TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT SEX IN A BROKEN CULTURE

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Though the Christian *message* of sex and marriage has gone largely unchanged, our *methods* in teaching this message have evolved indeed. For example, as a youth grouper, I vividly remember what I’ll call “the fear method.” “If you have sex before you’re married,” we were often told, “you’ll get a disease, or maybe get pregnant!” The seemingly daily discovery of a new STD made this approach quite effective, especially the scariest of them all: AIDS. When Ervin “Magic” Johnson announced he had contracted the HIV virus, that scared me and my friends pure for at least six weeks.

The obvious consequences to risky sexual behavior aside, the fear approach was (and still is) a bad idea for at least a couple of reasons. First, it’s utilitarian. Premarital sex is presented as wrong because of its potentially negative consequences. Today, however, most of those consequences have been eliminated or at least mitigated. Magic Johnson didn’t die of AIDS, as everyone expected, and medical advances now enable the infected to live mostly normal lives.

And what of that other consequence? Given the ready availability of free birth control and the legalization (and even subsidizing) of abortion on demand, we can largely avoid pregnancy as well. The inherent connection between sex and babies is dismissed these days, a fact that brings up the second problem with the fear approach.

Fear of consequences does nothing to teach the God-given purpose and design of sex. Also, we often got the impression that an out-of-wedlock pregnancy was like contracting syphilis. And it’s worth mentioning, if folks are taught to fear sex, some actually will, even after they’re married. It’s difficult to transition from “this is bad” to “this is good,” even with a ring on.

By the time I was in college, the fear approach had been largely supplanted by another approach: the rally. Large church-sponsored events, at times stadium-sized, featured cool
speakers and hip musicians challenging Christians to make their commitments before God to stay pure until and during marriage, in direct competition with entertainers selling an opposite message. But Christians couldn’t really compete with Madonna or free pornography and, like most emotionally charged events, found that it’s easier to motivate people to make promises than it is to help them keep them. The overall effectiveness of purity pledges is highly disputed,¹ and rumor has it that hotels see a spike in porn consumption when hosting Christian men’s conferences.²

Today, the favored approach seems to be what one of my friends has labeled “Princess Theology.” In this view, chastity guarantees a marital happy ending. Stay pure, students are told, and God will write your love story. Save sex for marriage, and God guarantees “your best sex now” with prince charming (or princess charming). It’s a sort of sexual prosperity gospel only, in this version, the divine genie is more of a cosmic Dr. Ruth than a cosmic Donald Trump.

Statistics do, of course, tell us that married couples have the most satisfying sex lives, but it’s neither a money-back guarantee nor a divine wedding gift. What those statistics reveal is the emotional and physical security provided by marriage. In fact, there are three reasons Christian leaders should never perpetuate Princess Theology.

First, the Bible never promises it. Christians rightly believe that God is sovereign over our lives and human history, and in this sense he does write our love stories. However, we mustn’t forget that God wrote Hosea’s love story too, and many biblical stories with a beautiful beginning did not have terrific endings. Israel’s patriarchs come to mind.

Second, human nature cannot deliver it. Biblical stories clearly reveal, and universal human experience confirms, that no one is a prince charming. Marriage involves two people, and one spouse’s purity does not guarantee the other’s. In fact, we risk teaching husbands and wives to approach their spouse in a demanding, selfish way as if, since they played by the rules, God owes them a perfect spouse. But what of potential life challenges that interfere with sexual happiness, such as illness or disability? What of sexual addictions or frigidity? What of infidelity or abandonment? These situations happen.

Third, our current culture cannot sustain it. We live in a time where the average age that women first marry is older than the average age they have their first child.³ Nearly one in four females and one in six males will be sexually abused by age eighteen.⁴ Average first exposure to pornography by Internet users is estimated to be at age eight,⁵ and rates of porn addiction are at epidemic levels.

In this sexually broken environment, how many young adults can we reasonably expect to emerge unscathed? The old youth group line, “Be a virgin, marry a virgin,” is unhelpful. To what are we referring? A technical virgin? Someone who has never made a sexual mistake of any kind? In that economy, how many marriageable candidates would be left? And what does this say of the restoring work of the gospel?

Admittedly, my descriptions of Christian sex education are overgeneralizations and, at times, exaggerations, but I’m trying to make a larger point: we need to rethink how we
communicate biblical sexuality both inside and outside the church. Living and communicating a genuinely biblical view of sexuality is a powerful apologetic today. We never operate in a cultural vacuum. Our culture has undergone more than a moral slip into debauched activities. It’s undergone a worldview shift. Our gut-level understanding of sex, relationships, love, and marriage has changed dramatically in the following ways.

How Sexuality Is Experienced

It wasn’t easy to find sexually explicit material when I was a teenager. Maybe a friend could sneak his dad’s Playboy or maybe we could sneak a peek at a convenience store. Today, however, there is unlimited and immediate access to sexually explicit material of all kinds. The Internet, smartphones, social media, and mainstream entertainment virtually ensure that we are all consistently exposed to various forms of sexual brokenness. As Josh McDowell once told me, the question for parents isn’t whether our children will see pornography but when. And, of course, things once taboo are now fodder for sitcom jokes, pop music lyrics, or heartwarming family-friendly movies.

Further, the kind of sexual brokenness we experience in our culture is predatory. One mother told me how shocked she was when her nine-year-old asked, “What’s a pervert?” When she asked him where he heard that word, he told her it was from an online popup ad that interrupted his homework. Not knowing what it meant, he clicked on the ad and was exposed to pornography for the first time. He wasn’t looking for it; it was looking for him.

In light of all of this, churches should assume that because most of us have encountered sexuality early and often in a society committed to tolerance and resistant to moral judgments of any kind, we have had very few years of sexual innocence. Not only do we have little control over what sexually explicit images we encounter, we do not choose what definitions, philosophies, and arguments about sexuality we encounter. We live in a sexually pluralistic society.

How Sexuality Is Understood

An old Chinese proverb says that if you would like to know what water is, you shouldn’t ask the fish. Cultural norms powerfully shape our gut-level ideas about the world and ourselves. Thus, it is crucial to understand which gut-level assumptions about sexuality our culture is catechizing into our thinking.

Sexuality has been radically privatized. It used to be that privacy ended at the bedroom door, and care was given to which views, attitudes, and behavior about sex were allowed in the public square. Today, however, pornography, medical technology, and public policies advance as if there are no levels of public accountability. The student center of Shippensburg University (PA) offers vending machines for soda, snacks, and Plan B (the “morning after” pill). Following suit, the Federal Drug Administration decided in 2013 that Plan B should be available over the counter in pharmacies, without a prescription, to girls of any age. Apparently, both the university and the feds believe that not even doctors should have
opinions about a patient’s sexual behavior, even if it’s risky and involves a minor.

Gone are the days when red-faced males had to face convenience store clerks with their pornography purchases. We now surf the Internet alone on handheld devices. When British Prime Minister David Cameron proposed, to counter the predatory behavior of online pornography, that the default setting for Internet providers be to block sexually explicit websites unless the user specifically requested access, he was made out by many to be an enemy of free speech. Apparently, many think unrestricted access to pornography is a basic human right.

Our sexual activities are best kept to ourselves, but it’s a mistake to think that sex is purely private. There are public consequences: for others, for family units, for societies, and for nations. We once thought citizens accountable for the consequences of their sexual activities, but no longer. Whereas the government historically regulated against certain sexual behavior it deemed dangerous and damaging (though not always done well), it now sees its role as ensuring unfettered sexual freedoms. And whereas marriage was long thought to be the best institution for protecting and, in a very real sense, regulating sex, that hasn’t been the case for quite some time. Instead, the government is expected to expand the natural limits of marriage more and more so as to officially express approval of our autonomous sexual choices.

At the root of these changes and shifting legal policies is the cultural shift I mentioned earlier. The recent song “Take Me to Church” by the band Hozier proclaims that objects of our sexual desires are more properly understood as objects of adoration and that the bedroom is an altar where we will find salvation. Sex is “the good life” to be pursued without restrictions or accountability. At root, this song reveals a culture that has embraced a new vision of life or, we might even say, a new religion.

“A culture,” as Rod Dreher observed, “requires a cultus—a sense of sacred order, a cosmology that roots... moral demands within a metaphysical framework.” Cosmology is another term for worldview and consists of commitments about God, authority, human nature, and morality. Ours is a culture that considers God optional, authority self-determined, and morality relative. More importantly, human identity is reduced to sexual preferences and inclinations. To deny someone their sexual freedom is tantamount to denying their dignity. The church must understand that, given this cultural framework, biblical sexuality is not even taken seriously. Instead it is dismissed as unbelievable from the start.

It may seem hopeless to think that the Bible’s life-giving vision of sexuality can gain any traction in these cultural waters. But it’s not. Bad ideas have bad consequences. We may soon rediscover, like generations before us, that the biblical vision is attractive amidst the chaos of sexual brokenness. In the meantime, here are some important things apologists today can do.
We Can Clarify the Beautiful and Holistic Biblical Vision of Human Sexuality

Before we determine what to do with something, we must know what that something is and what it is for. Biblical sexual norms are nonsensical outside of the biblical understanding of what sex is. So we must start again to clarify and explain God’s design. Here are three suggestions for doing this.

First, churches must disciple their own. It is not enough to teach correct values and appropriate behavior. We must ground these values and behaviors, over and over again, in the biblical worldview of human identity as first and foremost bearers of God’s image, and in the biblical worldview of sexuality as God’s great gift that enables spouses to bear God’s image in a new way as one, in order to fulfill his purposes. This is the why that makes sense of the what.

Second, we must continuously counter the wrong definitions of love, human dignity, freedom, and marriage that are continuously being communicated by our culture, and we must consistently propose the biblical definitions of these concepts that are so much richer and truer. Words have meaning, and unless Christians are clear on definitions, our efforts will be futile. Our best seminars and books will only be moral window dressing on a wrong and damaging worldview.

We Can Offer Hope and Healing for the Sexually Broken, Including Ourselves

Paul told the church at Corinth, “Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18). Many churches and Christian leaders are falling for the very real temptation to assimilate to ever-changing sexual norms. The impulse is understandable: stay relevant or alienate people from the gospel. But this is a “devil’s bargain.” We may feel, as I often do, that love and truth are incompatible when it comes to heated issues like sexual orientation, marriage, divorce, and gender identity. However, only the gospel promises forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God, ourselves, and others. By caving where the Bible is clear, we stand in the way of sinners finding what they need most.

This forgiveness is for all of “us” as much as it is for “them.” A sexually broken culture produces sexually broken Christians too. We need forgiveness as much as anyone.

We Can Embody Sexual Wholeness as the Better Alternative that It Is

Sexual brokenness is exhausting and unsustainable for both individuals and entire cultures. Sex, properly ordered, is life-giving in all kinds of ways. When not properly ordered, it dehumanizes and victimizes. There is, and will be, no shortage of victims of our sexual hubris.

Let’s remember that we are not the first Christians located in a culture hell-bent on sexually exhausting itself. The earliest Christians found themselves in a world even worse than ours. Though the dominant myth is that puritanical Christians ruined all the pagan
sexual fun, the truth is far different. As Rod Dreher explains,

In fact, Paul’s teachings on sexual purity and marriage were adopted as liberating in the pornographic, sexually exploitive Greco-Roman culture of the time—exploitive especially of slaves and women, whose value to pagan males lay chiefly in their ability to produce children and provide sexual pleasure. Christianity, as articulated by Paul, worked a cultural revolution, restraining and channeling male eros, elevating the status of both women and of the human body, and infusing marriage—and marital sexuality—with love.  

This should give us hope. One of the church’s callings is to offer good gifts to the world. Sex, properly understood and properly ordered, is one of God’s best gifts. Potentially, this could be one of our best tools for pointing the world to the Giver of the gift. Let’s get on with it. Great opportunities await us.

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