



The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is Too Important to Define Who We Are
by Jenell Williams Paris
Book Review by Keith Poysti

Whenever I read a current book about sexuality, I want to know about the author. Is it curiosity, is it an attempt to see how they are living out their sexuality, or is it just about wanting a credible witness writing about a very hot topic? Jenell introduces herself progressively throughout her book – first as a Christian cultural anthropologist, brought into that discipline through her involvement in urban ministry, then as a professor at Messiah College whose motto reads “committed to an embracing evangelical spirit.” She further describes herself as an evangelical church participant from birth, currently attending a Brethren in Christ church. Jenell is married to James and they have three boys. She describes her marriage as happy though sometimes difficult. Her classroom teaching style could be described as encouraging her students to think critically rather than blindly accept tradition.

Similarly, she pushes her readers to examine the “patterns of the world” based on Romans 12:1-2. She claims that homosexuality and heterosexuality are social constructs and are fairly recent ones at that. “Though these categories claim to be natural, neutral descriptions of human beings, they are actually concepts created by people within the last two hundred years. When Christians develop theology and ethics about homosexuality and heterosexuality, then, they are really evaluating elements of culture, though they often mistakenly believe sexual identity as we know it today was given by God at creation.” This is Paris’ main theme – that Christians should not base their sexual ethics on currently defined cultural sexual identities but on God’s teachings of sexual holiness. She makes her point very bluntly: “Heterosexuality is a concept riddled with problems. I’d even call it an abomination...it is a social construct that provides a faulty pattern for understanding what it means to be human, linking desire to identity in ways that violates biblical themes.” Later in the same chapter, Paris gets to what she believes about sexual identity. “Sexuality, including both the good and the bad, is better understood in light of our beloved created nature, not in light of sexual desire. Identity comes from God, not sexual feelings.” Apply that to all current cultural sexual “identities” and then you can start envisioning a “post-sexual identity church.” These are convincing arguments which encourage a bit more humility on all sides of the sexuality debates.

In her chapter on Sexual Holiness, Paris admits that she is a “sex only within marriage between a man and a woman” kind of Christian. Yet she decries Christians who “boil down the complexities of human sexuality to a list of moral rules.” Instead of giving rules for living, Paris points her readers to develop discernment through Christ-focused living and Holy Spirit guidance. “In the post-sexual identity church, there’s no moral high ground for heterosexuals and no closet for homosexuals. There’s just people, each of whom is lover and loved.”