September 2007

Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity (Book Review)

Roger Henderson
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol36/iss1/5

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.
dragging in there every Sunday. I just want to find out if
the whole thing’s true. Just true….Either it is or it isn’t, and
that’s the one question you avoid like death” (qtd. 123).
Brown shows us that when we peer into these characters,
we find ourselves gazing right back from inside them, beset
with the old questions that come out in new ways.

Buechner’s style is new, of course. He has a way of not
just gilding the old stuff but remolding the questions into
blinding paradoxes. Brown mentions his striking stylistic
moves for particular novels. The cadence in Godric, for
instance, lilts along in iambic pentameter with solid Saxon
lines, whereas Brendan, another novel about a saint, relies
less on diction and more on syntax and adjective placement.
Buechner’s language is quite often earthy, ready and able to
point out the impish surprises of life.

Brown’s journey through Buechner’s life and writings
will captivate and inspire a deep respect for the man and
his words. Buechner peers through the mystery of grace
and offers us all comfort as we fall back on the old cry,
“Lord, I believe! Help me with my unbelief.” In the end,
that is all we have, and that is all we need.


A non-patronizing, non-moralizing book about chastity: is that possible? Although not caring much for this book’s
title, Real Sex, I find the point of the book compelling:
chastity is a practical and (the) attainable norm. Much of
what goes on today in our sexually over-stimulated society
is insincere, mistaken, or just plain fake (i.e., unreal “sex”) and hence the title Real Sex. Honoring chastity will help
lead to the real thing. The silhouette of the book is the
author’s own experience, a movement from an unchaste youth and college life to a Christian conversion and phased
awakening(s) to chastity, its meaning and necessity. The case
is made for a continent life-style within the framework of
Christian community, discipline, and discipleship. Chastity
is argued for, provocatively explained, and its difficulties
(and objections to it) illustrated. The real topic of the book
is chastity, not “sex.”

In terms of language and style, the book is well crafted.
It speaks a very contemporary idiom, using a diverse and
sometimes trendy diction. It is thought out and well-
organized in scope and treatment of its topic. The author’s
goal is both to instruct and to give practical suggestions on
how to achieve a chaste way of life. It is evidently written
by a well-read, serious-minded person with an excellent feel
for contemporary American language and cultural trends.
Lauren Winner is a writer and journalist and author of Girl Meets God (her conversion story), which received various
prizes. Her grasp of the issues surrounding chastity is extensive and suggests a Christian approach with an
uncommonly broad and deep Biblical perspective. Perhaps
the most surprising feature of this book is that although
its advice is at odds with current Western attitudes and
practices concerning sexuality, its form of expression is
in tune with these attitudes and practices. In fact, I found
the book’s language and style so much in tune with urban
trendy speech that I kept wondering if it would eventually
lapse into something other than Christianity and other
than chastity as usually defined. It never did.

The book’s author makes few if any compromises with
our contemporary secular consensus in struggling for a
Biblical approach to all of reality. She clearly goes against the
gain of our contemporary sexual trend without becoming
wild-eyed, obnoxious, or dismissive of the claims and
problems of other-minded people. For example, she gives
voice to contrary approaches and then attempts to answer
them, having struggled with chastity and with the shallow
advice she found in numerous inauthentic “Christian”
books on the subject. The book tells many short stories to
make its points and draws on insight gleaned from each of
the major Christian traditions. Winner gives a balance of
explanation and advice written in a personal style without
catering to the appetite developed in most of us for
voyeuristic tell-all writing on “sex.” Winner is theologically
engaging and responsible in her handling of Scripture. She
makes profuse use of quotations and stories drawn from
a diversity of authors, counselors, theologians, preachers,
popular commentators, and scholars. While making clear
that contemporary practices are wrong and destructive, she
never falls into mere condemnation.

The book is worthwhile for young and old alike
but a bit graphic or explicit for very young or sheltered
teenagers. It is well-rounded in its treatment of the issues;
for example, it contains good sections on men’s clothing
and women’s fashion, money and budgeting, monastic and
ascetic practices, fasting, virginity, discipline, and ancient
spiritual disciplines It also contains worthwhile discussions
on marriage, being unmarried, sexual experience, the
potentially positive and often factually negative role of the
Church in working with or ordering sexuality, and setting
parameters for pre-marital “sexual” contact.

As I read, however, I kept wondering what Winner
would say is wrong with un-chastity or promiscuous sexual
relations—especially since she had experienced them
herself. Was she secretly just preaching dogmas which
she really did not understand and of which she had no
experiential sense of what made the actions in question
wrong? It appears from her story that she became
convicted that pre-marital sex is wrong during a time of
confession of sin when challenged about what she had
done. She gives less attention to the question than to other topics discussed in the book.

Another minor shortcoming of the book is that Winner sometimes talks as if her own body were something other than herself, as if it had desires and cravings that were not quite her cravings or her desires. Although there is a long tradition of doing so, speaking this way is misleading because it suggests mere occupancy of our own flesh and blood. Isn't it clear that it is our eyes, our life history, our feelings that are at play in sexual desire? Isn't it our lack of care and love, or more pointedly our love for the wrong things, that turns temptation into acts of sin? By not having trained our taste buds, nose, and eyes (when we had the opportunity), we easily attach ourselves to things less lovable than God, fellowship of the saints, and good works. It is we, our person, that is having the craving, not merely our “body.”

All in all, though, it is a good book that is worth reading and worth giving as a gift.


In Less than Two Dollars a Day, author Kent A. Van Til argues that the Christian faith requires that all people have access to basic sustenance. In an extensive review of economic and political theory as well as biblical and contemporary theologies, Van Til lays out the need for distributive justice and, ultimately, an alternative system of distribution.

Van Til is currently a visiting assistant professor of religion at Hope College. This book, which is a product of his doctoral work at Marquette University, combines his interests in economics, political theory, and theology. Van Til spent time working in Central America and uses those experiences and his family friend, Ester, to highlight the stark inequalities of the current system:

The simplest explanation for the privileges I have received and the hardships that Ester has endured is that I was born in the United States of America and Ester was born in Panama: as a result of this accidental difference, I received many of the benefits of my society, and she received many of the burdens of her own (2).

An estimated forty percent of the world’s people live on less than two dollars a day. Not surprisingly, these people do not have the capital to participate in the market. The poor do not have access to basic goods and services, never mind the rewards and benefits of the market economy. In the initial understanding of the free-market system, as described by Adam Smith in the late eighteenth century, there was the assumption that “within a properly functioning market economy, the entire population would necessarily receive basic sustenance” (18). Clearly, the historical and current realities indicate that either the market is not functioning properly, according to Smith’s intention, or the assumption itself is faulty. One thing should be made clear: Van Til does not propose an entirely different system of distribution; he lauds certain components of the free-market capitalist system, especially its efficiency in the distribution of goods. However, the main flaw of free-market capitalism, he asserts, is that there is no moral component to the system: “the market is not designed to value claims based on human need” (52).

Free market capitalism as it stands currently, then, runs contrary to the biblical mandate to care for the poor, the widowed, and the orphans. Using examples from both the Old and New Testaments, including the Year of Jubilee, distribution of land within the Promised Land, the importance of work, and shalom, it is clear that God established and promotes systems of distribution that, in some way, provide basic sustenance for all members of the community. In addition, “At the heart of Scripture’s teaching on wealth, property, and poverty is the belief that the world and all things within it belong to God, and whatever portion of it we receive is a gift of God” (67). All wealth and property belong to God, and his Word indicates that he favors systems of distribution that provide basic sustenance for all. From these two basic principles emerge a variety of contemporary theologies that attempt to navigate a world in which goods are not distributed equally. In fact, as Van Til points out repeatedly, the free market system allows for inequality and does not include a mechanism that addresses human need. A review of Catholic and Protestant theologies provides a helpful backdrop for the subsequent conversation. Van Til lays the groundwork for an alternative system of distributive justice that seeks to go beyond the current flawed system to validate both the biblical and moral claim of the right to basic sustenance for all.

On what basis should such a system be devised? Van Til synthesizes work by Abraham Kuyper, the Calvinist theologian and Dutch statesman from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Michael Walzer, a contemporary Jewish political theorist, to develop a theory of justice for just such a system. Van Til draws heavily on Kuyper’s Reformed Christian perspective of “sphere sovereignty” and of people as image-bearers with a creational mandate to create and care for creation and created order. From Walzer, Van Til seeks to simplify the concept of “spheres” to three basic relationship types: instrumental, solidaristic, and citizenship. Although Van