

# spirituality and sex?

by Ginger Kolbaba

What 4 Christian sex therapists wish you knew



Sexual Wholeness Inc.  
co-founders: Michael, Doug,  
Christopher, and Debra

"Welcome to Atlanta!" Michael Sytsma, one of the Christian sex therapists I'd flown in to interview, greeted me at the airport, holding out a small, white paper bag.

"Thanks," I said, noticing that wrapped delicately within the folds of fire-engine red tissue paper was a white feather.

"That's for you and your husband," he continued.

*Uh-oh*, I thought, almost afraid to unveil the other contents. *Let it just be chocolates*. I had no idea what to expect. This was a sex therapist, after all.

Indeed, there were mini Hershey bars and heart-shaped goodies . . . along with two tea lights, the feather, and five packets of lubricant gel.

"I think you'll like the warming one. But the mango orange is nice, too," Michael told me nonchalantly. "There's even one that's sugar free."

"Whew, that's good, since I'm on the South Beach diet," I said, trying to sound just as casual, even though I was mentally wide-eyed. Right then I knew this would be no ordinary interview.

You never know what to expect when you get in a room with sex therapists. One thing is certain—you're going to talk about sex. But in the case of these four profound and deeply committed Christians, you're also going to talk a whole lot about God. Combine the two topics, and you get one fascinating dialogue.

In the mid-1990s Doug Rosenau, Michael Sytsma, Christopher McCluskey, and Debra Taylor—each working in private practice across the country—found one another. Realizing the need to stick together in a field that had few Christian sex therapists ("We could just about count them on two hands!" Debra says), they founded Sexual Wholeness, Inc. (SWI), a multi-functional organization devoted to training and certifying professional Christian therapists in the area of sexual healing.

One of their greatest passions has been to create a "theology of sexuality"—a biblical, practical, Christ- and Christian-honoring understanding of sex.

Now, more than a decade later, they've counseled or trained thousands of individuals and couples.

"There is no area of our being in which we can become more deeply wounded than our sexuality," explains Christopher McCluskey. "And within marriage, there's no area in which you can minister to a couple and bring greater healing and stability than in their shared sexuality. You'll impact both their intimacy together and their individual sense of wholeness as male and female, created in the image of God, reflecting Christ and his bride, the church. If you get a Christian couple on the same page with God's vision for marital intimacy, you'll have poured super glue over that marriage, and you'll have a beautiful picture of the relationship God desires to have with us."

After meeting the Sexual Wholeness professionals, I was overwhelmed by how fun they were. They're witty, smart, empathetic, and passionate about helping people discover God's unique and wonderful gift of sex. Not to mention they have some solid insights on how to have a great sex life. Here's what they shared with MP.

## W e hear about "myths" of sex. What do you wish couples knew about their sex life?

**Debra:** Every couple except maybe one or two in the entire universe will have sexual problems at some point in their marriage. Anyone who tells you otherwise is misleading you.

**Doug:** I tell my male clients, "Guys, I've got good news and bad news." The bad news is everyone here is going to suffer from three major issues at some point: impotence, premature

ejaculation, and delayed ejaculation. The good news is there are ways to work through those, so don't spend so much time fretting over them.

**Debra:** One of my favorite verses is Psalm 34:19: "A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all." That's a great theme for a couple. You'll have sexual problems. Don't be surprised. Seek the Lord and get counsel. God will rescue you—not always the way you want

Nigel Marson

him to, but there are ways to work through it. Get over it. Move on.

**Doug:** Sex is complex, and a variety of things weave together to create a good sex life. So many of my clients expect a neat cause and effect, as if they're dealing with a case of appendicitis. They think, *Let's take out the appendix*. Sex isn't typically that simplistic.

For instance, a wife may say, "I don't enjoy sex." I tell her and her husband, "Maybe it's not the sex. Maybe you're not a night person, and he prefers to make love at night. You've got two children under the age of three. Maybe recently you were suffering from endometriosis." I wish couples would understand that when there's an issue, sometimes it's better to see the complexity of it, rather than reducing it to *we need to make love more often*. God has designed sex to be physical, emotional, and spiritual, so it would do wonders for their sex life if they'd consider how those elements interact.

**Michael:** Another myth is that great sex should be natural and should happen easily. Here's the truth: *great sex doesn't*

"What can I do?" or "How far can I go?" are the wrong questions. "How can I help my spouse become sexually whole?"—that's a good question.

**Christopher:** Go to the spirit of the act. When Christ was confronted with people who wanted to know, *What's the boundary? What's the rule?* invariably he cut through all the "surface" questions, all the rules, and went to the core, which is the spirit of the act.

Although sex is physical, it's an emotional connection of souls, and it is a spiritual act. *Every single act* of sexual intercourse is an act of worship. The question is, *Who is being worshiped? Who is being glorified through this act? Is it glorifying God or is it glorifying the enemy?* You cannot engage in a sexual act and not have it connect to the spiritual realm. It's impossible.

The apostle Paul tells us: "Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Romans 12:1). We offer our bodies in spiritual worship through our singing, our praise, our teaching, our

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happen for many couples until they've been married 30 years or so, and they've learned each other and themselves.

### Really? Thirty years?

**Michael:** When couples are first married, they have the tendency to believe that sex is body focused, that it's about how big your penis is or your breasts are. But it isn't. It's about the heart. Great sex is heart sex.

**Christopher:** The big O is not orgasm. The big O is *oneness*. It's not how great the bodies, how great the orgasm. It's, *Was that a loving experience where you shared with each other? Was it contributing to your oneness?*

**Michael:** So many people think sex is about the pleasure, which it is, but it isn't. Or about the act itself, which it is, but it isn't. Sex reflects something far grander, far more beautiful. The problem is that people want to look more at the details.

### What do you mean?

**Debra:** What's okay and isn't okay in the bedroom.

**Christopher:** One of the most damaging myths is the notion that anything the Christian husband and wife agree to sexually is okay or is somehow going to be blessed by God. This idea that everything you do within the marriage bed, as long as the rings are on and it's with the one you chose, is okay.

### You're talking about the verse in Hebrews?

**Christopher:** Right. In Hebrews 13:4 the writer says the marriage bed should be kept pure and undefiled. But I know Christians who take that verse and cheapen it in order to justify whatever they want to do. It's a huge distortion of Scripture, of the freedom we have in Christ.

### So then what is and isn't okay in the bedroom?

**Michael:** That's really the wrong question to ask.

### It is?

**Doug:** It's about intimacy and connecting. You need to ask, *Is what I want to do selfish? Is it giving? Is it loving?*

hands through service. Our bodies are a living sacrifice offered every day in various physical expressions of spiritual glorification of God. When we offer our bodies in sexual union, it is a spiritual act of worship, but we can blaspheme just as surely as we can glorify.

### This feels like your theology of sexuality.

**Doug:** It is. Why did God create sex? To reveal his love and his creativity. To reveal himself.

**Debra:** We're basically talking about how to live out the Word of God. What is the truth God has about sexuality? How do you live that out for Jesus?

**Christopher:** Couples tell me, "But we love each other, so we should be able to do what we want." I encourage them to say, "Okay, God is love, capital L. So we must capital L love each other. We're going to express the One who is Love through this union."

So, for instance, let's say a husband wants his wife to have sex with another person. You can use scriptural principles to prove it's wrong. The wife can say, "Honey, this is not okay because Scripture says not to do that." He says, "Yeah, but I'm just fantasizing about it." She can respond, "Then let's look at the spirit of the act. If that's what you're thinking about as the two of us are becoming one, and God hears and knows all, what is this act communicating to him?" I think the average couple can go, *Huh, I never thought about it that way before.*

### Swinging is an extreme example, but you're saying no matter what's in question, go to the heart issue.

**Michael:** Once couples understand the heart of sexuality, they aren't concerned with those detail questions of *How far can I go?* and *What can we and can we not do?* So many Christians are stuck on those boundary questions—Is it okay to have oral sex with your wife?

**Doug:** The husband needs to think, *This behavior is truly okay, but am I violating my wife's spirit by asking her to do something she's uncomfortable with?* It's not as simple as saying oral sex is okay. It may be okay, but not right now,

## Who's Who

Besides being certified Christian sex therapists and counselors in private practice, these co-founders of Sexual Wholeness, Inc., have several other diversified interests:



**Christopher McCluskey**  
Certified Christian life coach.  
Co-author with his wife, Rachel,  
of *When Two Become One: Embracing Sexual Intimacy in Marriage*. Married 21 years.  
[Christian-living.com](http://Christian-living.com)



**Doug Rosenau**  
Ordained minister and one of the first certified Christian sex therapists. Has practiced in the field for 30 years. Author of the best-selling book *A Celebration of Sex*. Married to Cathy 21 years.



**Michael Sytsma**  
Ordained minister and founder of Building Intimate Marriages, Inc. Married to Karen for 21 years.  
[Intimatemarriage.org](http://Intimatemarriage.org)



**Debra Taylor**  
One of the first women Christian sex therapists, practicing in the field for 19 years. Co-author of *Secrets of Eve*. Married to Kent 29 years.

because you're violating your wife's or your husband's spirit by selfishly pushing that behavior in the present lovemaking. But it's equally selfish to be inhibited about permissible pleasures.

**Michael:** Let's take oral sex, for example. Research points out that oral sex has reached the point in our culture where it's almost as accepted as intercourse.

In our field, we see that people aren't asking the question, "Is oral sex okay?" anymore. That doesn't come up nearly as often as, "Is anal sex okay?" Our fear is that culture is leading what is and what isn't acceptable in Christian marriages, and that's wrong. Just because birth control, different positions, different acts are okay in culture does not mean that they're okay before God.

### But there are Christians who will manipulate that.

**Christopher:** The Christian husband who comes into my office and says, "We're here because you're a Christian counselor and my wife is withholding herself from me. I want you to address this from the Scriptures and instruct her that she's in sin because her body is not her own."

Does he have scriptural basis for every argument he's making? Yes. Is he right? No. He's totally missed the spirit of the act, though he could back up every point with Scripture. I tell him, "Everything you're saying may be right by the letter of the law, but it's so far from the spirit of the law that you're the one who's in sin, because you've totally missed the spirit. And if you force your wife to submit to you in giving you her body, Satan will be glorified through what you do."

**Doug:** Scripture clearly teaches against necrophilia. Scripture clearly teaches against incest. Scripture clearly teaches against bestiality. Let's just take those three. They're spoken against in Old Testament law. But I've had people say, "But if I follow Old Testament law, I can't kiss my wife during her period. And I don't hear anybody teaching that one's wrong. If we live in an age of grace, and we're able to throw out any of those rules, why can't we throw out all of those rules?" It's easy to manipulate and twist Scripture; it's really difficult to manipulate and twist the *heart* of it once you capture that.

**Michael:** Which is why I think Jesus always went to the heart of the issue when nailed with specific questions.

### So we shouldn't ask boundary questions?

**Doug:** It's more complex than the boundary question someone may be asking. That per-

son is asking, "Can I do this and not sin?" And I'm saying, "The heart's sinning in even asking the question."

**Michael:** That person's asking a question that comes out of his or her sin, and so we have to address the sin that causes the question; it's invalid because of where that person's heart is.

**Debra:** We need to deal with the heart. Then that original question is no longer important.

### You talk about worshiping God through sex. How can couples embrace that idea?

**Christopher:** Connect it to the scriptural principle of feasts. In the Old Testament God ordained feasts to celebrate his glory. What's a feast? It's eating sumptuous foods, drinking fine wines. If you do that without the right spirit, you get gluttony and drunkenness, and God is certainly not going to be worshiped. But if you worship in a feast while still having discipline, still having boundaries, God says he's greatly glorified.

Marital union is meant to be a feast—look at the Song of Songs. There's so much metaphor that is about feasting and fine wines and good rich foods. See it as another type of bodily feast as the two "consume" each other. It's the consummation of their oneness. They offer themselves for consumption, and God is glorified.

**Doug:** And that requires making sure couples give themselves permission to learn those disciplines—the discipline of feasting, of playfulness, of sensuality—and give themselves permission to be erotic, to be truly naked and unashamed.

**Michael:** A couple can really drink in and enjoy each other. But that means they have to slow down. They have to tune in to the sensuality of it, which is part of the beauty of it all.

### That's difficult to do.

**Michael:** Yes. That's why it takes some 30 to 35 years to have great sex.

**Doug:** A practical way to talk about the discipline of partying and celebrating is Jesus telling us to be childlike. For my granddaughter, play is a way of life. Being childlike is not just about faith. Jesus is talking about that ability to be naked and unashamed. To cavort, to frolic, to laugh and have awe and wonder and anticipation. Oftentimes a couple is more childlike in their dating experience than they are in their marriage. I'm not talking sexually. I'm talking about the creativity and planning little treats and surprises for each other.

**Christopher:** Play replenishes. But the problem is that we either turn our play into a part-time job and wring all the fun out of it, or it's vegetative escape, entertainment, amusement.

**Debra:** Which is not play.

**Michael:** It doesn't feed the soul. It doesn't replenish.

**Doug:** Playfulness really is an important part of spirituality. We've lost that.

**Debra:** Relaxing, refreshing, recreating. There are a lot of couples struggling, and part of it is they've lost the joy of just being together sexually and intimately.

**Christopher:** A paradigm shift has to occur first that says it's not only *okay* to play; it's *important* to play. It's wrong if I don't play. A lot of couples, when they get to their forties or so, have a midlife crisis. They go off and have an affair because it's somebody to "play with." They recapture a spirit of play, but it's childish instead of

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**Debra:** Oh, yes.

## Quickie sex can be worshipful sex?

**Debra:** Yes, yes.

**Christopher:** Because we're talking about making love, not simply having sex, and it's flowing out of the rest of the spirit of the marriage. If they've been playful throughout the day, with little kitchen hugs, and notes in the lunch, or phone calls, or e-mails, or anything that is playful and loving—not necessarily sexual—then it naturally connects.

**Doug:** Structured optimal time for sex, such as every Friday night, can be worshipful like going to church from 10:30 to 12:00 on Sunday morning. But if all we have is structured time with God and never just hang out and "waste" time with him, we're probably never going to have the worship we'd like.

## IT'S NOT ONLY OKAY TO PLAY; IT'S IMPORTANT TO PLAY.

childlike. Right idea; wrong direction. They recognized they were starving, but didn't understand where the real food could be found.

### How can a couple rediscover that childlike play?

**Christopher:** Ask yourself, *What puts my spouse in the most playful moods?* I've had women say, "You know, I've noticed when I get him away from home, away from the office, when we're in a car, he talks. He'll talk and talk and talk. What's that about?" Get him in different contexts.

**Michael:** Part of what I teach couples is they've got to set aside some sacred time and let nothing encroach upon it. That creates a bubble of safety they can relax and play in. But we have such a mindset in our society of, *Okay, I flipped a switch and I can be there.* No, you can't. That's not how we're created.

My son collects lizards. You can't get much stupider than a lizard. I mean there's not much brain there. And they play. They have so much fun just chasing each other around. And I think, *What kind of a God instills play in such a base creature?* That says something about God. And I watch when they do and don't play. They play when their tummies are full and when the heat's right and it's a safe environment. Then they start chasing each other just for the fun of it. And I think, *Well, we can't expect couples just to go in and say, "Okay, it's eight o'clock, it's our playtime."*

**Christopher:** "I got candles lit. I drew a bubble bath."

### Yet we talk about scheduling sex.

**Michael:** That's important to do, but we can't expect all of that to happen at the same time. There are times we schedule sex because it's nurturing and we have to discipline it. But we also need times that we just relax and revel in it, that we get away for a weekend. And it takes 36 hours before we're relaxed enough and calm enough that we can look at each other and say, "Hey, you're kind of cute. Want to go play?"

### So just to bring this all back around. Playful sex can be worshipful sex?

**Debra:** Oh, yeah.

**Michael:** Very highly.

Sometimes you have to do more than that 15 minutes or 45 minutes and have that wasting time together. It's all worshipful, but sometimes to get the connecting, intimate worship, you've got to do the extended time, too.

### This is a paradigm shift, which means we can't expect things to change overnight.

**Michael:** I tell couples it took 40 years of wandering in the desert to teach the Hebrews a lesson. Why do you think you're going to learn it overnight? Some things are more difficult than that. It takes awhile to sink through our thick, sin-filled skulls.

When the goal becomes oneness, the sex gets really cool. But if you make really cool sex the goal, you destroy it all.

For 30 minutes last week, I helped a husband caress his wife's hand and then tell me what he was experiencing. It started with, "Well, I feel her skin." And after a bit, it became, "I can feel blood vessels and maybe nerves." After about ten minutes he said, "These are the hands that touch my face. These are the hands that care for my kids. These are the . . ." He started to go from just the sensations, which were important, to the *meaning* in those hands. And tears began to stream down her face as he was really beginning to experience her.

When we finished, I said, "Hands are the least intimate part of your body. This is the part you'll let anybody touch. But what if you start doing that with all of her body?" How intimate that becomes when you start tuning into the more sacred parts of the body. And is that sexual? Very much so.

**Doug:** One of the church fathers, Jean Pierre de Caussade, talked about the sacrament of the present moment. Michael gave that couple a gift of a sacrament, of truly tuning in, in ways that we don't take time to do.

**Christopher:** And the cool thing is that they'll wind up with a far better sex life because they've learned how to make love.

**Doug:** Which is the point. Great sex becomes ancillary; it's not the goal. We really believe that when you truly learn to tune into God, you're going to tune into each other. And you'll end up with a great sex life.

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For more information on Sexual Wholeness, Inc., to contact Michael, Doug, Debra, or Christopher, or to find a certified Christian sex therapist in your area, visit [www.SexualWholeness.com](http://www.SexualWholeness.com).