

Sex, God, & the Conservative Church by Tina Schermer Sellers PhD is a powerful tool for individuals, partners, pastors, practitioners, churches, and communities who are suffering from the consequences of damaging sexual messages. I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in the connection between spirituality and sexuality, anyone interested in the history of sex and the church, and anyone who is or has felt shame about sex.

However, many people may not be ready for this book. Some may not be emotionally or spiritually mature enough to handle the challenging messages and critiques of cultural norms that Tina gives here. That's ok, no one is ready for the liberating word of the gospel until they are sufficiently open to it.

The book begins with a case study of an inter-faith couple, and I found this odd at first. I wanted (emphasis on "I," not the author or publisher) this book to be for people inside the conservative church as much as for those recovering from it, and this did not seem like the best start to court those readers. It functionally said, "For the readers who are hell-bent on maintaining every belief of your conservative framework, read no further, but if you are open to change, read on." This is actually one of my favorite rhetorical tricks (see Peter Singer's *Famine, Affluence & Morality*). Any conservative who does make it past this with an open mind will find a well structured and thorough argument in support of her premises. The most basic of which, that "the Spirit and the body are not separate things," will surely be a decentering experience for the conservative reader.

In one of the following case studies Tina highlights what is a little discussed double-bind for the conservative christian marriage. If they seek help within their community they are too close to the problem and are likely to get ineffective answers at best and reinforce harmful ones at worst. But, if they look outside of their community for someone with expertise in sexual issues, like a sex therapist, then they are caught defending or explaining their faith instead of working on their issues. This is a truly hopeless place to be, and it is hopefully remedied by this book.

I say it is hopeless, but it is not entirely so. Before books like this, myself and many other men and women hurting from the sex-negative messages turned to 12-step programs like SAA or SLAA, did our best to make progress with a secular sex therapist, did our best to make progress with a somewhat sex-positive Christian therapist, or a mixture of these. For any of these to actually work, they needed to emphasize what I believe are Tina's 4 main premises in her book.

1. The spirit and the body are not separate things.
2. Embodied experience brings us closer to God.
3. Sex is Good.
4. Sexual expression must become about more than intercourse and orgasm.
5. There is power in being seen, known, loved, and accepted.

It is from this position that sexual illiteracy stemming from silencing or punishing sexual curiosity can begin to be overcome. Tina has a process for this called: "Frame, claim, name, aim." It is one of a number of practical methods, reflections, and exercises offered for recovery. The others include:

- Is your marriage becoming a consumer marriage?
- Breaking old rules: following a road map
- 7 continuums of negative to positive (body, sensuality, desire, heart, trust, aesthetic, and ecstatic)
- A series of 4 letters to become open to spiritual sexuality

- The Unified Mind-Body Cycle

So, you get the idea that I liked the book a lot, but no book is perfect. My experience recovering from sexual shame gives me a much narrower perspective than Tina's, and I am certain she had difficulty limiting the scope of the book based on her broad experience, so the following imperfections are to be taken with a grain of salt. There was no focus on conditions caused by sexual shame like vaginismus or sexual anorexia that must be overcome prior to or in conjunction with her method. It was not emphasized that being gay, queer, or nonconforming within the church causes deeper levels of shame and therefore harm. I cannot remember her mentioning that desiring kink increases the silencing and thus increasing the sexual illiteracy. Lastly, I wish it was emphasized that overcoming sexual shame is not a form of repentance or conversion to "true Christianity." One can overcome sexual shame using secular institutions and resources while maintaining one's faith. This book obviously offers a better path, but it is possible.