

# How to Teach Sex

Seven realities that Christians in every congregation need to know.

**Stanton L. Jones/ FEBRUARY 9, 2011**

*Last year, a National Association of Evangelicals Generation Forum held at Wheaton College addressed the goal of reducing the abortion rate both inside and outside the church as it also released its helpful study document *Theology of Sex*. Wheaton College provost Stanton L. Jones spoke about how churches could deepen and refocus their message about sexuality. The following is a portion of his address.*

There have been over 45 million legal abortions in the U.S. since elective abortion was legalized in 1973. This loss of human life is roughly equivalent to the numbers exterminated in the Soviet gulags during the Stalinist repressions or the Communist purges in China under Mao—statistics I have used in other contexts to epitomize the depths of human depravity.

What can Christians really do to help reduce abortion? The church's response must be multifaceted:

- We must educate and shape our young people, indeed all of our people in a deeper and truer understanding of sex. Evangelical Christians need to learn to celebrate and embrace their sexuality and to live out their sexuality in holiness, and thus to have no occasion for abortion.
- We must shape the consciences of our congregants and of our communities, especially on the value of human life.
- We must create communities that support sexual restraint and responsibility for the unmarried adults in our midst who often are lost in a "meat-market" culture.
- We must empower church members to be articulate citizens who understand the moral bedrock on which civic law and liberty is ultimately grounded, articulate citizens who exercise their democratic rights to shape the law of the land.
- We need to support those who articulate a thoughtful and effective prophetic witness against killing unwanted human beings.
- We need to extend works of compassion toward children in need of foster care and adoption so that there are viable alternatives for a good life for children spared from abortion.
- We must work to create ways for people to escape poverty and the sense of hopelessness and despair that is too common for many in our culture and from which decisions to perform abortions too often issue.

- We need to contribute mightily to the strengthening of marriage, and strengthen also the support our church communities give to single-parent and broken families in a time when the bulk of abortions are performed not on pregnant teens but on unmarried adult women, many of whom already have one or more children.
- And we must pray without ceasing.

This is a daunting to-do list. I will focus on the first of these calls to action, because a positive, profoundly biblical understanding of sexuality is desperately needed in evangelical churches today.

For a community that prides itself on being "biblical," it is shocking how out of focus our views of sexuality can be. A biblical view of sexuality is a profoundly positive, profoundly appealing, and profoundly life-affirming foundation from which to address the abortion problem. Evangelicals are fundamentally not anti-abortion—at the most basic level, we are defined by what we are for rather than what we are against. We are fundamentally life-affirming and sexuality-affirming because we celebrate the truths that are ours in Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, we start the formation of our young people's understandings of sexuality tardily, anemically, ambiguously, and ineffectively. We are stuck in avoidant, negative, sub-biblical paradigms for thinking about sexuality. Our pastors avoid the topic except for the safest messages, which too often are shame-oriented, "just say no" litanies. We engage easily in negative culture-war rhetoric. Sadly, too many evangelical leaders fail to live up to the standards they proclaim and become very public examples of hypocrisy. Competing views about sexuality take advantage of these failures and seduce our youth.

There are two main competing views of sexuality in today's broader culture. First, there is evolutionary naturalism. This materialistic worldview reduces reality to the physical cosmos. In this view, sex is ultimately meaningless. An evolutionary psychology slogan says, "A hen is just an egg's way to make another egg." Sex is merely the mechanism by which genes replicate themselves.

Evolutionary naturalism is a bleak and cold view, so it is little wonder that another view has growing appeal. I call it "postmodern identity formation." Thinkers like Nietzsche and Foucault posited that persons establish their true personhood by rejecting society's norms, particularly in the area of sexual morality. Nietzsche promised that "Nature" will "surrender her secrets" when we succeed in "victoriously

opposing her by means of the Unnatural." Foucault commended an "ethos of transgression." Thus sexuality moves to become the foundation of personal identity.

It is part of the general human condition to long to be our own gods and to construct our own realities. D. H. Lawrence wrote, "[Men] live in glad obedience to the masters they believe in, or they live in a frictional opposition to the master they wish to undermine. In America this frictional opposition has been the vital factor."

This is Romans 1 lived out as perhaps never before. We rebel now not only against cultural and moral constraints, but also against our most basic biological and physical realities such as what our bodily organs are meant for and even our own fundamental sex as male or female. We rebel also by replacing God and his call on our lives with our sexual behavior, preference, and identity.

Theologian David Bentley Hart accurately characterized modernity's ideal of personal autonomy this way: "We are, first and foremost, heroic and insatiable consumers, and we must not allow the specters of transcendent law or personal guilt render us indecisive. For us, it is choice itself, and not what we choose, that is the first good."

A powerful contemporary model of postmodern identity formation comes from my professional organization. A recent American Psychological Association taskforce rightly notes that some religions (including Christianity) lift up a vision that identity is properly found in striving to bring my life into congruence with a transcendent ideal, something above and beyond myself. In contrast, the "affirmative and multicultural models of LGBT psychology" they espouse are about living in congruence with what we are as we experience ourselves now. They rightly portray a fundamental decision point: Are we to seek conformity with ourselves, or with some ideal outside ourselves?

In the face of these views, what biblical, positive, truthful vision of sexuality is the church to teach? The key elements are that we are embodied, gendered and sexual, relational, made in the image of God, fallen and conflicted, blessed with an objective meaning of sexual intercourse, and souls under construction.

1. We are embodied.

"Then the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7).

To be human is to be a physical, biological creature. Christians view all of physical existence, from the grandeur of the cosmos to the particularity of the human body, as the good creation of a benevolent God. Physical existence is not divine, but it is good.

The goodness of embodiment is also grounded in the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Resurrection. If God can become fully human, bodily existence must not be intrinsically evil or incompatible with the perfect good. Similarly, we also can appreciate our embodiment because the final state of redeemed humanity will be enjoyed in resurrected, perfected bodies. We are more than bodies, but we are bodies.

Throughout history, Christian theology has tilted dangerously away from this truth. In ancient times, Christian theology was shaped by Platonic or Stoic philosophy or even Gnostic understandings that denigrated the body. During the Enlightenment, many exalted human reason, which distanced human experience from its grounding in "lower" faculties. Current reactions against Darwinistic understandings of human nature may feed the same dynamic. Instead, we must affirm that to be fully human is necessarily to be embodied, but also to affirm that we are never merely physical. We are bodies, though we are more than bodies.

How does our embodiment address abortion? Many have puzzled at the downturn of teenage abortion over the past decade. Some speculate that nothing has influenced this more than the proliferation of ultrasound technology, which makes it possible to view the living, moving fetus inside a mother's womb. This growing knowledge about the previously secret life of a very young baby provokes a primal recognition of our shared humanity with the fetus. Knowing that we are fundamentally and irrevocably bodies supports our understanding of very young humans as our brothers and sisters.

2. We are sexual beings.

"So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27). "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). We are not merely generic physical beings but gendered and sexual beings. Some other creation stories in the ancient world viewed sexual differentiation as a mistake. Women were often portrayed as defective forms of men.

In contrast, Genesis declares God's creation of gendered people to be the divine purpose, with both sexes made in the "image of God" and humanity corporately, male and female, declared to be "very good." In the ancient world, this was a radical view.

How does this relate to abortion? Scripture views the prospect of bearing children as fundamental to our gendered natures, and a blessing. Sex is fundamentally intertwined with childbearing. The enormous wedge driven between sex and childbearing in our contraceptive and "sex for recreation" culture has profoundly distorted our view of sexuality.

Scripture also extols the physical pleasures of sexual union (Prov. 5) and links eroticism explicitly with romantic love and intimacy (Song of Songs). The apostle Paul sternly admonishes married couples to fulfill each other's sexual needs, and in a remarkably egalitarian fashion (1 Cor. 7:1-6).

But we must exercise caution here. The concrete implications of sex—procreation, physical pleasure and eroticism, sexual need—are all tied to the physical union intended by God for married persons, yet single persons are no less fully sexual than the married. The Lord Jesus himself is an example of a fully sexual existence as a Hebrew man, but without sexual union in marriage. Scripture gives us little guidance for understanding Jesus' experience of his sexuality, but the biblical teachings that "he was made like his brothers in every way," that he "suffered when he was tempted," and indeed that he was "tempted in every way" suggest that Jesus fully entered into his sexuality as a single man, "yet was without sin" (Heb. 2:17, 18; 4:15).

Our sexuality is expressed in but not reduced to the sexual experiences of marriage. All persons are fully sexual as gendered beings with uniquely male or female bodies, beings with sensations, desires, and gender-grounded emotional and cognitive capacities. Gender is only one facet of sexuality, and gender itself is a construct with many biological, psychological, emotional, and relational dimensions.

### 3. We are relational.

Genesis teaches us to think of human nature as fundamentally relational. The Creator judges the first man incomplete, even though he lives in a perfect environment with perfect work and in a perfect relationship with the triune (and hence intrinsically relational) God. "It is not good for the man to be alone," God says (Gen. 2:18), and God then creates for him the perfect partner. The man recognizes how the woman so

aply complements him, and God declares that because of this reality, "a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Romantic love, then, becomes an important way that we experience this relational reality.

We experience it also in parenting, in friendships, and in other relationships. Relationality is partly grounded in our sexuality. To be sexual is to be incomplete in ourselves, and this incompleteness drives us to relationships. After the Fall, our common human experience is that all relationships, with God and with each other, are fractured. If the primal human sin is prideful assertion of self-sufficiency against God, our sexuality bears witness against our delusions, as our biology cries out that we are not self-sufficient, that we cannot escape the need for a relationship with "the other." Single or married, we know that we are made for relationship.

#### 4. We are made in God's image.

Catherine Beckerleg, a Wheaton College Old Testament colleague, notes that God created the creatures of the sea and the birds of the air according to *their* kinds, and the wild animals and the livestock according to their kinds. But God did not create the first humans according to *their* own kind but according to *God's* kind—in the likeness and image of God (Gen. 1:21, 24, 26).

The cultures around ancient Israel used creation narratives to establish the descent of the king from tribal deities. The point was exclusion: the king was part of the divine family, and his subjects were not. What an inversion we have in Genesis! It establishes the royal and divine lineage of all humanity. We are royalty! We are all the children of God. To be made in God's image also means that we are moral, rational, relational, and capable of exercising dominion. And if all humans are made in God's image, so are our unborn children.

Sexuality seems explicitly connected to working and living out the image of God. Nowhere is this reflected more clearly than in Genesis 5:1-3, where the declaration—again, remarkably inclusive of both sexes and the entire human race—that "when God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them 'mankind' when they were created," and this is followed immediately by the report that Adam "had a son in his own likeness, in his own image." The way Genesis 5 mirrors the language of Genesis 1:26 is stunning. The conception and birth of a son to our primal parents parallels the way God fathered the first humans. God's image cannot

be reduced to simple procreation, but the act of human procreation is somehow part of what it means to be in the image and likeness of God.

5. We are broken and twisted.

Up to this point, it has all been good. The basic, foundational truths about our sexuality are positive. But that's not the full picture. Humanity is broken and in rebellion against God. This has not eradicated the primal good of human nature, but it conditions all of human experience.

We usually think of sins as willful acts of disobedience, but sin also shows itself in the way every aspect of our being is tinged with ruin, decay, and bondage. Our freedom is bounded by our own "addiction" to things that are less than the fullness and goodness God desires for us. This bondage points not only to our rebellion against God but also to an evil force outside ourselves.

Our sexual longings are grounded in our good capacities for union, love, and pleasure, but are always tainted with selfishness, sensuality (physical appetites disconnected from their transcendent purposes), and the desire to dominate.

This is why we experience a deep sense of conflict in our sexuality. We know the beauty, potential, and realized good of our sexual natures, but we never experience that good distilled and pure. Contrary to sexuality theorists who take what is for what should be, our brokenness warns us that we can only learn so much about true human nature from observing our sexuality.

6. We encounter objective reality when we have sex.

Contemporary Westerners believe that sexual intercourse acquires meaning from what we bring to it. Sex may be an act of love and devotion or of mere physical release or even a purely commercial transaction, depending on the intent of those who engage in it. Sex means, we think, whatever I want it to mean.

Ethicist Philip Turner correctly argues that if we believe sexual intercourse has no objective meaning, then we have erased its moral significance. It has become only one among many ways to achieve desired ends. In this scheme, the act itself loses all moral value; only the ends can be judged. Standing in the apostolic tradition, Turner argues instead that sexual intercourse creates a one-flesh union. The creation account, Christ's teaching on divorce, and such pivotal passages as 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 teach us that

God made sexual intercourse to create and sustain a permanent, one-flesh union in a male-female married couple.

The fact that intercourse creates a one-flesh union profoundly challenges our individualism. This is not, though, the only such challenge. We learn from the apostle Paul that the marriage union testifies to something bigger than itself (Eph. 5:32): All Christians participate in a mystical body, which is truly the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), and the consummation of history is not the redemption of a gaggle of individuals but a marriage between the Bridegroom Lamb and his (collective singular) Bride. This reveals a collective identity that none of us properly comprehend. There is more to sex than meets the eye.

7. We are souls under construction.

Who are we, really? To answer that, we need to ask whether the true self is a given that we discover or something that we progressively form. The two great competitors vying for our allegiance in sexuality—evolutionary naturalism and postmodern identity formation—have their answers.

Naturalism is *all discovery*—we are merely what we are—and what we discover is that we aren't much and that we don't matter much. No wonder so many struggle with despair.

Postmodern identity formation is *all progressive formation*—our selves are what we make them through the raw assertion of unbounded human will. Many believe our sexuality, in the words of Turner, "in some way defines the inner depths of the self" and is thus fundamental to the very "powers and abilities [which] the self is to discover, develop, and exercise in the course of daily life." It then follows that "denial of one's 'sexuality' is akin to denial of 'oneself' and so also one's basic 'identity.' "

The Christian vision of personhood takes us in a profoundly different direction: the true self is both discovered and formed.

Understanding our selves begins with the given realities of our lives, by meanings revealed by God and worked out in real community. Further, our selves are grounded in visions of objective realities beyond our selves, visions of virtue and goodness beyond our current abilities. Here is where our formation comes in: in light of what we discover about our selves, we make choices that form us. Our sexuality has meanings and implications that exist independently of what we might think we mean by such acts. We form our selves, our core identities, as we respond to these objective realities and pursue (or fail to pursue) the virtues entailed. Obedience and disobedience mark us and make us.

There is a given nature to the self. Part of what it means to be a self is to discover who we are. Part of this objective reality is our sexuality, one of God's greatest gifts. Proper self formation occurs when our self is submitted to God, who transforms us as we obey his revealed will and we abide in a relationship with a Savior who indwells and molds us. A self that is only discovered is an undeveloped, impoverished self. A self formed autonomously, apart from God, is likewise undeveloped and impoverished, especially when our broken sexuality is elevated to the core of identity. A self that is discovered and then formed in the joyful, painful, humbling, and intimate process of celebrating the gift of sexuality God has given, dying to one's sin nature, and living in costly obedience to God will be the truest and most real self.

D. H. Lawrence accurately prescribed the cure for our disorder: "Men are free when they are obeying some deep, inward voice of religious belief. Obeying from within. Men are free when they belong to a living, organic, believing community, active in fulfilling some unfulfilled, perhaps unrealized purpose .... Liberty in America has meant so far the breaking away from all dominion. The true liberty will only begin when Americans discover ... the deepest whole self of man."

Lawrence was dead right in this. Ethicist Gilbert Meilaender adds, "To be human ... is to learn to live and love within limits—the limits of our embodied, mortal life, the limits of those whose being opens to God. It is to acknowledge, honor, and esteem the particular place—between the beasts and God—that we occupy in the creation."

The Christian church has rightly taught that sexuality is crucial to understanding personhood, and sexual ethics to the formation of the person. We have rightly defended all human life as precious and created in the image of God. We face a daunting challenge in trying to effectively carry our testimony to a secular culture in which people are addicted to thinking of themselves as autonomous beings who can create themselves in their own image. We face a daunting challenge in trying to witness for life in a culture that seems intent on embracing death. We need to seek to deliver faithfully to others that which has been delivered to us: the true revelation of the living God. It is ultimately only in this living Word that we understand human brokenness and its cure.

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