In the early 2000's, while pastoring at a church in Calgary, I was working to complete a Masters' Degree in Leadership from Trinity Western University. My degree had both an online and an in-class component; for three consecutive Summers, I studied on campus during the month of July.

As I neared the end of my degree, I was putting the finishing touches on my Master's Thesis—it was a study in Christian, servant, leadership. As I boarded a plane to fly back to Calgary, my mind was buzzing with ideas for all that remained to be written. On the flight home, I happened to be seated next to a man in his late 30's to early 40's. He introduced himself mid-flight and he began to tell me a little about himself—I quickly discovered that he was completing a Masters' Thesis of his own.

He was writing on the subject of pornography, and more specifically, his thesis argued that pornography was a tool that enhanced relationships between men and women, whether dating or married. I was completely caught off guard—I had never heard anyone make that argument before. I didn't know what to say and so I said something like, "*That's a very interesting perspective*."

For the next 30 minutes he outlined his argument and conclusions, with me asking the occasional question—he didn't ask for my opinion on the matter and I didn't offer one. Moments before the plane landed, he asked me what I did for a living. I groaned inwardly —*this isn't going to end well.* I have to confess, I would have been quite happy for Jesus to return at that exact moment; it would have saved me from a painful conversation.

I proceeded to tell him that I was a Christian pastor who worked at a church in Calgary, and in an instant his countenance changed. He began accuse me of the worst forms of intolerance—narrow-minded, self-righteous, judgemental. It's ironic, don't you think? In 30 minutes of listening to him, not once did I tell him he was wrong, but after hearing I was a Christian, he proceeded to engage in the very behaviour he accused me of. For the record, I kept this irony to myself.

One would think that living in the age that we do—an age of moral relativism, where you can you can have "your truth" and I can "my truth"—one would think that two of us could simply agree to disagree. Sadly, he wouldn't allow for such a possibility. The last image I had of him was standing at the baggage carousel, red-faced, insistent, and absolutely livid with me.

I learned a lot from that encounter. I can no longer recall the details of his thesis, but I do remember his outrage. It wasn't that he saw Christian sexual ethics as strange, old-fashioned, or out of touch; his reaction was too extreme for that. His response revealed a conviction that continues to grow in our culture, namely, that the Bible's teaching on sexuality is oppressive, damaging, and dangerous. Here's the question, as Christians who hold on to the truth of the Bible, *are we the light of the world, or, are we living in the dark ages?*

Most of you are well-aware that our Western Culture—along with a significant number of churches—are moving away from a largely biblical sexual ethic that has been in place for thousands of years. The question is, *why? How did we get here? And what do we do now that we're here? What boundaries are being left behind, and what is being embraced? And can the new sexual ethic deliver on its promise to provide freedom and fulfillment for human beings?*

Over the next four weeks, Pastor Brendan and I are going to be taking a closer look at **The Bible, Sex, and our Changing World**. We're going to be opening the Bible, looking at our culture, and holding out a Christian vision of relationships, sexuality, and human flourishing.

You may wonder why I've brought these three things together—relationships, sexuality, and human flourishing. The truth of the matter is that much of our culture's focus on sexuality and gender is in pursuit of a larger goal. All human beings, in every age and culture, have been concerned to find a life worth living—a life filled with purpose, meaning, wholeness, and fulfillment. Behind the cultural conversation on sexuality and gender is a conviction about the kind of life that will really satisfy.

If we read the Bible well, we discover that God is equally concerned about the kind of life that leads to true and lasting satisfaction. In fact, God became human in the person of Jesus Christ and Jesus went so far as to say "*I have come that humanity might have life—a full, abundant, and satisfying life.*"[1]

And so, it's not simply that Christ and Culture clash on matters of sexuality and gender—they do of course, and in significant ways—but they clash on these subjects precisely because Christ and Culture hold out two competing visions of the path that leads to satisfaction and flourishing.

All that I've said so far serves as an introduction to our 4 week series. This morning I want to highlight three crucial disagreements between the Cultural Vision and the Christian Vision. So let's begin at the beginning—the first disagreement is about the nature of reality itself.

1. Transcendence vs. Materialism: The first four words of Genesis 1:1 are instructive—*In the beginning God.* From a Christian perspective, any discussion on the nature of reality begins with God—*in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* Before there was humanity, before the earth, before the universe, before time itself—there was God; all that we see and know was brought into being by God.

In Genesis 1:27 we read, "*God created human beings in his own image…male and female he created them.*" There is much more to this verse than the treatment I will give to it but I want to highlight two implications. (a) First, who and what we are is a gift. Life is primarily something we receive, not something we make, and so, we are not free to make of ourselves whatever we want.

(b) Second, who and what we are, while unique, in some way reflects God's own nature and being—we have been created in His image. And so, while we live in a material world, human beings are more than merely material creatures. Along with mind and body, we possess a nonmaterial dimension of being—what traditionally has been referred to as the "soul" or "spirit".

Behind these implications is the belief that there are self-evident, unchanging, moral truths that provide a foundation for human conduct. And so, murder is wrong, not because it is against the law,

[1] Paraphrase of John 10:10.

but because it fundamentally crosses one of God's established principles, namely, the sanctity of human life.

The Christian vision is founded upon transcendence in that Christians believe that God Himself is Transcendent; He is higher, greater, beyond us—He created all things and to Him all things must give an account. Christians believe that God has revealed these unchanging, moral truths through His word—the Bible; through God's final Word—the Lord Jesus Christ; and by the ongoing witness of the Holy Spirit. Through spiritual connection with God we come to know and live by these transcendent truths.

The current Cultural Vision utterly rejects the transcendent—we're told there is no God above. Neither is there a spiritual dimension to humanity; we are purely material beings—bodies and brains, but no soul. Jonathan Grant writes,

"Modern authenticity encourages us to create our own beliefs and morality, the only rule being that they must resonate with who we feel we *really* are. The worst thing we can do is to conform to some moral code that is imposed on us from outside—by society, our parents, the church or, whoever else…Ultimately, this form of expressive individualism, with each person doing his or her own thing, leads to a soft form of moral relativism: we should not criticize each other's 'values' because each person's right is to live as they wish. The only sin we cannot tolerate is intolerance."[2]

If there is no God (no Creator), there's no higher authority (no universal truth), and therefore, no basis upon which to enforce moral boundaries. As a society, we may decide from time to time to enforce particular boundaries—we may even call them "truths"—but they are merely truths "*for the time being*;" as public opinion changes, so can our "truths," so can our boundaries.

I've seen these shifts in my own lifetime. It wasn't that long ago that our culture was overwhelmingly against abortion; in my lifetime public opinion has shifted—what was once considered "wrong" is now considered a "right". It wasn't that long ago that our culture was overwhelmingly against assisted suicide; in my lifetime public opinion has shifted—what was once considered "wrong" is now considered a "right". It wasn't that long ago that our culture was overwhelmingly against sex outside of marriage; in our lifetime public opinion has shifted—what was once considered "wrong" is now considered "good" and "necessary" to human fulfillment.

Let's move to talk about the second fundamental disagreement…

2. The "Sovereign Self" vs. Created For Relationship (with God and Others):

When I use the term "Sovereign Self," what do I mean? Personal freedom has come to occupy the central place in Western culture. Our culture has come to believe that living authentically—being true to who we really are—is only possible if we are *free from* outside

[2] Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision For Christian Relationships In A Hypersexualized Age*, 30.

influences.[3]

Our culture operates by the assumption that maximizing individual freedom, and expanding the choices available to individuals, is the path to satisfaction and self-fulfillment. *Freedom is understood as the absence of restraint.* Our culture operates by the following two principles: (1) I should be free to do what I wants—as long as I don't harm you; and (2) You are not free to question, criticize, or limit my choices and behaviour.

Relationships are important to our culture, but even our most important relationships are marked by this primary commitment to self-fulfillment. Accordingly, when evaluating our relationships, the underlying questions are as follows:

- *is this relationship meeting my needs?*
- *does this person make me happy?*
- *would I be happier, more satisfied, with a different person?*

Do you see the problem? A commitment to self-fulfillment actively deconstructs committed relationships; this commitment to self-fulfillment also breeds insecurity. If you know that I am only going to relate to you as long as it suits me, how can you be sure that I won't walk out? You can't.

And more, a fundamental commitment to our own happiness leaves us all asking the question, "*How can I know if I might be happier with someone else?*"[4] Because we can never know for certain, there is a growing trend—people "commit" to relationship, seeking to get as much they can for as long as they can, while keeping their options open for future relationships. With this kind of mindset, sex isn't something to be saved for marriage—your relationship isn't guaranteed to have a "tomorrow," so make yourself happy today.

In contrast to the "Sovereign Self," and its focus on self-fulfillment, the Bible teaches that self-fulfillment is impossible. Mick Jagger confirmed this truth when he sang "*I can't get no satisfaction, 'Cause I try and I try and I try and I try.*" We were created for committed relationship with God and others—personal satisfaction cannot be found in living for yourself.

Jesus said something that was as counter-cultural in the 1st century as is it is in the 21st: "*If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.* (Mt. 16:24-25)"

The Christian conviction is that making yourself the centre of the universe won't lead to life, but knowing the One who made the universe, will. Real life isn't found in unlimited choice, it's found in making one choice—to follow Jesus. Committing to live for your own happiness, will only lead to a dead end; real life is found in giving your life away to God and to others.

The Christian vision and the Cultural vision are fundamentally at

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[3] Grant, 55.

[4] Dale Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship Beyond An Age Of Individualism*, 77.

odds, and nowhere is this more evident than when it comes to understanding the nature and purpose of sex.

3. Defining Sex (nature and purpose): I told you earlier about my conversation with a stranger on a plane. It wasn't that he saw Christian sexual ethics as strange, old-fashioned, or out of touch—it was much more than that. His response revealed a conviction that continues to grow our culture, namely, that the Bible's teaching on sexuality is oppressive, damaging, and dangerous.

Let me take a moment to offer a brief summary of Christian sexual ethics. *God-honouring, life-enhancing sexuality finds its expression in the goodness of either celibate singleness or the life-long covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. Sexual intimacy is intended for marriage and therefore sexual intimacy outside of this protective bond is contrary to God's good design for humanity.*

From the Old Testament to New Testament, from the early Church right up until the present day—a span of thousands of years—the Bible has held forth these particular boundaries. Some try to dismiss the Bible's teaching on sexuality, suggesting that we live in a different world today, one that is far less traditional than the ancient world.

While it's true that our world is different in some significant regards, when it comes to sexuality, the 1st century Greco-Roman-world was even more liberal and expressive that our Western culture today. Both Polygamy (marriage to more than one spouse) and Polyamory (having multiple sexual partners) were common. Same-sex relationships were a part of the ancient world, so too were sexual relationships between adults and children—something that is still taboo today (at least for now).

When it comes to sexuality, the Western world is changing, but not into something never seen before—it is reverting back to a time that has not been seen for 1700 years. Our culture is changing in that it will not recognize any moral authority that curbs one's freedom to choose.

The arguments against a Christian sexual ethic don't just come from the outside—from culture—there is a growing segment within the church that is calling for a more "relaxed" approach to sexuality. I've heard people suggest that sexuality can't have been very important to Jesus because He didn't spend a lot of time talking about it. This is what is called an "argument from silence"—if Jesus didn't address the issue, it was unimportant to Him, and therefore, we can make up our own mind on the matter.

There's many problems with this argument, but I will mention just one. Whenever Jesus did address sexuality, He clearly reaffirmed the Bible's traditional teaching, going beyond the letter of the law in order to address the heart of matter. If anything, Jesus' teaching was more strict, not less.[5]

I've talked briefly about the Christian boundaries around sex, what is the competing cultural messaging? Quite simply, that sexual

[5] See Mt. 5:17-20; see also Mt. 5:21-24 where Jesus "intensifies" the law in His address of divorce and remarriage, adultery and lust, etc. All the New Testament writers affirm the same Old Testament sexual boundaries; Paul is most explicit in Romans 1:18-32.

intimacy, as long as it is consensual—and doesn't hurt anyone—should be permitted and celebrated. With the Sexual Revolution of the 1960's, the nature and purpose of sex was completely redefined. Sex came to be understood as something "natural," a "force," that was either embraced or denied—but to deny or repress this natural force was to deny and do damage to your true self.

The assumption was, and is, that there is a direct link between sexual activity and human fulfillment—if you're not having sex, then you can't experience the satisfaction and fulfillment you deserve. Having swallowed this vision of the "Sovereign Sexual Self," I've heard well-meaning Christians argue the following—since God is committed to my happiness, and sex is essential to my happiness, I'm not particularly concerned about the Bible's sexual boundaries."

Romans 12:2 says, "*Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.*" Another translation captures this verse in the following way, "*Do not allow this world to mold you in its own image. Instead, be transformed from the inside out by renewing your mind.*"

Colossians 2:6-8 says, "*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.*"

Sex isn't something that will ever satisfy the soul's hunger for love, relationship, meaning, and purpose—we cannot live apart from God's design and expect to experience peace, joy, and hope.

Conclusion: There are many things that I could have said this morning, but didn't; there are likely a number of things I should have said this morning, but didn't. I have seldom felt so impoverished as I have crafting this sermon. I trust that over the next 3 Sundays, we can continue to cast the Bible's vision for relationships, sexuality, and human flourishing.

As I conclude this morning, I want to share something with you that has been developing in my mind as I think about the clash between Christ and Culture. What began with a thought, led to an image, and then grew into what I'm calling a "modern parable"—a story to help us make sense out of where we are—culturally—and what I think is required of us in the days ahead. Let me begin with the thought…

Thought: Not all movement is progress—some movement results in something important being lost. Certain things should not "change with the times"—some things should not move. There comes a time when we are called to stand firm, steadfast. I am, of course, talking about the shifting cultural landscape with respect to sexuality.

Image: The image I have been pondering is one that is familiar to me—a mountain river—I grew up fishing on the Vedder River in Chilliwack. Fed by the melting snow and other tributaries, this river is clear, winding, and wild. In the Summer months, we would don swim trunks, wade in up to our knees, and cast our lines into the river, hoping to catch a Rainbow Trout, Dolly Varden, or Jack Spring. In The Fall and Winter months, we would don Neoprene waders,

wade in up to our knees and cast our lines, hoping to catch Coho, Spring, or Steehead.

Now for the parable.

Parable: Have you ever waded into a river or stream? If you have, you know what you feel the moment you set foot in the river—you feel the pull of the current.

Throw a stick in the river and it will float on the surface, hurried along wherever the current runs. Throw a small stone in the river and it quickly disappears, but much like the stick, the current drags it along the bottom—rolling to its final destination.

But in most mountain rivers, there are boulders—carved from the mountain itself. These boulders are often so big, so heavy, that though they stand in the middle of the river, they remain unmoved. In the Spring, as the snow melts, the river is swollen by the abundance of water—months go by and the boulders cannot be seen, the current thunders by unchecked. And yet, when the Summer comes and the water subsides, the boulders emerge once again—steadfast and unmoved.

The deeper you wade into the river, the stronger you feel the pull; if you wade too deep, the current will eventually sweep you away—unless, that is, you can find a boulder upon which to stand.

Not all movement is progress—some movement results in something important being lost. Certain things should not "change with the times"—some things should not move. There comes a time when we are called to stand firm, steadfast. In our shifting, sexual, cultural landscape, the pull of the current is strong, but we are called to set our feet upon Christ—He is our solid Rock.

Pray

Worship

Benediction

"*Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*"
1 Cor. 15:58