

Integrating Differentiated and Christian Views of Sex and Sexuality

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Abstract

The topic of sex and sexuality fills the minds of so many in this world. This can also be tied to the ideas of sex and sexuality in the Christian and differentiated realms of the world. David Schnarch's *Passionate Marriage* and Rob Bell's *Sex God*, reaches out to people that are suffering in their relationships and really gives hope. Schnarch focuses more towards differentiation in the areas of sex and sexuality. Bell is tied to the relationship of God and humans and the spiritual relationship this creates. Both may seem to have their differences but really they have a deep connection in the areas of differentiation and relationships (between God and humans). While comparing the two authors, there is a strong association to their meanings.

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The book *Passionate Marriage* by David Schnarch, Ph.D. focuses on keeping a relationship together through various practices. Mainly, Schnarch focuses on the area of differentiation which as he said, "...involves balancing two basic life forces: the drive for individuality and the drive for togetherness" (Schnarch, 1997, p. 55). To break down the definition of differentiation, individuality is who a person is. It maintains one's own life while in a relationship with another. Togetherness is the feeling of being connected to other people (unity).

Throughout his book, Schnarch points out many ideas related to this topic such as "... differentiation is the ability to maintain your sense of self when you are emotionally and/or physically close to others-especially as they become increasingly important to you" (Schnarch, 1997, p.56). This has so much meaning to it as it could really affect a relationship. If someone in the couple is simply stuck on themselves and not focusing on being differentiated (balanced), then this can lead to a quick fight in the relationship. Schnarch wants everyone to understand that individuals may or may not get along with the other person but one can still have a "sense of self."

Differentiation is a complex topic to grasp. Schnarch does an exceptional job explaining his meanings of the association of togetherness and individuality. According to Schnarch, "Differentiation is the ability to maintain your sense of self when your partner is away or when you are not in a primary love relationship" (Schnarch, 1997, p. 67). This is a common case when one partner in the relationship is called away for work or some other event and the other is left alone. A professional sports player, i.e. golf, basketball, football, would fit perfectly in this category. This time of separation can be difficult for the couple and can cause change in the

“self.” But a couple that can work through this difficulty will become stronger in their bond of sex and sexuality. The “self” is tagged with shock while the other is absent and this can lead to acting out of norm sexually-the use of pornography and masturbation or even worse, cheating on his or her partner. Schnarch really stresses the idea that for this situation to work, you must “... value contact, but you don’t fall apart when you are alone” (Schnarch, 1997, p. 67). Couples that communicate in a healthy regular basis can really strengthen their bond and when the partner returns, expect a fun night of intimate sex and sexuality.

There are so many meanings to differentiation but “Differentiation is different from similar sounding concepts” (Schnarch, 1997, p. 67). Schnarch wants everyone to understand in terms of differentiation that “individualism” doesn’t mean that everyone is setting themselves apart from others or that togetherness is grouping together, but that there is a solid balance between the two. People that live an individualistic life struggle with relationships because they are so distant while someone who is differentiated greets the idea of intimate connections. This differentiated balance allows them to live this healthy lifestyle. Schnarch also says that “The differentiated self is solid but permeable, allowing you to remain close even when your partner tries to mold or manipulate you” (Schnarch, 1997, p. 67). This is by far the most impacting view on differentiation. What impacts a person more than anything? Just a few main topics to answer this would be religion, culture, and trying to blend in with the crowd. Culture impacts everyone across the world as there are various customs to adapt to. Religion also limits the “self” and what people can explore and do in this messed up world. Trying to blend in with the crowd takes the cake. Everyone is about image in America. If someone doesn’t have the right shoes, clothes, car, house, and family, they are seen as different. So when one partner tries to manipulate the other or change one’s “self” by these terms, one can still differentiate, just be careful.

Troubled couples stress all the time that there is lack of communication which will lead to lack of feelings for each other. Schnarch says that, "Differentiation doesn't involve any lack of feelings or emotions" (Schnarch, 1997, p. 68). It is very important that each member of the couple pays attention to the wants and needs of the other. This knowledge won't be gained immediately but over the long span of the relationship. It is also important to realize that Schnarch wants you to have full feelings and emotions in the relationship but not to let the partner take control of one's feelings. These feelings do not control anyone's lives but rather define one's sense of self. Relating to this, Schnarch states that "The self-determination of differentiation doesn't imply selfishness" (Schnarch, 1997, p. 68). Sometimes it is so easy to get caught up in one's own life; living a high life. But a healthy differentiated person balances his or her own needs while including themselves. There needs to be a mutual feeling between a differentiated person and another. If one masters this, it will change their view of others and how to treat others.

Differentiation is passed down from generation to generation. With this inheritance, there are two key ideas that form one's view of differentiation. Schnarch's states that two areas that everyone should address: "First, we emerge from our family of origin at about the highest level of differentiation our parents achieved. Second, we always pick a marital partner who's at the same level of differentiation as we are" (Schnarch, 1997, p. 69). Everyone's parents teach their children morals and the ways of life. With this, one develops an understanding of differentiation, just in a different way. The way one is treated growing up greatly impacts this area. If they are abused or ignored during the adolescence stage, they can be one-sided on the differentiation scale. As a person grows older these skills develop and then typically, a spouse is chosen. Schnarch points out that we choose a partner on the same level as us which can make a great

balance for the relationship. If there were two opposites, then a break up early in the relationship is almost certain.

Schnarch makes many brilliant points about the areas of differentiation and how this impacts relationships. In a comparison similar to Schnarch, Rob Bell and his book *Sex God* provide information similar in reason. Bell is fixed on the idea that God and humans are connected but at the same time separate in a way. Bell's book is about the connection of relationships between people and how they can tie to a relationship with God. This supports Schnarch's view of differentiation as there are two different relationships going on liking to one relationship. Bell states, "The writer of Genesis makes it clear that in all of creation there is something different about humans. They aren't God, and they aren't going to become God, but in some distinct, international way, something of God has been placed in them. We reflect what God is like and who God is. A divine spark resides in every single human being" (Bell, 2007, p. 19). If everyone was created in God's image, then doesn't that make us automatically connected to God? Yes, everyone is connected to God in this way but to truly be connected to God, one must accept Christ into their life.

When a couple begins a relationship or marriage, God is a part of that relationship-after all he *helped* it happen. Humans have this thing called free will. This gift allows humans to make decisions for themselves. Some may believe the idea of "pre-determination" but God simply influences one's judgment. Couples are influenced to date by God but the choice is made by free will.

Differentiation to Bell and Schnarch may seem to come off as different but the deep meaning of the two explanations is similar. When a couple is together, they can choose to go off on their way ignoring God. It seems that everyone does this when everything is going good for

them but when trouble strikes they run after God for help. The path of individual (couple without God in the relationship or one member is with God) can be chosen or the alternate togetherness (only connected to the partner in the relationship). Together they balance the scale to differentiation but only if both are fully connected. Couples need to thank God for all that he has done to get them to where they are. A relationship with God needs to be set in stone with each individual in the couple as well as the couple as a whole. This will build a stronger bond between the two and differentiate with God.

Differentiation is obtainable just like Schnarch noted. Bell said, "You can't be connected with God until you're at peace with who you are. If you're still upset that God gave you this body or this life or this family or these circumstances, you will never be able to connect with God in a healthy, thriving, sustainable sort of way" (Bell, 2007, p.46). This connection is important to have with God if one is to reach the balance of differentiation. God created everyone perfect in their own way but many remain bitter by the lack of abilities which leads to coveting. This coveting in relationships can be issues sexually (any area of sexual dysfunction) or even spiritual areas. The area of sexuality can be focusing primarily on one's partner by being manipulated to only pleasing them instead of a good balance for the "self." Other ways might be that one in the relationship covets another of the opposite sex causing conflict. With God as the center of the relationship-the key to differentiation- it will make things so much better. Struggles will remain as would they with anyone, it's normal but God is there to help.

There is so much tension in differentiation and that is why it is so hard to master. Many people open up but then end up being guarded or even open up too much. There has to be a balance of giving your soul to your spouse (togetherness) and letting her know your soul

(individuality). That is a solid way to prove that you trust your spouse and mainly that you *love* each other. Bell states four important points to the concept of love:

[First,] Love is handing your heart to someone and taking the risk that they will hand it back because they don't want it. [Second,] Love is a giving away of power. When we love, we give the other person the power in the relationship. [Third,] Love is a giving away. When we love, we put ourselves out there, we expose ourselves, we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. [Fourth,] Love is giving up control. It's surrendering the desire of control to the other person (Bell, 2007, p. 98).

Differentiation is covered through here with many examples to back it up. One gives their heart to the other and expects (if truly in love) a return of theirs. But when the other gives their heart, the "self" is still maintained without any lack of feelings or emotions. This quote by bell touches every point that Schnarch made about differentiation minus the two principles. By giving up one's heart for another, it shows the lack of selfishness in the relationship. If someone is on the other side of the relationship and is receiving the heart of the other, they could be manipulated but a differentiated person keeps the "self solid but permeable" (Schnarch, 1997, p. 67).

The topic of differentiation is covered in many relationships, not just related to love relationships. *Sex God* and *Passionate Marriage* have many view of differentiation but each completes the other. Schnarch lists the main points of differentiation but Bell explains them a little further. Bell wants everyone to understand that God is there in relationships as well as individually. God can be the helpful balance that one may need to reach differentiation. With both views on the topic, the "sense of self" is protected yet opened up in many ways. God will be there to guide a relationship as will the concept of free will. Both authors want to connect that there is a path to achieve differentiation but certain tools are needed for the job. In conclusion, differentiation is in everyone's life and the drive to find it is deep within one's soul.

References

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