

The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex Is Too Important to Define Who We Are By wpstarternepal.com
The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex Is Too Important to Define Who We Are While she poses some hopeful thoughts.

Various paradoxical definitions are all biblically compatible that sanctification is both a crisis and a lifelong process; that the process is one of both great blessing and sometimes great suffering; that becoming Christlike involves both incarnation and separation; that it happens individually but also corporately. I would go so far as to say that very many of the conflicts and ethical horror stories in church life perhaps derive from a failure to battle with both ends of the paradox. She takes on too much of being an anthropologist and too little of a discussion conservatives can't avoid and still need to have respectfully addressed which is what to do with the texts. Who I am and who others are is much more complex than those labels allow and there is something unhealthy about making such a public statement about our inner sexual desires what should be one of the most private parts of our lives. English She approaches the topic of sexual identity from the standpoint of cultural anthropology in effect arguing that the whole idea of sexual orientation as it's understood in the West is a bit of an oddity: not necessarily wrong but just itself carrying a fair bit of cultural baggage. There's enough in here to discomfit both mainstream progressives (what do you mean sexual orientation isn't universal and immutable???) and conservatives (what do you mean homosexuality isn't a 'thing' like other sins?) so she's probably on to something. This is a fair and respectful discussion with chapters on heterosexuality and homosexuality sexual desire and sexual holiness having sex and celibacy and such as a chapter on What is Defined as Real. This suggests that a deeper harder honest dialog is in order not identifying anyone based on behavior (right wrong or in between) but on their willingness to be counted as belonging to Jesus. But how on earth is it possible (let alone right) for Christians to wade in without causing terrible offence or worse? Are there ANY alternative paths into mutually respectful civil and hopeful dialogue? Not as things currently stand in the popular mindset.

WORKING ACROSS THE DIVIDES As evidence that she engages in such conversations it is clear throughout the book that she has many friends and colleagues who take a range of sometimes very different views on sexuality. A conversation with a fellow anthropologist (who just happens to be lesbian) about the sexuality culture wars led them observing the very aggressive and polemical rhetoric employed by both sides. So they decided to do some proper research on it and published a joint paper: Our conclusion was that despite the deep differences between gay and lesbian activists and conservative Christians they might agree that violence is wrong and change their approach in the light of the abundant evidence that violent speech promotes physical violence. DESIRES DO NOT AN IDENTITY CREATE Because heterosexuality and homosexuality are concepts that have only really been around for 100 years or so what were initially medical terms have had all kinds of funny things done to them. In fact according to Paris the words were originally used to describe people who pursued sexual pleasure in whatever way without concern for procreation! (p42) The idea that doctors would even feel the need to label such behaviour with a specific medical term seems utterly laughable and pointless today. The major problem for Christians with heterosexuality and sexual identity in general is that it is a social construct that provides a faulty pattern for understanding what it means to be human linking desire to identity in a way that violates biblical themes. And 'Christianizing' sexual identity whether by affirming or negating the morality of various sexual identities doesn't help because it doesn't address the faulty connections that sexual identity categories make between human desire and identity. (p75) But if desire is not a trustworthy indicator then what is? Well in a Christian framework it must be the gospel of grace that in Christ we can never be truly loved more than we are by him because we can never be loved less than we are by him. So Paris proposes a new identity label: lover and beloved When desire is seen as the sun around which identity orbits both become rigid and unassailable; to question desire is to question a person's selfhood and worth. However when desire is seen as a shifting planet that moves around the stable sun of belovedness one's desire as a child of God can remain in place regardless of how desire changes (or doesn't change). And when desire is respected as a site of conflict and a venue for grace

it remains responsive to discernment and care though this may or may not mean that desire will respond to attempts to change it as Paul lamented so poignantly in Romans 7. CREATING REAL COMMUNITIESThe biggest challenge of this uncoupling of identity from sexuality is that churches have much to repent of and change not least in how it helps nurtures and loves single people (regardless of the reasons for their singleness). (p92)If it doesn't we are all in danger especially as the culture wars heat up:In place of discipleship the adversarial approach offers morality and the inclusive approach offers affirmation. (p106)Then for people who are single but committed to celibacy we need to find ways of nurturing all the wonders of human relationships at their fullest within the Christian community: intimacy comfort practical support encouragement and sharpening up. But as Paris points out:Sexual holiness is strange and celibacy all the because they aren't reinforced by dominant plausibility structuresWhether married single and hoping to be married single and satisfied living with some degree of same sex desire or some combination of these the practice of holiness makes strangers and aliens of us all Long term celibacy becomes plausible when there are widely held values positive languages meaningful social roles and real social support for celibates. (p129 130)There is MUCH to this book than I've been able to cover here it will be a book I will revisit for there were a few things I need to think through a bit carefully:

Sexual identity has become an idol in both the culture at large and in the Christian subculture, And yet concepts like gay or straight are relatively recent developments in human history. We let ourselves be defined by socially constructed notions of sexual identity and sexual orientation even though these may not be the only or best ways to think about sexuality: Anthropologist Jenell Williams Paris offers a Christian framework for sexual holiness that accounts for complex postmodern realities. She assesses problems with popular cultural and Christian understandings of heterosexuality and homosexuality alike, *The End of Sexual Identity* moves beyond culture war impasses to open up new space for conversations in diverse communities both inside and outside the church: But of crucial importance is that our identities in Christ redefine EVERYTHING: In the post sexual identity church.

She leaves far too much unsaid. It is far beyond being sentimental to leave us at the thought of hoping we'll all just agree to disagree. She takes a nice stab at defining sexual holiness but simply holds back and truly lacks any biblical discussion. English I found Paris's insights very helpful in thinking about gay straight issues in relationship to my Christian faith: Her point is that modern society has made too much of the gay straight distinction and that life is much too complex to reduce people to those two simple categories. Though previously I would have described myself as straight I'm leaning strongly toward following Paris's lead and refusing to use that as a label that defines me to others. All this is independent of the moral questions that are so hotly debated about homosexuality particularly its relationship to Biblical teaching which Paris supports. Her contribution though is valuable in cutting through all the side issues that have gotten stuck onto the core questions over the past century and a half. In brief we as a society have not thought clearly about this moral issue and mistakenly added on to it a whole bunch of assumptions and understandings that are not helpful: Definitely worth reading even if you don't end up agreeing with everything she says: English I find this a difficult topic but important enough to try to understand what's happening in sexual identity, She says: The fact that sex is so important and that sexual desire is seen as a central element of human identity is new. At the same time sex is much less than it used to be (10). Even among contradictions this author finds a satisfying balance. I've felt dissatisfied with the state of the public dialog around issues of sexuality, It has begun to feel like a gang war raging outside my door: each side demonizing the other dismissing them with broad generalizations based on the colors they wear: Paris suggests a third way to the thoughtful Christian (and not Christians alone) who hopes to see the question of identity dealt with in a rational way, Her simple point is that our identity is not determined by our feelings desires orientations hopes and dreams. God alone is the source of our identity especially if we name ourselves Christian, So if any

human comes to Jesus if any person is willing to be identified as a follower of Jesus the question becomes how then will they live?: From that place of solidarity each person regardless of how they struggle for purity in the world has the same task to face God and to pursue deeper devotion every day: English I read Jenell Williams Paris' remarkable book *The End of Sexual Identity* over the summer and have been reflecting on it ever since. It is a brave book not least because it wouldn't surprise me if it invites potshots (and worse) from all sides: It doesn't take a degree in political science to gather that the cultural climate in the west has shifted significantly in recent years: To put it crudely Europe has shifted over the last few centuries from a politics of raw power and imperialism to the battle of political ideologies. But the 20th Century put paid to that as the world witnessed the bankruptcy not to mention the horror of the extremities of BOTH left and right, For all kinds of reasons a post ideological politics is much concerned with personal identities: So the current North American and European culture wars are hardly a surprise: Paris is an anthropologist and a Christian and she has specialised in the area of sexuality over many years: The book has a provocative title but it gets to the heart of what she is saying, And for many from either side of the culture wars there will be challenges: But she does so to plead for what she calls for 'Respectful Conversation': It helps no one and simply entrenches people and crushes those caught in the crossfire, And one group who hardly ever get heard are those like Vaughan who seek to take a traditional view while battling with their own difficult realities, Heterosexuality implies that what you want sexually speaking is who you are: A pervasive biblical theme however is that human desire is fickle a mystery even to our selves. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Jeremiah 17:9 10 is helpful: 'The heart is hopelessly dark and deceitful a puzzle that no one can figure out. I treat them as they really are not as they pretend to be: We are known by God truly than we will ever know ourselves, And even when living righteously we like Paul find ourselves wanting things we don't want to want and doing things we don't want to do. (p43)So she has a nice line to help clear away the debris: God created sexuality: (p98)The result is that whenever people ask Paris what her sexuality is she invariably replies that she is 'unlabelled' (despite being a married mother of 3 children): And she is not trying to be pedantic it's simply a helpful way for redirecting our assumptions, And of course this has relevance far beyond the current culture wars: For it means that my identity is not derived from my social status physical appearance wealth intelligence power respectability or anything else, NONE of these things does any justice at all to what it means to be truly human. Any discussion must start here for there is SO much about the church of which I am deeply ashamed when it comes to this issue: In this light one of the most helpfully challenging sections of the book is Paris' articulation of different understandings of holiness and sanctification (p84ff): In particular there's no moral high ground for heterosexuals and no closet for homosexuals. In both approaches we can cling to these outward forms of godliness but deny the real power of holiness. We desperately need to recover the practice of deep and committed friendship especially between men. We need to encourage the Davids and Jonathans of our time, Of course the very notion of celibacy is regarded as absolutely ridiculous and even harmful, For example a church could review the language used to describe its groups and programs and make sure they make room for celibates): But as a helpful aid to dialogue and above all respect I sincerely hope that it will be read by many whether its central premises are accepted or not. For my profound longing is that the very idea of hatred of others who are different from us doesn't even come into it, But it can't if our identity is grounded grace from outside of ourselves: English This book will challenge the current and popular wisdom of defining ourselves predominately by our sexual identity, To define ourselves solely by our sexual orientation is limiting and calls the reader to consider how we describe ourselves: Some may take offense with this book but the challenge is thoroughly appropriate for the Christian church AND those outside of the church who wrestle with this topic, I found it helpful andbreaking my internal boxes I've conceptualized on this topic, English This is an intelligent timely thought - provoking biblically accurate and convicting book, This would be an enlightening read for people on either side of the current debate over homosexuality. Anyone who cares about sexuality or the church should read this incredible work, English I so appreciated this woman's gentle approach to this topic. I too

was raised in a very conservative rather silent on the topic and have to struggle with this in a very personal way, As a Christian minister I am trying to find my way through this mine field I was married several years when my husband confessed to me that he was gay, I have a lot of unlearning to do and I found this book very well researched and compassionate. However the divorced spouse was left out of the discussion so only a 4 out of 5, English recommended for anyone interested in faith and sexuality. It ends abruptly. and shallow. English Paris' book was very encouraging to me. But recently there have been a few grounds for hope. This book is one of them. (p71)Amen to that. No pattern is perfect but this one isn't even close. But I God search the heart and examine the mind. I get to the heart of the human. I get to to the root of things.' (The Message). Desire is not a trustworthy indicator of human identity. People created sexual identity. There's just people each of whom is lover and loved. We as people are far thanheterosexual gay or transgendered. Dr. Williams Paris puts us and sexuality in perspective. I am divorced now. Excellent approach. Thanks. English

Jenell Williams Paris

