

We Don't Age Out of Our Sexuality

Balancing love, desire, and the demands of midlife.

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During the season 6 premiere of *Downton Abbey*, head housekeeper Mrs. Hughes confides to her friend Mrs. Patmore, the house's cook, that she is concerned about intimacy in her impending marriage. "Look at me," she says. "I'm a woman in late middle age." Hughes wonders if it would be better to leave that side of their relationship dormant, living instead with her older husband-to-be as a "very loving brother and sister."

At the episode's end, the older couple has a tender conversation about whether their aging bodies would be desirable. The pair's final embrace leaves no doubt that they will be living not as brother and sister but as husband and wife.

That was 1925. Since then, a whole sexual revolution has taken place. But in our contemporary discussions of sex, the topic of later-in-life sex remains an awkward afterthought.

In the tide of Christian books addressing marriage and sexuality, intimacy at midlife and beyond typically receives a cursory mention in the final chapter, if brought up at all. When evangelical pastors decided years ago to start talking (and talking) about married sex from the pulpit, the scope of many of these lessons was pretty limited: *Have [more](#) sex. Have [better](#) sex.* It was as if we were trying to take our cues from over-sexualized popular culture while trying to one-up it.

Local churches—like the rest of society—have kept their messaging about mature sex...well, immature. Our lessons focus on those who are married and relatively young. Singles have long felt marginalized or ignored in church conversations about sexuality. Those in the second half of life often find themselves in the same boat, relegated as either hormonal eunuchs or couples whose sexual season has long past.

When we solely address married couples in the first half of life, we are speaking to an increasingly small group. Statistics tell us that on average, American women are [now 27 and men 30](#) at the time of their first marriage. By 2020, more than 35 percent of the population will be [over 50](#). Plus, more than half of all adults in the country are [single](#).

As the "senior" demographic grows in the American population and in our churches, discussions of later-in-life sexuality will be part of ongoing discipleship. Especially in contrast to culture's prescription to stay "sexy at 70" and [stave off the effects of aging](#) with drugs that promise to keep us young (and virile), our communities can serve their members well by making spaces where we can speak in frank, God-honoring ways about the challenges of growing older. Topics like:

- ***Our changing bodies:*** From vaginal dryness to the risk of osteoporosis, midlife heralds physiological changes as radical as those of adolescence. What do our aging bodies tell us about ourselves and about the One who made them? How do we come to terms with the sexual changes that accompany the aging process for some in this demographic, including vaginal atrophy and erectile dysfunction? Are pharmaceuticals the best solution for everyone? How do illness and disease shape our sexuality as we age? Our culture celebrates youth and beauty. How do we begin to create a counter-cultural narrative in the church about physical beauty that embraces aging?

- ***Our empty nests:*** Children leave home about the time in our lives when we no longer need to worry about pregnancy. This new freedom can be a time of great physical reconnection and fun for couples. But it can also surface deep, dormant issues in a marriage. The over-50 divorce rate has been rising for decades, and I've

watched a number of married friends grow apart and separate [once they reach midlife](#). What can we in the church do to support couples facing one of the biggest transitions in their lives?

- ***Our caregiving responsibilities:*** Our day-to-day needs or health demands can shift family roles, with the child playing the parent to aging Mom or Dad, or a spouse turning into a caregiver. It can be difficult to give up independence, or see our relationship dynamics change so dramatically. How can we comfort the cared-for as they get used to new rhythms? How can we encourage the caregiver to not be overwhelmed by the needs of her parent or spouse and find time for self-care too?

- ***Our re-coupling:*** Older adults who are single, divorced, or widowed still crave intimacy, and many find themselves dating again. Relationships bring different challenges and temptations at 60 than they did at 20. How do we support those navigating issues ranging from sexual intimacy to finances to merging lifelong networks of friends and family?

There is no age limit on Jesus' promise of abundant life—and this promise encompasses every area of our lives, through every life stage, to the glory of God. Scripture presents a hopeful and life-giving portrait of sexuality for those of us at midlife and beyond. Both Sarah and Abraham, and Elizabeth and Zechariah, each long infertile and past their active childrearing years, conceived children as a miracle from and a testimony to God—a miracle that took place for the aging pairs in the context of intimacy.

A congregation committed to spiritual maturity will honor the growth and longing for intimacy all of us have in every season of life. The author of Ecclesiastes points to a loving, lifelong marital relationship to help us face the challenges of life (9:9). Paul honors singleness as a means of focused service to God, but also offered encouragement to couples for how to honor God and one another by nurturing their ongoing physical relationship (1 Cor. 7).

In their book for singles, [Are You Waiting For "The One"?: Cultivating Realistic, Positive Expectations for Christian Marriage](#), authors Margaret Kim Peterson and Dwight Peterson remind us of what this looks like:

Perhaps what contemporary Christians need is less romance and more love – and we mean real love, not “perfect love.” Real love is unitive and community forming; it weaves people together into familial and churchly networks of mutual care and dependence on one another and on God. Husbands and wives, neighbors and friends, children and grandchildren, widows and orphans, all are adopted into the house of the church and invited to love and care for another another in ways that certainly include the bone of marriage, but include as well a range of other human relationships—all of which involve real connection, real intimacy, real enjoyment of other people and a real participation in the redemptive work of God in the world.

This description might have been written with singles in mind, but I suspect it is the kind of love that would look familiar to *Downton's* Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson. May it be the kind of love that frees us to celebrate our beautiful humanness as we age.

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