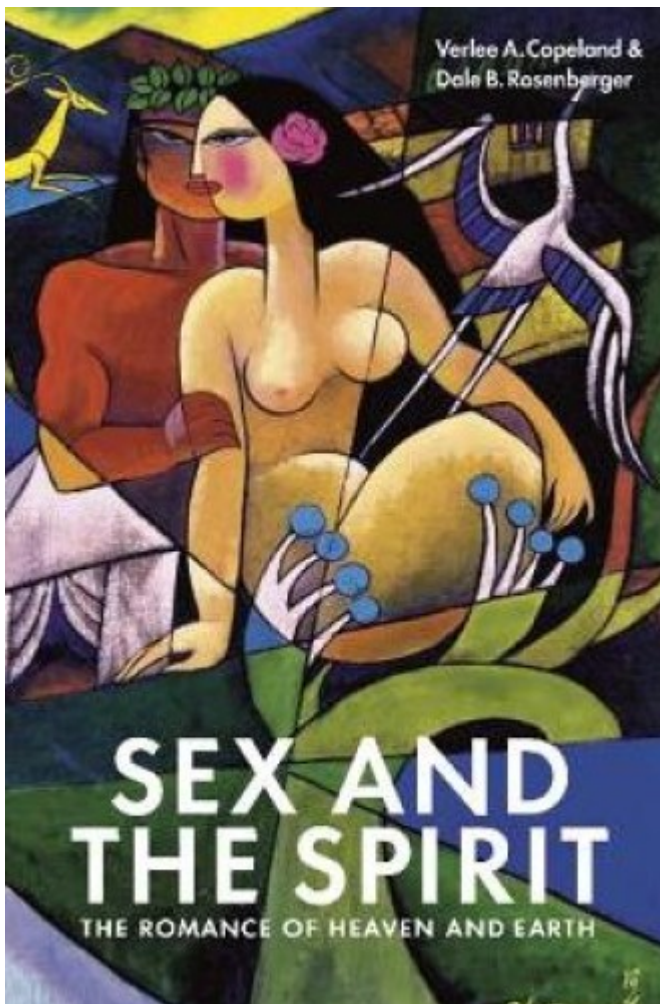


Sex and the Spirit,
by Verlee A. Copeland and
Dale B. Rosenberger

reviewed by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [October 29, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Sex and the Spirit

By Verlee A. Copeland and Dale B. Rosenberger
Pilgrim Press

“Sex and the Altar” was the title our campus minister gave to a series on sexuality, hoping students might mistake it for a similar, more blasphemous phrase. (You have to be creative to get the attention of the 18–22 set.) It worked. The campus ministry house was full to bursting for those talks. In one session, two married clergy of differing orientations and races led a discussion about premarital sex. With passion and emotion, students discussed how to live a life in Christ while being in committed, sexually intimate relationships. After an hour or so, the clergy shared their beliefs, stating that they agreed with the position of our denomination: sex belongs only within the sanctity of marriage. Engaged discussion turned to silence, then anger and fear. One young woman broke down in tears. The students had made themselves vulnerable, and their church had shut the door in their faces. Later the two ministers recanted and explained that they’d wanted to show this contrast.

Mainline churches have struggled to express a theology, ethics, or spirituality of sexuality. The liberal church I attended while growing up was silent on the issue despite being quite vocal on many others. In my twenties I turned a few times to evangelical websites, looking for any kind of theology of singleness and sexuality that I could relate to.

Verlee Copeland and Dale Rosenberger seek to fill that mainline gap, countering both “society’s prevailing affirmation of sex as entertainment” and the “painful chasm between our spiritual and physical natures” in traditional church teaching.

The book’s scope is broad. Written in ordinary, funny, earthy language, the chapters address sexual fantasy, gender difference, marriage, our sexual past, masturbation, foreplay, machismo, infidelity, aging, celibacy, and the sexuality of Jesus. As married heterosexuals who state in the introduction that they “write from what they know,” the authors chose not to address homosexuality.

Sex and the Spirit is biblical. Copeland and Rosenberger rely heavily on the Song of Solomon; creation; the complicated relationship between Abram, Sarai, and Hagar; the treatment of women as property in the Old Testament, the wedding at Cana, and the letters of Paul. I am sometimes frustrated that moderate and liberal Christians don’t engage the Bible more in their theology or political positions on issues of sexuality. I am grateful that these two authors do.

This is the first time I’ve come across sex advice in a mainline church publication. At first I cringed—it’s a bit like having your grandparents leave a can of whipped cream

by your guest bed. On the other hand, it's about time. We should stop pretending that sexuality and spirituality aren't integrally connected. Out of loyalty to my husband, I won't share details, but we've used some of their advice with great success (chapter 13's discussion of "hot monogamy" was one of my favorites). Copeland and Rosenberger tell the story of an upstanding married couple in one of their churches who were arrested for engaging in sexual activity in a parked car and offer their example as one that should perhaps be admired. "Come on, you mainliners," they seem to say, "Let's have a little sexy Christian fun out there!"

Copeland and Rosenberger want readers to come away from their book believing that the words sexy and Christian belong together. Sexuality isn't a superficial pleasure; it's a deeply woven part of our God-given selves. It's an integral part of God's self, too. As Copeland says, "Our God is indeed a sexy God, who loved us into being and made us just this way." Sexuality is part of our spiritual lives as publicly Christian people: "All that happens in every relationship has wide implications for our relationship with God and especially for our place in serving to advance God's reign."

This book is primarily about married sexuality. There is a chapter about singleness and celibacy near the end of the book; however, I wonder if those two subjects deserve their own chapters since the two don't always come as a set. The authors do not devote a chapter to premarital sex, which my campus community so longed to comprehend in a faith context.

But Copeland and Rosenberger offer a lot of information that would be of interest to any Christian asking questions about spiritually healthy sexuality. I had never thought bodice-ripper romance novels to be on a par with male pornography, but Copeland and Rosenberger write that "both are remote, unattainable, and unsustainable in real life, . . . a self-involved, immature recoil to replace the demanding work of negotiating with another, . . . [where we] retreat and hide in our fantasies." On striving to strengthen marriage, they write: "Do we dare consider erotic imagination to be a spiritual discipline?" And I didn't realize that the infamous enemy of sexuality in Christianity, St. Augustine, had a worthy opponent in his contemporary Julian of Eclanum, who, according to the authors, spoke the mind of the Christian mainstream at that time. He taught that "God made bodies, . . . and God made nothing evil," and called sexual desire "vital fire" not (as Augustine called it) "diabolical excitement of the genitals."

The format of the book is sometimes clumsy. The conversational language can be so casual as to be distracting—for instance, when the authors refer to Henry Miller as “no Sunday school boy” or address the married male reader, saying that his wife “pledged [her] lovely bottom to your keeping.” Sometimes more explanation is needed: to nonchalantly comment on “the woman who composed Song of Solomon” or to say that marriage was “God’s idea” without further elaboration leaves questions unanswered. Finally, each chapter includes a “Male Counterpoint” or “Female Counterpoint” in which one of the authors responds to the other. I didn’t find that these had much to do with gender perspectives; the counterpoints mostly reiterated points already made in the chapter.

Copeland and Rosenberger have mature and worthy conversations about sexuality that, if shared, could enrich and illuminate a great many Christians’ lives in crucial, life-giving ways. They’re absolutely right: our incarnate, sexual selves are our Christian selves, and our sexual, incarnate self is our relational self, which relates to a spouse, to family, to friends, and to God. The more conversations we can have in our churches about sexuality and spirituality, the fuller the lives of the Christians in our churches will become. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

I hope church leaders will take the risk of reading and sharing this book and engaging in the awkward but life-giving conversations it will inspire. If nothing else, I’ve noticed in my own congregation that whenever sex is part of the topic for an adult education class, attendance doubles!