

but these considerations present food for thought for any scholars looking towards a third edition of the series in the future.

In any case, an inclusive spirit is what underscores Bicket, Dymock and Jack's approach to defining the category of Scottish religious poetry as a whole. Their insightful discussion throughout the introduction of what makes a poem 'religious' culminates in the decision to provide 'a generosity of spirit in finding the religious in a poem' (p. xxiii), including poems which respond to the notion of the divine, as well as those more concerned with the material history of theological belief and its impact on Scottish culture. In an increasingly secular age, such an approach invites us to rethink what religion might mean to us today. To quote from Alycia Pirmohamed's "I Want the Kind of Permanence in a Birdwatcher's Catalogue": 'I shower in the summer solstice light/ and read my morning prayers off the cracked/ screen of my phone' (ll.14–16). Today, our encounters with the divine might be more fleeting than in past eras, but in their generous spirit the editors of *Scottish Religious Poetry* (2024) remind their readers that this does not make them any less impactful.

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Alasdair Black, *The Courage to Speak: Sex, Sexuality and the Church* (Stirling: Extremis Publishing, 2025), pp. xi + 218, ISBN 978-1739484583. £13.00

New Testament scholar Preston Sprinkle has commented that few subjects have been as heatedly debated within the church as sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Moreover, he notes that this contentious ethical issue, which was relatively untouched by biblical scholars and theologians until the 1980s, has seen a significant wave of writing and



studies in the last forty years, much of which challenges the traditional view of what the Bible says about human sexuality.¹ In *The Courage to Speak* Alasdair Black offers a pastoral-yet-scholarly contribution into this current literary melee on human sexuality, one that is couched in personal anecdotes and pastoral reflections gleaned from his thirty plus years as a Baptist church minister.

Black, currently senior pastor of Stirling Baptist Church, is a part-time colleague of mine at the Scottish Baptist College as well as my former line-manager when I was part of the pastoral team at Stirling Baptist Church over a decade ago. I say this because, as someone who knows the author quite well, the book exudes his pastoral concern for people and has more than a hint of a desire for all persons to encounter Jesus Christ, thereby ‘not wanting anyone to perish, but to come to repentance’ (2 Peter 3:9). As the title of the book makes clear, Black is speaking with courage on matters of human sexuality and seeks to navigate a course between the Scylla of liberalism and the Charybdis of narrow conservatism that has polarised the debate within the church and more often than not produces more heat than light in the conversation.

At a recent book launch for this title, Black unequivocally stated that he considers himself to be a ‘conservative evangelical’ and that the main purpose of the book is to promulgate a third-way proposal that moves the methodology on matters of sexuality from a purity-code approach to a person-centred one. Put differently, should we accept the current default status quo of polarity between liberal and conservative churches on sexual-ethical matters, or is there a more dialectical approach that can be adopted by all churches when seeking to live out the gospel faithfully while engaging relevantly with the surrounding cultural milieu? *The Courage to Speak* is an attempt to delineate a new dialectical third-way approach.

Helpfully, in the introduction Black sets the scene by tracing the significant change over the last sixty years in Western culture on matters of sexuality, especially the change in the meaning of sex from procreation to pleasure to personhood. It is a clear and stark clarion call of the current state of play, one that churches ignore at their peril. Therefore, because of this change it is now incumbent upon churches to seek out a new perspective biblical sexual ethic that helps bring an end to the perception

¹ See Sprinkle, in Preston Sprinkle et al., *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (Zondervan Academic, 2023), 10–11.



of irrelevancy that has beset the church for decades by offering a new sexual ethic that is communicable to the surrounding culture.

Each one of the book's eight chapters is rooted in a biblical text and so the reader is receiving an education in biblical theology which also engages with practical theology and ethics. Our *de facto* ontological status as human beings who are alienated from our creator God is the subject of chapter one. Based on Romans 8, Black argues that all human beings live in a state of alienation and subsequently cannot please God. Moreover, in this state of alienation we lose sight of the intrinsic worth of other human beings and so we dehumanise, denigrate and abuse others, especially in the realm of sexual behaviour. This problem of alienation is behind the Bible's use of words under the rubric *porneia*, such as fornication and licentiousness, that represents all sexual activity which uses another person for sexual gratification.

Somewhat controversially, Black takes the contested etymology of *porneia* as linked to abusive forms of sexual behaviour in order to extrapolate and posit a case that *porneia* is *not* a catch-all term for all sexual acts outside of heterosexual marriage. In making such a bold claim this early in the book, the reader encounters one of the main weaknesses of the text throughout. Because the origin of this book was a sermon series preached in Stirling Baptist Church a few years ago, the prose and argumentation come across as more homiletical than exegetical. Unlike a typical scholarly text, in *The Courage to Speak* there are no endnotes and very few footnotes that show the research trail which would enable the interested reader to investigate the veracity of a claim or argument. Hence, when Black makes an argued claim that is somewhat inimitable and not historically orthodox – as he does a few times throughout the book – it is near impossible to unearth his sources and understand how he arrived at his reached conclusion.

In chapters two and three, Black reminds the reader of the central place human sexuality has in the spiritual life because all humanity is made in the image of God and this includes our bodiliness with its sexual drives and desires. Following Ezekiel 16, the author argues that God entered a marriage with Jerusalem because of his desire for bonding and faithfulness. Indeed, our sexuality is part of our covenant with God and so this is why attachment follows attraction and, *contra* Augustine, sex is a sign of commitment, not a consequence of sin. However, sex can of course be used in sinful ways and so when we consider the common occurrence



of divorce and remarriage with its pastoral implications, it is imperative that the church follows Brueggemann's differentiation of texts of rigour from texts of welcome, and compassionately communicates instructions of redemption alongside her ministry of prevention and morality. Notwithstanding humanity's *imago Dei* which renders marriage as covenantal and person-centred, divorce is a concession because of the brokenness of the world we live in.

In the next two chapters, four and five, Black sets out positively his case for a person-centred ethic and a vision for marriage. The articulated person-centred ethic will be used when looking at various Pauline passages in the rest of the book. Significantly, Black's use of Richard BurrIDGE's work on an inclusive approach to New Testament ethics frames all sexual behaviour as broken or fallen, thereby removing any blame and fully mitigating any room for human agency or sinful rebellion. When delineating a vision for marriage, it is very noticeable that Black defines marriage as a covenant commitment between two *persons* thereby preparing the groundwork for his later comments on marriage equality. Moreover, this move is further supported by stating that the principal purpose of sex within marriage is physical love and affection, not procreation.

In the final three chapters of the book, Black centres on and reinforces the main thesis of the book by exegeting certain New Testament passages through the lens of a person-centred ethic. He argues that what we do with our bodies really matters and so the important question to ask of all sexual behaviour is not about the act itself but rather about the intent behind the act and whether it is malevolent or not. Indeed, in applying this understanding to the biblical use of *porneia* means that it is not about the sexual act *per se* but rather concerns malevolent behaviour within a sexual context. In fact, claims the author, non-malevolent sexual behaviours do not represent an impure act that needs purged or repented of.

All of this prepares the reader for what is arguably the climax of the book, a re-reading of chapter one in Paul's letter to the Romans. Following a somewhat anachronistic anecdote about vitriol and hatred from a church group towards the gay community in San Francisco which Black experienced in the 1980s, the author offers an interpretation which concludes that Romans 1:18–2:1 is primarily referring to the displacement of God in our lives and the subsequent idolatry that follows. It is not focussed solely on homosexual relations but rather states that the wrath of



God is aimed at all unchecked sexual desires. When humanity ignores God and abandons the covenant, then cultic and idolatrous worship follows, and this can include homoerotic acts. Notwithstanding these comments, however, Black stops short of agreeing with affirming scholars who argue that the Bible has nothing to say about same-sex loving relationships or even state that the Bible promotes same-sex unions. Rather, posits Black, biblical teaching on same-sex relationships concerns agape not eros love and promotes non-sexualised relations between two persons of the same gender.

The Courage to Speak is a welcome contribution to the ongoing cultural debate about sexuality, gender, and identity which impacts the church and is causing serious division within the ranks of the bride of Christ. The strengths of the book lie in the fact that each chapter seriously engages with a related passage of scripture, thereby attempting to be thoroughly biblical. It is also a timely reminder that all sexual-ethical dialogue and debate need to be approached from a posture of humility, recognising that all human beings are not reducible to sexual behaviours but are divine image-bearers who have inherent quality and worth. Thirdly, the three appendices which examine female subordination, divorce and remarriage, and singleness are very well thought out and pastorally helpful and sensitive.

The overall argument would have been more persuasive if the author engaged with some of the more contentious claims in the debate. For instance, some exploration into the teleology of sex and its intrinsic and biological connection with procreation would have been helpful. Some consideration of the biological congruence of the heterosexual act not found in other forms of sexual behaviour could have mitigated the sense that only a sanitised view of all sex acts is being put forward. Moreover, the apparent default acceptance and non-critique of the cultural belief that sex is all about personhood could have been interrogated. Could a better vision for procreative-covenantal sex have been put forward as an antidote to the reality of malevolence that emerges when sex is framed solely in categories of the self? Because of its genesis as a series of sermons there is a non-committal element to the overall project and Black posits ideas that could be argued to be somewhat mutually exclusive. For instance, contrary to the main argument of chapter six that it really matters what we do with our bodies, in chapter seven Black claims that *porneia* does not refer to what sexual activity we use our bodies for but rather the malevolent



drive behind certain sexual acts. Therefore, in all likelihood, I can see both sides of the debate citing the book as evidence in support of their position.

Despite those weaknesses, I still strongly encourage all Christian believers, especially leaders and pastors, to study and engage with Black's contribution. *The Courage to Speak* is a qualitatively strong piece of work and a well-written book. The scholarly-yet-pastoral approach is very relevant in this current church climate as many self-labelling 'evangelical' churches are trying increasingly to work out if it is possible to be welcoming without affirming sexual behaviours and lifestyles outside of their understanding of the parameters of scripture. Black has contributed a nuanced, dialectical offering which needs to be engaged with.

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John Perry and Joanna Leidenhag, *Science-engaged Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 79, ISBN 978-1009094054. £18.00; available online at <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009091350>

John Perry and Joanna Leidenhag attempt to carve a new path in the science and theology discourse, with this little volume entitled *Science-engaged Theology*. In their first move they engage in some myth busting directed at the history of the discourse; specifically at some widely accepted caricatures of how the Christianity and science story has been told. In the second move they seek to offer a new alternative framework for Christian theologians to engage with science: science-engaged theology. It is presented as a winsome alternative to more static forms of engagement. This edition represents a helpful guide to an often-debated question which may appeal to lay readers as well as academic readers who are new to the topic.

