

When it comes to talking about sex, people think they know what Christians are against—but what are they for? In a culture that sees Christianity as shaming and oppressive, it takes an open mind to pick up this book and read it. But for those willing to swim against the flow, Sam Allberry's fresh look at what the Bible says about sex will challenge misconceptions. It could even change your life.

Glynn Harrison MD

Formerly Professor of Psychiatry and Consultant Psychiatrist;
Author, *A Better Story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing*

My generation has grown up in a culture which tells us that the Christian view of sexual expression is not just boring and bizarre but offensive and repressive. Sam's book is a refreshing and insightful reminder that the baby may have got tangled up in the bedsheets. With kindness and clarity, and using a wealth of interesting illustrations, Sam explores some of the unresolved tensions we've inherited from the sexual revolution, and shows how Jesus' life, death and teaching don't just make sense of our longings but meet our deepest needs.

Rachel Jones

Author, *Is This It?*

Clear, wise, pastoral and in places very funny, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?* gives an excellent answer to one of our generation's most pressing questions. If this is a question you've asked, wondered about or even just heard from others, Sam Allberry's brief and thoughtful book will be a great help.

Andrew Wilson

Pastor, Author and Broadcaster

Sam Allberry writes with clarity and empathy about one of the biggest questions of our day. His honesty and sense of humour cut through the stereotypes and platitudes we might be used to hearing about sexual relationships. Here is a countercultural voice challenging us to consider afresh the Christian faith and, ultimately, a relationship with God amid the changing landscape of culture we find ourselves in.

Dr Amy Orr-Ewing

Director, The Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics

Given all the controversies and challenges surrounding sex, I am delighted to welcome this bold, wise and sensitive treatment of the issues at stake. This is a book capable of changing opinions, altering viewpoints and, ultimately, rescuing lives. Thank you Sam Allberry!

J. John

Pastor, Author and Broadcaster

In this rich and provocative book, Sam Allberry explores how the yearnings of our hearts, the instincts of our bodies and the complex cravings of our minds point us to something we want even more than sex. You can read it in an evening. But its effects could last a lifetime.

Dr Rebecca McLaughlin

Author of *Confronting Christianity:
12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion*

Clear, careful, compassionate and compelling—Sam's analysis of the sexual culture and why it matters to God is a message for every human being. Buy two copies. At least. You'll need them because I guarantee you won't want to pass on your own copy.

Adrian Reynolds

Author and Pastor

Why
does God
care who
I sleep
with?

SAM ALLBERRY



Why does God care who I sleep with?

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Published by:

The Good Book Company in partnership with

The Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics and The Zacharias Institute

thegoodbook.com | www.thegoodbook.co.uk

thegoodbook.com.au | thegoodbook.co.nz | thegoodbook.co.in

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN: 9781784982775 | Printed in India

Design by André Parker

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*To Logan Gates and Ben Dyson,
with thanks for your faithful friendship*

Introduction: Christianity's unavoidable problem

It was probably the most bizarre moment of my life. I was doing some English teaching in central Thailand and had been invited to contribute to a regional training day for high-school English teachers. As a “native” English speaker, I was there to help with things like pronunciation and conversational English. Or so I thought.

The first indication that this wasn't going to go as I'd expected was when they invited me onto the stage at the start of the day. After they introduced me they said we were going to open the day by singing the song chosen as the theme for the day. Or rather, their very own native English-speaking guest was going to.

The bad news: I *really* can't sing, not in front of actual people. The good news: the song was in English. The other bad news: the karaoke system they were using. It was weird enough that it was early morning on a Saturday, that I was in the middle of a very unfamiliar country, that I'd agreed to come and do this as a last-minute favour to my Thai hosts, and that I was now about to sing solo to several hundred teachers.

The song was *I Just Called To Say I Love You* by Stevie Wonder—admittedly a great song, but not necessarily what you'd immediately associate with teaching the language of Shakespeare. I was already well out of my comfort zone, but that wasn't the worst of it. The background footage on the karaoke screen was rather raunchy—a procession of writhing bodies in various states of undress. Somehow I had to follow the words while ignoring the incongruous imagery they were accompanied by. And try not to turn the colour of beetroot while doing it.

All of which is to say that it is impossible to avoid the subject of sex. If it pops up in as innocuous a setting as I was in that morning in Thailand, there really is little hope of steering clear of it in any and every area of life.

And if I'm honest, short of repeating my karaoke experience from that morning, writing a book on sex is about as bizarre a thing as I can imagine myself doing right now. But, like I say, it's impossible to avoid—because it means so much to all of us.

For the past few years I've been working for a charity whose main task is to address the most urgent questions people have about the Christian faith. Other books in this series will give you a feel of what some of those questions are; but top of the list for most people invariably has something to do with what Christians think and believe about sex.

It is not hard to see why. We know that our sexuality, sex, and the relationships we form are a part of life that really matters. It is not inconsequential. I am very conscious that every single one of us has a range of powerful emotions that come into play as we talk, think and react to sex and sexuality in our lives and culture. We have memories (both good and bad) that shape how we think and behave. Some of us

will have painful memories and experiences that continue to haunt us. Some of us will be restless, seeking some form of deeper satisfaction than we're currently experiencing. Some of us will be confused by various things we've experienced. And some of us will be perfectly happy with our sex life as it is, and perhaps wonder what all the fuss is about.

And that means that this could be a difficult book for you to read. Whether you're a Christian or not, you may at times find yourself wanting to grunt in disgust or hurl the book across the room—because what I am suggesting conflicts so deeply with your own views and experience.

But rather than give in to your instinct to hurl this book far from you, can I urge you to consider carefully, and as objectively as you can, as I try to explain why I think sex matters so much to all of us. I'm writing this as someone who is single and expects to remain so for the future. As a Christian that means I am committed to being celibate—to *not* having sex unless it is with someone I'm married to. This issue matters to me, just as it does to us all.

DANGEROUS

There are significant challenges for Christians in discussions about sex. More and more, sexual freedom is regarded as one of the greatest goods in Western society. A huge amount has changed over the past decade or so. Just fifteen years ago Christians like me, who follow the teaching of the Bible, would have been thought of as old-fashioned for holding to the traditional Christian understanding of sex being exclusively for marriage.

But now, increasingly, we are thought of as being dangerous to society. Our views on sex have become *that* significant. Who we sleep with is seen as a supreme human right.

Anything that seems to constrain our choice in this area is somehow viewed as an existential threat.

So the Christian claim that sex is for a very particular context is far more of an offense than it is a curiosity. *Why should God care who I sleep with?* is perhaps less a question and more just a freestanding objection that doesn't really require an answer.

And yet an answer exists. Christians continue to believe what we believe about sex, and it is a belief that isn't going away, however much it might be derided today. And it is a belief for which there are compelling reasons. I would love you to understand these reasons and weigh them properly before you decide what to do with them.

God cares who we sleep with because he cares deeply about the people who are doing the sleeping. He cares because sex was his idea, not ours. He cares because misusing sex can cause profound hurt and damage. He cares because he regards us as worthy of his care. And, in fact, that care is not only seen in telling us how we should use sex, but also in how he makes forgiveness and healing available to us when we mess this up.

A quick word about the title: Yes, *Why does God care about with whom I sleep?* is more grammatically correct, but it's clunky, and I really think God (and we) have bigger things to worry about. Start on the next page and you'll see what I mean.

Why do we care who we sleep with?

It's not often that a single tweet explodes into a whole movement.

In late 2017 Hollywood was ablaze with a series of accusations against one of its most celebrated producers, Harvey Weinstein. A succession of women were accusing him of predatory behaviour, and it was receiving widespread attention. On October 15 one actress, Alyssa Milano, tweeted the following:

If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write "me too" as a reply to this tweet.

The hashtag #MeToo quickly went viral. The original tweet was posted around noon and by the end of the day the phrase "Me too" had been used on Twitter over 200,000 times. Within a year, it had been used 19 million times—more than 55,000 each day.¹

Many celebrities also told their stories, further raising the profile of the hashtag. Hollywood was engulfed. Other

¹ USA Today: go to. www.bit.ly/occasleep (accessed 21 August 2019).

parts of the entertainment industry followed. Stories of harassment and abuse quickly spread in the realms of politics, media, academia and religion. A parallel *#ChurchToo* hashtag began to emerge as survivors of assault in churches or by church leaders shared their own experiences.

Although Milano's tweet seemed to be the starting gun for this, she was not the first person to use the phrase "me too" in this context (as she went on to acknowledge). The hashtag's true origin had been a decade earlier. Activist Tarana Burke was "looking for a succinct way to show empathy", according to an interview in the *Huffington Post*. "Me too is so powerful because somebody had said it to me and it changed the trajectory of my healing process once I heard that." Soon after Milano's tweet went viral, Burke herself wrote, "The point of the work we've been doing over the past decade with the 'me too movement' is to let women, particularly young women of colour, know that they are not alone".²

The widespread adoption of the hashtag has certainly had that effect. Young women of colour may have been a particular concern for Burke, but the hashtag has also enabled many others—women of different backgrounds and ages, along with some men too—to be able to share their stories.

One story is particularly worth reflecting on. Writing in *The Atlantic*, Caitlin Flanagan spoke of the time at high school when a young man had attempted to rape her in his car at an empty parking lot by a beach. After a struggle he eventually stopped and drove her home. She never spoke about it, and goes on in the article to explain why:

2 *Huffington Post*. www.bit.ly/occasleep2 (accessed 21 August 2019).

I told no one. In my mind, it was not an example of male aggression used against a girl to extract sex from her. It was an example of how undesirable I was. It was proof that I was not the kind of girl you took to parties, or the kind of girl you wanted to get to know. I was the kind of girl you took to a deserted parking lot and tried to make give you sex. Telling someone would not be revealing what he had done; it would be revealing how deserving I was of that kind of treatment.³

The #MeToo movement has shone a spotlight on the prevalence of sexual assault. It is now thought that between 20% and 30% of American women have been sexually assaulted in the course of their lives. Exact figures are hard to come by; these are extremely difficult stories for people to share, for a host of reasons, as Flanagan's story highlights. But many have been able to open up for the first time, and we are gaining a truer understanding of the prevalence of these brutalities. Men too are opening up about their experiences of sexual assault and harassment. Some men are also acknowledging failures in their own past behaviour towards women. On all sorts of levels, from individuals to institutions, the western world seems to be having a major reassessment of its collective sexual values.

If #MeToo has shown us anything, it is that our sexuality matters profoundly. Its violation leads to the deepest emotional and psychological damage, quite apart from the physical scars it leaves. Flanagan's own story reflects this so powerfully. What that young man attempted to do to her told her something about herself, and her worth, that became calcified in her thinking over many years afterwards.

3 The Atlantic. www.bit.ly/occasleep3 (accessed 21 August 2019).

JESUS ON ABUSE

We might wonder at this point how any of this connects to Christianity. If anything, Christianity seems to be just as much a part of the problem as any other movement, and perhaps even more so. As more and more historic and present-day accusations are proved, it is very clear that many Christian institutions have been places of horrific abuse. In any context, these facts would be appalling. But it's the Christian context that makes them all the more reprehensible. We all know that sexual assault is wrong; no one group or religion has a monopoly on that conviction. But Christians have more reason than perhaps anyone else to know that.

Jesus of Nazareth, the founder of Christianity, was known for his care for the marginalised, for the overlooked and for the vulnerable. It was said of him, "A bruised reed he will not break" (Matthew 12 v 20); he was someone who was naturally tender towards the wounded and hurting. There is something particularly incongruous, therefore, about those who purport to follow Jesus who contradict his teaching and example on this point.

But it is also worth noting that Jesus was himself the victim of unimaginable abuse. We don't need to be Bible-believing Christians to know the basic facts about how the life of this man ended. The historical record shows us that he was publicly executed by the Roman authorities on the orders of Pontius Pilate.⁴ We know he was killed by crucifixion. We also know that this followed a grueling process of humiliation and torture. The New Testament accounts are surprisingly light on the gory details but tell us that

4 See, for example, John Dickson, *Is Jesus History?* (The Good Book Company, 2019), p 149-154.

Jesus was stripped, flogged, beaten and mocked. He was sexually exposed, physically abused, and repeatedly ridiculed. His own companions betrayed him, denied him or deserted him. The emotional, psychological and physical suffering is not something we can easily quantify. All this was before he even arrived at the point of crucifixion.

This is the man Christians follow and worship. And that tells us that Christians should have an inbuilt sensitivity towards those who are victims. Because Jesus himself embodied and experienced some of the most intense forms of victimisation and rejection, an awareness of pain and brutality is baked into Christianity. Christians should be the last people on earth to show indifference to abuse, let alone enabling or perpetrating it in any way. This is reinforced by Jesus' own teaching about human sexuality.

JESUS ON SEX

One of the best-known sections of Jesus' teaching is the Sermon on the Mount. Many of its lines have become embedded in Western culture. You might be more familiar with it than you'd thought. Jesus touches on the issue of sexual ethics early on in the sermon:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

MATTHEW 5 v 27-28

Jesus knows that his hearers have been taught the Ten Commandments from the Old Testament, including the seventh commandment against adultery (which he quotes). Adultery is any sexual intercourse between a married person and someone who is not their spouse. Jesus reiterates this commandment

and adds his own take on it. His words are not in contrast to the content of the commandment but provide fresh insight into how it is meant to be applied.

Make no mistake, what Jesus is saying here is revolutionary, both for the time in which Jesus was speaking and for us today.

Let's think about how these words would have been heard by his original listeners. Jesus was a first-century Jew speaking to an audience of fellow Jews, and the Ten Commandments were foundational to all their ethical thought. They were treated as the executive summary of the whole of God's law in the Old Testament. They continue to exert significant cultural influence today as a basis for morality.

Jesus quotes the seventh commandment against adultery. This was the basis of the shared sexual ethic of that time. We can imagine a Jewish man listening to Jesus. Perhaps he had been faithfully married for many years and felt proud of how he had conducted himself. Perhaps he was one of the first to disapprove of adultery whenever he ever heard about others involved in it. Maybe it would never even occur to him to get into a situation where he might end up being physically intimate with another woman. His hands had never touched any woman other than his wife. He would have been typical of many, committed to this commandment and confident that he had been fully obedient to it.

So as Jesus says the first part of his teaching—"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'"—men like this would have nodded along with enthusiasm. *Yes, this is what we've always heard. This is what we've always stood by.* They may have found other aspects of Jesus' teaching challenging or searching (it is hard to read through the Sermon on the Mount without experiencing this), but on

this point they could feel sure that they would meet his full approval.

But then comes the second part of what Jesus says:

But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Think about that. Jesus is not contradicting how people had understood the commandment; he's expanding what it means and how it applies. They'd assumed it was just about physical adultery. But physical adultery is not the only kind there is; Jesus is saying adultery can take place in hearts even if it never takes place in beds. It can be committed by looking, not just by touching—*anyone who looks with lustful intent has already committed adultery*. It is not simply about what you do with your genitals but what you do with your eyes and your mind—how you look and think about another person.

Jesus is concerned with *intent*. His issue is not with people noticing each other, but with people looking at others “with lustful intent.” It is the difference between noticing that someone is attractive and wanting in some way to have them. *That*, Jesus says, is what the commandment against adultery is getting at. We'll return to the significance of this in due course.

THE VICTIM

But while Jesus' main focus is on the person doing the looking, it is worth pausing to think about what this implies about the person being looked at.

Jesus gives us a scenario where a man is looking lustfully at a woman. What Jesus is teaching here applies to us all, of course, but it may be that men in particular need to hear it.

After all, the overwhelming majority of sexual violations are committed against women rather than men.

So Jesus says the man looking lustfully at a woman has broken the commandment against adultery just as surely as if he had physically slept with her.

But think about what Jesus is also saying about the woman. *She is not to be looked at lustfully.* Jesus is saying that her sexuality is precious and valuable: that she has a sexual integrity to her which matters and should be honoured by everyone else. *He is saying that this sexual integrity is so precious that it must not be violated, even in the privacy of someone else's mind.* Even if she were never to find out about it, she would have been greatly wronged by being thought about lustfully.

We tend to think that someone's thought life is their business alone, and that what they think about in their own head has nothing to do with anyone else; and so we might want to write Jesus off at this point for daring to regulate what goes on in our minds. But before we do, we need to see *why* Jesus is saying this. As someone once said, we shouldn't take down a fence until we know the reason it was put there in the first place.⁵ Jesus is showing us that our sexuality is far more precious than we might have realised, and that his teaching is actually a form of protection for it.

NOT JUST JESUS

Jesus' teaching reflects something we see throughout the whole Bible: how we treat one another sexually matters a great deal to God.

One of Israel's greatest heroes in the Old Testament was King David. He united the kingdom, defeated many enemies (fa-

5 G. K. Chesterton, "The Thing," *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton, Vol 3* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) p 157.

mously including the giant Goliath) and was a skilled poet and musician. But the Bible never whitewashes its heroes. It paints them with all their flaws and faults. And for David, his flaws led to an infamous incident with a woman called Bathsheba.

We'll come back to this episode a couple of times in this book, as David is a foundational example of just how messed up things can get, and also of how we can find healing and forgiveness from God in the context of even terrible mistakes.

David summoned one of his subjects, Bathsheba—a married woman—to sleep with him. She became pregnant, and so he arranged for her military husband, Uriah, to have some time back home with her from the battlefield, so that people would assume the baby belonged to Uriah. This didn't work, so David arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle and quickly married Bathsheba himself.

Sometime after this a brave man called Nathan confronts David about the evil he has committed. David is brought to his senses. The depth of his own wickedness sinks in. He is deeply and rightly remorseful. It is worth noting that he was still the king. This was not the remorse of someone who had been exposed and brought down; he is still on his throne. He could have Nathan killed. It is his own conscience before God, not public opinion or a threat to his career, that leads him to repent.

David writes a powerful poetic prayer to God in which he comes to terms with what he has done. At one point he writes:

*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is
evil in your sight.*

PSALM 51 v 4

At first glance this feels very inadequate. It sounds as though

David is conveniently overlooking the human cost of his actions and simply writing it off as “a spiritual matter” between himself and God. It feels evasive, as if he is not properly facing up to the full extent of what he has done.

But the opposite is in fact the case. David realises that what he has done to Bathsheba is a sin against God precisely because *her sexual integrity is something God has given her*. David’s violation of Bathsheba is no less than treason against God. Far from minimising the seriousness of his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah, David’s prayer is *accounting* for it.

Here’s another way of saying this: *any sexual assault is a violation of sacred space*. To mistreat someone is to mistreat something God has made. Other people are not some irrelevant third party: they are people whom God decided to make and cares deeply about. An abuse of them is an affront to him.

This belief gives us a basis for saying that sexual assault is objectively and universally wrong, because it locates the reason in who the victims are to God. He made them. Their personal and sexual integrity matters to him. You mess with them, and you end up picking a fight with God himself. This is what Jesus himself is warning us about in his teaching against adultery.

Who we sleep with matters. Even who we *think* about sleeping with matters. If God cares about us, he will care about our sexuality. It is precious. And a violation of it is serious, as we are about to see.