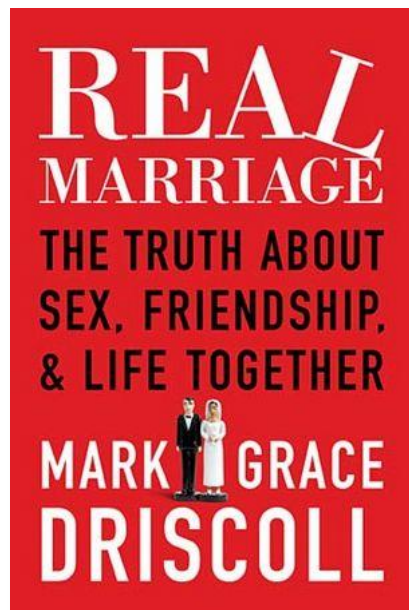


## A Review of *Real Marriage*

By Denny Burk

**Mark and Grace Driscoll. *Real Marriage: The Truth about Sex, Friendship & Life Together*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012. 249pp. \$22.99 (hardback).**

I am no connoisseur of marriage manuals, but Mark and Grace Driscoll's recent contribution to the genre has to be one of the most provocative treatments ever penned for and by evangelicals. In *Real Marriage: The Truth about Sex, Friendship & Life Together*, Mark and Grace share candidly about the significant sexual brokenness that afflicted the early years of their own marriage and about how the Lord delivered them from it. They also discuss in graphic detail the questions that couples frequently ask them about the marital bed. The two-hundred plus pages of this book focus on personal testimony and practical teaching so that readers might walk in biblical holiness and avoid the pitfalls experienced by the Driscolls. *Real Marriage* reads like a marriage seminar that has been put into book form, and there are hints throughout that this is exactly what the book actually is (e.g., p. xiii). *Real Marriage* has eleven chapters that are divided into three major sections: Part 1, "Marriage"; Part 2, "Sex"; and Part 3, "The Last Day."



### Summary

*Part 1, "Marriage"* – Chapter 1 begins with Mark and Grace's story, in which Mark and Grace appear first as an unmarried, sexually active couple; second as an unhappily married, sexually dysfunctional couple; and third as restored and reconciled husband and wife. Their story is as gut-wrenching as it is honest. Chapter 2, "Friends with Benefits" instructs readers about the necessity of being best friends with one's spouse. Chapter 3, "Men and Marriage," is Mark's effort to exhort men to grow up, take responsibility, and be the godly servant leaders that God has called them to be in their homes. Chapter 4, "The Respectful Wife," is the corresponding exhortation to women to respect and to submit to their husbands. Chapter 5, "Taking out the Trash," addresses conflict between spouses and instructs spouses to fight fair and to be quick to forgive and reconcile through disagreements.

*Part 2, “Sex”* – Chapter 6 instructs spouses not to regard sex as “God” (which is idolatry) nor as “gross” (which is prudishness) but as “gift” (which is God’s intention). Chapter 7 narrates Grace’s story as a sexual assault victim and offers some practical guidance to others who bear the scars of sexual abuse. Chapter 8 addresses the pervasive problem of pornography and its devastating impact on both the individuals who produce it and those who consume it. Chapter 9 instructs spouses on how not to be “selfish lovers” but “servant lovers” to their spouses. Chapter 10—which is probably the most controversial in the book—assesses the morality of a variety of sexual activities that spouses might engage in.

*Part 3, “The Last Day”* – The final chapter of the book contemplates concrete steps that couples might take to intentionally plan for successful marriages. It is less of a chapter *per se* than it is a workbook for a kind of self-directed marriage retreat.

### **Some Areas of Appreciation**

Even though I have some theological and pastoral disagreements with this book, I am grateful for some significant common ground.

First, the book is unashamedly complementarian. Mark’s challenge to men in chapter 3 is one of the strongest exhortations to biblical manhood that I have ever read. Mark is particularly strong in admonishing men who prolong adolescence into their adult years: “*There’s nothing wrong with being a boy, so long as you are a boy. But there is a lot wrong with being a boy when you are supposed to be a man*” (p. 43). Mark challenges men to grow up, to take responsibility, and to lead their families. He encourages them to be producers not consumers, to be students of scripture, and to be faithful churchmen. Above all, he encourages husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church. This part of the book is countercultural in the best kind of way.

Grace’s chapter on “The Respectful Wife” is likewise helpful. She encourages women to respect their husbands with their head, heart, and hands. She also gives practical advice to women about how they can disagree, counsel, encourage, and submit in a respectful way with their husbands. The Driscolls argue that the only way to experience marriage to its fullest is to embrace manhood and womanhood as the Bible defines it and to live out the roles that are prescribed in scripture. This is all to be commended.

Second, *Real Marriage* has a gospel-focus and argues that the gospel gives us the only path toward wholeness in marriage. The Driscolls give healthy counsel when they say that spouses should be best friends (ch. 2). Yet they also acknowledge that sometimes spouses find it difficult to maintain this kind of intimate personal connection (ch. 5). Falling out of love usually means that spouses have fallen out of repentance (p. 90). Yet the gospel helps us to have realistic expectations about marriage. It also gives us the resources to deal with the conflict that inevitably comes when two sinners come into close proximity with one another. The Driscolls present repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation as gospel graces and as a necessity for healthy Christian marriages.

Third, the authors open up their own lives in ways that are uncommon. This actually has both negative and positive aspects in my view, but I am grateful to read a testimony that gives evidence of the redeeming grace of God in some difficult years of marriage. Neither Mark nor

Grace have pristine sexual histories, and the baggage they brought with them into their marriage caused significant problems for many years. Theirs is a risky story to tell, but you have to appreciate their willingness to share it. Their testimony could encourage other couples to be more honest with each other about the foxes that are ruining the vineyard.

Having said all of that, my theological and pastoral concerns with this book are considerable, and I will begin with chapter 10. Before I do that, I should warn you that some of the material you are about to read is of a sexual nature and may be offensive. I have tried to summarize and critique as discreetly as possible, but I think that there are still some things here that might raise eyebrows. *Caveat lector.*

### The “Can We \_\_\_\_\_?” Chapter

Chapter 10 of *Real Marriage* will most certainly prove to be the most controversial chapter of the book. It has the simple title “Can We \_\_\_\_\_?,” and the Driscolls fill-in the blank of the chapter title with a variety of sexual activities that are sometimes considered taboo. The chapter goes on to describe these activities in explicit detail, and then the authors give an ethical assessment of each activity for Christians.

The problems begin at the beginning of the chapter where the Driscolls try to pre-empt critics by saying,

*If you are older, from a highly conservative religious background, live far away from a major city, do not spend much time on the internet, or do not have cable television, the odds are that you will want to read this chapter while sitting down, with the medics ready on speed dial.*

*If you are one of those people who do not know that the world has changed sexually, read this chapter not to argue or fight, but rather to learn about how to be a good missionary in this sexualized culture, able to answer people’s questions without blushing (p. 177).*

In my view, these remarks start the whole conversation off on the wrong foot. The authors know that the explicit nature of this chapter will be offensive to some readers. But they address offended readers not by allaying their concerns but by suggesting that anyone uncomfortable with the content must be either a rube or uninterested in reaching the culture for Christ. To those with legitimate concerns, these remarks come across as dismissive at best and patronizing at worst.

The bulk of the chapter gives an ethical assessment of a variety of sexual activities. The Driscolls invoke 1 Corinthians 6:12 as the basis for the evaluation, “*All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.*” From this text, the Driscolls propose a “taxonomy” of questions to assess the different activities: (1) *Is it lawful?* (2) *Is it helpful?* (3) *Is it enslaving?* If one judges a given behavior to be biblically lawful, relationally helpful, and non-addictive, then it is permissible for Christians to participate in that activity. Among the activities that the authors deem permissible within this taxonomy are masturbation, felatio/cunnilingus, sodomy (on both spouses), menstrual sex, role-playing, sex toys, birth control, cosmetic surgery, cybersex, and sexual medication. The Driscolls are careful to stipulate that these are activities spouses *may* participate in by mutual agreement,

but not that they *must* participate in (p. 180). No spouse should be manipulated into doing anything that violates his or her conscience (p. 178). The only item in the list deemed impermissible in every circumstance is sexual assault.

The value of the Driscolls' taxonomy is only as good as the exegesis that it is based on, but in this case their reading of 1 Corinthians 6:12 is fundamentally flawed. The Driscolls read "all things are lawful" as if the phrase were Paul's own declaration of Christian freedom, but that is mistaken. Almost every modern translation<sup>1</sup> and a near consensus of commentators<sup>2</sup> treat "all things are lawful" not as Paul's words but as a slogan that Corinthian men used to justify their visits to prostitutes (cf. 1 Cor. 6:15). The NIV captures the correct interpretation:

*"I have the right to do anything," you say--but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"--but I will not be mastered by anything (1 Cor. 6:12).*

The Corinthians may have been riffing on themes they had heard from Paul (cf. Rom. 6:14; 7:4, 6). But they had twisted Paul's law-free gospel into a justification for bad behavior. Thus the phrase "all things are lawful" is not an expression of Christian freedom from the apostle Paul, but rather an expression of antinomianism from fornicators! Paul's aim in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 is to correct the Corinthians' misunderstanding. One of the reasons for the Corinthian error was the fact that they viewed the physical body as inconsequential in God's moral economy (cf. 1 Cor. 6:13b). Yet Paul refutes the Corinthians on this point and gives them an ultimate ethical norm with respect to their bodies: "*You have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God with your body*" (1 Cor. 6:20).

Driscoll begins his ethical assessment with "Is it lawful?" and he answers the question based on whether or not there is an explicit prohibition of the behavior in scripture. As we have seen, this is a misapplication of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 6. Paul's question is not "Is it lawful?" but "Does it glorify God with my body?" To miss this is to miss the entire point of the text. Sex exists for the glory of God, and Paul only commends activities that glorify God with the body. In order to answer the question "Does it glorify God?," one has to have an understanding of the *purposes* that God has given for sex and whether or not a given activity fits with those purposes (more on this below). This kind of reflection is absent from chapter 10 in Driscoll's book.

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<sup>1</sup> ESV, HCSB, NET, NIV, NLT, NAB, NJB, RSV, NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 251; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997), 101; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, The Anchor Yale Bible 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 263; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 460; Craig L. Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 125-26; C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1968), 144; F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 62; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "Corinthian slogans in 1 Cor 6:12-20," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1978): 396; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *1 Corinthians*, New Testament Message 10 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1979), 49-52.

To be sure, the Driscolls are not the only persons who have ever misread 1 Corinthians 6:12. Nor are they the only ones to use a taxonomy like this one.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the Driscolls' questions are almost identical to the ones that John and Paul Feinberg use to judge the limits of Christian liberty in their book *Ethics for a Brave New World*.<sup>4</sup> Yet the Driscolls' use of the questions is reductionistic. Whereas the Feinbergs have eight questions, the Driscolls only have three. Consequently, the truncated assessment tool leaves out questions that would have mitigated the impact of the Driscolls' misreading of verse 12. The Feinbergs questions are: (1) *Am I fully persuaded that it is right?* (2) *Can I do it as unto the Lord?* (3) *Can I do it without being a stumbling block to my brother or sister in Christ* (4) *Does it bring peace?* (5) *Does it edify my brother?* (6) *Is it profitable* (7) *Does it enslave me?* (8) *Does it bring glory to God?*. Had the Driscolls used all eight of these questions in their taxonomy (especially number 8), their assessments might have been different.<sup>5</sup>

The problems with the Driscolls' advice, however, are not merely exegetical. They are also pastoral. Although some Christian authors comment on the ethics of a husband sodomizing his wife<sup>6</sup>, I have yet to find any who contemplate the reverse. Yet the Driscolls give explicit instructions to wives about how they might sodomize their husbands in a pleasurable way (p. 188). Yet where in the Bible is such an activity ever commended? The Bible only contemplates such activities in the context of homosexual relationships. The Bible condemns the "unnatural" use of bodies between persons of the same-sex (Rom. 1:26-27). Why would Christian couples emulate that unnatural use in the marital bed? What about a husband for whom such an activity might stir up homosexual desires that he has never experienced before engaging in this activity with his wife? I do not think that the Driscolls have reckoned with the view that says

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., Andreas J. Kostenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 83-84; Linda Dillow and Lorraine Pintus, *Intimate Issues: 21 Questions Christian Women Ask About Sex*, (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 1999), 203-204.

<sup>4</sup> John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). Driscoll does not attribute his taxonomy to the Feinbergs.

<sup>5</sup> On the question of limits, I have found a disturbing trend in the literature, and the Driscolls fit in to that trend. Upon finding no specific biblical prohibition of an activity, authors are quick to categorize a given sexual activity as a matter of Christian freedom. But this approach is reductionistic. The Bible has much to say about God's purposes for the sexual union, and those purposes can be used to assess the morality of sexual behaviors. For example, Dennis Hollinger identifies four scriptural purposes for sexual intimacy in marriage: consummation, procreation, love, and pleasure. He then argues that the ethics of any sexual act should be measured by its ability to encompass those four ends. See Dennis P. Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 95. Christian ethical reflection has to take into account the whole counsel of God. Ethical decision making can fall short of that ideal when Christians are quick to label something a matter of Christian freedom simply because there is no explicit prohibition in scripture. An act may fall short of the glory of God because it does not achieve His purposes for human sexuality.

<sup>6</sup> Even those who allow for sodomy within marriage often do so with extreme caution, both for marital and medical reasons. For instance, William Cutrer writes, "In my years of practicing medicine, I have never met a woman who engaged in anal sex because she thought it was 'the best thing going.' Most were doing it because their partners were pressuring them... If couples wish to engage in this practice, they should know that at first it can be somewhat painful, cleanliness is important, anal contact followed by vaginal contact can cause infection, and anal sex carries with it the potential for damage to the sphincter" (William Cutrer and Sandra Glahn, *Sexual Intimacy in Marriage*, 1st ed. [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998], 87).

“immorality” (*porneia*) is possible within the marital bed. The Driscolls may disagree with this point of view, but they should at least engage biblical commentators who understand sodomy as a defilement of marriage.<sup>7</sup>

I can think of a whole range of other pastoral problems that might be provoked by chapter 10. Is sexual holiness really upheld while engaging in cybersex with one’s spouse over the internet (p. 184)? Does anyone really think it wise for Christians to upload digital, sexual images of themselves to the internet even if it is only intended for a spouse? What if a third party were to intercept such an image and make it available to everyone with an internet connection? How the cause of Christ would be shamed by such a result! But the Driscolls give little consideration to the potential consequences of making private pornography even though they admit that keeping such images private “can be nearly impossible” (p. 200)!

Or what about the endorsement of “Sex Toys”? The Driscolls recommend purchasing them “from one of the more discreet Web sites” (p. 193), but this seems to me a precarious proposition. How does a Christian go about finding a “discreet” seller of sex toys? The authors give no specific vendor for such objects. Specific rather than vague guidance might be better here, since a search for “sex toys” is just as likely to connect Christians to pornography as it is to “discreet Web sites.”

Finally, I question the wisdom of addressing sexual topics in such explicit detail. I understand that the authors view their approach as contextualizing the Bible’s teaching to reach modern people who are sexually broken (p. 177). Yet I wonder about how this book will land on Christians whose social context has been one of innocence. I have been far from innocent in my own experience and enculturation, yet there are perversions that even I have never heard of before reading about them in chapter 10 of Pastor Driscoll’s book. It seems to me that there is something wrong with that.

I can only imagine how chapter 10 might land on someone whose experience has actually been one of sexual innocence. I work with college students who tend to get married at a very young age. I meet students who come from sexually broken backgrounds and others who come from sexually innocent backgrounds. Sometimes these students marry each other. I think chapter 10

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<sup>7</sup> It seems to me that the Driscolls need to engage interpretations of the biblical text that disagree with their own before declaring sodomy lawful. F. F. Bruce, for instance, thinks that Hebrews 13:4 has a bearing on this question, “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral [*pornos*] and adulterous.” Bruce comments, “Fornication and adultery are not synonymous in the New Testament: adultery implies unfaithfulness by either party to the marriage vow, while the word translated ‘fornication’ covers a wide range of sexual irregularities, including unions within the bounds prohibited by law” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, revised, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 373). One early Jewish commentator remarks on Leviticus 18:22, “Outrage not your wife for shameful ways of intercourse. Transgress not for unlawful sex the natural limits of sexuality. For even animals are not pleased by intercourse of male with male. And let not women imitate the sexual role of men” (Pseudo-Phocylides, lines 189-92 in Pieter Willem van der Horst, *The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides: With Introduction and Commentary*, *Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha* 4 [Leiden: Brill, 1978], 101). Such commentators are not inerrant, but their views have a long history in the Christian church. Christians have long studied what comprises an “unnatural” sex act, and the Driscolls need to give a better defense of the idea that sodomizing a husband fits within God’s aims for human sexuality.

has the potential to wreak havoc in such marriages where one spouse will feel a whole range of taboos to be “permissible” if he can convince his spouse to participate. This to me seems like a recipe for marital disaster, and I do not think the Driscolls’ requirement of “helpfulness” mitigates the difficulty.

## Purposes of Sex

One of the great weaknesses of *Real Marriage* is its failure to set forth a biblical theology of marriage and sex. There is no other text in the whole Bible that goes to heart of the issue like Ephesians 5, yet there is no sustained reflection on Ephesians 5 anywhere in *Real Marriage*. This is more than just an oversight, for it affects the entire framework our thinking on marriage and sex. Paul argues that the deepest meaning of marriage and indeed of the sexual union is to signify another marriage—Christ’s marriage to His church (Eph. 5:32). In Ephesians 5, we learn that every marriage from Adam and Eve until now exists ultimately to give an enacted parable of Christ’s covenant love for His bride. In other words, the purpose of marriage is to glorify Christ—to shine a light on his redemptive love for His people.

It is only within that framework that we can understand the ultimate meaning of the marital act. That is why Paul can command believers in other texts to “glorify God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:20). In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul specifically has in mind the use of the body for sex, and he still says that the purpose of the union is the glory of God. The glory of the marital act is in the gospel union that it signifies. All the other “purposes” for the sexual union are subordinate to the ultimate end of glorifying God. Where this biblical teaching is absent, so is the framework for putting together ethical standards for sexual behavior within marriage (as chapter 10 purports to do). Again, the fundamental question is not “Is it lawful?” but “Does it glorify Christ?”

## Direct Revelations from God

Much of *Real Marriage* contains personal testimony from the Driscolls, and this is especially the case in chapter 1. The most critical turning-points in Mark’s testimony come from direct revelatory experiences from God, some of which are quite bizarre. After Mark’s conversion, he describes going for a walk and asking God for direction in what to do with the rest of his life.

*I was basically just walking along a river in the Idaho woods, talking aloud to God, when He spoke to me. I had never experienced anything like that moment. God told me to devote my life to four things. He told me to marry Grace, preach the Bible, train men, and plant churches (p. 8).*

This direct revelation would later be the basis for Mark’s continued commitment to the marriage, even though he no longer wished to be married to Grace. Grace writes

*All we knew was that we had made a covenant before God in 1992 to stay married for better and for worse... and God had told Mark very clearly to marry me—it was all we had to hold on to (p. 12).*

Do the Driscolls really wish to communicate that direct revelations from God were the basis of their staying together? Should not the Bible's clear prohibitions on divorce have been enough to bind Mark's conscience to his marriage?

The interpretation of Mark's experience, of course, is entirely dependent upon one's view of the Bible's teaching on the revelatory gifts. Those of us who understand the scripture to teach a cessationist perspective are not going to be compelled by claims that God spoke to Mark like he spoke to Jeremiah or other prophets, nor are we going to feel comfortable setting forth such revelatory experiences as an authoritative norm alongside of scripture. But in some ways, that is exactly how these experiences are presented in the book.

At least one of Driscoll's direct revelations from God looks unbiblical even if one holds that the revelatory gifts are still valid today. Mark writes,

*One night, as we approached the birth of our first child, Ashley, and the launch of our church, I had a dream in which I saw some things that shook me to my core. I saw in painful detail Grace sinning sexually during a senior trip she took after high school when we had just started dating. It was so clear it was like watching a film—something I cannot really explain but the kind of revelation I sometimes receive. I awoke, threw up, and spent the rest of the night sitting on our couch, praying, hoping it was untrue, and waiting for her to wake up so I could ask her. I asked her if it was true, fearing the answer. Yes, she confessed, it was. Grace started weeping and trying to apologize for lying to me, but I honestly don't remember the details of the conversation, as I was shell-shocked. Had I known about this sin, I would not have married her.*

Mark describes a revelation from God on the order of what we find God giving to the prophets of the Old Testament or to John the Revelator. Yet Mark describes his vision as pornographic in nature. Is this really a faithful depiction of the scriptural gifts of prophecy or discernment? Mark's visions seem a far cry from Peter's vision of the sheet descending from heaven in Acts 10 or from Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7. I am not gainsaying Mark's experience. But I am questioning his interpretation of it and the implication that other Christians might expect to have similar experiences.

### **Salacious Speech and the Song of Solomon**

The Driscolls argue that a prudish impulse in the history of the church has led some Christians to regard sex as "gross"—a necessary evil for the propagation of the race. According to the Driscolls, it was in fact this very impulse that has distorted the Bible's true teaching on marital love. This fact is clearly seen in the history of interpretation of the Song of Solomon. The Driscolls write,

*Early in the history of the Christian church, as allegorical methods of Bible interpretation became fashionable, the Song of Songs was explained as being about our relationship with God instead of being a passionate poem about a husband-and-wife relationship... Those who consider, to varying degrees, sex as gross drive this misuse of Scripture. And rather than renewing their minds to agree with the Bible, they instead change the meaning of the Bible to*

*fit their own error, as they simply cannot fathom that God would speak in detail positively about sexual pleasure (p. 117).*

I agree with the Driscolls that the Song of Solomon is mainly about marital love. I disagree, however, with the notion that the content of the Song might be used to excuse sexually provocative speech. The Song of Solomon should not be used as the Bible's permission-slip to speak salacious words about sex. Pastors and authors would do well to explain what the Bible says using the same level of discretion that the Bible itself uses. The Song of Solomon gives us a poetic depiction of the marital act that is cloaked in symbolic language. Should not Christians exhibit similar discretion when speaking about the marital act? Shouldn't our speech about sex be more discreet and indirect than it is provocative and explicit?

### Conclusion

I love and appreciate the Driscolls, and I am really grateful for the testimony that they share about their own marriage. I was genuinely helped by many of the practical exhortations in this book. I think many marriages would be strengthened by the Driscolls' advice on becoming a friend to your spouse. Men would benefit from hearing Mark's powerful call for husbands to grow up, take responsibility, and lead their families. Women would be edified to hear Grace's testimony and passionate call for wives to follow the leadership of their husbands. At the end of the day however, the shortcomings I have identified above keep me from giving *Real Marriage* an unqualified endorsement. Indeed the theological and pastoral errors of chapter 10 alone are weighty, and they are the primary reason that I would not recommend this book for marriage counseling. There are other books that have many of the strengths of *Real Marriage* without all the weaknesses.

