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What passages would be helpful to pastorally assist a Christian married couple, who for a physiological reason, cannot have sexual intercourse?

I chose to look at this topic for two main reasons. Firstly, there is limited literature about pastoring a couple suffering from sexual dysfunction biblically. There are many books applying the bible to a variety of pastoral situations, however if there is a gap in our biblical understanding then it's the responsibility of those who will teach the word to know what God's word says to a particular situation. Secondly I wanted my theological convictions to line up more with my practice. If the bible is central to all we do in ministry then looking at a biblical approach to pastoral care in regards to sexual dysfunction seemed an essential study. The learning outcome I am seeking to grow in is 'Understand the central place of Scripture to all Christian ministry and mission'.

Assisting a Christian married couple who cannot have sexual intercourse is an immense pastoral challenge. The bible must be a central tool for pastoral care of a couple with this condition. Marriage and sex are to be in the service of God. When sex does not work, a couple can struggle to know how to serve God in their marriage and sex life. Often the natural, pastoral tendency is either to send the couple for medical help and counseling assistance, or attempt to provide such psychological and counseling assistance oneself. Although it is necessary to seek medical and psychological assistance, and to show concern and sensitivity, the couple usually has an unsatisfied need to be pastored from God's Word. God created marriage and sex not only for the benefit of mankind but also as a model of Christ's relationship with his people. With that in mind, it is inadequate for

only the physical and psychological needs of a couple to be addressed without first looking at what the bible has to say about their issue.

There are a variety of reasons why couples may be unable to have intercourse¹. These may include muscular issues (including vaginismus), hymen thickness, past abuse, and past sexual activity. It can be very distressing when a physical or physiological barrier to sex causes sexual dysfunction. Often, a Christian couple can enter their first night together completely unaware of the challenges that lie ahead due to physiological issues not caused from a specific past sin. This kind of situation can place a great deal of strain on a marriage.

There is limited research regarding a biblical perspective for helping couples deal with this type sexual dysfunction. When corresponding with Christopher Ash he replied, "... I'm not aware of authors who have touched on this".

Correspondence with Dr Patricia Weerakoon also revealed that available articles mostly address the physical condition with little biblical guidance. Therefore, the present essay will suggest passages that form a framework in which a couple can navigate these kinds of struggles from a Christ centered and biblical perspective.

Developing an understanding of what the bible says about marriage in the wider context of scripture will help couples develop a godly perspective on their sex

¹ Amelia and Greg Clark, *One Flesh: A Practical Guide to Honeymoon Sex and Beyond* ((Kingsford, N.S.W.: Matthias Media, 2001). page 123-133

life². A biblical perspective of sexual intercourse originates in the relationship ordained by God in Genesis 2. However, man's rejection of God's good rule leads to disastrous consequences as Genesis 3 establishes the effects of the fall. The relationship between man and wife is now strained. Therefore, the whole nature of the sexual relationship is fractured with sexual dysfunction being one result. Yet, in God's perspective, sex and marriage are not to be separated^{3,4}. The bible "begins in creation, centers in Christ, and ends with the consummation of the kingdom of God and of his Christ"⁵. Within this framework is the theological theme of the marriage between God and his people⁶. This great marriage is what all human marriages are to be a model of⁷, pointing towards the great wedding day of the Lamb at the end of time (Rev 19:7-8). Therefore the passages that will be most helpful in pastoral care will address both sex and marriage.

The focus of a couple's marriage needs to be beyond themselves, and be in the service of God. The Bible's teaching on marriage and sex is derived from Genesis 1:26-2:25⁸. This passage establishes that God's initial plan for sex and marriage

² Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010). page 79

³ Christopher Ash, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* (Vancouver: Regent College Pub., 2005). page 227

⁴ Tony Payne and Phillip D Jensen, *Pure Sex* (Kingsford, N.S.W.: Matthias Media, 1998). page 23

⁵ Ash Christopher, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* page 84

⁶ Ash Christopher, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* page 88-89

⁷ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (The Pillar New Testament commentary; Leicester: Apollos, 1999). page 408

⁸ T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, England : Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity Press ; InterVarsity Press, 2000). page 654.

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is for the couple to be outward looking⁹. The commands in Genesis 1:28-31 are commands to the man and woman to serve God and the creation in their union¹⁰. They are to rule (Gen 1:28), to be fruitful and multiply (1:28) and to do so in partnership (Gen 2:18). In 2:18, their complementary difference is what allows them to fulfill their purpose in serving God. Adam's cry of delight in 2:23 is not limited to that of sexual delight; it is one of purposeful satisfaction, as Eve is the only suitable companion to help Adam in the task God has given him in the garden¹¹. Ultimately, this passage like the whole creation account, places the focus on God and the couples job in the garden, and not on the couple themselves. This passage is helpful because it orientates marriage and sex around who God is and his purpose, not in the couples performance in the bedroom. If sex within marriage is purely for pleasure, and is a self contained and self-serving unit then you would not remain in the marriage when sex is painful and hard. Christopher Ash expresses the danger of introspective intimacy in a marriage, concluding that a relationship that is introspective in regards to sex and intimacy is ultimately self-destructive¹². He also argues that a marriage motivated by sensual, personal fulfillment will hold together and break by the same ethos¹³. Having a God centered understanding will help the couple focus on serving the kingdom of God despite their challenges¹⁴. Therefore, a couple must

⁹ Ash Christopher, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* page 121

¹⁰ Ash Christopher, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* page 121

¹¹ Ash Christopher, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* page 120

¹² Ash Christopher, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* page 123

¹³ Ash Christopher, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* page 124

¹⁴ Though I have found no specific research on this in regards to sex, Paul's teaching on 'light and momentary afflictions', and 'perseverance' though, usually talking about persecution could apply. Having an eternal and kingdom focus is central to serving God in this life despite all kinds of suffering.

work out what 'sex in the service of God' looks like without intercourse. This is also very comforting, as the couple's marriage still has a function in loving and serving others beyond that of procreation and sexual perfection. This fact will be helpful for pastoral care.

The bible also shows marriage has eternal significance, as understanding the purpose of marriage can help a couple serve Christ despite sexual difficulty.

Ephesians 5:22-33 shows the eternal purpose of marriage and its earthly outworking within the marriage relationship and "(...)identifies the institution of marriage as a 'mystery' revealing Jesus Christ and the church"¹⁵ (Eph 5:32).

Paul's argument in Ephesians 5:22-33 is grounded in the steadfast, sacrificial, covenant-love of the heavenly bridegroom Jesus¹⁶¹⁷. Therefore a couple's love for one another is not grounded in their sexual performance, but in modeling Christ and the church. Christopher Ash in his book 'Married for God' affirms that, "you will make a better marriage if you focus on God and not on marriage"¹⁸. If a couple focuses on the frustration of not being able to have sex¹⁹, they forget what their sex life has to do with the eternal purposes of marriage²⁰, namely that a godly marriage points to Jesus. This understanding can bring great comfort in

¹⁵ Alexander 'New Dictionary of Biblical Theology' page 654

¹⁶ O'Brian Peter, *The Letter to the Ephesians* page 420

¹⁷ Mark 2:18-20, John 3:29, Jesus takes the Old Testament relationship of Yahweh and Israel to apply to himself and his people.

¹⁸ Christopher Ash, *Married for God: Making Your Marriage the Best It Can Be* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007). Page 5

¹⁹ "...cried the first three times we had sex (on our honeymoon) and for the first year of marriage counted ceiling tiles to take my mind off the pain. It caused a significant strain on our marriage, obviously." "The Pain of Vaginismus: Women Sufferers Speak", *To Love, Honor and Vacuum* (January 13, 2016), Cited 3 Jun. 2016, Online:

<http://tolovehonorandvacuum.com/2016/01/pain-of-vaginismus-women-speak>.

²⁰ Patricia Weerakoon, *The Best Sex for Life* (Sydney South, N.S.W.: Growing Faith, 2013). page 114-155

pastoral care because their purpose and worth as a couple is not dependent on sexual intercourse working well.

Ephesians also provides a pattern for how husbands and wives should conduct themselves in marriage. Paul grounds his instruction for husbands and wives in the eternal marriage of Christ and the church²¹. The headship of the husband is paralleled to Christ's headship and rule over the church²² (Eph 5:25). Similarly, the wife's call to submit is paralleled to the church (Eph 5:24)²³. These verses give the couple the pattern for relating to one another as they deal with sexual dysfunction. The wife is to submit to the loving self-sacrificial rule of a husband, and the husband is to lay down his life for his wife no matter what the cost. This biblically shaped perspective of marriage can bring joy in the heat of suffering and can provide the pattern of relating. Therefore, this biblical text is helpful in pastorally assisting a Christian married couple experiencing sexual dysfunction.

The bible also provides motivation for a couple to address their sexual dysfunction as it places great importance on sex in marriage. 1 Corinthians 7: 1–4 is extremely important for a couple who struggle to have sexual intercourse, as it shows that a duty of wife and husband is to have sexual intercourse; 'husbands and wives are not to deprive one another'²⁴. In this passage Paul aligns himself with the biblical perspective that sex in marriage is good, encouraged, and to be

²¹ O'Brian Peter, *The Letter to the Ephesians* page 410

²² O'Brian Peter, *The Letter to the Ephesians* page 415

²³ O'Brian Peter, *The Letter to the Ephesians* page 415

²⁴ Ash Christopher, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* page 191

sustained²⁵. In verses 3-5 the husband and wife are to fulfill their sexual duty to one another as beings who belong to one another and could be tempted to fall into sin. The husband and wife's bodies are not their own (1 Cor 7:3-4) and Paul insists on the mutual giving of the husband and wife to each other as an act of responsibility²⁶ as "sex is the gift and plan of God"²⁷. This passage may appear initially insensitive to a couple who are unable to have sex, however it provides motivation through instruction and encouragement to persevere. When suffering from a physiological sexual problem, the temptation to avoid sexual intercourse is significant. There is great emotional pain and discouragement associated with sexual inability²⁸. Going to a doctor, psychologist or even talking about the particular struggle together can be incredibly draining²⁹. Therefore, the reminder in this passage for husbands and wives to prioritise sex in accordance with their marital duty, even in the face of great sexual struggle essential for pastoral care regard sexual dysfunction.

1 Corinthians 7:1-5 also helps couples be reminded of the importance to guard each other from sexual temptation (1 Cor 7:5)³⁰. Part of fulfilling their marital duty is in the context of sexual sin and temptation (1 Cor 7:4). Lack of sexual

²⁵ Ash Christopher, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* page 191

²⁶ David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church* (The Bible speaks today; Leicester, England ; Downers Grove, Ill., U.S.A: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985). page 116

²⁷ Prior David, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, page 115

²⁸ Kat Macey et al., 'Women's Experiences of Using Vaginal Trainers (dilators) to Treat Vaginal Penetration Difficulties Diagnosed as Vaginismus: A Qualitative Interview Study', *BMC Women's Health* 15/1 (June 20, 2015): 1.

²⁹ 'Women described having to work up the courage to ask for help, overcoming feelings of embarrassment and abnormality, and doubts about the legitimacy of their problem.' A Qualitative Interview Study, *BMC Women's Health* 15/1

³⁰ Weerakoon Patricia, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* page 130

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intimacy can cause marital fracturing, and sexual frustration³¹, therefore sexual intimacy is important for the functioning of the marriage³². Wisdom is required when pastoring a couple using this passage. There is already a sense of failure, fear, and maybe even anger at God in regards to sex. Therefore, wisdom must be used in knowing when to speak, how to helpfully show a couple that this is God's good word to them, and discussing that there are many other options available to help them to develop sexual intimacy even when things are challenging³³. No matter the pain and discouragement experienced, encouragement is needed to help the couple not only seek assistance, but to work together to find out what fulfilling their marital responsibility means in their particular situation.

Therefore, pastoral care that helps couples understand the importance of guarding from sexual temptation also helps a couple become motivated to seek help to deal with sexual dysfunction.

Consequently, although helping couples deal with sexual dysfunction is complex and involves psychological issues, God's word must be the central tool for pastoral care. God's word helps couples see the purpose for their marriage and sex, understand the ultimate purpose of sex and marriage and how they are to relate to one another, and emphasises the importance of sex in the marital union and how they can help each other even during their struggle. Focusing on the truth of God's word will set the tone for the way the couple will deal with sexual dysfunction. Thus pastoral care will ultimately encourage a couple to look

³¹ Weerakoon Patricia, *Marriage: Sex in the Service of God* page 132

³² Leman, Kevin. *Sheet Music: Uncovering the Secrets of Sexual Intimacy in Marriage*. Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003. Page 44

³³ 'Honeymoon Sexpectations (a Blog for Newly Weds)', *Patricia Weerakoon*, December 31, 2015.

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beyond themselves to the service of God and to the great eternal marriage between Christ and the church, and how they may serve one another in sex.

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