

The Ironies of Real Marriage

A Review of Mark Driscoll, *Real Marriage: The Truth about Sex, Friendship, and Life Together*.
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The first time I heard Mark Driscoll speak I cried. About a year ago I was attending a conference where he was speaking in Florida. He spent a few minutes reflecting on his ministry in Seattle. This city was the least-churched in the United States, and he desired to provide a gospel witness to the people living there. God used Driscoll mightily, and Seattle is no longer America's least-churched city. Though I have been aware of the broad following he has with many young Christians and have heard about some of the controversies he has stirred, I have not followed his ministry very closely at all. As I listened to him speak that day I was moved by his faithfulness in proclaiming Christ. I knew that Mark Driscoll and I were on the same team.

It was in that spirit that I came to *Real Marriage: The Truth about Sex, Friendship, and Life Together*. Because I am a professor who teaches many classes on marriage, a pastor who does ministry with many married couples, and a husband who is married, I have a great stake in books on marriage. I am always interested when a book on marriage is released. I am always excited when such a book is written by an influential Christian leader and his wife with the potential to influence massive numbers of people.

I really wanted *Real Marriage* to be a helpful book and was concerned when I began hearing that many of the reviews on the book were nega-

tive. I was even more concerned when I found, after reading the book myself as well as a number of the reviews, that many of these negative reviews were far too favorable of the book. In fact, I was sad when upon completing the book it was clear that this book is a dangerous and troubling one that will cause confusion and difficulty in many marriages.

It is not as though there is nothing of any value in the book. The problem is that the good elements of the book are so frequently obscured and/or contradicted by very many bad elements of the book. The mingling of these helpful things with a lot of bad things are what I refer to as the ironies of *Real Marriage*. The book is a contradiction. In fact, I think there are at least ten ironies with regard to the Driscolls' book.

The Driscolls say they want to speak candidly, but their presentation is impractical. The Driscolls say,

After years of learning, counseling, teaching, repenting, forgiving, and praying, we believe it's time for us to tell the story of what we've learned and what we are learning. The story is honest, helpful, practical, and biblical. We'll give date night tips, talk about how to set up a marriage, and discuss how to fix a broken marriage. We'll have pointed words for husbands and wives (18).

These words were encouraging to read. Too many couples are left to drift in their marriages existing in churches that have no candid wisdom for them either because they do not know what to say or because they are afraid to talk about difficult topics. The church today is in great need of leaders who will stand up and give bold advice to couples struggling in the dark with problems they think they could never share. I am thankful for the desire the Driscolls have to speak into this void. In fact, I imagine that it is this element of honest sharing that will impact most people positively. Many people will be encouraged to discover that they are not alone in their marriage struggles but are in the trenches with a popular Christian leader and his wife.

The problem with the book is not with the Driscolls' desire but with their delivery. *Real Marriage* is a hard read because it is so poorly organized, but, worse than that, it is impractical. This one is a critique with huge pastoral implications. If your material is disorganized and impractical, people will not be helped by it.

One example of this is Grace Driscoll's chapter on abuse. I read the chapter, and was repeatedly thankful that she was able to find grace to help in the aftermath of her own abuse. I was disappointed, however, because her communication was so disorganized that I fear too few will receive help from it. I read the chapter three times trying to isolate the various, isolated pieces of advice that were not clearly described or cohesively presented. Though it was clear she is better today, I was completely unclear about the specific process that she used. I have counseled many victims of sexual abuse, and my guess is that most women reading the book will be encouraged by Driscoll's candor and hopeful in their own struggle because she was able to find help. I also think most will be hard-pressed to take away from the chapter a specific plan to help in their own efforts at change.

Another example of impracticality was Mark Driscoll's chapter on pornography. Driscoll's chapter was fifteen pages, and only the last few concerned practical help for people struggling with this problem. The rest of the chapter was filled up with facts and figures on the pornography indus-

try, details of how the brain processes pornographic images, and an explanation of why pornography is damaging. I have counseled scores of people who struggle with this problem and have never met one who was powerfully and qualitatively changed by a description of the billions of dollars spent on porn, by an analysis of how neurons work in the brain, or even by descriptions of the deleterious effects of pornography. People struggling with pornography simply do not need these things. That means that the thing people most need is what Driscoll spent the least amount of time developing. I was sad at an opportunity, now missed, to provide so many people with practical help.

The Driscolls say their book will be biblical, but their treatment regularly falls short of this standard. In the quotation I referenced previously, the Driscolls state that their book will be biblical. They make clear in a couple of other places in the book that one of their chief goals is to be biblically faithful (see ix, 3). These are encouraging words to read. There are many books on marriage, but few that reflect God's perspective on marriage. I was delighted by the Driscolls' desire to have a book on marriage that was anchored in the text of Scripture. I was disappointed, however, when I found that much in the book was so deeply *unbiblical*. The unbiblical nature of the book showed up in a number of ways including the rare occasions the Bible was mentioned at all, the bad exegesis that was characteristic of the Driscolls' handling of texts on the few occasions they turned to actual passages,¹ and by the way that the Driscolls regularly highlight their own experience above the instructions of the Bible. It is this last problem that I will focus on here.

The Driscolls are really quite mystical. God talks to Mark and Grace Driscoll a lot. In repeated places throughout the book they each describe hearing the verbal voice of God from Heaven (8, 12, 13, 15, 25, 69, 78, 121). There is a time and a place to discuss the appropriateness of such experiences in an abstractly theological sense. That is not my concern here. My present focus is pastoral in nature. I am concerned that the Driscolls' repeated

references to hearing the voice of God will hurt marriages. Time and again they make clear that the truth that held their marriage together was Pastor Mark's experience of hearing God tell him to marry Grace (see especially p. 12). It is actually astonishing that in the entire account of their difficulties the Driscolls never point their readers to the many passages of Scripture that teach on the permanence of marriage.

This is an enormous pastoral problem because I have talked with dozens of couples where one spouse is just itching to find a reason to walk out. What kept those couples faithful and clinging to their partner were the clear truths in God's Word that he speaks to all of his people. I know so many people that would be discouraged after reading Pastor Mark's experience and would be emboldened to pursue divorce because they have not had a similar one. Regardless of what Pastor Mark believes happened to him, the call to be a faithful preacher of the Word of God points to the error of highlighting one's own experience over the clear instructions of the Bible.

The Driscolls adopt a complementarian vision of marriage but implement it in a confusing way. The Driscolls share an appreciation with all complementarians that the Bible teaches a vision of life in the home where men are called to loving headship and women are urged to respectful submission. Mark Driscoll is clear that a man is to "take responsibility for the well-being of his wife and children" (56). Grace Driscoll is clear that women should be submissive to their husbands and should repent of a sinful disrespect of authority (68). This is a bold and courageous stand. The Driscolls will be maligned for taking such a firm position. Pastor Mark and Grace will be unfairly critiqued for holding a position which will be called chauvinistic. Complementarians should be thankful for the Driscolls' conviction, and pray for them to be able to withstand the criticism they will get for it.

Having said that, the way the Driscolls develop their view of biblical complementarity is unhelpful. This was clear in a number of areas. First, Mark

Driscoll recounts how he invited his wife to be his "functional pastor" (34). Obviously husbands want to be open and live honestly with their wives, but such an invitation smacks of the kind of authority for a wife that cuts against the complementarian vision the Driscolls are trying to embrace. Second, the Driscolls say that a wife gets to decide if her husband is being loving, and a husband gets to decide if his wife is being respectful. They say,

But the verse that sets up the responsibilities of husbands and wives, Ephesians 5:21, commands them to be "submitting to one another." This means she gets to decide if you are loving and leading well as the head, and you get to decide if she is respecting and submitting well as the helper (64).

The primary problem with this assertion is that it is not what the passage means.² A secondary problem is that it is unwise advice for evaluating whether a spouse is meeting his or her obligations in the marriage. Obviously married couples need to be sure that their efforts at love and respect are communicating to their spouse. It is too simplistic, however, to point to one spouse's perception of this as the only way to evaluate it. What about abusive husbands? What about exasperating wives? The Driscolls' counsel will not help in these situations and many others. Husbands and wives need biblical guidance as they make evaluations concerning whether their spouse is treating them as they should. The Driscolls would have served their readers much more practically if they had given some guidance from Scripture about how to recognize loving and submissive behavior. They never do this, and the failure here will cause many couples to evaluate their spouse's behavior in subjective and selfish ways.

Mark Driscoll says men should deal humbly with their struggles but leaves readers wondering if he has repented of patterns of extreme sinfulness in his own life. Driscoll writes wisely to men, "As the family leader, model humility, honesty, repentance, service, study, and worship. Your

life preaches at least as loudly as your words, so teach and model humble godliness by the grace of God” (62). I am so thrilled that Driscoll says this in his book. Literally every man I know needs to be reminded of this. I need to be reminded of this. My concern is that in the book Driscoll does not heed his own counsel. He teaches humble godliness, but does not model it. Let me explain what I mean.

One thing is crystal clear about the Driscolls’ marriage after reading their book, and it is that Mark Driscoll believed he was not getting enough sex in the early years. He offers repeated complaints about this. If there were other significant issues contributing to their marital discord it is hard to tell from the book. The degree to which Pastor Mark believed he was being cheated out of sex was clearly *the* issue in their marriage. Driscoll’s self-assessment that he was sex-starved led him to bitterness against God and Grace, feeling trapped in the marriage, self-entitlement, thoughts of infidelity, frustration, discontentment, regret over their marriage, lust, loneliness, explosive anger, and depression (see 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 120, 162). Driscoll is not the only man to struggle with such sinful responses. The problem is that in the book he never takes responsibility for his role in their poor marriage.

Grace Driscoll confesses to being in an abusive relationship before she met her husband. She then spends pages of humble, honest, and tender reflection discussing how—in her brokenness—she neglected the sexual relationship with her husband. After God healed Grace of her brokenness, Pastor Mark asked her to have more frequent and free sex. She acquiesced, and that was that. Their marriage improved. Grace dealt with her frigidity, and the problem was solved. There is never any fault placed on Pastor Mark for his sin. There is never any regret expressed over his contribution to their difficulties. There is no consideration that his role of leading Grace into a premarital sexual relationship may have contributed to her distrust of him. There is no discussion that his constant anger and badgering for more sex may have raised real and legitimate questions about his love for her. This one was a tragically wasted opportunity for Pastor Mark to *show* repentance instead of merely commending it

to his readers.

To be clear I am not saying that Driscoll never repented for these obvious sins. What I am saying is that, if he did, readers do not know it because he never talks about it in the book.³ This is inexcusable given how clear his sinfulness was and given how much time Grace spent dealing with her own issues. The message from the book is “I wanted more sex than my wife would give because she was frigid. She needed to deal with that. When she did, I told her I wanted more sex, and I got it. Problem solved.” I cringe when I think of how this message will play in so many broken marriages with husbands even more selfish than Pastor Mark.

The Driscolls emphasize the nature of marriage as friendship, but then highlight sex in an extreme way. The Driscolls spend an entire chapter emphasizing the importance of being best friends with your spouse. In many ways I found this to be the most helpful chapter in the book. As they note, the Driscolls fill a void in discussing the nature of marital friendship in a way that few other resources do (see 24). I was deeply encouraged after reading this chapter and went home emboldened to redouble my efforts in building a close friendship with my wife.

Another of the many ironies of *Real Marriage*, however, is that the book does not really pick up this theme again. Most of the rest of the book is dominated by the nature of the sexual relationship in marriage. Obviously sexually intimacy is of great importance in marriage and any good marriage book will deal with it. But sex so dominates the Driscolls’ book that readers will find themselves wondering where the theme of friendship went after the initial mention. The Driscolls talk more about friendship *per se* than most books on marriage. That is true enough. But the rest of the book is framed by their sexual difficulties, and is filled with chapters about pornography, sexual abuse, and detailed descriptions of which sex acts are acceptable in marriage. Though they pay lip service to “friendship,” sex is where the action is in the Driscolls’ book. The problem with this is that even with a maximum amount of sexual activity

couples will still spend most of their time in marriage engaged in activities that happen outside the bedroom. The Driscolls spend a maximum amount of space discussing important sexual matters that are rather less dominant in marriage than other things couples do. The lasting impression that one receives from the Driscolls' book will not concern friendship but sex.

The Driscolls desire for people to avoid a pornographic culture, but much of their book grows out of that same pornographic culture and will guide many people into it. The Driscolls hate pornography. They understand how prevalent, powerful, and poisonous it is. They speak with clarity about the way that pornography degrades the individuals who view it, women, children, and the glory of God. Theirs is a powerful witness against one of the defining sins of our age.

The crystalline clarity with which they condemn pornography is why it is so distressing that much of the counsel they provide to couples is more grounded in our pornographic culture than in the pages of Scripture. Examples could be multiplied, but for the sake of space I will only mention two.⁴ The Driscolls say, "One of our culture's powerful lies—fueled by pornography, sinful lust, and marketing—is that having a standard of beauty is in any way holy or helpful. God does not give us a standard of beauty—God gives us spouses" (108). A few chapters later, however, they commend cosmetic surgery saying, "There are many reasons cosmetic surgery may be beneficial. It can make us more attractive to our spouse. And if our appearance is improved, we feel more comfortable being seen naked by our spouses, which can increase our freedom in lovemaking" (197). The contradiction inherent in these two comments took my breath away. How does the call to delight in the appearance of one's spouse commend expensive and permanent procedures that alter the appearance or enhance the features of the spouse who was supposed to be the standard of beauty before their surgical metamorphosis?

That is not all. In another place the Driscolls say, "Seeking to emulate what their husbands

view in porn compels women to push their bodies beyond God's creation design" (148). Then, only pages later, the Driscolls commend anal sex as a potentially helpful practice in marriage. The contradictory nature of such phrases is astounding. It is difficult to imagine a more degrading, dangerous, and pornographic practice than this one. Few other sexual acts could be identified that more clearly push a woman's body beyond God's creation design.

Another problem with the way the Driscolls treat pornography has to do with the reality that many people will be guided to pornography because of their book. Make no mistake: men and women will be introduced to pornography because of this book. For almost my entire ministry I have been talking to at least one person a week who struggles with pornography. I do not live in some sheltered ministry context away from people with perverse struggles. As true as that is, the Driscolls taught me a lot about pornography I wish I never knew. The Driscolls introduce their readers to the titles of pornographic books, magazines, and videos; they provide technical names for specific kinds of pornographic films; they list the names of celebrities who have starred in pornography; they even provide web addresses where readers can meet people for sex. As I look back on that sentence I am overwhelmed that a Christian minister could be so irresponsible. I can tell you for an absolute fact that there are young men and women all across the country who will read *Real Marriage*, have their interest piqued by some of the details the Driscolls provide, will turn to Google for a search on those things, and will not come up for air again for hours—perhaps months and years. If you or someone you love struggles with pornography the Driscolls' book will do *serious* damage.

The Driscolls say they want to deal with issues that real people are struggling with but lose sight of real people in many of the issues they address. The Driscolls say,

Because we are a pastor and his wife, we really do want this book to be used of God to help people. It's the kind of book we wished we could have read earlier in

our marriage, and wish we could have given to those we served in ministry. So we wrote what we hope is a book that is biblically faithful, emotionally hopeful, practically helpful, sociologically viable, and personally vulnerable (ix).

The Driscolls are not writing a theoretical book. That is a good thing. Marriage is anything but theoretical. Books by ministers who are willing to deal with practical matters that keep real people and real situations in view are always desirable.

Unfortunately, there are all kinds of real people who get lost in the shuffle in the Driscolls' book. Above, I discussed real people who struggle with pornography who will be led astray. Consider another example. Real people who are sexual abuse victims will feel wounded and troubled by this book. The Driscolls make clear that they have hundreds of victims of sexual abuse in their congregation (130). In spite of this the Driscolls commend oral sex, anal sex, and advise, "If your spouse is not getting enough sex, maybe you don't need marriage counseling and long deep conversations as much as you need to try regular sex" (163). I know and have counseled many victims of sexual abuse, and know with certainty that—standing alone, and without qualification—such counsel will send many women into despair at the sex practices they will have to endure.

This reality is accentuated in *Real Marriage* for two reasons. First, Mark Driscoll regularly responds to critics of his explicit language that he is doing ministry in the gritty environment of Seattle. He speaks the way he does because he is addressing a certain context. If true, one would imagine that the knowledge of the many sexual abuse victims in his congregation would commend some modicum of pastoral sensitivity in suggesting such practices to his audience. Second, the responsibility for the difficulties in the Driscolls' sexual relationship was placed on Pastor Mark's wife. The sad reality is that many real women who struggle in the aftermath of sexual assault will be confused, hurt, troubled, and plagued by much of the Driscolls' talk about, so-called, real marriage.

The Driscolls are writing a book on mar-

riage, but seem only lately to be figuring out their own marriage. It is hard to construct an explicit timeline from the details of their book, but it is obvious that the Driscolls have had a very unhappy marriage for the larger part of Pastor Mark's ministry. Grace Driscoll seems to indicate that things have only improved within the last few years (136). During the years of extreme difficulty the Driscolls led premarriage counseling with other couples teaching on the "freedom and joys of married sex," which Pastor Mark admits he was not enjoying (11). He also preached through Song of Songs highlighting, again, the joys of marital sex (14). Such work, Driscoll admits, only increased his bitterness (14). Driscoll also did marriage counseling trying to help people with their sexual difficulties in marriage (15). All of this went on for more than ten years of marriage and ministry with Driscoll being accountable to nobody (16, 34).

It is important to confess that no marriage is perfect, and even pastors have marriage problems. The depth of the problems in the Driscolls' marriage, however, is troubling. It is precisely this kind of marital dysfunction that God means to eliminate with commands for pastors to have a well-ordered home (1 Tim 3:4) and to keep a sharp eye on their life and doctrine (1 Tim 4:16).

The Driscolls write about marriage, but seem to misunderstand the fundamental nature of marriage. The Driscolls write many good things about marriage—some of which I have observed above. They commend complementarian marriage and friendship in marriage, and they argue for a covenant understanding of marriage (53–57). In spite of all this, the Driscolls miss the fundamental essence of marriage. The most profound passage in Scripture about marriage is, arguably, Ephesians 5 where the Apostle Paul states that marriage is essentially a picture of Christ and the Church. Marriage is a profound demonstration of the love Jesus has for his bride. Any Christian book on marriage that approaches faithfulness must address this reality. The Driscolls, amazingly, never even *mention* it. As all the buzz about the book demonstrates, people walk away from this book talking about its sexu-

ally explicit nature. They will not walk away with a clear vision of the gospel of Jesus as demonstrated in marriage. There is no greater loss than this one.

The Driscolls make a point in their book of saying they appreciate their critics only to dismiss them in other statements. The Driscolls say, “We want to thank our critics who help us continually serve Jesus better by the grace of God” (219). This is a humble and wonderful statement. None of us are perfect, and all of our work is marked by a need for improvement. The only question is whether we will embrace this reality or reject it in a spirit of arrogance. It is encouraging to hear such humility from the Driscolls.

That is why it is so unfortunate that Driscoll has rather publically dismissed his Christian brothers who raise legitimate questions about his work. In response to a question from CNN asking what he thought about the negative reviews of his book, Pastor Mark responded dismissively, “Sometimes reviewers will reveal more of their own struggles than actual problems with the book.”⁵ Is this the response of a Christian leader to the careful critique of his work? I have read a few of the other reviews of the Driscolls’ book. I know some of the men who wrote them, and they are examples of the godliest people I have ever met. It is irresponsible and unchristian to ignore substantial critique from wise men by directing aspersions onto their marriages.

I cannot tell you how discouraged I was when I read these words from Pastor Mark. All of us have miscalculated, overstepped, and otherwise made mistakes in work we have done. That is why it is so critical for every Christian to cultivate a heart of humility that receives and even encourages constructive criticism. Pastor Mark’s stubborn response in the CNN interview bodes poorly for his willingness to modify the more troubling portions of his book.

Conclusion

This is longer than a typical book review. There is a reason for that. I hope that after reading it you will not sense the need to read *Real Marriage*. I want to be clear: I have nothing against Mark Driscoll and his wife. Instead, I am thankful for

(what I have been told is) a clear witness to the gospel in Seattle. Having said that, I am deeply disturbed by this book on marriage. This book will hurt people. It is going to create confusion in marriages, trouble in the sexual relationships of married couples, turmoil in individuals struggling with all manner of difficulties, and questions about the nature of marriage from God’s perspective.

When I first received the advance review copy my wife and I agreed to read the book together. I was further along than she, and ultimately asked her to stop reading it. I could not imagine asking her to process all the bad material in the book when there are so many other things she might read that would be beneficial. I pray that you too will spare yourself, those you love, and those in your ministry the many troubles of *Real Marriage* by focusing on a Christian book on marriage that is more helpful.⁶

The first time I heard Mark Driscoll speak, I cried. To be very honest, I also cried when I read his book on marriage. Unfortunately, my tears in each case were for very different reasons. My initial tears were full of joy over a man who so clearly desires to spread the gospel of Jesus. More recently my tears are full of sadness over the message of a book that has strayed so far from the intentions of its authors and will bring pain to many real marriages.

ENDNOTES

¹See pages 175–77. As many others have noted, the Driscolls do not correctly interpret 1 Corinthians 6. They also typically push the language of Song of Songs past any normal hermeneutical bounds as even the scholars they cite seem to understand (see 170, 184).

²This is another example of the mishandling of texts in the book.

³As far as I could tell, the only time Pastor Mark confessed any sin was when he repented of not being a better provider for his family (see 11).

⁴For more examples, see 144, 146, 149, 174, 176, 190–91, 198.

⁵<http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/01/06/pastors-detailed-book-on-sex-divides-reviewers-sparks-controversy>.

⁶There are many good books, but a few examples are Ken Sande with Tom Raabe, *Peacemaking for Families: A Biblical Guide to Managing Conflict in Your Home* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2002); Dave Harvey, *When Sinners Say I Do: Discovering the Power of the Gospel for Marriage* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd, 2007); Stuart Scott, *The Exemplary Husband* (Bemidji, MN: Focus, 2002); Martha Peace, *The Excellent Wife* (Bemidji, MN: Focus, 1999); C.J. Mahaney, *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004); John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage: A Parable of Perseverance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).