

In Theory: The language of love

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Gary Chapman, a 73-year-old Southern Baptist preacher, is trying to bring sex back to Christianity. Chapman, who authored a book titled “The Five Love Languages,” holds gatherings with hundreds of congregants to dole out advice on marriage, love and what he calls Christianity's “great sex swindle.” At a recent conference in Nashville, Chapman said, “[There's] this idea that good Christians don't talk about sex. Dr. Ruth did not invent sex. Sex was invented by God,” and discussed the Bible's support for conjugal sex.

Chapman began offering marriage counseling as a young pastor and was so surprised by how many people wanted his advice that he decided to concentrate on it and, over time, developed his theory of “love languages.” He points to cases where he says couples are speaking different love languages — for example, the man might do the cooking and cleaning and feel like he's helping his wife, whereas the woman might just want to spend time with him. He is dismissive of academic studies of marriage and believes most people just want plain advice that will help their relationships. “The key is,” he says, “we have to learn to speak the language of the other person.”

Chapman's advice certainly has been taken to heart by his followers, with his books selling millions of copies with little or no publicity. TV host Elisabeth Hasselbeck credits “The Five Love Languages” — the proceeds from which Chapman donates to charity — with saving her marriage.

The book has received some criticism for a passage in which Chapman encourages a wife to submit sexually to her husband to save their marriage, but he defends this by saying that the idea of submission has been misunderstood by Christians and that scripture says both husband and wife should be submissive to each other. “If both of you ask God to help you express your love every day ... you will continue to grow through the years,” he says.

Do you think Chapman's ideas fit in with the framework of marriage? Does Christianity preclude discussions of sexual matters between believers?

Answer:

I believe that Chapman's ideas about love definitely belong within the context of marriage; although I am quite sure there are more than five love languages. And I agree that it is very important to recognize that each of us does have unique ways of relating to other people and that our needs are met through different means. If more of us recognized and communicated the particular needs we have for one or more of Chapman's love languages, our intimate relationships might be stronger. And a good marriage requires that we discover and honor the needs and desires of others as well as ourselves.

Further, I too am convinced that neither Christianity nor any other faith tradition should preclude discussions of sexual matters among congregants, both within and outside their sacred spaces. Sex is a beautiful gift when shared by people in committed relationships, not a taboo subject that must be ignored or denigrated. It was for that reason that the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ created the "Our Whole Lives" curriculum for children, teens and adults to explore the topic of sexuality in a safe and age-appropriate program under the sponsorship of each congregation.

Where I find serious disagreement with Chapman is in his directive that women should be submissive to men in marriage. As justification for that idea, he says that both men and woman should submit themselves to each other. But most of the material I read on his website, and about his workshops, concentrated on the wife's need, and often subconscious desire, to serve her husband.

Chapman's patriarchal and sexist views fly in the face of a great deal of current psychological research and pastoral counseling programs. Submission is learned behavior where one person has control over another. In the context of my ministry, that is not what marriage is. Marriage is about two people supporting and nurturing each other so that both may know fulfillment in their relationship and their lives. When that happens, it is a beautiful and rewarding affirmation of commitment and trust.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

There's an old funny story about a speaker who says, "Ladies and gentlemen, on the subject of sex, let me say it gives me great pleasure. Thank you very much." And then the speaker sits down. No, Christianity doesn't preclude talking about sex. Sex is good. It says so in the Bible, if you sort of read between the lines in Genesis. Chapter 1, verse 27, says "... male and female he created them." And the next verse says God told them, "Be fruitful and multiply." You can't be fruitful and multiply if you don't engage in sex. Then Genesis 1: 31 says that God saw all that he had made, and "it was very good."

The trouble is that all societies recognize that sex is a very powerful thing, and so just about all societies have put taboos on the practice of sex. Unfortunately, some people and societies consider sex a "necessary evil." So some little girls have grown up thinking that they had to put up with sex in order to please their husbands and to have babies. How sad for them. Their upbringing has taken one of God's greatest gifts and turned it into a chore.

So I think it's a good thing that Chapman has started talking about sex. And it is especially good that such talk has started in a notoriously conservative denomination, the Southern Baptist

Convention. I must confess a certain discomfort with the idea of a woman being “submissive” to her husband, and I'm glad Rev. Chapman adds that husbands should be submissive to their wives, also.

Last week we commented on domestic violence, and I'm sure there are lots of batterers out there who point to that “submissive” Scripture passage in the New Testament to “prove” that a wife must let a husband do whatever he wants to her. I couldn't disagree more. Keep in mind that the apostle Paul was probably never married, and that it was he who penned that “submissive” idea.

Also, read the first few chapters of Genesis again. “In the beginning” we were all in this together, male and female, husband and wife. “In the beginning” one sex is not more dominant over the other.

So keep up the sex talk, Gary. I'm not prone to argue.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Congregational Church
La Cañada

It appears that Gary Chapman has taken a sound and biblical approach to helping couples with the often troublesome issues of marriage and sexuality. He begins with the basic observation that God created these gifts, a fact that people both inside and outside of the church often overlook. As the author of these good gifts, God naturally can tell us the most beneficial way to pursue them, and he does so in the Bible. Verse after verse addresses these issues. It's like God is shouting out to our culture, “If you want to get it right and really enjoy it, listen to me!” While issues of intimacy are very personal, and must be addressed with much discretion from the pulpit, the church is amiss if we don't encourage each other in appropriate venues with the Bible's often candid and convicting instruction.

Here's a biblical “primer” on marriage and sexuality. Marriage was God's idea as the exclusive, intimate, life-long union of one man and one woman (see Genesis 1-3). In marriage, each partner is to put the other's needs above his or her own. Marriage is even an earthly illustration of the intimate relationship followers of Jesus Christ have with our Lord, who loved us and gave himself up on the cross for us. Sexuality is God's gift properly enjoyed and blessed in the context of legitimate marriage. Its purpose is not only for procreation, but also for mutual enjoyment and the meeting of each spouse's needs. Let's face it: marriage is often difficult. We all need the help and wisdom God freely offers to all who have the faith to listen. The church as “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15) has the honor of pointing hurting people to the loving Lord who desires to bless every area of our lives.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

I can't say that a 73-year-old Baptist is the first guy I'd think to go to for advice on sex and marriage. My understanding of Baptist views on the matter is that they use the word "only" a lot: sex is good and right — but only between a man and a woman, and only if they're married, and only if the idea is procreation. (I'm not sure on that last point actually; I just have a hard time seeing the Baptists as champions of recreational sex.)

But Chapman's summary of "the five love languages" (words of affirmation; gifts; acts of service; quality time; and physical touch) is good and useful, if not all that new. Ultimately, what he's encouraging is a practice of making non-judgmental reality checks into each other's needs. This is good.

In premarital counseling, I have couples take the Myers-Briggs personality test to give them a similar tool, a sane way to talk about their differences as mere differences, not as personal flaws or failures to love.

I'm all for the quick pop summaries that help people understand each other in relationships: Men want to be approved of, women want to be desired; men get married expecting their wife to stay the same, women expect their husbands to change; women think a problem is to be discussed, men think it's to be fixed, etc. Look at the way we all still talk about the "man cave" almost 20 years after the publication of "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus." These admittedly over-simplified generalizations have their place in helping us live in the tension of our differences.

As to whether Christianity precludes discussions about sexual matters, my own feeling is that the church has had far too much involvement in the bedroom over the centuries. I honor the impulse of Chapman and others to connect faith to all aspects of our lives, but I don't need the church's advice about sex. I love Jesus and all, but sex is one of those areas of my life where frankly, I just don't care what Jesus would do.

The Rev. Amy Pringle
St. George's Episcopal Church
La Cañada

I confess that I had not heard of Chapman, but from a brief introduction to his work, I'm betting that I would like him. He's right that married couples are typically not looking for an academic analysis of their compatibility. In fact, the last time I walked in with a new personality typing system from a pastor's training event and announced, "Hey, honey, you're a Four!" my husband ran and hid. My insistence that this insight would be helpful to our marriage became a lost

cause as he bobbed and weaved to avoid letting this new label stick.

He'd probably be OK with the five love languages, though, as I imagine most couples would be. It is beautiful when you find someone has written the words you have struggled so hard to communicate, and a blessed relief to hear them expressed to you in words you can understand.

Regarding the question of submission, I would agree that the apostle Paul's words on the matter have been widely misunderstood and certainly misapplied. I don't know specifically what Chapman says, so I can't say whether or not I endorse his views. But perhaps we agree that when in Ephesians 5 Paul writes, "So wives submit to their husbands in everything like the church submits to Christ. As for husbands, love your wives just like Christ loved the church and gave himself for her," we are mistaken to emphasize the idea of submission over the quality of mutual self-giving and sacrifice that Paul is trying to get across.

A growing marriage is one in which people learn how to give of themselves and receive the gifts of their partners. We submit to each other and we are changed by that process in a good way.

And no, Christianity does not preclude healthy, appropriate discussions of sex, as long as you use biblical euphemisms like "she lay down at his feet" and "he knew her." Just kidding.

The Rev. Paige Eaves
Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church
Montrose

I feel that Gary Chapman is correct when he states that the Bible has a healthy attitude toward sex and encourages physical intimacy when it's practiced within the framework of a loving marriage.

Judaism views the act of intimacy as a "mitzvah" — an obligation and a good deed. We do not consider sex to be sinful, shameful or obscene. On the contrary, according to Jewish teachings, the primary objective of sex is to reinforce and strengthen the marital bond of love between husband and wife. Therefore, sexual relations within the context of marriage and commitment are a spiritual union of the highest degree.

I believe Chapman is trying to counter the sexually-charged environment in which we live, where almost anything and everything sexual has become acceptable.

It's certainly true that the Internet and major media outlets flaunt this hyperactive view of sex, and the trend is unfortunately becoming more prevalent in our schools and youth organizations, as well. I believe this ongoing shift is extremely dangerous, since it ultimately cheapens something that is so important and creates a negative, destructive attitude toward sex among our young people. This casual, self-indulgent mindset causes a lack of respect for any long-term

commitment and undermines the institution of marriage. It also diminishes respect for women.

We need more voices to join the chorus promoting healthy sexual attitudes, while at the same time opposing the trends that are so detrimental to our moral values and community cohesion.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
Chabad Jewish Center
Glendale

Sex is good stuff, and everyone likes it. God made it so, and we obviously agree, or America would not have reached its current population of 300 million, with 6 billion the world over. I frankly don't know what the hoopla is all about, since I have been just as straight with my people as they have been with me. Why should Christians be ostracized as asexual or anti-sex? It's absurd.

Our only Christian difference with the rest of the population is that we think sex is not a sport, but a connector, like tape. It sticks strongly once, but loses its adhesiveness the more it's reattached. And God has something to say about it: "Abstain from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:20), and "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Hebrews 13:4 NIV). So there is a context for sex, and when we hear such things about celebrities like Wilt Chamberlain having sex with 20,000 women, we don't think automatically, "way to go, bro," we think, "what a dork!"

Who does that, having sex with any, and every, willing groupie? Stupid, pagan people, that's who. And Hollywood contributes to this attitude that sex is just a casual thing that you do whenever you feel so moved. What movie today doesn't have a love sequence where two people consummate their recent introduction with passionate sex, probably filmed in some tasteless, near-soft-porn manner? Ah, but that's just Hollywood. Avert your eyes if you can't countenance two people engaged in conjugal sweatiness, puritanical Christian.

We are not dogs, and we do not believe that our every urge should be satisfied, as it might be in some alley cat or other feral animal.

That's the difference between us and lower life forms. So sex is good, and our good God created us to partake. It joins genders together in unique, almost god-like relationships, something akin to the Trinity, but distantly, as only material, temporal beings may experience. Let's not be the stereotype, but embrace the goodness of intercourse with the holiness of marital commitment.

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