

ADAM HAMILTON

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Author of *Making Love Last a Lifetime*



LOVE

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SEX, GRACE, *and* COMMITMENT

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TO STAY

LOVE TO STAY

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ADAM HAMILTON

# LOVE TO STAY

SEX, GRACE, AND  
COMMITMENT

Abingdon Press

Nashville

Love to Stay:  
Sex, Grace, and Commitment

by Adam Hamilton

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*To LaVon,  
I love you more now than the day we married.*



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# INTRODUCTION

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There lies within the heart of most human beings a deep longing for close companionship with another – one who is like us, yet mysteriously and sometimes maddeningly different from us. That heartfelt urge has been there from the beginning, and most of us feel it long before we're aware of our sexuality.

When I was in first grade, before I knew anything about adult love or true intimacy, I asked a neighbor girl to marry me. Though we were only imitating the relationships we saw in our parents, there was something wonderful and exciting about that childhood friendship.

I was in sixth grade the first time I kissed a girl. We had been meeting at the Coachlight Skating Rink for several weeks when she began hinting that maybe we should kiss. So, one night while we were waiting for our parents to pick us up, we sneaked behind the rink. I had no idea what I was doing, and she didn't either. When the magic moment came, we banged our teeth together hard enough that it hurt. To top it off, she had bad breath.

*This is really gross!* I thought. Yet I still liked her and wanted to go steady with her. Eventually we improved our technique, and I came to appreciate the excitement of a kiss.

Then at church, when I was fourteen, I met an amazingly beautiful tomboy named LaVon. We became good friends, but

it took me two years to work up my courage and have a friend ask her out for me! We began dating, and I found that she made my heart beat faster. I couldn't wait to spend more time with her. The first time I kissed her, I knew that someday she would be my wife. We married right out of high school.

I brought certain preconceived ideas into our marriage. I imagined it would be an eternal state of bliss, full of loving feelings and constant excitement. We would make love every night, and she would cook breakfast for me every morning. (Yes, it was sexist, but I was seventeen and didn't know any better!) Every day, we would be happier than the day before. We would never fight, and for the rest of our lives we would never, ever stop wanting to be together.

Those illusions lasted forty-eight hours. On the third night of our marriage, I learned that making love every night was not in the cards. The next morning, when we woke up in our small apartment, I asked, "What's for breakfast?" She said, "I don't know about you, but I'm having a Pop Tart."

I'm exaggerating, but not by much. Both of us learned a lot that first year of marriage. Over the thirty years since, we've experienced times when we didn't think it was possible to love each other more, and other times when we could hardly stand each other. There were several periods when we wondered, Is this marriage going to make it? Thankfully, we've had far more times when we were happy to be together. Today our love is stronger than it's ever been, but I know there will be challenges yet to come. That's the reality of marriage—it has its ups and downs, its ebb and flow, and it requires perseverance, hard work, and from time to time a bit of help.

In this book we'll explore the meaning and mission of marriage. I hope to offer an honest, real, and hope-filled picture of the blessings and challenges of marriage, and what it takes to make it work. Though the book focuses on marriage, so many of the principles can also be applied to other committed relationships and to nearly every other relationship in our lives. I offer the book as part encouragement and part coaching, to help you achieve a love that lasts a lifetime.

In sharing my thoughts on the subject, I'll be drawing on several sources: the wisdom of the Scriptures; the knowledge of experts in the field of relationships; a survey of 5,184 people affiliated with the church I pastor; the stories of hundreds of couples who have talked with me over the years about their marriages; and the experience of LaVon and me during thirty years of seeking to love one another.

No coaching is complete without practice. At the end of each chapter, you'll find a short section called "Reflect and Engage," lifting up an important theme presented in the chapter through story, activity, and prayer. You'll find activities for couples to do together and separately, as well as activities for readers who are single.

My hope is that within the Scriptures, stories, statistics, and activities, you will find practical wisdom to help as you and your spouse or loved one learn the lifelong dance that marriage is meant to be.



# 1

## MORE THAN A PIECE OF PAPER

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*Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." ... So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,*

*"This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
this one shall be called Woman,  
for out of Man this one was taken."*

*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.*

Genesis 2:18, 21-25

An elderly couple lay down for bed one night. The woman said to her husband, "When we were younger, you used to lie close to me." The man sighed and moved closer.

The woman said, "I remember when you used to hold my hand." The man sighed again, a little frustrated, but reached out and took her hand.

Then the woman said, "I remember when you used to nibble my ear." This time the man angrily threw back the covers and got up to leave. Shocked, the woman asked, "Where are you going?"

The man replied, "To get my teeth!"

I love this story. Simple but moving, it offers a glimpse of a love that can last a lifetime – selfless, sacrificial, the kind love that gets a husband out of his warm bed to find his teeth in the cup of Efferdent so he can bless his wife!

As that husband would probably tell you, one of the most important things about love, marriage, and sexual intimacy is that it's hard work. When we fall in love, it seems so easy. But maintaining love over decades – that's another story. Most couples have seasons when they fall out of love. Most report that their sex life seems boring at times. Most think about calling it quits. Most fight fairly regularly. But those who don't give up, who work on their marriage, who endure "until they are parted by death" find profound rewards. This book is written to help you find or rediscover a love that not only stays but deepens over the years.

## **The Changing Face of Marriage**

The social changes of the past few decades have done nothing to dampen the human need for romantic partnership, for someone with whom to share love and intimacy, but those changes have certainly altered the way relationships play out. Divorce rates have declined since their peak in the 1980s, and yet the probability of divorce for a couple marrying today is still between 40 and 50 percent.<sup>1</sup> What's more, many of the couples whose marriages do last will have serious and painful issues to work through.

Young people who have seen the reality behind those statistics, watching as their parents and grandparents divorced, have decided to postpone their own weddings, so the marriage rate has declined precipitously in the past 50 years. In 1960, 72 percent of all Americans over 18 were married; in 2011, it was 51 percent. In 1960, the average age of men and women marrying for the first time was 22.8 and 20.3, respectively; in 2011, the average age was 28.7 and 26.5.<sup>2</sup> I seldom officiate at a wedding where the parents of both the bride and groom are still happily married. Typically at least one set of parents is divorced.

The number of young people choosing to live together rather than marry is dramatically higher as well, and their success rates are even worse than those who marry, with 50 percent breaking up within the first five years.<sup>3</sup> It would appear that whether we're married or cohabiting, we're not sure how to have lasting, loving relationships. And where, at a time when this generation's role models have made such a mess of marriage, would we go to learn about those relationships?

In order to get a driver's license you have to pass a test, and high schools offer driver's education to teach what we all know is essential to safe driving. But a marriage license? To get one in my home state of Kansas, you need just \$75 and a birth certificate. There is no training, no preparation, no certification. Some churches, including ours, require premarital counseling, but when you're young, you may not be paying attention because you figure you know it all and love is enough.

The church where my wife LaVon and I got married gave us one hour of premarital counseling with our pastor. *One hour* to prepare a 17-year-old and 18-year-old for a lifetime relationship! There are so many things I wish someone had told us, though I have to admit that we, like most young people, may not have paid attention.

If you haven't had any instruction and then hit turbulence in your marriage, where do you go for help? You can seek out a counselor, but tragically many of us – let's face it, mostly men – tend to think that going to a counselor is a sign that we're failing. So instead we say to our spouses, "Go ahead, you can see a counselor, but I don't need one." Guys, that's like having a car that you love and deciding it's not manly to take it to a mechanic if it overheats. You can keep on driving it, but eventually you'll ruin the engine. In marriage, it's helpful and sometimes essential to consult an objective third party who is trained in helping couples work through common, and sometimes not so common, marital issues.

With so many people struggling in marriage and young people postponing marriage, does it mean that marriage is

dead? A lot of people think so. It's not hard to find pundits suggesting that maybe humans just aren't cut out for long-term, monogamous relationships. A Pew Research Center study found that 40 percent of people think marriage is obsolete, though interestingly enough a majority of those respondents still want to get married!

In that study, researchers asked people to characterize their level of happiness and found that, despite all the challenges of marriage, those who were married were 11–28 percent more likely to describe themselves as “very happy” than those who were single.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, those statistics don't mean that being single causes unhappiness; many singles are very happy. What it tells me is that marriage isn't obsolete and that the institution offers something valuable to those who figure out how to make it work. It just looks like more of us need help in figuring that out.

## **The Meaning and Mission of Marriage**

Not long ago I spoke to a young couple in our congregation who told me they wanted to move in together but weren't interested in getting married. They said, “We don't know why we need a piece of paper to love and be committed to one another.” Another young man commented how he thought a legal contract for love was silly. In his mind, it was more romantic to love someone who could leave if she wanted. Her choosing to stay showed she wasn't sticking around just because of a piece of paper. His perspective reflected a view held by many young adults today.

Marriage rightly understood is much more than a piece of paper. Christians and Jews believe that marriage was created by God, that it was God's way of addressing a need in human beings. It was part of the very story of Creation, told in the opening pages of the Bible. Some read that story literally, others more poetically or figuratively, but in either case we agree that the story is archetypal and deals with some of the really big questions in life: "Where did we come from?" "Is there a God, and if so, what is God like?" "What does it mean to be human?" and, yes, "What is the meaning and mission of marriage?"

Looking back, I wish I had understood more clearly that marriage has a mission. I was madly in love with LaVon. I couldn't keep my hands off her. But everything else was guesswork. Nobody ever said, "Adam, this is the meaning of marriage. This is your mission statement. This is what you're supposed to do after you say, 'I do.'"

From the first, the Bible makes clear that marriage is a calling from God to care for, bless, and serve another. We are called to channel God's love and kindness to all, but marriage calls us to do it in a special, intentional way toward someone with whom we will partner in life.

In Genesis we find two Creation stories. The first, found in Genesis chapter one, repeatedly states that everything God created was "good." On the seventh day God takes it a step further and declares everything he had made "very good." In the second Creation story, found in Genesis chapter two, we reach the first thing that is "not good."

"It is not good," declares God, "that the man should be alone." This speaks of the hunger each of us is born with for

intimacy with others. And so God says, “I will make him a helper as his partner” (Genesis 2:18).

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## **The new and improved model of the human – woman!**

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God brings to Adam all the animals and birds formed out of the ground. Adam is given the prerogative of naming each and, it seems, the opportunity to find among them a creature who could be a partner and companion. But, says Genesis 2:20b, “no suitable helper was found” (NIV).

God looks at the man and sees the longing in his heart. God says, as I imagine the story, “I have something in mind for you that you would not believe if I were to tell you.” God causes the man to fall into a deep sleep and takes from his side a rib. He closes up the place with flesh and forms a new and improved model of the human – woman!

I picture Adam wiping the sleep from his eyes and taking a look at Eve, so like him and yet so mysteriously and maddeningly different. As Adam’s heart beat faster, he must have thought, *This is what I have been waiting for!* Genesis 2:23 quotes him as saying,

*“This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
this one shall be called Woman,  
for out of Man this one was taken.”*

The narrator of Genesis continues, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (v. 24) – a euphemism for sexual intimacy. The narrator goes on to say that “the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (v. 25). Right here, in the foundational story of the Bible, we find love, sex, and marriage, presented in such a way as to make clear the meaning and mission inherent in the partnership that brings all three together. The story tells us that marriage is God’s gift to men and women, a way of blessing us as it meets a fundamental, existential need we have as human beings. Genesis doesn’t talk of romance or emotion, but rather of God’s offer of a partner – a companion and helper – with whom to walk through this life.

The mission of marriage is for both husband and wife to be helpers, partners, and companions for one another. Being a helper does not imply a subservient role for either the woman or the man. The word for “helper” in Genesis 2 is the Hebrew *ezer*, always used in the Bible to connote one who is stronger coming to help one who is weaker. In fact, it is often applied to God himself in relation to humanity. The idea is not that a weaker person is brought in to serve the stronger, but that two people bring their mutual strengths to the relationship in order to bless one another.

Both parties in any marriage are intended to be each other’s helpers and companions. They are making a covenant with God and with each other to bless and minister to one another. They are meant to be counterparts, to complement each other the way the left shoe complements the right shoe in a long

journey on a rocky road. Ideally, it's an equality that comes from complementary strengths working in unison.

To be a helper is to seek the best for the person you're helping—in the way they can best receive it. Some of us need to be reminded that our job is not to solve all the problems our spouse brings to us; in fact, most people hate it when we try to solve all their problems. When they bring us problems and lay out things that are burdening them, the help we can bring is to come alongside them, encourage and bless them, and build them up—the very things we need when we are troubled. That is part of what it means to be a helper.

## ***Eros, Agape, and the Vision of Marriage***

When I married LaVon, I made a covenant with God to bless her, to encourage her, and to incarnate (“put flesh on”) the love of God for her. I believe I'm called to build her up and help her be the woman God wants her to be, just as part of her job in my life is to help me be the man God wants me to be.

Everything we've talked about and will talk about in the rest of this book shows that these are things we find very hard to do. Part of the reason for the difficulty is built into our very complementarity—in so many ways, those who marry are very, very different from each other. We think differently. We experience things differently. We see the world differently. The things I think are going to bless LaVon sometimes only irritate her. Any man who's ever bought a woman a vacuum cleaner for Christmas—and I have to admit I've done it—knows what I'm talking about.

Men and women may have had difficulties understanding each other's needs from the very beginning. In the Genesis story, when God confronts Adam about eating the forbidden fruit, Adam instantly blames Eve. Reading that passage makes me smile, because this is precisely how marriages work!

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**We still carry the differences that can drive each other crazy, but at least we've been given the blueprints for how to treat each other.**

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When Eve was created, she may have looked at Adam and then at God and said, "Really? Him? This is the best you could do? He burps, he scratches, he never listens to me, and he watches the animals play games all weekend long! When he does pay attention to me, he can't keep his hands to himself! And did you see what he made me for my birthday last year? A broom!"

Adam may have countered by saying, "Do you know how crazy she makes me? She's moody. She's always after me to pick up my things. And the talking! How could one person have so many things to say? She doesn't give me any time just to kick back in my man cave. And when it comes to 'be fruitful and multiply,' I'm not sure she got the message!"

We still carry the differences that can drive each other crazy, but at least we've been given the blueprints for how to treat each other. What the Hebrew word *ezer* (helper) is to our Old Testament understanding of marriage, *agape* is to our New

Testament understanding. *Agape* is of course the Greek word for “love,” or more precisely one of the Greek words for love. Another word, *eros*, has to do with the passionate, sexual side of love—we get the word *erotic* from it. Eros is also the name of the Greek god whose Roman counterpart was Cupid; Cupid’s arrow was said to produce the heart-pounding desire that kicks off the passionate early days of romantic longing.

But you can’t build a marriage or a long-term relationship on *eros* alone. It’s just not possible. Eventually, *eros* must be transformed into something more substantial. Augmented by the desire to help and encourage, to nurture and lift up, *eros* is transformed into *agape*, a selfless, sacrificial love that wishes the best for the other.

*Agape*, which is independent of our own personal feelings, is what God intended for us from the time he created us. Paul describes that love in his famous passage from 1 Corinthians, where he writes, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

Jesus taught and championed this beautiful ideal. He said it was what God seeks from each of us. Jesus, at the end of his life, showed us what that love looks like. As he hung on the cross, he was saying, in effect, “This is *agape* – laying down your life for others.”

Jesus showed us the ideal, the pattern for what love looks like. It’s what we’re called to strive for in all our relationships,

but especially in marriage. Paul writes, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25).

It is a lovely thought. Unfortunately, men and women do not readily display *agape* love toward each other. By nature, I am not selfless but selfish. It is easy to believe that the world revolves around me. I don't automatically think first of others. But as a Christian, I hear the call of Jesus to love LaVon selflessly and sacrificially, regardless of what I'm feeling or what my inclinations are. Christ's very life was *agape* love writ large, and I decided many years ago to follow him. *Agape* is what I'm aiming for. It's what I pray that I might demonstrate more of, both to LaVon and to others.

As we strive to live the Christian ideal, the Holy Spirit changes our hearts in a process called conversion. We are changed from the inside out, so that over the course of a lifetime we're meant to become more and more loving. In twenty years I should be able to love LaVon more fully, selflessly, and completely than I do now. The biblical and theological word for this process is sanctification, or being perfected in love by God.

There are certain practices that seem to help me become more loving. I feel closest to God when I've been praying, worshiping, and studying Scripture, and when I am doing these things I'm also a far better husband. I think less of myself, and it becomes almost second nature to think of LaVon. Conversely, when I drift away from God (yes, preachers drift away from God), I tend to become more impatient and irritable, thinking more about myself and what LaVon is not doing for me.

Our capacity to fulfill the mission of marriage is strengthened by our faith in Christ and our desire to serve him, and by the work of the Holy Spirit as we grow in faith.

To understand the mission of marriage, it is helpful to have a vision of what that mission looks like when we actually fulfill it – to have a “preferred picture of the future” for our marriage.

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**“Across the course of our love  
and our life together, you’ve  
made me a better person.”**

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So, what does it look like when we live out this mission? What is the vision? My parents and LaVon’s parents both divorced; like so many others, we didn’t see the vision lived out by our parents. But as a pastor, I have been able to witness this kind of love many times. I see it when I officiate at the renewal of wedding vows by a couple celebrating their fiftieth anniversary, or when I speak with a husband or wife who has just lost a spouse after a long marriage. I let them paint the picture for me, and I find my vision for LaVon and me strengthened.

Sometimes I get glimpses of the vision from the briefest of comments. Not long ago, I watched the end come for a man in our congregation who had been married for many years. His wife was with him in the care center just before he passed away, and before she left for the day he looked at her and said, “I want you to know this: Across the course of our love and our life together, you’ve made me a better person.”

It was a remarkable testimony of the power of love and of the ministry and mission of marriage. His words reminded me that LaVon has made me a better person, and my hope and prayer is that, should I die before she does, she might say, "You know, over the course of our years together, Adam made me a better person."

There are times when the vision is shown to me in profound and deeply moving ways. The most powerful vision I've seen in my ministry of what marriage is meant to look like is the story of John and Denise.

John and Denise were among the founding members of our church. They and their two elementary-age sons helped in a host of ways as we launched our community of believers.

Denise had suffered a brain tumor many years earlier, but it had long been in remission. Then, about three or four years after the founding of our church, the tumor returned. John and Denise learned that it was cancerous and inoperable, and though the doctor tried to slow its progress, the tumor would not respond to treatment. It was obvious that at some point before too long, she would succumb.

John, Denise, and their sons moved to Columbia, Missouri, to be closer to family. One day several years after they had moved, John called to let me know the end was drawing near. I drove the two hours to Columbia in order to spend some time with them. I rang the doorbell and heard John shout from the top of the stairs, "Adam, it's unlocked. Come on in."

He had just finished giving Denise a bath and was doing her hair and putting on her makeup. I watched as he took her in his

arms, carried her downstairs, and set her gently at the kitchen table. He made us bologna sandwiches, and gently fed Denise, wiping her face tenderly after each bite. Now and then Denise would have a brief flash of awareness, as though she recognized something familiar, but most of the time there was a blank look in her eyes. When we finished, John and I prayed together for Denise, giving her to God.

As I got in my car to start back, I broke down. The tears flowed down my face. *This*, I thought, *is what marriage looks like*. It wasn't about a piece of paper. It had long ago stopped being about sex or romance, fun, or even friendship. This was marital love, a commitment that John and Denise had made, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and cherish one another until they were parted by death.

This is *agape*, and it's something profound, holy, and beautiful. This is God's mission and vision for marriage.

## REFLECT AND ENGAGE

### Wedding Vows Review

They say that you shouldn't sign any document without a lawyer present and a thorough understanding of what you're agreeing to. That may be the case when you are buying a house or car, or taking out a loan, but it's really the opposite in the covenant of marriage. There's no way to fully understand what you're getting into until you've experienced it. You sign on the dotted line first, and only over time do you understand what it really means. If you had any idea what marriage would really look like ahead of time, you might not agree to it at all!

The vows you make are necessarily vague because the meaning of those commitments evolve over time, just as you evolve and change as people. Your spouse will not be the same person on your twentieth anniversary as on the day you married. And neither will you! Because both of you will change over time, what you both need in order to be loved, honored, and cherished will also change over time.

Take time together to think about the vows you made when you married. Begin by finding a copy of your wedding vows, whether you wrote your own or used traditional wording. Take a moment to reflect on them privately, and then discuss the following questions.

- Why did you choose these words at the time you married?  
What did they mean to you at that time?
- What promise has proven most challenging over the years?

Did you expect keeping it to be difficult, or has that come as a surprise?

- What do those vows mean to you today? Are there elements that mean something different to you now than they did when you married?
- Separately, write new vows to one another that reflect your current understanding of marriage and the unique strengths and challenges of your relationship. Come back together to discuss what you wrote. How are these vows different from the ones you said at your wedding?

## **Pray Together**

Make time each day to pray as a couple. Whether you use a written prayer like the one below, speak in your own words, or pray silently while holding hands, seeking God together can bring you closer and invite God's influence into your relationship.

*Dear God, we know that we do not fully understand what it means to love one another unconditionally, but we know that you do. Help our marriage to embody the kind of love you have for us. Give us the courage and humility to seek forgiveness when we need it, and to recommit ourselves to one another and to you daily. Amen.*

## **On Your Own**

Every morning, read the new vows you wrote and think about how you can fulfill those promises that day. Remember the

elderly man who said his wife had “made him a better person”? Ask yourself what you would want your spouse to say about you toward the end of your life. Are your words and actions today contributing to making you the spouse you want to be? What might you need to do differently in order to be a better spouse?

## **If You’re Single**

You don’t magically become a new person as soon as you slip a ring on your finger. The character and values you bring into marriage are developed over many years and continue developing alongside your partner. Think about the type of spouse you want to be. Write down the vows you could imagine making to your future spouse. What promises might be most challenging for you?

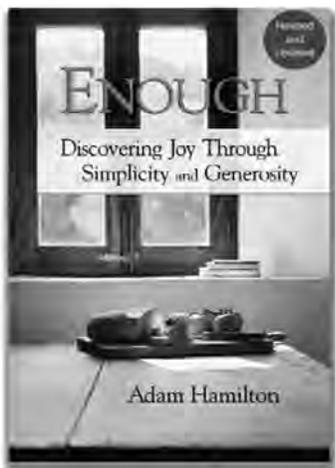
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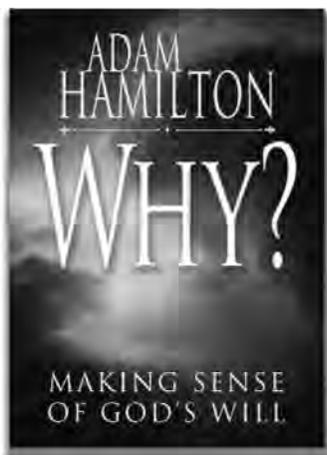
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