*, "A person can starve himself for only so long before the choice becomes clear: either I find something to eat, or . . . I'm gonna die. . . . This is why the culture's 'fast-food gospel'—the promise of immediate gratification through indulgence of desire—inevitably wins large numbers of converts from the 'starvation diet gospel.'"¹

Of course, it's equally true that a person can eat the fast food for only so long before all the grease and sodium take their toll. Once the pleasure of indulging wears off, bad food, I came to learn, is no less destructive than malnutrition.

Were these the only two options for my hunger: death by starvation or death by food poisoning? Was there any "good food" to be had, food that could actually bring life to my aching soul? I wanted answers. I *needed* answers! If God were real, I figured he must have some kind of plan in giving us such strong sexual desires. So in a college dorm in 1988, I let loose a rather desperate cry of my heart, a ragged prayer that went something like this:

God in heaven, if you exist, you better show me! And you better show me what this whole sex thing is all about and why you gave me all these desires, because they're getting me and everybody I know into a lot of trouble. What is your plan? Do you have a plan? Show me! Please! Show me!

That's when I started studying the Bible, and eventually I encountered Jesus in a living, personal way. He wasn't just an idea to me anymore: I started experiencing the power of his resurrection in my life in dramatic ways, particularly with regard to my sexual brokenness. After years of selfish erotic indulgence, I was experiencing real deliverance and healing from addictive fantasies, attitudes, and behavior.

Soon after my conversion, I became part of an ecumenical community of Protestant and Catholic believers. We had Bible studies together; studied the works of A. W. Tozer, Andrew Murray, and Watchman Nee; prayed together; evangelized together; and enjoyed a committed Christian fellowship. There was a deep fear, however, surrounding sexuality within this group of believers. Grown men and women didn't know how to relate to each other and were largely kept separate. Dating was pretty much forbidden until you got "approval" from the leadership, who, in turn, basically arranged who dated

whom without much respect for the freedom of the people involved. Not surprisingly, under the surface of these tightly controlled relationships there was a lot of unaddressed sexual brokenness.

This painfully dysfunctional situation only compelled me all the more to dive into Scripture seeking answers to my questions about God's plan for sex: *There's got to be more than indulgence and repression! There's got to be more than the fast-food diet and the starvation diet. Lord, what is your plan?*

Over a period of about three years of intense, prayerful study of God's Word, I came to see that the Bible takes us on a journey from a wedding in the earthly paradise of Eden to a wedding in the heavenly paradise of the New Jerusalem. I came to see that the Prophets use some boldly erotic images in describing God's love for his people, that the intimate love poetry of the Song of Songs was a window into things of heaven, and that the joining of spouses in "one flesh" was a "profound mystery" that revealed Christ's love for the church (Eph. 5:31–32). In short, the spousal imagery of the Scriptures was bringing my faith to life, shedding light on the entire mystery of our creation, fall, and redemption in Christ. Yes, yes—there *was* more than the starvation diet and the fast-food diet! It's called *the marriage feast of the Lamb!* And Christ didn't come to *repress* our desires; he came to *redeem* our desires—to heal them, to redirect human hunger and thirst toward his eternal banquet of love.

Oh! I was on fire . . .

Expecting an enthusiastic response from the people in my Christian fellowship (and knowing how desperately we all needed help in this regard), I was surprised to be met with blank stares or worse when I tried to explain how the union of man and woman in "one flesh" was like a golden key that unlocked the mysteries of the Bible. Confused but not deterred, I started

looking elsewhere for confirmation. Then a fateful meeting with a high school theology teacher changed my life forever. Testing some of my "spousal" readings of the Bible on her, she interrupted, "Oh, you must have read John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*." "What's that?" I probed. She responded, "Gosh, I thought you'd already read it. What you're saying sounds like his teaching."

It turns out that John Paul II's first major teaching project as the bishop of Rome had been a Bible study on God's plan for man and woman so detailed and comprehensive that it spanned five years. It may well be the most in-depth biblical vision of what it means to be created male and female ever presented in Christian history. When I read it for the first time in 1993, I knew I was holding a new kind of sexual revolution in my hands and that I'd spend the rest of my life studying it and sharing it with the world.

Although I began my work translating John Paul II's rather dense scholarship in a predominantly Catholic context, it didn't take long for it to spread across denominational lines. I have been humbled and honored over the years to be invited to address countless Protestant congregations and events. I agree with Craig Carter's prediction that "Protestants, especially evangelicals, will embrace the *Theology of the Body* in greater and greater numbers in the years ahead" and in doing so "will be in the position to launch the second sexual revolution" through a compellingly positive "Biblical approach to human sexuality and the family."²

I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my Protestant brothers and sisters for helping to bring me to Christ and for inspiring me to love God's Word as I do. Translating the *Theology of the Body* into a language more easily accessible to you—the goal of this book—is a small way of saying thanks.

ONE

*OUR BODIES TELL
GOD'S STORY*

I know some muddle-headed Christians have talked as if Christianity thought that sex or the body were bad in themselves. But they were wrong.

—C. S. Lewis

In the early 1900s, a “respectable” woman wore an average of twenty-five pounds of clothing when she appeared in public. The sight of an ankle could cause scandal. Over the next hundred years the pendulum swung to the other extreme. Today, scantily clad, hyper-erotized images of the human body have become the cultural wallpaper; and graphic, hard-core pornography has become our main reference point for the “facts of life.”

Is it any wonder in our post-sexual revolution world that our deepest, most painful wounds as human beings often center on our sexuality? And by “sexuality” I mean not only what we do

with our genitals behind closed doors but also our very sense of ourselves as male and female. We live in a world of chaotic, widespread gender confusion, a world that seems intent on erasing the essential meaning of sexual difference from the individual and collective consciousness.

A Bold, Biblical Response to the Sexual Revolution

All of this has posed an enormous challenge to Christians. How have we responded? Those who began acquiescing to what might be called “the new morality” had to reinterpret the Bible in order to do so, a move that eventually led many believers and denominations to abandon the basic tenets of the Christian faith. On the other hand, Christian leaders who upheld traditional biblical faith and morality often found themselves without a convincing language to engage their own congregations, who were being increasingly influenced and formed by the ethos of the secular culture. The same held true for parents with their children. The silence was deafening. “The Bible says so” and “thou shalt not” weren’t enough to prevent people from getting carried away by the tide of so-called sexual liberation.

In the early 1950s, right at the time Hugh Hefner launched *Playboy* magazine, a young Polish priest, philosopher, and theologian named Karol Wojtyla (pronounced “voy-tee-wa”) started quietly formulating a fresh, bold, compelling, biblical response to this modern brand of liberation. This was a man steadfast in his commitment to traditional Christian values but also open and attentive to the challenges being raised by the modern world. As a student of contemporary philosophy himself, he understood how modern men and women thought, and he believed he could explain the biblical vision of sex in a way that would ring true in their hearts and minds. From Wojtyla’s

perspective, the problem with the sexual revolution was not that it overvalued sex but that it failed to see how astoundingly valuable it really is. He was convinced that if he could show the utter beauty and splendor of God’s plan for the body and sexuality, it would open the way to *true freedom*—the freedom to love as Christ loves.

Over the next twenty years, he continually refined and deepened his vision via the pulpit, the university classroom, and in countless conversations and counseling sessions with dating, engaged, and married couples. (Wojtyla’s open, honest approach with young people—no subject was off-limits if sought honestly—was very similar to that of Francis Schaeffer.) In December 1974, now as archbishop of Krakow, he began putting this bold, biblical vision to paper. On page 1 of his handwritten manuscript, he gave it the title “Theology of the Body.”

This was an altogether different kind of Bible study on sex. It was not the all-too-common attempt to scour the Scriptures looking for proof texts on immorality. The goal was to examine key passages from Genesis to Revelation—over fifteen hundred in all—in order to paint a total vision of human love in God’s plan. In essence, Wojtyla was saying to the modern world, “Okay, you wanna talk about sex? No problem. But let’s *really* talk about it. Let’s not stop at the surface. Let’s have the courage to enter together into what the Bible calls the ‘profound mystery’ of our sexuality. If we do, we’ll discover something more grand and glorious than we have ever dared to imagine.”

This was a vision that had the power to change the world—if the world only had a chance to hear it. That chance came when, in October of 1978, this little-known Polish bishop was chosen as the first non-Italian pope in 450 years, taking the name John Paul II. Having only recently completed his *Theology of the Body* manuscript (it was originally intended as a book to

be published in Poland), he decided to make it his first major teaching project as pope, delivering small portions of the text over the course of 129 weekly addresses between September of 1979 and November of 1984.

It took some time, however, for people to grasp the significance of what this in-depth Bible study had given the world. It wasn't until 1999, for example, that his biographer George Weigel described the *Theology of the Body* to a wide readership as "a kind of *theological time-bomb* set to go off with dramatic consequences, . . . perhaps in the twenty-first century." While John Paul II's vision of the body and of sexual love had barely begun to shape the way Christians engaged their faith, Weigel predicted that when it did, it would "compel a dramatic development of thinking" about virtually every major tenet of the Christian faith.¹

God, Sex, and the Meaning of Life

What might the human body and sex have to do with the basic tenets of Christianity? There is, in fact, a deep, organic connection between the two. As mentioned above, rejection of the biblical vision of sexuality has led in practice to a rejection of the basic principles of the faith. And here's why: if we are made in the image of God as male and female (see Gen. 1:27), and if joining in "one flesh" is a "profound mystery" that refers to Christ and the church (see Eph. 5:31–32), then our understanding of the body, gender, and sexuality has a direct impact on our understanding of God, Christ, and the church.

As we will see throughout this book, to ask questions about the meaning of the body starts us on an exhilarating journey that—if we stay the course—leads us from the body to the mystery of sexual difference; from sexual difference to the mystery

of communion in "one flesh"; from communion in "one flesh" to the mystery of Christ's communion with the church; and from the communion of Christ and the church to the greatest mystery of all: the eternal communion found in God among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is what the tenets of Christian faith are all about.

As we're already seeing, the body is not only *biological*. Since we're made in the image of God as male and female, the body, as we will unfold in some detail, is also *theological*. It tells an astounding divine story. And it does so precisely through the mystery of sexual difference and the call of the two to become "one flesh." This means that when we get the body and sex wrong, we get the divine story wrong as well.

Sex is not just about sex. The way we understand and express our sexuality points to our deepest-held convictions about who we are, who God is, who Jesus is, what the church is (or should be), the meaning of love, the ordering of society, and the mystery of the universe. This means that John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* (henceforth TOB) is much more than a biblical reflection on sex and married love. Through reflecting on those profound mysteries, we are led by the TOB to "the rediscovery of the meaning of the whole of existence . . . the meaning of life."²

Christ teaches that his highest will for our lives is to love as he loves (see John 15:12). One of John Paul II's main insights is that God inscribed this vocation to love as he loves *right in our bodies* by creating us male and female and calling us to become "one flesh" (see Gen. 2:24). Far from being a footnote in the Christian life, the way we understand the body and the sexual relationship "concerns the whole Bible."³ It plunges us into "the perspective of the whole gospel, of the whole teaching, even more, of the whole mission of Christ."⁴

Christ's mission is to reconcile us to the Father and, through that, to restore the order of love in a world seriously distorted by sin. And the union of the sexes, as always, lies at the basis of the human "order of love." Therefore, what we learn in the TOB is obviously "important with regard to marriage." However, it "is equally essential and *valid for the [understanding] of man* in general: for the fundamental problem of understanding him and for the self-understanding of his being in the world."⁵

Looking for the meaning of life? Looking to understand the fundamental questions of existence? Our bodies tell the story. But we must learn how to "read" that story properly, and this is not easy. A great many obstacles, prejudices, taboos, and fears can derail us as we seek to enter the "profound mystery" of our own embodiment as male and female. Indeed, the temptation to disincarnate our humanity and, even more, to disincarnate the Christian faith is constant and fierce. But ours is an *en-fleshed* faith—*everything* hinges on the incarnation! We must be very careful never to *un-flesh* it. It's the enemy who wants to deny Christ's coming in the flesh (see 1 John 4:2–3).

Spirit and Flesh

When it comes to present-day Christianity, people are used to an emphasis on "spiritual" things. In turn, many Christians are unfamiliar, and sometimes rather uncomfortable, with an emphasis on the physical realm, especially the human body. But this is a false and dangerous split. Spirit has priority over matter, since God, in himself, is pure Spirit. Yet God is the author of the physical world, and in his wisdom, he designed physical realities to convey spiritual mysteries. "There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God," as C. S. Lewis insisted. "God

never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why he uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not. . . . He likes matter. He invented it."⁶

We should like it too. For we are not angels "trapped" in physical bodies. We are *incarnate spirits*; we are a marriage of body and soul, of the physical and the spiritual. Living a "spiritual life" as a Christian *never* means fleeing from or disparaging the physical world. Tragically, many Christians grow up thinking of the physical world (especially their own bodies and sexuality) as the main obstacle to the spiritual life, as if the physical world itself were "bad." Much of this thinking, it seems, comes from a faulty reading of the distinction the apostle Paul makes in his letters between Spirit and flesh (see, e.g., Rom. 8:1–17; Gal. 5:16–26).

In Paul's terminology "the flesh" refers to the whole person (body and soul) cut off from God's "in-spiration"—cut off from God's indwelling Spirit. It refers to a person dominated by vice. And in this sense, as Christ himself asserted, "the flesh counts for nothing" (John 6:63). But the person who opens himself to life "according to the Spirit" does *not* reject his body; it's his body that becomes the very dwelling place of the Spirit. "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? . . . Therefore honor God with your bodies" (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

We honor God with our bodies precisely by welcoming his Spirit into our entire body-soul personality and allowing the Spirit to guide what we do with our bodies. In this way, even our bodies "pass over" from death to life: "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you" (Rom. 8:11).

Christianity Does Not Reject the Body

The “spirit-good / body-bad” dualism that often passes for Christianity is actually an ancient gnostic error called “Manichaeism,” and it couldn’t be further from a biblical perspective. In fact, it’s a direct attack on Christianity at its deepest roots. If we’re to rediscover God’s glorious plan for our sexuality, it will be necessary to contend with some ingrained habits in our way of thinking that stem from Manichaeism. So let’s take a closer look.

Mani (or Manichaeus), after whom this heresy is named, condemned the body and all things sexual because he believed the material world was evil. Scripture, however, is clear that everything God created is “very good” (see Gen. 1:31). It’s critical to let this point sink in. Unwittingly, we often give evil far more weight than it deserves, as if the devil had created his own “evil world” to battle God’s “good world.” But the devil is a creature, not a creator. And this means *the devil does not have his own clay*. All he can do is take God’s clay (which is always very good) and twist it, distort it. That’s what evil is: the twisting or distortion of good. Redemption, therefore, involves the untwisting of what sin and evil have twisted so we can recover the true good.

In today’s world, sin and evil have twisted the meaning of the body and sexuality almost beyond recognition. But the solution is never to blame the body itself; it’s never to reject or eschew or flee from our sexuality. That approach is gnostic and Manichaean in its very essence. And if that’s our approach, we haven’t overcome the devil’s lies. We’ve fallen right into his trap. His fundamental goal is always to split body and soul. Why? Well, there’s a fancy word for the separation of body and soul. Perhaps you’ve heard of it: *death*. That’s where Manichaeism, like all heresies, leads.

The true solution to all of the pornographic distortions of the body so prevalent today is not the *rejection* of the body but the *redemption* of the body (see Rom. 8:23): the untwisting of what sin has twisted so we can recover the true glory, splendor, and inestimable value of the body. John Paul II summarized the critical distinction between the Manichaean and Christian approaches to the body as follows: If the Manichaean mentality places an “anti-value” on the body and sex, Christianity teaches that the body and sex “always remain a ‘value not sufficiently appreciated.’”⁷ In other words, if Manichaeism says “the body is bad,” Christianity says “the body is so good that we have yet to fathom it.”

We must say this loudly, clearly, and repeatedly until it sinks in and heals our wounds: *Christianity does not reject the body!* As C. S. Lewis insisted, “Christianity is almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves of the body—which believes that matter is good, that God himself once took on a human body, that some kind of body is going to be given to us even in heaven and is going to be an essential part of our happiness.”⁸

Of course, it would be an oversight not to acknowledge that, in this life, our bodies are often a source of great unhappiness and sometimes terrible suffering. Genetic defects, disease, sickness, injury, and a great many other maladies and misfortunes—not the least of which is the inevitability of death—can cause us to loathe our bodily existence. But, united to the bodily sufferings and death of Christ, our bodily maladies and misfortunes can become something redemptive—both for us and for others. Suffering, as I once heard it said, can either *break us* or *break us open* to the mystery of Christ. Matthew Lee Anderson expressed the conundrum well: “This is the paradox of the body: The body is a temple, but the temple is in ruins.

The incarnation of Jesus affirms the body's original goodness. The death of Jesus reminds us of its need for redemption. And the resurrection of Jesus gives us hope for its restoration."⁹

Word Made Flesh

Establishing the fundamental *goodness* of the body and the hope of bodily redemption is one thing. But what is it that makes the body a "theology," a study of God?

We cannot see God. As pure Spirit, God is totally beyond our vision. Yet the Bible teaches that the invisible God has made himself visible: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it" (1 John 1:1–2).

How did John and the other disciples *see* "that which was from the beginning"? How did they *touch* "the Word of life"? "The Word became flesh. . . . We have seen his glory" (John 1:14). Everything about our faith hinges on the incarnation of the Son of God, on the idea that Christ's flesh—and ours, for it's our flesh he took on—has the ability to reveal God's mystery, to make visible the invisible.

If the phrase "theology of the body" seems odd, perhaps it's because we haven't taken the reality of the incarnation as seriously as Scripture does. There's nothing surprising about looking to the human body as a "study of God" if we believe in Christmas. "Through the fact that the Word of God became flesh, the body entered theology . . . through the main door."¹⁰

"Theology of the body," therefore, is not only the title of a series of talks by John Paul II on sex and marriage. The term "theology of the body" expresses the very *logic* of Christianity.

We must say it again (and again) until it sinks in: *everything* in Christianity hinges on the incarnation of the Son of God.

The Thesis Statement

This brings us to the thesis statement of the TOB, the brush with which John Paul II paints the entire vision. It's an incredibly dense statement, but fear not; we'll spend the rest of the book unfolding it. Here it is: "The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it."¹¹

Let's begin with the first sentence. Think of your own experiences as a human being: your body is not just a "shell" in which you dwell. Your body is not just *a* body. Your body is not just *any* body. Your body is *somebody*—you! Through the profound unity of your body and your soul, your body *reveals* or "makes visible" the invisible reality of your spiritual soul. The "you" that you are is not just a soul "in" a body. Your body is not something you "have" or "own" alongside yourself. Your body *is* you. If someone broke your jaw in a fit of rage, you wouldn't take him to court for "property damage" but for personal assault. What we do with our bodies, and what is done to our bodies, we do or is done to *ourselves*.

Once again, our bodies make visible what is invisible, the spiritual . . . *and the divine*. Aren't we made in the image of God as male and female (see Gen. 1:27)? This means that the very design of our sexually differentiated bodies reveals something about the mystery of God. The phrase "theology of the body" is just another way of stating the bedrock biblical truth that man and woman image God.

The body is not divine, of course. Rather, it's an image or a sign of the divine. A sign points us to a reality beyond itself and, in some way, makes that reality present to us. The divine mystery always remains infinitely "beyond"; it cannot be reduced to its sign. Yet the sign is indispensable in making visible the invisible mystery. Human beings need signs and symbols to communicate. There's no way around it. The same holds true in our relationship with God. God speaks to us in "sign language."

Tragically, after sin, the "body loses its character as a sign"¹²—not objectively, but in our subjective perception of it. In other words, in itself, the body still speaks God's sign language, but we don't know how to read it. We've been blinded to the true meaning and beauty of the body. As a result, we tend to consider the body as merely a physical "thing" entirely separated from the spiritual and the divine realms. Tragically, we can spend our whole lives as Christians stuck in this blindness, never knowing that our bodies are a sign revealing the "mystery hidden in God."

The Divine Mystery

Paul wrote that his mission as an apostle of Jesus Christ was "to make plain to everyone . . . this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God" (Eph. 3:9). What is that "mystery hidden in God," and how can it be "made plain to everyone"?

In a specific sense, Paul is talking about the fact that "the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel" (Eph. 3:6). In a broader sense, the biblical term "mystery" refers to the innermost "secret" of God and to his eternal plan for humanity. These realities are so far beyond anything we can comprehend on our own that all we can really utter is the word "mystery." And yet

God's secret is "knowable"—not based on our ability to decipher some divine puzzle but because God has made it known in Jesus Christ.

What has Jesus made known about the innermost secret of God? Dennis Kinlaw, former president of Asbury College, summarized it remarkably well. Jesus, he writes, gives us a "picture of the life of God as seen 'from the inside.'" And from this perspective "we discover the key for comprehending God: *self-giving love*. . . . Love is his inner life, the divine life, which the three persons of the blessed Trinity co-inherently share."¹³

God is not a tyrant; God is not a slave driver; God is not merely a legislator or lawgiver; and he's certainly not an old man with a white beard waiting to strike us down whenever we fail. God is an eternal exchange of love and bliss. He's an infinite "communion of persons," to use John Paul II's preferred expression. And he created us for one reason: to share his eternal love and bliss with us. This is what makes the gospel *good news*: there is a banquet of love that corresponds to the hungry cry of our hearts, and it is God's free gift to us! He has destined us in Christ "before the creation of the world" (Eph. 1:4) to be part of his family, to share in his love (see Eph. 1:9–14).

Kinlaw states, "Salvation is a gift of the Father through the Son and by the Spirit to bring [us], not just to forgiveness and reconciliation with God, but into participation in the very communion that the three persons of the triune Godhead know [among] themselves."¹⁴

This is the "mystery hidden for ages past in God" that Paul wanted to "make plain to everyone." How did he do it? In Ephesians 5, Paul reveals that this "mystery" isn't far from us. We needn't climb some high mountain to find it. We needn't cross the sea. It's already as "plain" to us as the bodies God gave us when he created us male and female and called the two to

become “one flesh.” We need only recover our ability to read God’s sign language to see it.

The Bible Tells a Marital Story

Scripture uses many images to help us understand God’s love. Each has its own valuable place. But the gift of Christ’s body on the cross gives “definitive prominence to the spousal meaning of God’s love.”¹⁵ In fact, from beginning to end, in the mysteries of our creation, fall, and redemption, the Bible tells a covenant story of marital love.

It begins in Genesis with the marriage of the first man and woman, and it ends in Revelation with the marriage of Christ and the church. And these spousal “bookends” provide the key for understanding all that lies between. Indeed, we can summarize all of Sacred Scripture with five simple yet astounding words: *God wants to marry us.*

As a young man marries a young woman
so will your Builder marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:5)

Your breasts had formed and your hair had grown, yet you were stark naked. Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, . . . I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine. (Ezek. 16:7–8)

I will betroth you to me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,
in love and compassion.
I will betroth you in faithfulness. (Hosea 2:19–20)

God is inviting each of us, in a unique and unrepeatably way, to an unimagined intimacy with him, akin to the intimacy of spouses in “one flesh.” While we may need to work through some discomfort or fear here to reclaim the true sacredness, the true holiness, of the imagery, the scandalous truth is that Scripture describes God’s love for his people using boldly erotic images. We are probably more familiar (and more comfortable) describing this love as *agape*—the Greek word for sacrificial, self-giving love. Yet one of the most astounding revelations of Sacred Scripture is that God loves as a bridegroom with all the passion of *eros*—an *eros* that is also totally *agape*.

One need only think of the Song of Songs. This unabashed celebration of erotic love is not only a biblical celebration of marital intimacy; it’s also an image of how God loves his people, fulfilled in Christ’s love for the church. And the Song of Songs is not a footnote in the biblical story. In fact, you’ll find it at the very center of your Bible for a reason (if your Bible is 1,000 pages, you’ll find the Song of Songs right around page 500). The greatest saints in history have understood this erotic love poetry as an expression of the very essence of biblical faith: not only does God love us, he loves us so utterly that he has wed himself to us forever in Jesus Christ. The Bible calls it the “wedding of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:7).

But there’s more. Remember that pithy rhyme we learned as children: “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage”? We probably didn’t realize that we were actually reciting some profound *theology*: *theology of the body!* Our bodies tell the story that God loves us, wants to marry us, and wants us (the bride) to “conceive” his eternal life within us. And this isn’t merely a metaphor. Two thousand years ago, a young Jewish woman gave her yes to God’s marriage proposal with such totality, with such fidelity, that she

literally conceived eternal life in her womb. This radical yes is why Christians have always honored Mary. She is the perfect model of what it means to be a believer, to be open to Jesus, to receive his divine life. (Guys, I know all this bridal imagery can make us uneasy. Think of it this way: Jesus is the quarterback and we are the wide receivers. Our job is to get ourselves open!)

Climax of the Spousal Analogy

As we unfold the biblical analogy of spousal love, it's very important to understand the bounds within which we're using such language and imagery. Analogies, of course, always indicate, at the same time, both similarity and substantial dissimilarity. Without this recognition, there is a real danger of using human realities to infer too much about divine realities.

"It is obvious that the analogy of . . . human spousal love, cannot offer an adequate and complete understanding of . . . the divine mystery." God's "*mystery* remains *transcendent with respect to this analogy* as with respect to any other analogy." At the same time, however, the spousal analogy allows a certain "penetration" into the very essence of the mystery.¹⁶ And no biblical author reaches more deeply into this essence than the apostle Paul in Ephesians 5.

Quoting directly from Genesis 2:24, Paul states: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." Then, linking the original marriage with the ultimate marriage, he adds: "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:31–32). Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul employs the intimacy of marital union to reveal not just some aspect of the Christian mystery. Rather, spousal union

illuminates the reality of our union with Christ in its entirety, the reality of salvation itself. Martin Luther explains as follows: "[Faith] unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. . . . Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them and sins, death, and damnation will be Christ's while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul's; for if Christ is the bridegroom, he must take upon himself the things which are the bride's and bestow upon her the things which are his."¹⁷

Could there be a more compelling demonstration of Christ's love than to make himself *one with his bride* even to the point of suffering as his own the death that was hers so that he might offer her his own divine life? For the ancients, immersed as they were in this spousal reading of salvation, it was not uncommon to speak of the "mad eros"¹⁸ revealed on the "marriage bed of the cross."¹⁹ All of this is revealed in Ephesians 5:31–32, which is why John Paul II sees in this passage the "crowning" of all of the themes in Sacred Scripture—the "central reality" of the whole of divine revelation.²⁰ The mystery spoken of in this passage "is 'great' indeed," he says. "It is what God . . . wishes above all to transmit to mankind in his Word."²¹

But let's be more specific. How does Genesis 2:24 refer to Christ and the church? Christ, the new Adam, "left" his Father in heaven. He also left the home of his mother on earth. Why? To give up his body for his bride (the church) so that she might enter into holy communion with him. In the breaking of the bread, "Christ is united with his 'body' as the bridegroom with the bride. All this is contained in the Letter to the Ephesians."²²

Allow me to concretize this glorious truth with a family story. I never met my father-in-law; he died when my wife was a young girl. But I admire him tremendously because of the intuition he had as a new husband. At church the day after his wedding,

having consummated his marriage the night before, he was in tears as he came back to the pew after receiving communion. When his new bride inquired, he said, "For the first time in my life I understood the meaning of those words, 'This is my body given for you.'"

Make no mistake: when all of the smoke is cleared and all of the distortions are untwisted, the deepest meaning and purpose of human sexuality is to point us to the "wedding supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9). In other words, God created us male and female right from the beginning to live in a "holy communion" that foreshadows the holy communion of Christ and the church. And this is precisely why questions of marriage and sexuality place us right in the center of "the situation in which the powers of good and evil fight against each other."²³

The Body and the Spiritual Battle

If God created the body and sexual union to proclaim his own eternal mystery of love, why do we not typically see and experience them in this profound way? For example, when you hear the word "sex," what generally comes to mind? Is it the "profound mystery" of Ephesians 5? Or is it something, shall we say, a little less sacred than that? Remember, it's because of sin that the body loses its character as a sign of the divine mystery.

Ponder this for a moment: if the union of the sexes is the original sign in this world of our call to union with God, and if there is an enemy who wants to separate us from God, where do you think he's going to aim his most poisonous arrows? If we want to know what is most sacred in this world, all we need do is look for what is most violently profaned.

The enemy knows that the body and sex are meant to proclaim the divine mystery. And from his perspective, *this proclamation*

must be stifled; men and women must be kept from recognizing the mystery of God in their bodies. And this is precisely the blindness that original sin introduced at the serpent's prompting, a blindness responsible for so much brokenness and human misery. The good news is that Christ came preaching the recovery of sight for the blind (see Luke 4:18).

For now, the point to keep in mind is that the battle for man's soul is fought over the truth of his body. It's no coincidence that Paul follows his presentation of the "profound mystery" of the "one flesh" union in Ephesians 5 with the call in Ephesians 6 to put on our armor and take up arms in the cosmic struggle between good and evil. As the source of the family and life itself, the union of the sexes "is placed at the center of the great struggle between good and evil, between life and death, between love and all that is opposed to love."²⁴ Therefore, if we are to win the spiritual battle, the first thing we must do according to Paul is gird our loins with the truth (see Eph. 6:14). The TOB is a clarion call for all men and women to do just that—to gird our loins with the truth that will set us free to love.

The Foundation of Ethics and Culture

The stakes are incredibly high in the cultural debate about the meaning of sex and marriage. In short, as sex goes, so goes marriage; as marriage goes, so goes the family. And because the family is the fundamental cell of society, as the family goes, so goes the culture. This is why confusion about sexual morality "involves a danger perhaps greater than is generally realized: the danger of confusing the basic and fundamental human tendencies, the main paths of human existence. Such confusion must clearly affect the whole spiritual position of man."²⁵

Think how intertwined sex is with the very reality of human existence. You simply would not exist without the sexual union of your parents . . . and their parents . . . and their parents . . . and their parents. Every human being is the end result of thousands upon thousands of indispensable sexual unions. Go back any number of generations in your family tree and remove just one sexual union from your lineage and you would not exist. Nor would anyone else who descended from that union. The world would be a different place.

When we tinker with God's plan for sex, we are tinkering with the cosmic stream of human existence. The human race—its very existence, its proper balance—is literally determined by who is having sex with whom, and in what manner. When sexual union is oriented toward love and life, it builds families and, in turn, cultures that live the truth of love and life. When it is oriented against love and life, sexual behavior breeds death—what we can grimly, yet accurately, describe as a “culture of death.”

The Interconnection of Sex and the Whole of Life

A culture of death is a culture that separates body and soul (remember, that's what death *is*). In turn, it cannot recognize the body as a “sign” of anything spiritual, let alone divine. It can't recognize the “profound mystery” of married love and procreation. Sex, instead, gets reduced merely to the pursuit of pleasure.

Sexual pleasure is a great blessing and gift from God, of course. But it's meant to be the fruit of loving as he loves, not an end in itself. When pleasure becomes the main goal of sex, society becomes utilitarian. You're valued if you're useful. And, in this case, you're “useful” if you're sexually stimulating. If

you're not, or if you get in the way of my pleasure, you will be ignored, discarded, maybe even exterminated. When pleasure is the main goal of sex, people become the means and babies become the obstacle. So we take our pleasure, and we kill our offspring. This is not some dire prediction of an apocalyptic future. *This is the culture we live in now*: a culture of death.

This is why it “is an illusion to think we can build a true culture of human life if we do not . . . accept and experience sexuality and love and the whole of life according to their true meaning and their close inter-connection.”²⁶ But that will never happen unless we can demonstrate that the biblical sexual ethic is not the prudish list of prohibitions it's so often assumed to be. Rather, it's an invitation to live and embrace the love for which we most deeply yearn.

The Underlying Approach

One of the main reasons the TOB resonates so deeply with people is the philosophical approach that undergirds it. In contrast to more conventional philosophical approaches that begin with *objective* and abstract categories and concepts, John Paul II's philosophical approach begins with the very familiar *subjective* realm of human experience. He believes that if what the Bible teaches is objectively true, then human experience—subjective as it is—should offer confirmation of that truth. Knowing that the Bible's message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart, John Paul II does not need, nor does he attempt, to force assent to his proposals. Rather, he invites men and women to reflect honestly on their own experience of life to see if it confirms his proposals.

Those who have been turned off by judgmental moralizers will find this approach delightfully refreshing. John Paul II

imposes nothing and wags a finger at *no one*. He simply reflects lovingly on God's Word and on human experience in order to demonstrate the profound harmony between them. Then, with utmost respect for our freedom, he invites us to embrace our own dignity. It doesn't matter how often we have settled for something less. This is a message of sexual healing and redemption, not condemnation.

With this compassionate and merciful approach—the gospel approach—John Paul II shifts the discussion about sex from *legalism* to *liberty*. The legalist asks, “How far can I go before I break the law?” Instead, John Paul II asks, “What is the truth about sex that *sets me free* to love?” To answer that question, we must ask why God made us male and female in the first place. These are questions that plunge us into the deepest truth of what it means to be human. Indeed, the fundamental fact of human existence is that God created us male and female.

What John Paul II's TOB is primarily after, then, is the full truth of what it means to be human—or, as he puts it, a “total vision of man.” To discover this “total vision,” we must turn to Christ, the one who alone fully reveals what it means to be human. And so, in the first three chapters of the TOB, John Paul II turns to three key words of Jesus—three appeals Jesus makes—that paint a three-paneled picture of where we've come from (*our origin*), where we are now (*our history*), and where we're headed (*our destiny*):

1. *Christ appeals to the “beginning”*: based on Jesus's discussion with the Pharisees about God's plan for marriage “at the beginning” (see Matt. 19:3–9).
2. *Christ appeals to the human heart*: based on Jesus's words in the Sermon on the Mount regarding adultery committed “in [the] heart” (see Matt. 5:27–28).

3. *Christ appeals to the resurrection*: based on Christ's discussion with the Sadducees regarding the resurrection of the body (see Matt. 22:23–33).

In the next two chapters of his TOB, John Paul II reflects on marriage both as a *divine gift* and as a *human sign* of God's love. Only in light of these two dimensions are we capable of understanding the true “language” of sexual love. And that's where the final chapter of the TOB takes us: to a winning explanation of how the Christian sexual ethic flows very naturally from a “total vision” of what it means to be human.

Having set the stage, we're ready to dive into the main themes of our Bible study.