

# The gift of sex: book review examples

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## **A Christian View of Sexuality Within Marriage**

### Abstract

The Gift of Sex, by Clifford and Joyce Penner, is a comprehensive, Christian educational guide for married couples about sexuality. Divided into a preface and five sections, the book uses Scripture and the authors' expertise in marriage therapy to offer important information to couples concerning sexuality so that readers may overcome problems or enhance a relationship that is already good. The book educates married couples on Bible-based considerations about sex, physical aspects of sex, and unifying the religions and physical aspects of sex in order to have a more fulfilling relationship with each other. It answers questions, offers exercises, uses anecdotes and analogies, and details problems to assist couples in understanding each other. It is a book that is useful for any couple, regardless of denomination, but is especially valuable for people who seek to understand the place God intended sexuality to have in a marriage.

## **A Christian View of Sexuality Within Marriage**

Clifford and Joyce Penner's book, The Gift of Sex, is a comprehensive, Christian educational guide for married couples about sexuality. Although the authors preface the book with information about their own Christian background, a German Mennonite tradition, The Gift of Sex is written without a specific Christian denomination in mind. The preface illustrates the conservative background the authors come from, one in which their religious community influenced the "rigid rules" concerning "acceptable dating habits" and that "instruction regarding sexual involvement within marriage

was lacking” (Penner & Penner 2003, Preface, para. 7). The authors state within the preface that this lack of communication and education about marital sexuality often leads couples and individuals to possess negative feelings about sexuality; however, in spite of their own conservative upbringings, the authors found themselves lucky enough to have positive feelings about sexuality. Using their Christian view of the Bible as a “very pro-sex” book and through their experiences with various forms of marriage counseling, the Penners decided to write this book to help couples understand and improve relationships through education and a Biblical understanding of sexuality’s place in marriage (Penner & Penner 2003, Preface, para. 15). In addition to the Preface, the book has five sections, including A Biblical Perspective, The Physical Dimension, The Total Experience, When Sex Isn’t Working, and Enhancing the Sexual Experience. In the Preface, the mention of the authors’ conservative Mennonite background sets the stage for readers by highlighting an important fact, that The Gift of Sex is intended for all Christians, no matter how conservative their background may be. This may be difficult at first for some readers to believe because the media portrays conservative Christians as being in a battle against sexuality and sex education, often with emphasis on abstinence-only and purity. As Jeffery Moran says in his review about sex education and today’s conservatives, “the leaders of the movement for sex education [are] governed more by the fear of controversy than a desire to educate and [hedge] their curricula with stern condemnations of sexual expression outside of marriage and prohibitions on teaching about birth control [and] sexual pleasure” (2003, 284). The authors of The Gift of Sex

believe that people from conservative backgrounds often carry unnecessarily negative feelings about sexuality into marriage. This may be because of their upbringing or the type of sex education they receive. The personal revelation by the authors of their conservative Christian upbringings, their continued lifelong dedication to Christ, their intense spiritual educations, their detailed familiarity with the Bible, and their professional credentials give them authority to write about the place of sexuality within a Christian marriage. The authors believe their book will help couples who have problems with sexuality in marriage and will enrich the relationships of those who already have positive sexual relationships.

### **A Biblical Perspective**

The first section of the book offers two chapters that are very important because they provide the foundation for the reasoning behind the rest of the book. They write, " Although the Bible is not an instruction book for sexual functioning, it gives a clear picture of God's value of our individual sexuality and His high regard for the sexual relationship in marriage" (Penner & Penner 2003, Chapter 3, para. 2). This chapter then illustrates examples of the Biblical picture of sexuality with direct quotes and paraphrased examples from the Bible.

Also important in this section of the book are the authors' description of misguided notions about sexuality that reading the Bible can help dispel. For example, they write, " The two of us grew up with the implicit view that sexual union occurred after man's fall into sin" (Penner & Penner 2003, Chapter 3, para. 17). They reason that sexuality seems always taboo, even in

marriage, because of a history of socio-cultural development. For example, in the *Journal of Religion and Health*, David Leeming writes that many Christians “ envision a world created alone by a distinctly womanless god,” which creates an “ antagonism between sexuality and religion” (2003, 105). The authors of *The Gift of Sex* point out the falsity of this genderless view of God. They write, “ The husband-wife sexual relationship is used throughout Scripture to symbolize the God-man relationship” (Penner & Penner 2003, Chapter 3, para. 18). In other words, though God is neither male nor female, when men and women are unified in marriage and sexual intercourse, they become one and an image of God. Their view of Scripture includes the idea that the physical nature of humankind, including sexual organ and function, were complete and had God’s blessing in Genesis 2: 24, before Adam and Eve committed any sin.

The authors realize that like they once did, many readers may have assumptions that sexuality is innately sinful. While the examples from Genesis may convince some readers that sex is not innately sinful and that it has its proper place in marriage, a more difficult argument is made in Chapter 4, which addresses the idea of sexual pleasure. The belief persists among some people that the sole purpose of sex is for procreation. Actively enjoying sex, pleasuring a spouse, or being pleased by a spouse do not have to happen in order for procreation to occur. As Leeming wrote, perhaps it is a view that God has no gender leading some people to believe that sexual pleasure lacks any place in human life, even in marriage. Leeming also writes, “ sexual and religious experience have in common characteristics conveyed by such words as desire, mystery, ritual, passion,

ecstasy, and union” (2003, p. 102, emphasis his). The Penners agree not only with this, but also that the Bible’s books, Song of Songs, Proverbs, and New Testament support the idea that sexual pleasure is an important part of marriage. In other words, Adam and Eve were not condemned and sent away from Eden as sinners because they had sex, but because they had disobeyed God. Their sexuality came before that, including the pleasure they found with each other. Because a marriage is a symbol of humanity’s relationship with God, having pleasure in a sexual relationship with a spouse is not a sin, but in being unfaithful or disobedient to each other.

The Scriptural examples and reasoning by the authors in this section go against the idea that “sexuality can be holy only when the couple engages procreative coitus (without sexual fantasy or erotic passion) in the missionary position” (Mosher 1989, p. 493). The use of specific Biblical passages, as well as the explanations of the analogies between humanity’s relationship with God as symbolized by marriage, can help the skeptical reader understand why pleasure has a place in sex for married people. It is worth noting that other scholars also interpret the Bible similarly. For example, Catholic Priest Ray Collins interprets Song of Songs as endorsing pleasure in married sexuality, because “human conjugal love is . . . recognized as somehow sharing in divine love. The songs celebrate the various aspects of human sexuality and conjugal love as a good gift of God” (Flaman 2003, p. 30). The Penners’ examples and explanations are thorough and likely to convince many readers of the value of looking to the Bible for guidance regarding sexuality in marriage. The authors assume of readers neither ignorance nor expertise regarding the Bible, but instead focus on a

mutual desire to better understand God's Word and how it applies to marriage.

## **The Physical Dimension**

The second section of the book includes four chapters describing the physical aspects of sex. The frank nature of this section emphasizes viewing the information in the light of God's Word and the pro-sex view the Bible has for married couples. The authors realize that the information and exercises they suggest may require couples to look at themselves in ways that they never have before and that it may be difficult at first. The straightforward, non-condescending tone used in the writing as well as continual reference to the Bible will provide comfort to couples who find the idea of accepting pleasure or a positive idea about sexuality to be difficult.

These chapters also include a number of exercises designed to help people in becoming comfortable with their own bodies and that of their spouse. For example, "Exercise 1" concerning body image suggests that the couple take turns standing nude in front of a mirror to describe him or herself without interruption, to be followed by the spouse's positive commentary and corrections. Although specific mention of the Bible is not made in the instructions for this exercise, the authors conclude the section on body image by reminding readers of a verse from Samuel and the necessity of placing importance on both body and soul as important, interdependent parts of a whole human being.

The authors offer complete information about basic human sexuality with physical description of male and sexual female organs and their functions as

part of the educational process for couples. Although many readers will find the information, including diagrams, is very basic, this section is important because many other readers may have never encountered some of this information in this form before. There is no guarantee that every reader will have encountered a straightforward, thorough diagram and explanation of sexual organs and their functions in school, from parents, or anywhere else. Because many Christians see marriage as the only appropriate place for sexuality, for some readers there will have been no occasion to learn anything about sexuality until after their own weddings. Although readers may have some understanding of their own bodies, they may lack knowledge or words to describe these aspects of themselves with a partner. They may understand the form and function of their own gender, but not that of the opposite. The authors present complete information, and assume nothing about the readers except that as married couples, they would like to be able to improve the sexual aspect of their marriage as Christians.

### **The Total Experience**

The third section of the book includes eleven chapters that aim to help married couples understand the complete sexual experience, including how the physical aspect of sex merges with and affects emotions and spirituality. As with the previous chapter about the physical aspects of sexuality, the authors do not make assumptions about the readers' knowledge or experience. For example, while some couples may find the information about "getting interested" in each other comes naturally, to others this could be new information. The readers familiar with this will find the authors' writing



to be a pleasant confirmation of healthy attitudes and beliefs pertaining to their marriage. For other readers who may be struggling with the idea that sexual interest for and pleasure with a spouse is appropriate, the authors offer gentle suggestions and dispel myths that may be blocking the way to intimacy. For example, the idea that straightforward communication about sex to a spouse may be difficult for some people. The authors write that some people may believe “ If I am that blunt about what I would like, it’ll take all the fun, spontaneity, and mystery out of” sex, or that a spouse should intuitively know what the other wants as a sign of love (Penner & Penner 2003, Chapter 9, para. 21).

Although the initial part of this section is light on Scriptural examples, the authors connect the ideas in this section to Christian ideas about sexuality by giving examples of typical questions and concerns they have gathered through their experiences in leading seminars in community evangelical church groups and other religious settings. Although men and women are not depicted as being identical, they are seen as people with equating needs. This is demonstrated as a social issue rather than a religious or innately gender-related issue. For example, the Penners write, “ It seems that men in our culture have been conditioned to sexual release rather than to total-body pleasure and emotional intimacy” love (2003, Chapter 10, para. 4). The idea that both man and woman in a couple have the responsibility to understand the needs of the other is an important message in this book. This is in contrast to some conservative Christian views; for example, on the Focus on the Family website, there are special sections dedicated to helping a woman understand her husband’s needs, but there is no section

specifically illustrating a woman's sexual needs for her husband (Slattery 2009). While *The Gift of Sex* describes the differences in attitude men and women bring to marriage, it assumes that both people in a marriage have needs and not that one will have more needs or more important needs than the other. Other Christians echo the Penners' ideas about sexuality being an important part of life. For example, one parent expressed the need for sex education for children because "As the parent and grandparent of boys, I wanted them to understand responsibility and the depths of relationships and the need for equality and mutual respect. I consider those our Christian values" (Christian Century 2012, p. 24). Although *The Gift of Sex* does not deal with the idea of sex education for children, it does emphasize the need for such education for couples as an essential part of having a fulfilling Christian marriage that honors God.

The suggestions the authors make in this section are appropriate for any married couple. Even couples that believe they are open-minded or have a good understanding about sex may still encounter issues regarding things like communication about sex, nudity, initiating sex, or other common aspects of sexuality. Again, this section offers some exercises for people to try that may help them resolve problem areas of sexuality in their marriage. Exercise 7, for example, offers a variety of things a couple can try to resolve initiation problems, meaning problems with how a sexual encounter begins for the couple. As the section progresses through a variety of things that may act as barriers to a married couple's sexual enjoyment of each other, it also continues to offer reminders that "bodily pleasure is a biblical expectation" (Penner & Penner 2003, Chapter 13, para. 3). The format of this

section of the book follows the couple from the initiation or beginning of their sexual experience through the end, or “cleaning up,” part. This format helps establish for readers the natural course of events that most couples can expect as they explore their sexuality together in marriage.

## **When Sex Isn't Working**

The fourth section of this book includes 12 chapters dealing with problems that couples may encounter in their sexual relationship. Some readers may wonder why, if sexuality in marriage is such a natural process and part of God's plan, they are having problems. The authors give a few reasons for problems, including lack of knowledge, unconscious avoidance from guilt, anger, lack of self-worth, or sexual anxiety, the need to please, blocked erotic feelings, past traumatic experiences, relationship problems, and the need for risk and guilt. The chapters in this section are not meant to solve all problems, but to assist couples in gaining more knowledge of typical sexual problems so they can evaluate whether they may need to focus on particular issues.

Even a couple who believes that they have a reasonably fulfilling sexual relationship within their marriage together should find some valuable insight in this section of the book. While reading through chapters like “Never Enough Time” or “Birth Control Gets in the Way,” a couple may realize that there are factors they could improve upon or never even realized were a cause of problems in their sexual relationship. Because this book is intended to address general issues that any Christian married couple may encounter in their sexual relationship with each other, in some cases the authors are

unable to give examples of real-world solutions for the problems addressed. For example, in the chapter about birth control, they write, “ We wish we could give clear and simple answers as to the best way to achieve absolutely hassle-free birth control, but each couple has to struggle out loud with each other as they plan their future” (Penner & Penner 2003, Chapter 25, para. 9). This is both a strength and a weakness of the book, because it does not impart a value concerning issues such as birth control that may not be endorsed by a particular Christian denomination or inappropriate for the health, finances, desires, and safety of a particular couple, but it also does not always offer solutions.

The lack of clear answers to some questions, such as in the chapter about birth control, is not the case in all chapters. Chapter 31, for example, provides a questionnaire titled “ How do you know if you have a problem with the Internet?” which specifically deals with pornography. Internet pornography is defined as “ the most prevalent sexual immorality that we bring into our homes” (Penner & Penner 2003, Chapter 31, para. 4). The chapter offers some concrete examples of steps people can take to prevent Internet sexual addiction, from using sections of the Bible to understand the situation to changing life patterns.

The Gift of Sex is not meant to offer a complete evaluation and solution for sexual problems within marriage. The authors offer another book they wrote, *Restoring the Pleasure*, as a more step-by-step manual for dealing with typical sexual problems. Rather, the “ problems” section of this book is valuable because it offers married couples a way to discover troubles, begin discussing these discoveries, and ways to initiate change for their problems.

As the preface of the book states, while some problems are easily solved, others may require the professional assistance of a counselor or doctor. This book can help couples determine their needs when it comes to solving problems.

Some readers may find the idea of using Christian-centered beliefs and faith to deal with issues of sexuality to be foreign. However, research has shown that religion can be a powerful force in helping couples deal with problems they encounter in their marriage. In a study conducted by Nathaniel Lambert and David Dollahite published in the *Family Relations* journal, the researchers found that religious belief and practice could help couples prevent problems, resolve conflict, and reconcile (2006, p. 448). Although the study does not deal with sexuality in marriage specifically, the evidence exists that in a general sense, religion helps couples gain focus, understand each other, find a shared vision, develop virtues, forgive each other, and other qualities that can enhance the marital relationship. It makes sense that the ways religion can help couples overcome one type of problem can also apply to their sexual issues. With its plentiful Scriptural references, this is one of the major ideas that *The Gift of Sex* offers its readers.

### **Enhancing the Sexual Experience**

The fifth section of the book includes six chapters designed to help Christian couples understand that “inviting God into the bedroom” is an essential part of having a satisfying sexual relationship within marriage (Penner & Penner 2003, Chapter 32, para. 1). While many Christians find it perfectly right to offer thanksgiving to God before a meal, the authors suggest that the same

is appropriate for sexual feelings (Penner & Penner 2003, Chapter 32, para. 6). Some couples may discover that reading *The Gift of Sex* affirms beliefs they already have, and can help them achieve progress in their relationship with God and each other. However, this invitation to allow God to be a part of their sexual life together may not come naturally or even be impossible for some couples.

The authors believe that “ couples can work out many of their sexual issues without professional help,” but that some situations require assistance from a professional (Penner & Penner 2003, Chapter 35, para. 1). A list of different kinds of helpers for different situations is given, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and ministers. As to the question of whether a Christian therapist will be more helpful than one who does not share the same faith, they write that a positive aspect of finding a Christian therapist will be that it “ may help facilitate communication. However, the authors do not wish to limit readers’ choices to only Christian therapists because, as they write, “ If you have to choose between an unqualified Christian helper and a qualified secular helper, you will probably receive the greatest benefit from the most qualified person” (Penner & Penner 2003, Chapter 35, para. 11). Their note that many therapists are trained not to judge or evaluate based on religious beliefs will help readers whose only option is a secular therapist to feel more comfortable in seeking help if needed.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, *The Gift of Sex* offers a valuable resource to any Christian couple desiring a way to not only make their relationship with each other better, but

also their relationship with God. The authors do not use euphemisms when discussing sex, but instead describe their topic in a straightforward manner. This approach makes their own comfort with the topic clear and demonstrates a healthy way to discuss sexuality to readers, which is one of the best effects this book can have.

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