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"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" Isaiah 40:3; John 1:23

Special Issue: Proceedings From A [Baptist] Conference On Sexuality and Covenant

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Why a Special Issue on Sexuality and Covenant?

By Patrick Anderson, editor

This special issue of *Christian Ethics Today* is focused on a single issue. We present here the proceedings of “A Baptist Conference on Sexuality and Covenant” convened at First Baptist Church of Decatur, Georgia, in April of 2012. This is the first time our journal has chosen to publish papers from a conference, and a fair question may be, “Why?”

I know something about the sensitivity some readers of *Christian Ethics Today* have concerning the subject of sexuality. I published an article in 2011 by a 93-year-old retired Southern Baptist minister, Bruce Lowe, which expressed a view of Scripture in which he claimed that denunciations of homosexuality were not the proper interpretation of certain verses generally understood to be denunciations of homosexuality. In the very next issue I published a rejoinder by Howard Batson, a prominent *active* Baptist pastor who took strong exception to Brother Lowe’s interpretation of the passages. Some readers praised the inclusion of the articles, others objected, a few even cancelled their “subscriptions.”

So, as editor of this journal, I thought long and hard about publishing these papers. I attended the conference and participated in the discussions as a small group convener, even though I was not involved in the planning for the conference and in some ways had been lukewarm about the event. But during the conference, it became very clear to me that what was happening was not only historic, but also very important to the church. Prior speculation and news stories wrongly claimed the conference was focused on homosexuality exclusively, or was a first step in the total affirmation of diverse sexual behaviors and lifestyles as normative for the Christian. Some observers believed that any discussions about sexuality were toxic for the church, too

politically charged, too controversial, too this and too that.

The conference itself, as the papers herein show, focused not only on titillating issues surrounding sexuality, but the deeper matters of *covenant* between followers of Jesus. These papers express deep feelings, serious reflections, important interpretations of spirituality and covenant. When I learned that the original sponsors of the conference had decided not to pursue the publication of the papers, I ask for and received permission to do so on behalf of *Christian Ethics Today*.

I consulted with the board of directors of *Christian Ethics Today* and

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together we discussed whether, how, and when to publish the papers. The final conclusion was to publish the papers as they were presented, as a special volume of “proceedings” from the conference. In addition we will publish the papers along with some other materials in book form. We concluded that it would be wrong for us to ignore the subject of sexuality in a journal called *Christian Ethics Today*, that our purpose statement calls us to address all issues of importance to followers of Jesus, that although other ethics journals or organizations avoid the subject we would do this to fill a void in Baptist ethics literature.

Sometimes we followers of Jesus have a tendency to talk about everything except what is important or, better said, we tend to talk about everything *with each other* except what is on every-

body’s mind. Even in high theological discussions we tend to keep it either simple or esoteric, attempting to avoid direct engagement with the topics.

During the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement, while I was a student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, I remember the chosen ethics topics of professorial and chapel speaker presentations to be whether girls should wear off-the-shoulder gowns during GA coronations and the propriety or impropriety of *glossolalia*. This, while the planes could be heard flying overhead from Carswell Air Force Base taking materiel to Guam to support the war and returning with body bags containing the remains of the fallen, and while American cities burned with racial hatred.

Indeed, even today we tend to shy away from thorny issues either by lumping them in categories which are easily bifurcated or by choosing not to address them at all in the name of being non-divisive. Abortion, capital punishment, and same-sex marriage are usually presented as point-counterpoint questions, for instance. This makes the issues seem simpler than they are by limiting discussion to “are you fer it or agin’ it?” debates. The role of women in the church or choices of denominational affiliations are avoided by many congregations in an attempt to avoid divisiveness, as though the decision to avoid the subjects is not in itself divisive.

This is where many of us Jesus-followers and congregations have left issues regarding human sexuality. The subject scares some of us to death, unless or until we are confronted with the issues within our own families or friendship circles. So, we avoid the subject. Out of sight and out of mind or head in the sand, that’s us. “Are you fer it or agin’ it?” some ask. “Let’s not talk about divisive subjects like that,” oth-

ers say. If someone wishes to bring up subjects regarding sexuality for serious consideration within our communities of faith, often it is like trying to argue with a deaf person. Arguing deaf persons get agitated and use dramatic sign language, dramatic facial expressions, lots of shaking of heads and pointing of fingers, strong gestures of strong opinions. But when one of the disputants wishes to make the last final point, or just shut off the conversation, all she has to do is finish her gestured statement and then shut her eyes and turn away. It is very frustrating to the other. It is impossible to converse with a deaf person who will not open his or her eyes.

But just because we close our eyes to issues regarding sexuality and shut out the discomfiting subject does not mean the issues are not real. Sexuality pervades every aspect of modern living. No one escapes it. Popular culture is saturated with sex. Advertisers, newscasters, and cheerleaders all know that more skin means more audience. Prepubescent children, geriatric adults, and everyone in between are very interested in sex according to every scientific study. There is no escape from the influence of sexuality in culture.

Sexuality is placed before us in flamboyant public displays by persons like Lady Gaga or Britney Spears or Kim Kardashian. Old timers remember Mae West or Marilyn Monroe or Miss Kitty; but how tame they seem by today's standards. If you are old enough to remember Playboy bunnies or Muriel cigar girls you know this is not new. But still you also recognize the extreme to which we have evolved since those simpler examples of titillation. Early television depicted married couples sleeping in separate single beds. Later, we thought manly Rock Hudson and beautiful Doris Day were an ideal couple, until Hudson died of AIDS and was mourned publicly by his live-in male lover.

Those illusions were nowhere more prevalent than in the churches of my youth. Professor Bill Leonard has rightly taught us that Baptist churches did not acknowledge homosexual-

ity in the church until many of our organists began to die of AIDS. Rather than whispers of sexual orientation, I remember church debates about whether divorced men could serve as deacons. Those were the days.

In today's church, grown-up Sunday School class members frequently tell of granddaughters or nephews who have "come out" and are living in loving relationships with partners of the same gender. Many of our children and grandchildren see no impediment to ordained ministry merely because of sexual orientation. Sexual activity outside of marriage is a norm even among many of the most conservative Christians, young and old. Research on the sexual activity of kids signing pledges of "true love waits" demonstrate little difference in sexual behaviors from kids who do not share the pledge. Christian denominations from the Roman Catholic Church to fundamentalist Baptists and Pentecostals attempt to tamp down the tendency toward "affirming and embracing" open same sex orientation, while others like United Churches of Christ join the parade of acceptance.

Still, back in our Sunday School classes, we learn in honest conversation that widows and widowers struggle with their own sexuality. Many of us are intimately connected with loved ones, truly *loved* ones, who just a short time ago would have been disowned as deviants or perverts. Meanwhile, down the hall, the teenager Sunday School class members look at homosexuality as Eskimos look at snow, and large numbers are on birth control. Times, they are a'changing.

All of this is fodder for serious Christian discussion and deserving of ethical attention. We need a renewed emphasis on covenant relationships. We have learned the heavy toll of suicide, depression, mental illness, violence... so much hurt...resulting from the struggles of our young with sexual orientation. Unplanned pregnancies outside of marriage have troubling aspects. Abortion is only one of myriad issues related to childbearing. We know the terrible hurt associated with infidelity

in marriage, public shame and embarrassment heaped on sexual sinners, disappointment with political and moral leaders who have publicly been exposed because of irresponsible, inappropriate sex. Baptist churches have long dealt with ministers who fall and the Catholic Church deals with pedophilia. Can anyone claim that the church is not a proper venue for serious discussion about all topics related to sexuality?

The conclusion of *Christian Ethics Today* is that we must include sexuality among *the moral and ethical issues that are of concern to contemporary Christians, to the church, and to society*. That is our mission. Sexuality is not the *only* such issue, but it is one.

Therefore, we are publishing the papers which were first presented at "A Baptist Conference on Sexuality and Covenant" convened at First Baptist Church of Decatur, Georgia, in April of 2012. The conference was designed and sponsored by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology. Over a three-day period, the papers contained herein were presented and discussed. Several topics of sexuality were included: divorce, homosexuality, dating, geriatric sexual activity...all with an eye on the implications for the church, especially the Baptist church, and another eye closely focused on the teachings of Scripture. The persistent context was the importance of *covenant* in all relationships.

We are presenting these proceedings from that conference with the strong hope that they will provide *laypersons, educators, and ministers with a resource for understanding and responding in a faithful Christian manner* to issues regarding sexuality, again, as our mission statement says.

We hope these papers will be a framework for further discussion and exploration of the subject. We invite others to write on the subject for our journal to express additional or reflective thoughts on the subject. We hope you find these papers timely, instructive, and helpful. ■

How the Conference Came To Be

By Rick Bennett, Co-Director of the [Baptist] Conference on Sexuality and Covenant

The General Assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) each June includes a variety of workshops at which topics of interest are presented and discussed. The planning committee decides which of many suggested topics or speakers to include in the scores of workshops. The idea for A [Baptist] Conference on Sexuality and Covenant had its roots in preparation efforts for the 2010 General Assembly (GA) in Charlotte.

The workshops committee each year is guided by CBF's mission statement and the goal of providing resources for churches and individual Christians in addressing the myriad subjects that affect them and are of interest. Topics have included worship styles and trends, roles of women in the church, Baptist history, digging wells in Zambia...so many subjects one would have to consult the programs for each General Assembly to see the full range. The 2010 workshops committee discussed at length the possibility of initiating a new series of sessions to help congregations have constructive conversations about difficult issues. Most churches have little capacity for open discussion of controversial issues. Among the most difficult subjects are those which involve sexuality. Those topics were considered toxic, volatile and far too emotional.

The committee concluded that if such topics were to be included in the lineup of breakouts, the aim of the workshops would be not only to provide participants with information about an issue, but also to create a "less-anxious" model for churches wishing to deal with those issues constructively and safely. With such a goal, it was not surprising that the committee began to talk about human sexuality. The committee was determined to ground any workshop

conversation well within CBF's vision and mission; so the topic question for a workshop became, "How is God calling us to be the presence of Christ among persons of same-sex orientation?"

The workshop was well-planned, carefully constructed, and well-led and facilitated. CBF learned a lot about how any future gathering needed to be designed. More than 325 persons attended the breakout, a big number for a General Assembly breakout. The interest was high. We saw that many people were seeking a

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care-full, meaning-full, and safe space for dialogue around an issue which often challenges our relevancy – especially among emerging generations.

Therefore, the 2011 workshops committee explored possibilities for continuing this conversation at the next General Assembly in Tampa. That conversation led us to David Gushee, distinguished professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University and director of Mercer's Center for Theology and Public Life. He agreed to help us facilitate any further discussion.

David, the workshops committee chair, and I concluded the General Assembly workshop format was inadequate to the challenge of this important conversation. The schedule of the 2011 General Assembly was already crowded (it was CBF's 20th anniversary) and we decided we could not deliver on our promises in

a workshop format. As a result, we set out to create a more appropriate venue and approach to the conversation, an approach that would be unhurried and one that allowed for moments of worship, prayer, and meaningful dialogue among participants. Second, we decided that a hyper-focus on same-sex orientation was itself poor stewardship. Churches needed a larger conversation about sexuality. Finally, we decided on this approach to the conversation: "What is unique about Christian sexuality?"

On June 1, 2011, CBF and the Center for Theology and Public Policy at Mercer University announced their partnership in this special event to be held in 2012. Shortly thereafter, we created on-line registration and Facebook pages allowing folks greater access to information and dialogue about the event. Associated Baptist Press ran an article on the event, and it received full-page profile in the General Assembly resource guide. Subsequent issues of *Fellowship!* magazine added information on the event as plans developed.

After the news release, volunteer offers of expertise and services began to be made. David and I regularly received emails acknowledging the need for the conversation. Perhaps pleasantly, many of those emails expressed surprise that CBF had the courage to host such a "needed" conversation. Many churches and Christians seemed to be seeking a model for conversations about sexuality, credible information about sexuality, and the fellowship of other like-minded churches courageous enough to come to the table for such a conversation. Of course, there are those who felt the conference was either ill-timed or that sex was never a suitable topic of conversation among believers, though it is worth noting that I received directly only three calls

of concern – I can name them today. But even the prospect for such a conference was concerning to some, we knew.

In October 2011, David and I gathered a group of potential plenary presenters for three days of prayerful efforts to assemble the best possible program for the conference. Three significant things happened. First, participants shared their personal narratives, as well as why they agreed to come to the table. The sharing of these profound stories revealed the resources available for such a significant endeavor. The second thing was the brainstorming around the many possible topics that could or should be a part of the conversation. Third, we gave each individual participant time in solitude and silence to build a potential conference program. We asked that each person present his or her ideas for a program, giving others the opportunity to ask clarifying questions while writing a private evaluation of each presentation.

Out of this effort seven potential conference scenarios emerged, each bathed in an assessment of available resources, checked motivations, and prayer. Later, David and I spent a day in retreat to create the final program.

Thus was born “A [Baptist] Conference on Sexuality and Covenant” to be held at First Baptist

Church, Decatur, GA. The 48-hour conference spanned three days. We had six plenary sessions. We created covenant groups of 10-12 participants to process their experiences and insights after each plenary session. We recruited and trained facilitators for each small group. Rather than being issue-driven, the conference approached sexuality in general, from the mature sexuality of seniors to the emerging sexuality of adolescents, all with a view toward helping churches understand and explore the needs, struggles, and dilemmas inherent in human beings created as sexual. The conference dealt with human sexuality as a matter of discipleship while understanding that some sexual expressions often prevent Christians from sharing or embodying the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The only agenda for this event was to resource Christians and churches for meaningful and faithful formation and engagement regarding sexuality. That is not to say that none of the participants had agendas; but we treated each participant with humility as a community of prayer first. Our hopes for the conference never were that CBF (or anyone) come to any conclusion on any matter, rather, that folks have an opportunity to share their stories and hear those of others in an atmosphere of worshipful work

and discernment.

We entered into the conference with some fear and trembling. Some people misunderstood the conference as an agenda-driven event to drive CBF into a new era of advocacy for gay rights. Others believed any conversation about sexuality should begin first with the premise of calling sinners to repentance. Some thought this conference would divide the churches more than assist them. A significant amount of misinformation about CBF was scattered abroad.

The event itself was a success. Feedback from the small groups was very positive and encouraging. Our method of presenting the subject was found to be a good model for addressing any issue of concern, and controversy in the church. All-in-all, the 500-plus persons who attended found the conference to be helpful, spiritual in nature, encouraging, and informative.

Now, we are happy to have the proceedings of the conference available to everyone. The papers in this journal are the ones presented at the conference, written by the presenters, and published with permission. ■

www.thefellowship.info/conference

<http://www.facebook.com/#!/event.php?eid=213642758660533>

What's Going On In The World (and The Church)?... While We Were Avoiding The Subject? *By Jenell Williams Paris*

Oh, my. I am the bearer of statistics and trends related to sexual behavior and attitudes – what it is we're talking about in these days together. God so loved the world... so what is it like, this world that God loves? My grandpa would probably disapprove of starting with conversation about worldly things – he was an American Baptist pastor, fundamentalist, studied under William Bell Riley, and the Bible was almost the

only book he read. He'd sometimes try to read the newspaper, but would be so pained by the worldliness, he'd have to set it down.

I thought of Grandpa a few months ago when, after a talk I gave about sexuality, a woman stood up in Q&A and held her ears, saying, “All this talk about culture, culture, culture. It should just be about the Bible. We can't just be bending truth around whatever happens to be going on in

the culture.”

I agree – we can't just bend truth around whatever's happening in society. But I also disagree. I do think culture matters. But why? Why be informed about society, especially about matters related to sin?

Information in itself is not wisdom, but it yields opportunities for formation in wisdom and holiness. It's not about bending truth to culture; it's about bending ourselves – being ever

flexible as we discern how to live, ever open to insight – to become better lovers of this world that God loves.

In First Corinthians, Paul describes his own flexibility in a pluralistic society, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law so that I might win those under the law...I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor. 8:19-23).

So, despite Grandpa’s probable misgivings, I’ve pondered and researched the question: What’s going on – sexually speaking – in the world and the church?

You can’t possibly expect good news, can you?

Here’s what I’m NOT going to do. I’m not going to get out the sin list and tell you how bad we’re doing. If I did that, I’d start with trends in marriage.

Americans are less likely to marry, and marrying later. From 1970 to 2010, there was a 50% decline in numbers of marriages per thousand people. Much of this decline results from delaying marriage. The median age at first marriage for females went from 20 to 26 between 1960 and 2010. For males, it increased from 23 to 28. Americans are more likely to cohabit before, or instead of, marriage, and younger Christians are less likely to disapprove of cohabitation than in the past. By the way, sources for all cited statistics are available at the end of this presentation.

Then there are the trends in out-of-wedlock births, which are increasing. About 40% of babies born in the U.S. are to unmarried women, and there’s a trend emerging. It’s not just a religious or moral concern; children born outside marriage face elevated risks for poverty, school failure, and emotional and behavioral challenges. Seemingly, the strongest support for marriage before children is not religion, but social class. College graduates mostly marry before having children, likely motivated by a desire

for education completion and financial stability.

And I won’t tell you about trends in divorce. The American divorce rate is nearly twice that of 1960, though it has declined since the 1980s. For the average couple marrying for the first time, their chance of divorce is about 50%. The public in general has become more accepting of divorce, and Christians too, especially for reasons such as abuse or infidelity.

As far as trends in abortion, abortion numbers are on a slight decline, but still, of the six million pregnancies that begin each year in the U.S., half are unintended. About four in 10 of these are terminated by abortion. The Guttmacher Institute estimates that one in five women having abortions are born-again or evangelical Christians. Catholics have an even higher rate of abortion than Protestants.

In considering trends in pornography, statistics aren’t strong, but I suspect we share a sense that the issue is severe. By one estimate, 12% of the internet is devoted to porn – 420 million websites, 25% of search engine requests, and 8% of all e-mails sent. Child pornography searches are in the hundreds of thousands. Pornography easily reaches youth and children through direct marketing, and through search engine tricks such as linking character names in children’s games, or simple words like “cat” or “play,” to porn sites.

I’m not going to tell you “sin stats,” because if you’re a Baptist anything like my grandpa, you might have to leave the room. And I’m also not going to tell you what you already know – that youth is wasted on the young.

The vast majority of Americans have sex before marriage, and that’s true for Christians, too. A recent national survey reported

In considering relationships among unmarried evangelical young adults (ages 18-29),

20% have never had sex

10% have had sex, but not in the last year

22% are not in a current relationship, but have had sex in the last year

42% are in a current sexual relationship

In their attitudes, too, not just behaviors, younger evangelicals (in contrast to older) are more accepting of pornography, cohabitation, and premarital sex, and are more likely to support same-sex marriage. In one study, abortion was the only issue where younger evangelicals did not differ from older, both generations tending to believe it is wrong.

Christians ARE different than others, not in a black-and-white way, but more in shades of gray. For example, we can’t say that Christian teens are celibate, and non-Christian teens are sexually active. The reality is that Christian teens are more likely to delay first-time sex, less likely to have multiple partners, and less likely to say they’d have premarital sex if they had the opportunity. In higher education, Christian colleges are havens of chastity culture and institutional and peer incentives for remaining chaste, but of course, sin still happens there, too.

But even abstinence from sex isn’t necessarily true virtue. Some Christian young adults indulge in oral sex and other intimacies, or pornography, avoiding intercourse not for moral reasons but because of middle-class aspirations – not wanting pregnancy to interrupt long-term education required for financial stability.

But lest we blame the young, consider this – as parents’ church attendance increases, frequency of communication about sex decreases. When talking does happen, it’s mostly about morality, not information about biology, health, society, birth control, pleasure, intimacy, or relationships. It’s more often closed-off dialogue with authoritative tactics, and vague and indirect communication.

But remember, I’m not going to tell you any of this, because what’s the point? To say that the world is

going to hell in a handbasket, and Christians seem to be clamoring for a seat? It's nothing new. There's nothing new under the sun.

"All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecc 1:8).

Also, I'm not going to dwell on the millions and billions of sexual sins going on in our society and in the church because it gives too much power to sin. We already know that people sin -- a lot. Sometimes we come up with a new sin, or we pick an old one and do it more than we used to; but really, it's nothing new. Sin is a big deal; but love, grace, gentleness, kindness, self-control, generosity... these are even bigger deals. I wish I could present different statistics, but we don't measure these kinds of things, at least not very often and not very well. What percent of American Christians have experienced grace? Forgiveness? How many have resolved to try again, after sinning sexually? How much love are we open to receiving? Are people giving and receiving more kindness, decade by decade?

But most of all, all that information I didn't present to you? I don't want you to take it wrong. I don't want you to turn against the young, indulging the "myth of the golden past." I don't want you to turn against yourselves, despairing at how inevitable, pervasive, and sometime irresistibly attractive sin can be. I don't want you to turn against our society, blaming and shaming the media, the government, the non-Christians, the artists, the public schools, the Republicans, the Democrats, the women, the men and so on. I don't want you to turn AGAINST, but I do want to invite you to TURN. A turning in your mind, even -- repentance, which after all, means "to turn... to think again, to think anew..."

Here are a couple of cultural shifts,

or turns, that give us opportunities to learn, to flex, to discern how to live the Gospel in a new context.

1. A turn from exemption to implication

Christians are not exempt from sexual sin. We do not live apart from society -- this is our world, and of course it influences us. Look at our language, our hairstyles, our clothes, our electricity, vehicles, food... all shared with society. Of course sexual trends and challenges affect us.

Rather than struggling to remove ourselves from society -- an impossible task -- why not accept the fact that, on every measure of sexual sin, we are implicated. That move makes us open to grace -- it's an acknowledgement that our own righteousness is not dependable.

It's not just a theological or spiritual matter, however, this matter of implication. Given our deep, unavoidable embedment in society -- our incarnation, if you will -- the image of God in each of us, present in this time and place -- how can we support sexual holiness for ourselves and for future generations?

Sociologist Christian Smith draws a conclusion based on his research that asks: What makes religion matter in the sexual lives of teens? (I think it's true for more than teens...) There are three factors:

a. Religious teachings (sermons, youth groups, retreats, role models). What are we teaching, how are we teaching it, and what are learners learning? When I was a teen, a Christian mentor gave me a two-sentence sex talk, "Just don't do it! That's all you need to know." "Just don't" is not sufficient teaching for sexual holiness. Just don't do what? And why not? And what to do instead?

b. Learned competencies (religiously distinctive skills, knowledge, and practices). What do we know how to do? We have a distinctive religious skill set -- we pray, worship, study Scripture, serve, track our own spiritual journeys, disciple others, provide or accept religious leadership. This is more than knowledge -- it's a

set of practices that shapes our daily lives, binding us to other believers and distinguishing our lives in the world.

c. Social and organizational ties (community, density of social relationships). It's good for kids, and others, to be embedded in intergenerational communities that extend beyond worship services to include daily life -- socializing, shopping, playing, working, and living. It's good to have organizational webs that are internally dense, and externally expansive.

The myth that Christians are exempt, or even can be exempt, from society's sexual trends is a dangerous one. We're implicated. Let's live accordingly, encouraging individual and collective practices that support our religiously distinctive way of life.

2. A turn from relative consensus to internal pluralism

This is a tough one. Christians disagree about sexual ethics. I was raised with a strong sense of separation between church and world. I pictured the church like a clear glass of water -- we on the inside are clean and pure, with a strong boundary separating us from the outside world. Our sins were real, but occasional and not super-bad, and we all agreed about what sin was. Outside of our glass... it's muddy out there -- unclear, messed up, dirty. I was taught that the Bible had a simple message, and all faithful Christians would read it the same way.

Well, that was never true. Protestants have pursued organizational purity by splitting into smaller and smaller groups, factioning off or fighting sometimes over matters of sexual ethics such as homosexuality, divorce, women's leadership, and contraception. I just didn't see that because my vantage point was 'within the glass.' Looking at American Christianity in a big picture view, there's strong, and perhaps increasing, internal pluralism. Christians have always disagreed, but when it comes to sex, American Christians have had relative consensus (not total) about

homosexuality, abortion, premarital sex, and pornography – all matters on which, today, you'd find different points of view. We also have exponentially more access to information, moral reasoning, and biblical interpretations beyond our geographical and religious communities.

This is why I didn't include "homosexuality" in my list of sin statistics. Some Christians believe it belongs there, but others might put it in a list of virtues, and plenty of others might see it some other way, or be uncertain of how they see it. Christian engagement over issues such as homosexuality is sometimes decades out of touch – trying to preserve or coerce an imagined consensus that hasn't existed for years. Trying to objectively or universally assess socially constructed categories that are shifting as we speak (and how DO we speak of it – gay, straight, homosexual, LGB, LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQQI...). That's what my book, "The End of Sexual Identity," is about — casting a vision for sexual holiness and stewardship of our sexual lives that takes internal pluralism as a given, not as a problem.

It's not that internal pluralism is all good or all bad -- it just IS. How can we respond? Trying to force consensus is not the path; that approach tends to rely on rigid authority, lack of charity toward others, and shaming discipline of dissenters. Instead, we need to develop tools of communication, peacemaking, conflict resolution, and discernment so we can, to borrow a phrase from Paul in Romans 12, discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed any longer to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." Romans 12:2-3 (New Revised Standard Version).

Sounds good? But Paul continues. "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." Oh. Engaging internal pluralism with love is a loss of power (if you or your group were in a power position in the era of relative consensus). It's a turning toward community, toward dialogue, toward tolerance for difference. It's NOT a turning toward relativism, or moral chaos, or dismissal of Scripture. Like Paul being all things to all people, this is an opportunity to live the Gospel – the old, old story - in a new context.

3. A turn from abhorrence to tolerance

Whether it's homosexuality, premarital sex, cohabitation, divorce, or even pornography, it seems that younger Christians are saying these things aren't as 'icky' as they used to be. We may watch shows that, in the past, we might have turned off. Images and words stream into our inboxes and across our screens, often without any effort on our part. People – sexual minorities in particular – who used to seem distant, rare and, if we're honest, freakish or even repugnant – are now as close as our favorite TV shows, our extended families or even as close as the image in the mirror.

Abhorrence is alive and well, of course; some Christians continue to be hateful in their speech and behavior toward sexual minorities.

But I see a strong shift toward tolerance. When I moved from Minnesota to Washington, D.C., a Christian mentor warned me, "There's lots of gays there. Make sure you don't touch them." Today, I talk to young Christians who say they're "kind of

straight" or "20% gay", and those estimations sometimes shift semester by semester. It's both-and. Homophobia is alive and well, AND tolerance toward sexual others, and exploration of sexual fluidity within oneself, are increasing.

I don't need to tell you that sexual orientation is more complex than ever. What are sexual feelings, exactly, and what do they mean? Do they constitute an identity or social role? What does it really mean to be human, and what is the place of sexuality in that? For Christians, the questions have ballooned beyond, "Is homosexuality a sin?" to include gay marriage, civil unions, hate crime legislation, health care, public education, and interpersonal relationships in families and neighborhoods. Things that, very recently, seemed unthinkable – like fluid sexual identities, or gay marriage – are nearly taken for granted.

This is an invitation to a new game – walking away from the tug-of-war where people line up on their side of the issue and start struggling against their opponents. It's an invitation to reconciliation. It's refusing to accept pre-packaged options and positions; it's thinking together as believers about ways to assess and approach various issues. It's refusing the social belief that sexuality is an identity-constituting element of life; instead putting sexuality in its place – an important place, but one that doesn't eclipse the real truth of human identity, that we are made and loved by God. It's not just refusing society, but making new culture – new ideas, words, practices, norms – and offering them in love to the world.

This work of reconciliation may well be a challenge to traditional sexual ethics. Can we uphold a traditional Christian sexual ethic AND really love those with whom we disagree? Does LOVE eventually soften into agreement, even against Christian moral teachings?

At worst, tolerance does turn to moral license. Such Christians may be "too cool to care", and want to appear hip in their appearance, their

socializing, and their technology more than they want to be holy. Others may find scriptural teachings to just be too bizarre, anachronistic, or even sexist and homophobic, and they just give up on applying certain teachings to our society.

At best, however, it's an opportunity for deep repentance, to see how much our theology was shaped not by God's love, but by abhorrence and even ethnocentrism—being disgusted by the unfamiliar, and 'blessing' that disgust with theology.

And at best, it's an opportunity to practice patience – to stay in relationship even when people are not being the way we think they should be. It means to keep learning, because elements of society such as the meaning of sexual feelings, sexual identity, and the definitions of once-taken-for-granted words such as 'sexual intimacy' or 'marriage' are changing faster than we can keep up with them.

So, how do we make sense of what's happening in the world and in society? It calls for a response, a turning of some kind.

Let's not turn against ourselves, getting so stuck in shame and blame and regret that we can't move forward in love. Let's not turn against others, rejecting them for being sinful, blaming them for social trends, or forcing them into behavioral compliance with moral teachings they haven't yet come to believe.

In "Culture Making," Andy Crouch offers a lovely metaphor of postures and gestures – a helpful way of thinking about what turning could look like. He says Christians shouldn't just decide, once and for all, what our posture toward society will be – open hands, an embrace, thumbs-up, thumbs-down, a turning away, fists poised for self-defense, closed eyes, eyes wide open. He suggests we develop a repertoire of gestures, not letting any one harden into a permanent posture. Be flexible, be prepared, be educated and skilled in a variety of responses.

"The remarkable thing about having good posture is that if you

have good posture, you are free to make any number of gestures. As we're reminded when we encounter a skilled dancer or athlete, good posture preserves our body's basic freedom, allowing us to respond to the changing environment with fluidity and grace."

One set of gestures for us to consider are those associated with covenant. I love that this gathering is organized around the notion of covenant; agreement; pact; promise; vow; the big "I do."

Sexual holiness is not a "NO", an endless series of choices to abstain from sin. It's a "YES," an "I do" -- to love, to grace, to repentance and sanctification, to participating in God's covenant.

A few months ago, I watched two of my former students say "I do." They are lovely, solid, committed people – but so young. My face was smiling, but my mind wondered, "What do they think they're doing?" Every wedding gives me flashbacks of my own, 15 years ago, the face of my beloved warping through the tears in my eyes. I didn't know what I was doing. I thought that, powered by the exceptional purity of our amazingly perfect romantic love, we'd get on the good side of the odds – more health than sickness, more riches than poverty, more life than death. It hasn't been what I expected, nor what I thought I was prepared for, but the promise has stuck.

In her homily, our pastor said, "May you have the love for which all people long." I didn't realize how easy that love is to come by, and it doesn't come from a man or a marriage. This covenant – this promise made by God to Abraham and passed down generation by generation, broadening out to include Gentiles, broadening and extending to include even us – it's a promise to which we say "I do" without fully understanding what we're doing. The opportunity to say "I do" to God is grace – we walk into a lifetime of discovering more and more of what a covenantal life with God means. The chance to practice holi-

ness in our sexuality, and to dip into failure and success over and over and over, that's grace too. The chance to talk with other believers – to discern what is God's will, what is good and acceptable and perfect – knowing that sometimes agreement will come easily, and sometimes it won't come at all. Knowing that it's not our perfect understandings or behaviors that hold the faith together, that's grace too.

This gathering is vital and urgent, but what's the urgency? There's nothing new under the sun. The urgency is that this is our moment under the sun. Humans are just human, still human, we have opportunity to help them – help ourselves – be what we are created to be – not good, not sinful, but human, increasingly able to handle our sin, to repent of it, turn from it, receive grace and forgiveness, and move on; to live a positive life, filled with good works and generosity and friends and family and food and beauty and goodness, not just a negative one of abstaining from sin. To make less of sin, give it less power to define us, less power to dominate our emotional lives with either anticipation, resistance, or regret, less power to unite or divide our relationships, our groups, and our churches.

Wesleyan theologian Mildred Wynkoop wrote, "*Holiness is love locked into the true Center, Jesus Christ our Lord. Being 'true', all of the self, and progressively all of life, comes into harmony and wholeness and strength.*" What an opportunity we have, even in these few days together, to enjoy TRUE conversation, that might come into the wholeness and strength that comes from the goodness, truth, and the love of Jesus. ■

Editor's Note: In order to conserve space, we have not included references and footnotes. To see a full copy of the papers with the citations, go to our website at www.christianethicstoday.com

What Prevents One From Being Baptized?

By Guy Sayles

I write this contribution to discernment about crucial and complex issues as an *individual* and not as a *representative*. Week by week, I have the privilege of listening *to* and speaking *with* the people of the First Baptist Church of Asheville, but I don't presume to speak *for* them. Some of them would agree with the things I have written, and some would not. Some would disagree, because they'd find my conclusions to be too cautious and too conservative. Others would disagree, because they'd find my perspectives to be too risky and too progressive. I often remind my friends in Asheville that agreement is not the most important goal of genuine conversation. Growth is. Agreement is overrated. What matters more than agreement are mutual respect, a willingness to listen, an eagerness to understand, and an openness to new insights, which are sometimes old wisdom reclaimed.

As I have written, I hold in my heart people who have turned to me for understanding, guidance, and support as they lived with the dreams and desires, the hopes and hungers, which drew them into intimate relationships. Some of them have spoken gratefully of knowing and being known, of accepting and being accepted, and of loving and being loved. Their closest relationships, while not perfect, have been, on balance, sources of joy and experiences of fulfillment.

I'm remembering a 60th wedding anniversary reception where the husband's and wife's eyes still sparkled whenever they were in sight of one another. For six decades, they had been by each other's sides, "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health." To be sure, they bore the scars of life's hurts, but, even more, they celebrated the healing shelter their commitment provided.

I have two long-time friends (let's call them Kate and Allie), who by the quality of their commitment to, and love for, each other; by the genuineness of their faith and the generosity of their spirits; by their investment in children; and by the growth in goodness they encourage in one another have created a stable and joyful home which, among other things, did me the favor of shattering some of my stereotypes.

There's the young adult couple, married for only a year or so, who struggled with his depression and her runaway spending. Loneliness, disappointment and stress were taking a toll. They asked for help, and the church arranged and largely paid for a season of intense therapy. He sought treatment for his depression; she came to terms with the feelings of deprivation and worthlessness that drove her spending. They worked hard on themselves and on their relationship. They gave and received the gifts of forgiveness and compassion. They practiced new ways of relating to one another. Today, a few years past the lowest point of their marriage, they have renewed faith in God and each other, and they are the parents of a newborn daughter. They celebrate each other as friends, partners, and lovers.

I could tell many more stories of people who have fashioned and refashioned their covenants with each other so that those covenants provide for, and protect, vulnerability and intimacy—including, where appropriate to the covenants they have formed, sexual intimacy.

However, I am also remembering people who have looked to me for help, mercy, and grace because their quests for intimacy have led them to struggle and suffering—to hurt and heartbreak.

I remember a 17-year-old young

man, a member of one of the churches I served, who talked to me for more than a year about the torment he felt because he was attracted to men and not at all to women. He kept trying to convince himself he could be straight. He saw a counselor. He forced himself to date girls. He agonized over the falsity of the image he presented to the world and over the terrible loneliness he felt. A week after his 18th birthday, he took his life.

I think of more than a few women who have stayed in abusive marriages—sometimes physically, oftentimes emotionally, abusive—having their hearts battered and their identities demeaned. Sadly, among the reasons they have stayed is that they were victims of the theological malpractice of a preacher who told them that staying, even if it was abusive, was part of what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, "wives be subject—submissive—to your husbands."

During the early days of the AIDS crisis, I visited a man in his early 20s in, essentially, an AIDS hospice. He was gaunt and pale. Breathing demanded exhausting labor. He would not let us call his mother and father to tell them of his illness. He did not want them to know that he was gay or that he was dying. One day, as I stood beside his bed, through tears and weariness, he said: "I've loved Jesus since I was a little boy. Is he going to send me to hell because I am gay? It doesn't seem fair, since it feels like God made me this way."

Unfortunately there are more of these painful stories—many more. They are the stories of people who, in a bid for acceptance, have hidden their true selves and who have learned that such acceptance is empty because their honest selves are not known. They are the stories of people who are surrounded by others but are desperately lonely, and they are the stories of

people who feel used-up and burned-out by relationships characterized by serious inequality. They give and rarely receive; they work and almost never rest. They do not feel cherished; they feel chained.

It's impossible to speak honestly and meaningfully about "covenant and sexuality" without hearing echoes of ecstasy and agony—of happiness and misery. These issues are at the heart of what it means to be human. They touch and are touched by the sources of personal identity, the longing for love, the craving for intimacy, the search for community, the making of promises, the giving and receiving of forgiveness, the need for compassion, the dynamics of faith, and the power of hope—not to mention the character of God, the person of Jesus, the ongoing witness of the Holy Spirit, the nature of the kingdom of God, the mission of the church, and the gifts and demands of discipleship. These matters shape, and are shaped by, how we approach "covenant and sexuality."

To respond meaningfully to the gifts and challenges which are a part of "covenant and sexuality," we need to know, as best we can, the mind of Christ and feel, as fully as we can, the heart of Jesus. He is the center and summit of God's self-revelation. As his followers, we want his will and way to form and transform us, so that we live a Jesus-kind of life. We want what we think, feel, and do to flow from our immersion in his presence and spirit. We want to reflect his words and deeds, his teaching and his actions, in the ways we live.

In this article, I respond to questions which cluster around *authority*, questions like: How do we discern the mind and heart of Jesus? How does our understanding of who he was and who he is shape our identity and practice? How does his vision of God's rule and reign affect our thinking about what it means to be human? How do his words, his works and his ongoing witness through the Spirit and the church guide our response to issues of covenant and

sexuality? These questions are about *authority*, in two broad senses:

1. Who or what "authors" a Christian's life? What stories, images, ideas, teachings, doctrines, traditions, evidences, songs, sacraments, and experiences come together to write the narratives and compose the music that is our lives? Who or what continues to create and "author" us?

2. Who or what "authorizes"—directs, leads, counsels, and commands—what we do and don't do?

For Christians, the answer to these questions of authority is, ultimately and finally, Jesus—or, more precisely, the revelation of God made known in Jesus. We want Jesus to *author* our lives. We want his Story to become increasingly central to, and transformative of, our own stories, with all

The authority of Scripture is secondary and proximate; Jesus' authority is primary and ultimate.

their disparate elements and divergent events. We want him to be the composer and director of the music which is our lives, music to which we bring the melodies and harmonies, the notes and rhythm, the beauty and dissonance of our own personalities, histories, and experiences.

We also want Jesus to *authorize* our lives, meaning we want to think and feel that we have been and done what he has called us to be and do; that we have honored, even if only by confessing our failure to measure up to them, his word and will; and that we have, with inevitable incompleteness, been devoted to his teachings and example.

Jesus is our authority. Nearly all Christians believe that his authority is mediated and communicated to us through four basic sources of authority: (1) experience, (2) reason, (3) tradition and history (one source)

and, preeminently, (4) Scripture. Discerning the authority of Jesus hinges on bringing these sources of authority into creative conversation and constructive collaboration with each other. Depending on the issues or concerns at hand, as well as upon how extensively or limitedly and how directly or indirectly the Bible addresses them, Christians give differing weight to each of these sources of authority.

Baptist Christians acknowledge how personal *experience* affects what people see, hear, feel, understand, do and become. We know that a person's life is partially determined by the particularities of his or her individual circumstances and "place" and by his or her relative wholeness and woundedness.

We use the powers of *reason* and the standards of logic to bring order and clarity to our search for wisdom. We face honestly the limitations of human knowledge and make use of responsible scholarship from a wide range of disciplines

We listen gratefully to the voices of *tradition and history*, but do not grant those voices a final say.

Most Baptist Christians privilege the Scriptures and attempt to let them govern their use of other sources of authority. We know, of course, that people read the Bible in astonishingly diverse ways. My own view is that the Scriptures intend, above all else, to tell the story of God made known in the history of Israel and in Jesus and to invite us to weave our stories into that Master Story. That Story, lived out in the worship, teaching, and mission of the church, transforms and forms us into the image of Jesus and empowers us to approach the challenges and opportunities of our lives as he would approach them. A faithful, communal, and Spirit-inspired reading of Scripture helps to make us people who, like Jesus, are courageous, compassionate, patient, ardent for justice, passionate for peace, joyful, and, above all, loving.

The Scriptures serve this formative and transformative purpose far

more than they function to provide detailed answers to our thorny ethical questions or to solve our complex moral problems. Reading, studying and living God's story, centered on Jesus, fashions us into people who can be burdened by, and trusted with, the privilege and responsibility of making decisions in harmony with our understanding of the will and way of Jesus. We are like jazz musicians who play our parts in response to a strong central theme—God's story made known in Israel and in Jesus—but we improvise (we *have* to and we *get* to) with creativity and passion as we make our own responses to that theme in our time, place, and circumstances. Our hope and commitment are that the music we offer will have been in harmony with the *authoring* and *authorizing* of Jesus.

Sometimes, we so closely identify the authority of Jesus with the authority of Scripture that we lose a necessary tension between the Living Word of God made flesh in Jesus (John 1:14) and the words about that Word written in Scripture. It's easy to understand why we so closely identify the Living Word and the written words: the Scriptures are our primary and indispensable witness to Jesus. It's important to acknowledge, however, that the Scriptures do not have independent authority; their authority depends on Jesus. The authority of Scripture is secondary and proximate; Jesus' authority is primary and ultimate. As the Scottish theologian Thomas F. Torrance wrote in *Reality and Evangelical Theology*:

The Holy Scripture is not Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate In the same way we must say that the Holy Scriptures are not themselves the real Light that Christ is, but are what they are only as enlightened by him and as they therefore bear witness to him beyond themselves. In no way can the light of the Scriptures substitute for the Light of Christ for they are entirely subordinate to his Light and are themselves light only as they are

lit by his Light [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982, p. 95].

The Scriptures point beyond themselves to Jesus. It is his voice we listen to hear from the Scripture's chorus of witnesses. They are central because they put us in touch with his heart. Their purpose is to enable us to encounter and know him.

Scripture tells us that Jesus still speaks to his followers. For instance, in John 16:12-15, Jesus says:

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears [note the present tense], and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

This text, like others, calls us to listen for further and ongoing revelation, which means that we should not interpret the Scriptures in a way that mutes, rather than amplifies, Jesus' contemporary voice in the church. How tragic it would be for us to interpret the written words of Scripture in a way that silenced, or made it more difficult to hear, Jesus' voice in the here and now.

It's vital, therefore, for us to preserve the tension between the voice of Jesus and the voices of Scripture, because it is that tension which makes it possible for us to remember that the risen, still-acting, and still-speaking Jesus is the norm by which we interpret Scripture and evaluate other sources of authority.

John 14 tells us that, on the night before his death, Jesus gathered his disciples to prepare them for the grief and confusion they were about to experience. He assured them that, in the end, all would be well, and he promised to send his Spirit to be with them, to comfort them, and to teach

them. One of them, Philip, said to Jesus: "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." In other words: "Show us what God is like, and then we will be all right." Jesus' response to Philip is startling: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." For Christians, it is an affirmation of God's essential nature: *God is like Jesus*. As Michael Ramsey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, once said, "God is Christlike, and in [God] there is no un-Christlikeness at all" [Michael Ramsey, quoted in John V. Taylor *The Christlike God*, SCM: 1992, opening page].

Most often, I think, the church has proclaimed something like: "Jesus is so much like God that he is, in fact, God. Therefore, we should worship and serve Jesus." The New Testament's claim is much more compelling: "God is so much like Jesus that we may trust and love God." Our faith is not so much that "Jesus is God-like," but that "God is Christlike."

The affirmation of God's Christlikeness means that any image or concept of God, any conviction or feeling about God, and any claim or statement on God's behalf which does not reflect the character and spirit of Jesus Christ is, at best, inadequate or incomplete--and, at worst, distorting and deadly, even blasphemous. It's crucial to keep this affirmation of God's Christlikeness before us as we interpret Scripture and evaluate the relevance of other sources of authority.

To demonstrate how this approach to "authority," especially the authority of Scripture might work, I turn my attention now to a brief exploration of the familiar story of Philip's encounter with the "Ethiopian eunuch" and with the Holy Spirit told in Acts 8:26-40.

Think of the man from Ethiopia as a seeker who struggled, even though he was wealthy and powerful; who was excluded, even though he desperately wanted in; and who, at last, found what he was looking for in Jesus. The story began when an angel said to Philip: "Get up and go toward the south; take the deserted road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza"

(Acts 8:26). Philip didn't fuss about the assignment; he simply "got up and went." Notice that the messenger spoke directly to Philip, not indirectly. This was an *experience* which registered with Philip's heart and spirit as a command or directive, requiring and authorizing his immediate action. Philip traveled the lonely road toward Gaza and, met up with a man whose name we never learn. We know him only as "the Ethiopian eunuch."

The man was traveling back to Ethiopia from a visit to Jerusalem. It was a long journey. "Ethiopia" was far to the south, well past Gaza, and in the region of the Upper Nile. In the popular imagination, "Ethiopia" was beyond the horizon of the familiar. *The Odyssey* spoke of the "far-off Ethiopians . . . the furthestmost of humanity." Ethiopia was what we might call "Timbuktu" or "the jumping-off place." This man was from the edge. He was a foreigner. He had a position of power. He was a highly-placed government official whose responsibility was to manage the treasury of the Ethiopian queen (known as "the Candace").

He was also a eunuch, which means he had been castrated, perhaps at an early age. In some parts of the world—not Israel—it was a common and cruel practice: to render a man physically incapable of having sex and then to place him in a position of high authority over the royal family's personal wealth and the king's harem. The indignity done to this man had consigned him to a life of heartache, and loneliness. While he had wealth and power, he had no fully-expressed intimacy, no family, no children, and no real home

This powerful and lonely man had somehow learned about the God of Israel. What he knew about God set him on a quest to know more. Given what we know about his circumstances, it's not hard to imagine that he yearned for love and belonging. He wanted to feel the acceptance and embrace of God and the welcome and friendship of companions. He

had gone to Jerusalem looking for that kind of God and that kind of community.

But, the door was slammed shut in his face. At the Temple, he was shunned and excluded. He learned that the Law of Moses prohibited a man like him from entering the holy place. According to Deuteronomy 23 (23:1) and Leviticus 21 (21:17-21), the gatekeepers in Jerusalem told him that a eunuch, a man whose sexual identity they judged to be unacceptable, could never have a place in the assembly of the Lord. Their Bible said it: A man like him could never call the Temple his home. The Ethiopian experienced what too many people experience from God's people: the ugliness of exclusion.

This man seemed to know that God was better than God's people said and showed. He did not give up on God. A wealthy and literate man, he did what few in his day could do: He purchased some scrolls of the Jewish scriptures for himself. On his way back to Ethiopia, he passed the time reading scripture, particularly the Book of Isaiah.

While he was reading, his chariot passed by Philip who was walking along the road. The Holy Spirit ordered Philip to run alongside his chariot. Philip heard the Ethiopian man reading from what we know as the 53rd chapter of Isaiah:

He was led like a sheep
on its way to be killed.

He was silent as a lamb
whose wool is being cut off,
And he did not say a word.

He was treated like a nobody
and did not receive a fair trial.

How can he have children, if his life is snatched away? (Contemporary English Version) The Ethiopian eunuch's heart must have leapt with hope when he read these words, because he could identify his own experience with the experience described in the text. Imagine how his spirit must have danced when, just a few chapters later, he read these amazing words: "Do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' For

thus says the Lord: 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast to my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off'" (Isaiah 56:3-5).

Though made hopeful and joyful by what he read, he must also have been confused. After all, there were passages in the Bible which made it sound as if people like him had no place and no hope. There were other passages, like these from Isaiah, which seemed to say that people like him were welcomed and loved. How was he supposed to make sense out of the Bible when it seemed in tension with itself?

Confused, this searching and lonely man kept reading the Bible. Philip, jogging alongside the chariot, asked him breathlessly, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" That question—"How can I understand unless someone guides me?"—reminds us that some issues are of sufficient complexity that we need the guidance of a wise teacher or a wise community to make sense of them.

For example, a wise teacher would attend to the dissonance between the assertions of scattered "proof texts," on the one hand, and the overarching themes of Scripture, on the other, and urge us to read isolated texts in light of those overarching themes. Such themes include: creation, brokenness, and new creation. Slavery, liberation, covenant, and promise. The rule and reign of God. The life, teachings, deeds, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Too often, Christians read the Bible in ways that overemphasize isolated texts and use them to push aside the just, gracious and merciful God whom the grand overarching themes reveal. The result can be that followers of Jesus think, feel, and act in ways that aren't Jesus-like, but seem to be required by their reading of the Bible.

The Ethiopian eunuch sought greater understanding and needed guidance in his reading of the Bible. He stopped his chariot and picked up the friend of Jesus who was jogging alongside him. As soon as Philip was settled in his seat, he asked him: "Who is Isaiah talking about, himself or someone else?" "Starting with the Scripture," our story tells us, "Philip proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus."

Philip told him the story of Jesus. It's the story which makes it clear who God is and what God is like. Jesus showed the world that God loves us fully and completely. Jesus went to people like the Ethiopian eunuch—the marginalized, excluded, least, last, lost, left out, and lonely. He opened wide his arms and his heart to broken, sinful people. He died the way the man Isaiah described in Isaiah 53 died: without a fair trial and like a sheep being sacrificed for sins. His life was snatched away. He never knew the intimate mysteries of marriage or the bright joys of fatherhood. He died alone, but for others: He took human sin, shame, loneliness, and brokenness into God's own heart. When Jesus was raised from the dead, forgiveness, acceptance, love and healing flowed freely over the whole world and on all people, including people like us and people like the Ethiopian eunuch.

The Ethiopian man had asked "Who is Isaiah talking about?" and Philip led him to the most profoundly true answer: Jesus. Isaiah's vision became Jesus' story, and Jesus drew the Ethiopian, and draws all of us, into his own story.

Philip and the Spirit guided the Ethiopian through the Bible into the arms of Jesus. The Ethiopian wanted to become a follower of Jesus. From the chariot where he and Philip talked, he saw a pool of water, and he asked Philip: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Would his race, or the fact that he was a foreigner, or his high place of authority, or his peculiar status as a eunuch bar him from following Jesus? Would he be held back, hindered, and

cut off once again? Were there hidden barriers in the Gospel, exceptions and exclusions written into the fine print of the Good News? He wanted to know: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Philip realized that there was nothing in God that would keep the man away from God. Jesus made the radical inclusiveness of God unavoidably clear. Philip knew, however, that there were barriers still in his own heart. Those would have to go.

What are the characteristics of people who appear at the doors of our faith communities which tempt us to become ecclesiastical border patrol officers and refuse them entrance or permanent belonging? Race? Gender? Class? The failure of a marriage? Sexual orientation? We become aware of the ways we might hinder others' experience of love and grace as we pay close attention to our responses to people who unsettle our settled opinions and challenge our prejudices and traditions.

What prevents people who make us uncomfortable, or who raise issues for which we lack adequate responses, from being baptized? In other words, what bars their becoming and being full and equal participants in the Christian community? Nothing in God. The mercy of Jesus has made a place for everyone. The love of Jesus has welcomed everyone. The grace of Christ has already embraced all the excluded. Therefore, it is a denial of God's unconditional love and of salvation by grace if the conditions of someone's life seem to us to justify our excluding him or her from the community. Based on the passionate and compassionate love of God disclosed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, I believe that the risen Jesus is, right now, actively working to bring down the barriers inside us and to open wide our hearts to welcome all whom God has already welcomed.

I've retold the story of Phillip's encounter with the Holy Spirit and the Ethiopian eunuch as a demonstration of how to read Scripture in the ways I described in the first section

of this presentation. In conclusion, I offer three observations:

The first is to underscore a point I made earlier: It's important to read isolated texts, especially those which function as "proof texts," in the context of the broader themes of Scripture. For Christians, these broader themes include the adventurous hospitality, open welcome, and radical inclusiveness of Jesus. As many New Testament scholars remind us, Jesus' ministry was centered on the practices of compassion and fellowship far more than on the creation and preservation of a "pure" community. Grace, mercy, and love do not thrive in a community which insists on purity. Some of the most difficult issues we face have to do with the "sacramental" life of the church: marriage, remarriage, and ordination, for instance. Addressing them is beyond the scope of this presentation. My view is that such complex conversations most usefully happen in local churches where such decisions are made with flesh-and-blood brothers and sisters in Christ at our sides. These conversations and decisions are not about issues and positions as much as they are about people and their flourishing as human beings and followers of Jesus. Such conversations are not *about "them"*; instead, they are conversations *among "us."*

The best news we have is that God is like Jesus. God loves us and everyone as much as Jesus said and showed. As we continue to discern the will and way of Jesus we may trust that he is at work forming and transforming his people into his image. Part of the joy of such transformation is that, as we become more fully like him, we become more radiantly and completely ourselves, our honest-to-God selves. And, part of the delight of living in Christian community is the opportunity to encourage and to witness how people shine ever more brightly as they become more confident that "nothing in all creation has the power to separate anyone from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." ■

How Do We Discern God's Voice?

By Sharyn Dowd

Discernment is the process of sorting out the voice of God from among the voices competing for our attention and indeed for our allegiance. It is very hard work. It must be done in Christian community because none of us can trust herself to hear a word that will cost her something. We always prefer to hear from God confirmation for our previously arrived-at conclusions and commitments. Because of that preference, the community of discernment must include advocates of the various voices clamoring to be heard. But those advocates must be surrendered Christians---people who ultimately prefer God's voice to their own. Discernment cannot happen without surrender, mutual love—a love that is deeper than mere politeness --- and transparency. All those requirements are the reasons that we Baptists prefer democracy to discernment. Democracy requires nothing but campaigning, attacks on opponents, voting, and disputing the vote count. But democracy reveals only the will of the majority. Discernment aims at the will of God.

Of course, we believe that God's will is revealed in Scripture, and we are right to believe that. But Scripture requires interpretation. Even the word *porneia*, often translated “fornication” or “sexual immorality” designates different behaviors in different contexts in Scripture. For that matter, the English word “marriage” translates a wide variety of practices in various Biblical documents, some of which practices are illegal in this country at present. So even Scripture requires more than one voice in the circle of discernment.

We Baptists would do well to consider the principle articulated by Alexander Campbell: Scripture can be interpreted only in a circle of understanding of which Christ is the

center and humility is the circumference. After I have stated the reasons for my interpretation of a particular Scripture, if I am not willing to add the clause, “but I could be mistaken,” then I have put myself outside the circle of understanding. If many Christians live with the conviction that their covenanted relationships outside of state-licensed marriage are faithful responses to God's call on their lives, then another Christian who disagrees cannot merely quote Scripture and call that discernment. To participate in discernment

One of the least helpful questions that can be asked about sexual behavior is the question, “Is it a sin to . . . ?” You fill in the blank.

within Christian community requires a dialogue with Scripture, not a monologue made up of a collage of Scriptures from various contexts.

The outcome of the discernment process is strongly affected by the way the issues being discerned are framed. One of the least helpful questions that can be asked about sexual behavior is the question, “Is it a sin to . . . ?” You fill in the blank. This question is unhelpful because under certain circumstances, the answer can always be “yes.” Sexuality is a gift from the Creator and every created gift can become an idol. In the case of sex, a created gift often becomes a weapon.

So, for example, sex forced on a spouse is sinful. Sex withheld from a spouse for the purpose of manipulation is sinful. In my relatively uninformed opinion, sex within marriage

as a replacement for problem-solving is sinful. One of my students called that “making-up sex.” In fact, 35 years of ministry have led me to believe that almost as much sexual immorality takes place within legal heterosexual marriage as outside it. We need some new ways of thinking and praying about our own sexual desires and behavior and some of those considerations will be dealt with by other speakers in this conference. But I'd like to draw attention to just two important questions that we need to be asking together in our various communities of discernment.

One is the question of ecclesiology. What kind of church best encourages covenant faithfulness with respect to sexuality? From our Baptist forebears we have inherited what we call the “believers' church”---a community of people whose baptism is testimony to their public decision to choose Christ. But that's not all. The fine print says that these baptized believers are expected to be conventional in their sexual behavior or if they aren't, they are expected to lie about it. And sex is usually all we care about. How these baptized believers treat their employees, their tenants, their business competitors, their customers, their relatives, their neighbors---none of those things affect their standing in a Baptist church. Oh, we recognize and applaud virtue (“So-and-so is a FINE Christian businesswoman.”) but we largely ignore vice, except for sexual vice. Most churches I have been part of do not even hold each other accountable for tithing. Giving records are as secret as illicit sex.

The concept of the church as holy, set apart, and intolerant of sexual sin is certainly a Biblical concept. Nothing could be more clear than that Paul is calling for the excommunication of the man who is involved in incest in the Corinthian commu-

nity (1 Cor 5). Paul does not inquire about the reasons for the relationship. He simply calls for the expulsion of the Christian who is engaged in the behavior. In Acts 5, the story of Ananias and Sapphira suggests that the consequences of church discipline are even more severe than excommunication for Christians who misrepresent their stewardship! The history of believers' churches is filled with stories of the expulsion of unrepentant sinners, either temporarily or permanently. This approach makes it clear where the congregation stands on certain moral issues and bears witness to a seriousness about Christian commitment that has been significantly eroded in recent decades. It treats the purity of the believers' church as more important than continuing influence on the sinner. In fact, one of the reasons for expelling the sinner is to prevent her or his continuing influence on the rest of the congregation. ("A little yeast leavens the whole lump.") I would argue that this model is a perfectly legitimate choice for a congregation that discerns it to be God's will for their life together. In some cultures, a church's stance on sexuality affects its ability to evangelize. At the last meeting of bishops in the global Anglican Communion (traditionally called the "Lambeth Conference"), an African bishop argued that Christianity could not compete with Islam in Africa unless the churches held to a rigid stance that confined sexual expression to marriage between a man and a woman.

There is another model for Christian community, however. The idea that all baptized persons who are not martyrs require purification before they are ready for the brilliance of the presence of God enables an understanding of the church on earth as a mixed bag of saints and sinners. Perhaps the parable of the weeds and the wheat in Matthew 13: 24-30 suggests that humans may not be wise enough to be entrusted with the destruction of weeds lest they destroy some of the wheat as well. Better to leave the sorting out until

the last judgment. And better to have it supervised by the One who knows better than we do who is which.

This latter approach is extremely difficult. If I consider myself a stalk of wheat, waiting until the last judgment may seem like waiting a long time to put up with being surrounded by weeds. And that is where the analogy breaks down. Unlike a field, a church is a setting in which all the saints are also sinners. If I find it hard to put up with the sins of my neighbor, it behooves me to realize that it is just as difficult for her to put up with me, and that both of us---all of us---are wretched enough to need the death of Jesus to set us right with God. Another point in favor of this model is that it puts a church's concern for sexual sin on the same level

And better to have it supervised by the One who knows better than we do who is which.

as our concern about all other kinds of sin. Unfortunately, that level of concern is mostly non-existent. While we may be concerned about financial exploitation of others, about pridefulness, about stirring up division in the congregation, about gossip, about laziness, about racial prejudice, about spiritual complacency, or a host of other sins, we have historically not been concerned enough about any of these things to exclude the unrepentant from the church. For the most part, we don't even confront them. We might do well to consider developing a way to hold each other accountable in community for growth in ALL areas of our lives. Instead of putting people OUT of the church for certain sexual behaviors, what if we put everybody IN the church into small growth groups with strict confidentiality requirements? When people know each other and care for each other over time they tend to have

more courage to confront each other about the gaps in their lives between profession and behavior.

Let's be honest about something: Our reasons for not wanting to welcome pregnant teenagers or lesbians or gay men or transgendered persons into our midst is actually more sociological than theological or biblical. On the one hand, it's our need for church to be a place where we can escape from social developments that make us uncomfortable, and our fear on the other hand that our children will be influenced to experiment sexually. I was a deacon in a church in Kentucky in which we were trying to be church for people who were different from us. But the efforts ran aground when two things happened: A pregnant girl brought the ultrasound pictures to Sunday School to be admired by the other girls, and some of the deacons' kids started dating youth group members of a different race. If we think that opening the doors of the church to the real, actual people of our community will make things sticky, we're right. It will. But if we imagine that our children are not already immersed in a world very much more complex than the one we grew up in, we are thoroughly self-deceived.

So, on the issue of ecclesiology, we need to be asking what kind of communities our congregations are called to be in this culture at this time in the locations in which we find ourselves. And not every congregation will be the same, which is something we Baptists have, until recently, celebrated.

The Baptist tradition has been that one first believes, then behaves (at least publicly) and finally belongs. But the heart-cry of many unchurched people today is a hunger to belong. There is a reluctance to commit, but a hunger to belong. If we exclude people who do not behave as we prefer, what chance do we have of influencing their behavior or, more importantly, of introducing them to Christ who is the only one who can change hearts and behaviors? If we

fear that others will interpret our welcome as condoning sinful behavior, at least we will find ourselves in the company of Jesus, of whom it was said, "He welcomes sinners and even eats with them!" At the same Lambeth Conference that I mentioned above, a bishop from New York is supposed to have said that in that context evangelism was impossible **unless** the churches opened their doors to gay and lesbian Christians.

My guess is that the church universal needs both holy, set-apart communities and communities that welcome all who want to draw closer to God. In fact, studies suggest that many Christians will need, at different times in their lives, to belong to different kinds of churches. We dare not label the discernment of other Christian communities as "bigoted," "unjust," "perverse," or even "unbiblical" if we have more than a naïve notion of the complexities of human behavior and of biblical interpretation.

If ecclesiology is one of the key theological categories that we need to think about, another is sanctification, or Christian maturity. So far in this talk I have been speaking about people whose sexuality is expressed outside legal marriage as though somehow "those people" are definitely sinners, by contrast with the rest of the congregation. We will begin to move toward honesty in our notions of Christian maturity when we admit that none of our relationships are what they should be and that all of us desperately need to be changed. We could begin with the recognition that people who have a legal license to engage in sexual intimacy need transformation and sanctification every bit as much as the rest of us do. If we believe that the difference between covenant faithfulness and unfaithful behavior is a piece of paper, we are sorely deceived. Unless we recognize our depravity at every level of life and relationships, we can never even begin a journey toward wholeness.

We have forgotten that the desire and the power of the Holy Spirit to transform people is just as strong as it ever was. We like to excuse our own behavior with the assumption that if we can't change ourselves, then we must be okay the way we are. That excuse won't wash, because there is almost nothing really important that we CAN change about ourselves. What we should be doing is asking the Holy Spirit to change us in whatever ways the Spirit chooses without assuming that "this is just the way I am." One of the things we repeat often here at First Baptist Decatur is, "God loves you just the way you are and God loves you too much to leave you just the way you are." And there is no area of life to which that claim does not apply. If we could get our

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minds and hearts around that truth we could stop being defensive and open ourselves to transformation.

The primary thing we don't know about ourselves, let alone about others, is what the Holy Spirit's priorities might be. I remember praying fervently for years about a behavior that I thought was the most serious

sin in my life at the time. I prayed and prayed and tried and tried to change myself. Finally, when I had reached a point of exhaustion and defeat, the Holy Spirit said to me, "I am going to change that about you, but before I do, there are five other things I need to change that you don't even know are wrong with you." If I don't even know what God wants to do in **me**, it is very unlikely that I know what God wants to do in **someone else**. For years we have been certain that the very first thing God wants to do in everyone's life is to make us "faithful in heterosexual legal marriage and celibate in singleness." What we need to ask is, "What makes us so sure about that?" Where in the biblical witness are we given that information? I'm not sure that we can give an honest answer.

A word of testimony and then I'll close. I am 65 years old, and I have never been married. Between the ages of 19 and 40, I engaged from time-to-time in sexual behaviors that I have since regretted and repented of. I pretended to myself at the time that nobody in any of the churches of which I was a member during that time had any idea about the kinds of experimentation I was indulging in. Looking back now, I seriously doubt that was the case. The fact that my sisters and brothers in those churches chose to let me live out the consequences of my own choices because they somehow thought that God was doing something in my life is the reason that I have continued to be involved in Christian congregations. It would have been better if someone had confronted me in real love. But knowing my own arrogance, I am certain that confrontation in judgment would have driven me away. Because God was given the opportunity to change me in God's own time, I have been able to use what gifts I have in the service of Christ's church. I didn't deserve that opportunity, but I am grateful for it. ■

Baptists and Sexuality: An Augustinian View

By Coleman Fannin

Lutheran theologian Diane Yeager recently reviewed a collection of essays (edited by Baptist ethicist Miguel De La Torre) from a conference that was intended “to allow clergy and church laypeople whose congregations were struggling with these concerns [about sexuality] to examine researched biblical perspectives . . . and to devoutly engage in processing the information by opening the mind, the heart, and the will through facilitated interaction, communication, and introspection.” The conference was structured to emphasize “dialogue;” among the stated ground rules were “no fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight.” Sound familiar?

In her review, however, Yeager points out that despite this intention, the presentations turned out to be aimed squarely at challenging the assumptions of those who did not affirm the organizers’ views. In the first essay, for example, Presbyterian Marvin Ellison writes,

As a gay man and Christian ethicist, my interest is not tolerance, inclusion, or even acceptance . . . but rather *transformation*, a dismantling of hierarchical social power and of the patriarchal conceptual framework that legitimates gender and sexual oppression. Theologically speaking, repentance is called for—a “turning about” that makes renewal of heart and spirit possible. This yearned-for transformation is well underway in faith communities that have joined . . . movements that challenge sexual exclusivism, this skewed notion that there is only one right way to be human, and that is as heterosexual, married, and procreative, and, further, that those who fit this norm have an obligation to

police and keep others under control. A norm-deviant paradigm regarding sexuality grants power and privilege to some while labeling the non-normative Other as defective.

According to Ellison, those who claim that there *is* a “norm” or that other people’s consensual sexual activity is any of their concern are “oppressive” and in need of “repentance.” The real “problem” or “sin” is their “heterosexism,” which is complicit in “sexual injustice” and closely tied to “sexualized violence” and racial, gender, and economic oppression. After noting other examples in the volume and wondering whether it is really possible to create a “safe space” for *both* sides, Yeager (who is generally welcoming and affirming) states,

It is hard for me to see how these positions differ, structurally speaking, from the mirroring position that finds truth exclusively in the heterosexual norm and regards LGBTQ sexual activity as a serious sin that needs to be repented. Neither position seems conducive to conversation—respectful or otherwise. Moreover, strictly from the point of view of dialogue, it would seem to be a deficiency of this book that no stories are included from Christians who support traditional teachings.

While I do not share Yeager’s view of “traditional teachings,” I have similar concerns about this conference. No, I do not believe that many Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) leaders are all that close to Ellison’s attitude or that the organizers have an agenda akin to that of the earlier event, but there is a strong current flowing in this direction among moderate Baptists. Somewhat selfishly, I am also anxious because I like to think that I am deep-

ly concerned with social justice and that, being a pacifist, I do not condone violence or oppression of any kind. But I know how powerful impressions can be, particularly when it comes to such a touchy subject. After all, I am a white male who is from the South and teaches at a university that prohibits intercourse outside of heterosexual marriage, and who was abstinent until getting married and has one child and another on the way. And yes, I am convinced that the church’s traditional teachings, properly understood, are correct and that although sexual orientation is determined by a combination of genetics and environment, sexual behavior is rightly directed toward two equally valid ideals: celibacy and heterosexual marriage; that the latter has two inseparable ends: procreation and the union of husband and wife—sexual difference—in self-giving love; and that apart from these ends there is no well-grounded rationale for anything other than approval of virtually all consensual sexual activity.

In other words, it may appear that I exemplify “sexual exclusivism” and “heterosexism.” I am not making light of this charge; I take it very seriously. At times my convictions are painful to me, not because I am sensitive to criticism but because I am aware of the pain that continues to be caused by some of the ways in which traditional teachings are presented and defended. Indeed, I am reluctant to discuss homosexuality in particular because doing so only seems to cause more pain and conflict. The church is certainly responsible for much of this pain and conflict, and the message to those who deviate from the ideals—which, to be honest, is almost everyone in some way—has all too often been unloving and harmful. In short, repentance *is* called for, and although this cannot be the only word, it ought

to be the first.

Furthermore, the church has forgotten that its teachings presuppose a community that shares certain convictions and is committed to the pursuit of certain ends and to acquiring the virtues necessary to attain them.

Christian ethics, including sexual ethics, is not primarily about exhorting the culture to adopt specific social mores and public policies or exhorting individuals to make good decisions; it is about forming communities that share a tradition and perform the gospel. In the dominant cultural narrative, love is always nice and accepting; that is, it always says “yes.” In contrast, in the Christian narrative, love sometimes says “no,” a word that is hard to accept. This “no” is essential because of the reality of sin, which affects all of our desires—even those, like sexual desires, that naturally long for the good—and which every culture is tempted to deny. It is our free will, a gift from God, that makes us moral creatures; but it is this same will that leads us to deceive ourselves about the good and opt for fleeting pleasures over discipleship. This is why we need a Savior. Yet this “no” is also dangerous because it tempts the church into self-righteousness, into forgetting that its holiness is due to Christ and not its own character. To be clear, the church is never pure, but it does pursue purity. This is why its “no” must be rooted in a community that recognizes the dignity of each person, forgives their failures, restrains and reshapes their desires, and provides a vision of their true end.

Neither celibacy nor marriage is merely natural; both require habituation and training. While this can take place outside the church, both celibacy and marriage fully make sense *inside* the church because every individual, single or married, is initiated into a body that is higher than both the family and society. Too often, however, Christians demand restraint of individuals regardless of whether they are part of such a community, in part because we still presume that Christian ethics is ethics

for everyone. It is no wonder, then, that celibacy ceased to make sense to most Americans some time ago and that marriage is slowly becoming one personal (and temporary) sexual option among equally valid others, none of which necessarily involves openness to having and raising children. Incidentally, this is one reason why the wish of some homosexuals to marry is down the list of challenges that includes abortion, artificial reproductive technologies, divorce, pornography, and so on.

Another reason that I am anxious is that I am tasked with discussing *tradition*. When I raise this topic with my students, they tend to be highly suspicious because they associate it with what their congregations have been doing for a few generations (e.g., the “traditional” worship service) or what Catholics substitute for the Bible and personal experience. Either way, it is a synonym for *irrelevant* in an age in which everything, including sexuality, is supposedly new and improved. Most students, even the pious ones, know next to nothing about the Christian tradition or why it is necessary for the sort of community that I have described. Having been in their position, I know how difficult it is to figure out if or where this foreign thing called tradition fits into your Bible and experience-centered theology and practice. When I was in seminary and, like many of my classmates, fleeing from anything with a whiff of fundamentalism, I had a different stance on homosexuality. But I soon realized that despite having grown up in church I was woefully ignorant about the subject and had few good reasons for having a stance at all. Whereas I had disapproved of homosexuality on the basis of cultural norms and a few verses, I approved of it on the basis of vague conceptions of “love” and “justice.” Thankfully, my studies had prepared me to seek out reasons, but I had to do so on my own and beyond my Baptist context—a pattern that has been repeated on many other subjects.

All this has a lot to do with the fact

that, as Philip Thompson points out, “Baptists have come to make a tradition of rejecting tradition, Baptist or otherwise.” The Christian tradition has remained operative in Baptist life but largely in unacknowledged and unintentional ways. Therefore I am skeptical about moderate Baptists’ capacity to receive the wisdom of the church in its history and catholicity rather than treating the tradition as something to be mined for resources, caricatured as anti-sex, or simply dismissed out of hand. Moreover, given our fragmented state, I am skeptical about our capacity to avoid the impasse reached by every other denomination that has addressed the subject of sexuality.

Although I want to believe that a respectful and open conversation is possible, I fear that moderate Baptists lack the means to guide such a conversation toward a real resolution or to bind the participants together in a real covenant. There is little incentive for Baptists today to stay in the same congregations and denominations with those with whom we disagree, let alone listen to one another’s stories and evaluate one another’s arguments. If I had time, I could make a detailed argument for my understanding of sexuality and marshal evidence and scholarship from theology, biblical studies, biology, and the social sciences in support of it. At present, I find the case for the church’s traditional teachings to be very convincing. Still, presumably someone could make a more convincing argument for a different understanding. In other words, I could be wrong, and I am okay with being wrong about beliefs not found in the ancient creeds. However, I venture that in the end arguments will not matter much and that most Baptists will make up their minds (or have already done so) on the basis of personal feelings and especially their respective cultural milieus, which means that they will likely end up very close to where the culture ends up, *regardless of whether the culture is right or wrong.*

Perhaps *the* defining characteristic

of Baptists in America—conservative, progressive, or otherwise—has been cultural captivity. (To label one's Christianity "conservative" or "progressive" is in fact a sign of captivity to American political discourse, the problem being that one inevitably becomes obligated to conservatism or progressivism rather than to Christ.) The root of our captivity has been our insistence that the social, political, and economic ideals of the United States are fundamentally congruent with Baptist principles. Briefly, because the state allows Baptists to be free, Baptists can be loyal citizens of the state and therefore at home in America. Yet this has meant that our notion of freedom has turned out to be inextricable *from* America. In addition, the conflict with conservatives has served to harden moderates' theological disposition to individual freedom to the point of obstinacy. As Lee Canipe explains,

While Baptists in America have traditionally insisted that the *institutions* of church and state remain separate, they have, at the same time, also recognized a complementary convergence of the two on moral grounds, particularly around the idea of freedom.

It is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which this notion of freedom has shaped the collective imagination of Baptists in America—specifically, white Baptists who live, work, and worship in the South. When the Southern Baptist Convention's fragile theological and cultural consensus fell apart in the early 1980s, the proposition that freedom represented a supremely distinctive Baptist virtue—above and beyond all others—took on added resonance for the self-described "moderate" Baptists who suddenly found themselves on the outside looking in at a denominational structure they once dominated. ... The essence of the moderate argument was clear enough: history is on our

side. The freedom of autonomous, individual believers to take personal responsibility for their spiritual welfare, moderates insisted, has always been the defining characteristic of the Baptist tradition and it remained a normative conviction for *all* true Baptists.

If this remains our normative conviction, then our ethics, including our sexual ethics, are in peril. For most of American history Baptists, particularly Southern Baptists, could emphasize the individual in their rhetoric because they could take for granted a different reality, namely, a broadly Protestant culture and their own congregational vigor that stressed confessions, covenants, and catechisms as well as church discipline, and then when those faded, a robust institutional subculture. This subculture was itself captive to its culture, but it also transmitted the content of the Christian tradition and provided a cohesive identity and a location from which to critique the culture, however infrequently Baptists did so. Perhaps the crucial fact in Baptist history in the second half of the twentieth century is neither the civil rights struggle nor the conservative-moderate controversy but the dissolution of the Southern Baptist subculture. The controversy led to the sanctification of individual freedom, the civil rights struggle to the temptation to "treat other ethical and theological questions as if they were equally simple." Yet the dissolution of the subculture is closer to the heart of what Bill Leonard calls a "serious identity crisis," a crisis that is fundamentally ecclesiological. For Baptists today every ethical question is inseparable from questions about the nature of the church: What is it? Where is it? Does it matter? If so, why and how?

With fading subcultural inertia and little congregational accountability, Baptists are exposed to what the late A. J. Conyers, one of my professors at Truett Seminary, described as "the [modern] notion that social life is framed by a national government at one end and the autonomous individual at the other—the bipolar vision

of society." In a context framed by this vision the government can more easily manipulate Baptists to support its policies and the culture (and the market) can more easily inculcate them with its attitudes and habits. Consequently we are becoming increasingly polarized and consumeristic even as we struggle to be relevant to a society full of "autonomous, individual believers" (and unbelievers), most of whom see no need for a religious, or for that matter, sexual identity other than one that they invent or learn through osmosis. I am not arguing that Baptists should discount our personal feelings or seek to either reclaim or withdraw from the culture. Still, while the individual may assert that Jesus is his or her authority, it is likely that "what the Bible says" or "where the Spirit leads" will turn out to be what he or she *wants* the Bible to say or where he or she *wants* the Spirit to lead, which is often precisely what the culture has formed him or her to want. There is always some community and some tradition informing the individual's moral reasoning, so the proper question is not "Which has priority, the individual or the community and the tradition?" but "What sort of community and tradition should the individual trust?" Although it has no independent authority, the church creates space for Christ's authority to be communicated through, to use a handy image, the four sources of the Wesleyan quadrilateral: Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience.

By now it should be obvious that I am much less concerned with presenting or defending traditional teachings on sexuality than I am with finding a way for Baptists to go about reasoning together, assuming that piety alone is insufficient. This is not a cop-out; I am simply convinced that the underlying issue here is ecclesiological and that sexuality is a test case for whether we can learn to live as disciples much closer to the margins of a post-denominational and post-Christian culture. Admittedly, connecting mostly white Baptists in the South to "the margins" is hyperbole, given that conservative

and hyper-politicized Christianity remains highly visible and that America remains somewhat culturally Christian. But we should not underestimate the extent to which the religious landscape has changed, a point brought home by a number of recent surveys and studies. We also should not underestimate the extent to which sexual customs have changed among young people, a point brought home by a stream of sobering statistics. I note these trends not to alarm or moralize but to clarify. It is convenient to identify individualism as the culprit, although it is impossible to deny its role in Baptist and American history, the dramatic increase in social isolation, and the troubling manifestations of egocentrism and narcissism in the millennial generation. It is also convenient to criticize politicians or purveyors of culture such as Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and Silicon Valley, although it is hard to overestimate their influence. But the crux of the matter is that Baptists cannot go back; the days of having cultural, much less legal, support for our ethics—for better and for worse—are all but gone, and the extreme individualism that we have championed is here to stay and threatening to swallow us into the sea of generic evangelicalism and cafeteria spirituality. However, the upshot of being free from cultural dominance is that we are also free to re-envision the church as a body that both cultivates the discernment necessary for discipleship and provides those harmed by cultural attitudes and habits with a safe place to heal.

One of the hidden truths of our supposedly “liberated” (and “safe” and “responsible”) views of sex is that they contribute to unhappiness. Sociologists Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker recently found a strong correlation between sexual restraint and emotional well-being in young adults, especially women. Of those surveyed, the two groups with the highest self-esteem were those in monogamous relationships and virgins, and the more partners a person

had, the more likely he or she was to experience depression. Furthermore, as the evidence of the effects of divorce and single parent homes has mounted, even secular thought has come to acknowledge that the best environment for having and raising children is a home with married parents. Yet Americans, Christians included, continue to have sex earlier, to have more sexual partners, to have more children out of wedlock, and to get married less often, and, when they do, to divorce at a rate of nearly 50 percent. Why are so many unable to see the disconnect between the widespread post-Freudian belief that acting on one’s sexual desire is central to a healthy self-identity and the negative consequences of doing so?

The answer is complex, to be sure, but a contributing factor is, again, the absence of communities that recognize that human desires are affected by sin and that they must be restrained and reshaped. While the church cannot solve society’s problems alone (if at all), it can provide such communities in part because it can draw on the wisdom of the tradition. One of my great joys is regularly teaching the *Confessions*. Yet who could be more out of touch in the eyes of contemporary Americans than Augustine? As a young man he engaged in numerous casual sexual relationships, had a mistress for about 15 years, and tried to marry another woman to curb his lust before converting to Christianity. In contrast, as a bishop he argues that celibacy is the most blessed sexual state but that marriage is permissible for two purposes: procreation and the satisfaction of concupiscence (lust), although the latter remains sinful to a degree. However, he insists that his carnality came from his longing to love and be loved and only needed to be rightly ordered to God, whereas his stealing of a few pears, for example, came from something much worse: his intent to defy God simply because he could. For Augustine the problem is not sexual activity but the disordered desire that accompanies it, which

requires the grace received in the sacrament of marriage, the virtue of continence acquired in the church, and ultimately the resurrection of the body to be redeemed.

Although some attribute Augustine’s teaching, which is by no means perfect, to overcompensation for his own failings, others continue to find it helpful. Catholic theologian Jana Bennett, who joined the University of Dayton faculty just after I completed my doctoral coursework, begins her book *Water Is Thicker than Blood* by noting that “there is a cultural frenzy regarding marriage, and that it has overtaken theology.” Briefly, widespread failures at marriage have caused the culture to propose a variety of ways to “fix” it, while some scholars have argued that it reinforces unhealthy attitudes about gender and sexuality and/or that it is superfluous because it is no longer needed to regulate society. Theologians have responded to this frenzy by idealizing marriage as capable of solving a myriad of societal ills, many having to do with children. According to Bennett, the “marriage and family” approach, which takes several forms, is overly sociological and oriented to the social and economic goods of the state. “[The ideal is that] the state undergirds the family and Christians have bought into that ideal.” In a word, Bennett argues that this approach is insufficiently theological; it marginalizes singleness, privatizes the family, and fails to acknowledge that both married and single persons—including divorced persons, widows and widowers, virgins, monastics, adopted and foster children, and so on—find their identity not in the family (blood), particularly the nuclear family, but in baptism (water), which initiates them into the genuine “Household of God,” that is, the church. Although Christians are right to be concerned with social crises, in coming to believe that they can rescue marriage and family and thereby rescue society they have neglected the primary task of relating them to the church.

Bennett grounds her theology of households in an Augustinian vision of marriage and salvation history. For Augustine, it is a Christian's *second* birth that defines his or her loyalties and reorders whatever "states of life" he or she happens to be in as part of "constituent households" of the church. In these households, for example, married persons learn that chastity includes them and single persons take on some of the responsibilities of parenthood, because the church is always ready to receive children. Augustine speaks of the church as "[a] new kind of family," and as Bennett explains, "We do not have any true family except the one by which we are joined to Christ in marriage because Christ himself has renounced familial ties [in Matthew 12:48]." This means that "households have sacramental character and may thus be intertwined with the church's own sacramental life," including Eucharist, baptism, and marriage. It also means that the bonds between Christians are enacted liturgically in worship, which creates a space in which the artificial dichotomies that divide persons (e.g., public/private, male/female, sex/gender) are redefined and redirected toward the final end of friendship with God. For Augustine, friendship is not only one of the goods of marriage but also that which unites all Christians under the rule of Christ, who calls his disciples "friends." Thus worship is a political act because it witnesses to the community's loyalty and fidelity to one another and to God. According to Bennett, in *The City of God* Augustine makes clear that "the church's worship is its own political life, and it forms people into that life and way of thinking, however imperfectly." Applied to dating, for example, this way of thinking means that "one's relationships should not be directed toward meeting one's individual desire and ... can be directed toward helping each other in Christian discipleship."

Bennett's work exemplifies the sort of creative engagement with the Christian tradition that Baptists will need in order to faithfully struggle

with sexuality and other difficult subjects and to reach conclusions that are trustworthy, truly loving and just, and in accord with who God wants us to be—conclusions that may or may not be the same as my own or those that the church has reached in the past. It is also fitting that Bennett is a Catholic, and although many Americans (and many Catholics) regard the Catholic Church as hopelessly backward on sexuality, I submit that this is not the case. Knowing the long history of antagonism between Baptists and Catholics, I marvel at the fact that I read Catholic theologians at a Baptist seminary, studied with them at a Catholic university, and teach alongside them at "the world's

Ministers can no longer be excused for not preaching or teaching on sexuality or for not accounting for the tradition when they do so, nor can ethicists be excused from ignoring the tradition and relying solely on biblical passages, social scientific data, and social mores in their work on sexuality or any other topic.

largest Baptist university." It has been a crucial step for Baptists to largely discard their anti-Catholicism, and the next step is to continue to learn from Catholics (as well as Christians from other traditions), not because Baptists need to craft some sort of hybrid identity but because Catholics have better maintained the tradition that all Christians share. Moreover, Catholics are in need of conversation partners as they renew their congregations after the dissolution of their own subculture. As Catholic philosopher

Alasdair MacIntyre reminds us, a "living tradition" is not a static collection of principles but "a historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely about the goods which constitute that tradition." Such an argument takes place within the tradition as a whole and within the diverse communities of which it is comprised.

So what will it take for Baptists to fully participate in this argument? Undoubtedly we must continue to integrate the study of the Christian tradition into the curricula of our colleges and seminaries. I was recently reminded of this when I taught a course at Truett in which students read primary texts in theology. One of the most insightful papers that I received was on Augustine's contemporary John Chrysostom, who emphasizes that in light of the greater mystery of faith—the union of Christ (the bridegroom) and the church—marriage concerns not only procreation and the satisfaction of desire but also the growth in holiness of both husband and wife. Furthermore, college and seminary graduates must find ways to integrate what they have learned from the tradition into the life of their congregations. Indeed, ministers can no longer be excused for not preaching or teaching on sexuality or for not accounting for the tradition when they do so, nor can ethicists be excused from ignoring the tradition and relying solely on biblical passages, social scientific data, and social mores in their work on sexuality or any other topic.

Finally, individuals and congregations must call on CBF and other denominations to respect and draw on the tradition. So while this conference may be several steps beyond where Baptists are, perhaps it can serve as a starting point for a conversation that we must have. ■

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What Do Christians Think God Thinks About Sex?

By Melissa Browning

Setting the stage: Listening to Bodies in Early Christianity

At this conference, we're talking about sex, which means we have to talk about bodies. After all, we have sex with our bodies. We also have to talk about why we have sex – why our bodies want to have sex. This means we're not only talking about our bodies, but about procreation, relationality, and desire. The task at hand is to analyze and explore our theology as it relates to the body. What do we, as Christians, think about bodies? How are bodies valued (or devalued) in Scripture; or in Christian history and tradition? What can we learn from Jesus' example in the ways that he interacted with bodies during his embodied life among us?

We can also ask, what can the experiences of our bodies teach us about theology and ethics? About a rightly formed sexual ethic? Can loving the body – our bodies – help us better place sexuality within the realm of covenant?

In order to begin answering these questions, we must look back before looking forward. The ways in which we see our bodies are deeply linked to the ways in which Christians have seen bodies for centuries. This link not only ties us back to Scripture, but to past civilizations in which Scripture was written and read. Because our contemporary views are so shaped by our history, looking back across Scripture and tradition must be the first step in our journey of formulating an embodied theology – a theology that is rooted in and takes seriously our relationship to our bodies.

In Christian history, stoicism played a major role in establishing a mind/body dualism and in dismissing or demonizing the role of sexual pleasure within relationships. Stoicism stepped on the stage of history during

the third century before Christ. This Hellenistic philosophy deeply shaped later Christian views on bodies and sexuality. The Stoic view of sexual desire was based first on a mind/body dualism – a separation of mind and body. It also reached toward the goals of self-sufficiency and *apatheia* (or a life free of emotions and passions). Within this mind/body dualism, the soul and the body were separate – the body was seen as negative or even evil, while the soul was transcendent and good.

Peter Brown, a scholar of Christian history, points out that this shaped the idea of what a true, moral man should be – passionless, self-controlled, never shouting at servants or wives, never becoming angry. In this paradigm, men were equated with the mind while women were equated with passionate, uncontrollable, emotional bodies. Being emotional was like becoming a woman. And only men, associated with the life of the mind, could truly be moral people.

This same goal of not being weakened by passions was especially important in the realm of sexuality. Medical doctors contemporary with the Stoics (and with the New Testament period) saw sexuality as dangerous in that it caused the temperature to rise and threatened men with a loss of vital energy. Too much sex could weaken a man and make him “effeminate.” Galen, a prominent physician in antiquity, believed that sex caused the blood to boil, and therefore posed a great danger to balance. A passionless sex served the goal of procreation without making men vulnerable through love or emotion – characteristics that were thought to be feminine, not masculine in nature.

Clement of Alexandria, an early Christian theologian who wrote between 180-215 CE, suggested the “Stoic Sage” as the perfect model

for Christian behavior. Like other Christian writers, he adopted Stoic views but did not see the body as completely evil. Instead, for Clement, the body was an ally in living the moral life. Yet, the body must be rigorously trained in order to accomplish the morality of a Sage. For Clement, Christ was the perfect Stoic Sage. In typical Stoic fashion, Clement separated sex and desire. Sexual desire was only useful (if it was useful at all) in the way that it contributed to procreation. Sex without a procreative goal was not only sinful, but vulgar and “plebian.” Clement believed that no good could come from sex and that participation (or passion) in sex actually harmed the beloved and created weak offspring. Following the medicine of his day, he believed that sexual desire cooled with age.

Tertullian, writing around the same time period, followed Clement by continuing the mind/body split, saying that sex and prayer were incompatible, and marriage should be a training school for continence. He believed that clarity of mind could be produced from avoiding sex and sexual desire. Therefore, for both Tertullian and Ambrose, virginity was the most desirable state for the Christian. Continent widowhood came second, and finally, chastity in marriage was third. Tertullian saw women as naturally seductive, and believed Christian baptism did nothing to change this. Because of this, Tertullian believed modesty had to be enforced on women, especially in church. He believed that women needed to be reminded that they, like Eve, might be “the Devil's gateway”

Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan who lived between 340 and 397 CE, further separated mind and body as he called the body a “veil” that should not interfere with the primacy of the mind. Ambrose said that each person's

body contained the “scar of sexuality” that could only be overcome by conversion and baptism that would allow us to participate in the “perfect flesh of Christ.” Christ was perfect because he was free from this “scar of sexuality” via his virgin birth. This concept would later become key to Augustine’s articulation of original sin.

The ideas of Clement, Tertullian, and Ambrose are more fully realized in the work of Augustine. Augustine, who lived between 354-430 CE, gives us an interesting take on bodies and sexual desire because he is the only writer who also gives us his own biography. In the *Confessions*, we see Augustine struggling with his own sexual desire as he wavers between the concubine, whom he was with for 13 years, a second concubine, and the possibility of an arranged marriage. Augustine says in the *Confessions* that he wishes he had been chaste from his youth, or that his parents had arranged an early marriage for him. Augustine embraced a form of stoicism that saw desire as evil, yet he did not see the body as entirely evil because it was part of creation. While others among his contemporaries would have thought sex and even bodies were a result of the Fall, and that before the Fall, Adam and Eve existed in an angelic state, Augustine believed Adam and Eve had the same bodies we have, but without the evil of sexual desire. He said that if there had not been sin, procreation would have still transpired in the same way, but without any sexual desire. Sexual desire, according to Augustine, was evil and would have brought evil into paradise.

Augustine believed sex for concupiscence (or sexual desire) was always a venial sin. For Augustine, there was no difference between sex with a prostitute and sex with your wife – both were sinful. The only redemption for sex with your wife came through procreation. Like the Apostle Paul, he saw marriage as a remedy for lust, but he did not believe that this remedy eliminated the evil present in all forms of sexual desire. This is seen most clearly

in Augustine’s view of original sin. It was the desire and lust present in the act of sex that transmitted sin from one generation to the next. Sin was transmitted through “seminal propagation” – for Augustine, sin was literally present in the semen. Augustine believed that if there had been another way to procreate, then our forefathers and foremothers of faith would have chosen that way instead. Yet since there was not another means for procreation, sex was necessary, but still not good. Continence was always more desirable, and a married couple should strive for continence as soon as possible.

Augustine’s views on sexuality were deeply shaped by his understandings of gender. Again, in this time period, men were equated with the life of the mind and women were equated with base-level bodily passions. Women incited lust, and like the earth, they needed to be subdued (by men of course). But men must show dispassion in sowing their seed. Sex and sexual desire, the body and its passions, were always closely linked to sin.

Setting the stage: Listening to Bodies in New Testament Texts

With a history in place that spans several centuries before and after the arrival of Christ, we can now turn to New Testament texts to ask how the writing and early reading of these texts were shaped by these same ideas on sexuality and the body. In some ways, the New Testament (and particularly the Pauline letters) diverged from the Hebrew Scriptures by placing sexuality primarily in the realm of rules that regulate the passions. In Jewish tradition, sexual satisfaction in marriage was considered a moral duty. Even before going to war, a soldier was required to satisfy his wife. Likewise, in the *Song of Songs*, we find a beautiful, sensual love story where bodily desire is trusted and shapes the relationship between the lovers in the story.

In the Pauline letters, we see a much different view of sex. The body is not trusted. Salvation happens not in the body, but in the mind. Marriage is a

way of quenching desire which, for Paul, is the real problem with sex. Sex within marriage was good because it kept desire at bay. For Paul, it’s “better to marry than burn.” The idea of sexual desire as “burning” was a common metaphor in Paul’s day.

Nowhere in Paul’s writings is there a place where sexual desire is seen as good. In fact, it’s likely that he only sees marriage as a good because it’s the best way to extinguish this negative desire. In 1 Cor. 7, marriage functions in three ways: as a way to guard weak Christians from pollution, as a duty Christian spouses owe to one another, and as a protection from satanic testing. We never hear Paul wax on about spousal love or, God forbid, pleasure. Paul is primarily concerned with protecting Christians from “porneia,” which is often translated as illicit sexual intercourse or “fornication.”

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul says that each person should control their own body “not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God.” For Paul, Christian sex is sex without passion, sex without desire. Even in Romans 1, a passage that is often quoted to speak against same-sex desire, the problem at stake for Paul is actually desire itself. The problem is the “lusts of their hearts,” their “degrading passions.” It is the presence of passion, of desire that leads the people to be given over to what Paul calls “unnatural intercourse.” Here, spiritual desire – desire for God, is contrasted with and incompatible with bodily desires. In Paul’s writing, idolatry, sexual desire, and pollution are deeply linked.

Like the early Christian theologians who read his writings, Paul is writing in a time when the medical doctors of his day saw sexual desire as a heat that could easily push the body out of balance. While this heat or desire was seen by these ancient doctors as necessary for procreation, controlling this desire was always a foremost concern. For Paul, keeping balance in the body, disciplining the body, was an ongoing battle for the Christian.

In the familiar verses of Romans 7,

we listen as Paul says, “nothing good dwells within me.” Starting in vs. 14, Paul says:

I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do... For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

For Paul, sin dwells in the body. Freedom and life, the Christian life, dwells in the mind. The body is a site of desire and simply cannot be trusted for moral wisdom.

Interestingly enough, the example of Jesus portrays a somewhat alternate view of the body than that of the Apostle Paul. While Paul is eager to leave behind the body, looking always to the future *parousia*, Jesus’ entire ministry is embodied. Jesus took on human form – the form of a body – to know our sufferings, to meet our spiritual and bodily needs. For Jesus, bodies and spirits were never separate. Jesus cared that bodies were fed – he multiplied loaves and fishes, turned water into wine, and caused his disciples to pull in a huge catch of fish. Jesus cared that bodies were well. He healed the sick, gave the blind their sight, made the lame walk, and even raised the dead. Jesus cared that untouchable bodies were touched. He violated taboos as he healed lepers and the woman with the issue of blood. When Jesus healed the blind man at Bethsaida, he made mud from spit and smeared it on the man’s eyes. For Jesus, the stuff of the body was the stuff of creation, the stuff of life.

The bodily controversies that consume our conversations on theological

ethics today were issues that Jesus was largely silent on. He never spoke a word condemning same-sex relationships or attractions. He didn’t even embrace what is sometimes called a “traditional view on marriage and family.” In fact, he more often spoke against the (patriarchal) marriage structures of his time. Jesus never married and saw his family as those who followed him, not those who were related to him by blood. He said that those who would not leave their families for his sake were not worthy of the kingdom. While Jesus forbade divorce, he still did not advocate for marriage. For example, in Matthew 19, when speaking against divorce Jesus ends by talking about those who have “made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven,” possibly implying that marriage – particularly a traditional, patriarchal marriage – might be more harm than good. It could be argued that the patriarchal household – like other institutions of power – was being challenged by the kingdom (or rather kin-dom) of God.

While Jesus rarely discussed sexuality, we do remember the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery. Of course, the first thing we notice about this story is that while two bodies were involved in this sexual act, only one body – a woman’s body – is accused. As the scribes and Pharisees prepare their stones for throwing, Jesus shifts the focus from her sin to their sin. The sexual sin – the sin of the body – is no greater than the sins of the mind, the sin of judging another person.

Rethinking Mind/Body Dualism: Resources for an Embodied Christianity

Like the scribes and the Pharisees, we Christians tend to be a bit infatuated with sexual sins, with sins of the body. When I teach ethics, I often ask my students to name the biggest issues in Christian ethics. They usually create the following list: homosexuality, abstinence education, abortion, birth control, access to healthcare, condoms... the biggest controversies are

always about sex and bodies. I’ve never had a student mention war, or torture or feeding the poor as the biggest issues we grapple with in the Christian community. Talking about sex takes up a good bit of our mental and moral energies!

And in some ways, this is a good thing. Sex is important. We need to understand the ways in which sex and sexuality shape us as moral people, as people in community. Yet, it can also be dangerous when we make sex the litmus test for faith. Sex does not define us entirely. It is not all-important. It is only a part of who we are as moral people, as people of God.

I believe that part of the reason that we allow sex to define us (and each other) comes from our mistrust of our bodies. With the apostle Paul, we see the body as the space of desire that must be disciplined. We too often neglect the words from creation that call the body good. We too often forget the example of Jesus who touched and healed bodies, of Jesus who was embodied – God embodied in human form.

In order to talk about sexuality, we must not only talk about bodies, but we must do theology from the body. What does this mean? Well, within the study of Christian ethics, we have a paradigm that is called the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” The term comes from an analysis of John Wesley’s theological writings that showed how Wesley used Scripture, tradition, reason and experience when writing on ethical issues. In Baptist life, I’ll admit, we have a tendency to turn only to scripture when navigating moral problems. But as Christians, there are wider resources that can help us interpret Scripture, such as tradition, reason and experience.

Today I want to talk a little more about the category of experience, because this is where we locate what is called a theology of embodiment or body theology. Doing theology from the body is a way of overcoming the mind/body dualism still present in Christian theology and practice. It draws on the category of lived experi-

ence to help navigate the moral life. It reminds us that we are not just our minds, but we are embodied people. Our bodies shape the ways we interact with each other and the ways we know ourselves.

Theologian Margaret Farley argues that this mind/body dualism and the social construction of gender are the two key issues we must sort out in any framework of sexual ethics. Farley talks about mind/body dualism by focusing on four key categories: profound suffering, objectification, aging and dying, and the experience of the “divided self.” In looking at these four categories, Farley suggests that we are “inspired bodies” and “embodied spirits.” She points out that while we seek to be unified selves, there are also experiences of disunity. Only “inspired bodies” and “embodied spirits” can experience profound pain and aging and dying. In the same way, objectification is an attempt to subjugate the “embodied spirit,” and the experience of the divided self reminds us of how our bodies can limit our spirits or how our spirits can limit our bodies.

Farley argues that when we talk about sexual ethics, we too often ask the wrong questions. We ask whether or not a particular type of relationship – such as a same-sex relationship – is moral. Farley argues that the better approach is to apply a framework of justice to all relationships. Here, Farley looks at sex and love through the lens of justice and argues that there are both, “wise loves and foolish, good loves and bad, true loves and mistaken loves.” Farley uses this to ask this question of what is a “right love”? For Farley, for sex to be ethical, to be within the realm of justice, seven characteristics are necessary. We must do no unjust harm, there must be free consent, mutuality and equality. There must be equal commitment, even if the commitment is not a lifelong commitment. There must be fruitfulness defined in broader terms than “procreation,” and attention must be given to social justice. Farley reminds us that marriage alone can-

not make a sexual relationship “just.” Marriages, like any other relationships, can be just or unjust.

For the past three years, I’ve been doing research with and writing on the lived experiences of HIV-positive women in Mwanza, Tanzania. While churches around the world have responded to the HIV/AIDS epidemic by focusing on abstinence and faithfulness, the women in Mwanza are testimony that this approach is insufficient. Most of these women were abstinent before marriage and faithful within their marriages. But 80% of them contracted HIV from an unfaithful spouse. The women in my study told me over and over, it’s better to be a girlfriend than a wife. Girlfriends have power; wives don’t. If we refuse sex, we’ll be beaten first, and raped later. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, marriage has become a risk factor for HIV and Christian marriage offers even less protection as it upholds rigid gender roles, discourages divorce and encourages women to return to abusive and unfaithful spouses.

What does it mean to listen to the stories of HIV-positive women and do theology from the body? What does it mean to allow the experiences of their bodies to inform the way we think about sexual ethics, about covenant, about which relationships are just and which relationships are unjust? The bodily experiences of women abused and raped within their marriages reminds us that a marriage document alone carries little moral weight; that fidelity to an unfaithful, abusive marriage can never be a virtue; that even in rightly ordered relationships, in good relationships, fidelity, is only a servant virtue. We are not faithful to our relationships for the sake of fidelity, but for the sake of love. Fidelity serves love. It protects the space to allow life and love to grow, and this, and only this, is why fidelity is important.

Miguel De La Torre follows this path as he writes from a Latino liberationist perspective. De La Torre argues that great sex must be understood

from the perspective of the marginalized. He argues for a love of neighbor that embraces the “sexually repressed neighbor.” He sees sexual desire as a gift from God, and emphasizes the importance of “great sex.” De La Torre believes great sex can only exist within a familial framework where relationality is fostered. He proposes a category of “*orthoeros*” which he defines as “correct erotic sex.” The requirements for *orthoeros* include: safety, consent, faithfulness, mutual pleasure, and intimacy. These categories are especially poignant in that they focus also on the community. De La Torre poses the question of whether or not great sex in the bedroom could create justice in other areas of our lives as well.

Returning to the category of experience, what can the experiences of those having sex (or wanting to have sex) outside of traditional marriage structures teach us about sexual ethics? What can we learn from a young single person who might choose to marry early – too early – so as not to break a vow of abstinence? Or better, what can we learn from a teenager who chooses not to carry a condom because they think “making a mistake” is better than “premeditated sin,” even if it results in pregnancy or an STD? These two scenarios are stories I heard from research with members of a young adult dance and drama team in Chicago – It’s better not to use condoms and call it a mistake; it’s better to marry early – just don’t break the abstinence pledge. But like fidelity, abstinence must be a servant virtue. It must serve life and love. It must bring human flourishing or it’s no good to us at all. Purity for the sake of purity is neither virtuous nor a moral good.

When we do theology from the body, we listen to lived experiences. We listen to the experiences of senior citizens who disagree with Tertullian and Clement and remind us that sexual desire does not cool with age.

When we do theology from the body, we not only remember our physical bodies, but the bodies of those around us, others in our community, the body of Christ. We

might ask the same question asked in a recent workshop session at a CBF General Assembly, "How is God calling us to be the presence of Christ among people with same sex orientation?" Yet when we ask the question, we remember that "we" who are Christians are both gay and straight, young and old, rich and poor, marginalized and mainlined. We might instead ask the question of how God is calling those with same-sex orientation to be the presence of Christ to us. How might our gay and lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer sisters and brothers be teaching us to finally accept sex as grace and gift? How might they be teaching us to call sex and sexual desire "good," as God did in creation?

Could listening to our bodies, our desires, our needs, our wants, paint a new picture of justice? Can a decision to love and trust, rather than discipline, our bodies teach us a new way to love ourselves? To love each other?

In thinking through this, we must examine the ways in which the mind/body dualism present in Christian history and some Christian Scriptures has shaped our understandings of sexual ethics. We must realize that this dual-

ism was gendered and did not account for women's experience or for the experiences of the marginalized. We must realize that this dualism not only supported only male/female relationships – but, more specifically, only supported male/female relationships where women were subordinate to and given less moral authority than men.

In looking back, in looking forward, we must ask ourselves hard questions. For instance, could our views on same-sex relationships be tied to our gendered understandings of sex – that sex equals male-female penetration – that same-sex relationships bend gender in ways with which we are uncomfortable?

Yes, the task is about hard questions, about difficult (yet potentially liberating) realizations -- such as the realization that, in the ancient world, in the world of the Bible, there was simply no concept of loving, committed, same-sex couples. And the realization that marriage in both scripture and in Christian history, has always been a patriarchal institution. Even the prohibition against sex before marriage was created in a world where women were property and virginity brought a greater dowry.

While there are resources within Scripture for mutuality and equality, there are also texts that devalue women's bodies or maintain strict gender hierarchies that shape opposite-sex relationships today. For those of us seeking to dismantle these hierarchies, same-sex relationships can point toward justice, modeling a form of relationality that is not hierarchical and is less caught up in the constraints of gender.

When we listen to the body, when we love the body, when we do theology from the body, we learn that lived experience matters. We remember that scripture and tradition are also embodied – in a certain time and location. And we remember the life of Christ, who took on human form, who met people where they were. We remember the example of Christ, who cared about our bodies. ■

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What Are The Ties That Bind?

By David Gushee

Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made the two of you one? You belong to him in body and spirit. And why has he made you one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful

to the wife of your youth. "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate it when people clothe themselves with injustice," says the LORD Almighty. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful. (Mal. 2:13-16)

A conference on *sexuality and covenant* invites each speaker to decide whether to start with a focus on *sexuality* or on *covenant*. My first draft of this talk started with sexuality, with what I described as the implacable, imperious, and relentless sexual drives that I discovered as a very young man and that I concluded long ago needed the

structures of covenant to avoid harm to others and chaos in my own life.

Well, maybe I just started with sexuality. But really I would rather now start with covenant. I start with the covenant of my parents. The covenant that binds together my father and mother, David and Janice Gushee, is very much on my mind these days. My father is now a very white-haired 82-year-old man. My mother is 79. They have been married since 1961. I came along in 1962. John F. Kennedy was president. Let's face it--that was a very long time ago. TV was black and white and had three channels.

My parents are on my mind because

my mother has been in rehab for two months from a nasty fall and a broken arm. This is her third major fall and she is struggling. Pretty much every joint has been replaced in recent years; she has been getting more and more wobbly; and now she is afraid that if she tries to walk again unaided she will hurt herself even worse than she already has.

When I think about covenant I think about the way my dad relates to my mom right now. Mom doesn't seem to have a lot of energy. Her infectious laugh seems largely to have been silenced. But Dad is there, by her side, in the rehab center attached to a nursing home that she is staying in. He sits with her. He talks with her. He takes phone calls for her because she doesn't really want to talk on the phone right now. He is there for her.

Dad was at one point concerned that Mom was more or less giving up, wasn't going to work hard for full rehabilitation one more time. When I visited her, I asked Mom if she would give it an effort. She told me that she would—for Dad. Not really for herself—she is tired of the effort. But she would do it, for Dad. All the while, Dad is doing all he can—for her.

I remember them when they were in their 30s and 40s. Dad worked for the federal government. Mom mainly raised us four kids. We were rambunctious, large, rowdy kids. Everyone knew what everyone else was doing because, well, there wasn't really any place to hide.

Sometimes Mom and Dad would have barn-burner arguments. They were from the North, so they actually had open disputes instead of doing the Southern passive-aggressive thing. Mom could flare up, especially when she was tired. She would yell. Dad would yell. We would go hide. But after a while a pattern developed. Their yelling was real, for sure, and it wasn't pleasant. But they made up. Each time. Nothing seemed to shake them in any fundamental way. I don't remember either of them ever walking out, storming out, spending the night away. They stayed. They fought, they made up

(just as noisily; it was so embarrassing), and they stayed together. The covenant that held during the Mad Men era of their early years still holds during the iPhone era. It is quite wonderful, quite amazing.

A Baptist family conversation about sexuality needs to talk about a whole lot of things. I am glad that we are surfacing so many different issues. But I have thought from the beginning that the very most important thing we could talk about would be the issue of covenant. I believe that covenant is a, if not the, single best way that has emerged in the great Christian theological-ethical-ecclesial tradition to talk about what we are supposed to do with our sexuality, and for that matter, our relationality. It is certainly not the only way that Christianity has addressed sexuality and relational bonding—but I submit to you that it is the best way. I propose it to you as a moral norm worth not just retaining, but strengthening in our own lives and in the ministry of our churches.

An interpersonal covenant, as I understand it as a legacy of the Christian tradition, is a voluntarily entered sacred pact between two persons and between those persons and the God to whom both are committed. That sacred agreement is freely entered between two persons who are equal in power and who are under no coercion—otherwise it is not truly an interpersonal covenant. But once it has been freely entered, the freedom of its participants is henceforth and always constrained. Once having made the covenant they are now no longer free of its obligations. A covenant is a free decision to make oneself no longer free.

Such a covenant involves an exchange of promises. In the Christian community, these promises are considered fully binding by the couple, their faith community, and the God to whom all parties are pledged. In Christian-influenced cultures such as our own, these sacred interpersonal promises undertaken by people legally eligible to make them were believed to be and were treated as legally binding as well. An interpersonal covenant thus became

a legally recognized marriage. It was understood to be the way adults committed themselves to each other and the approved context in which children were to be born and raised.

Traditional wedding ceremonies still retain vestiges of a covenantal structure—even when participants have little sense of the significance of what is being said.

In the structure of the wedding service that I usually employ, the couple has two moments in which they verbally affirm their covenant promises to each other. The first one is what I call the “declaration of consent.” It usually goes like this—I draw from the last wedding I performed:

Abby, do you freely take Jake to be your wedded husband, to live together in the holy estate of Christian marriage? Do you promise to love him, comfort him, honor him, and keep him in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all others, keep you only unto him, as long as you both shall live? And Abby answers: I do. And after the same recitation, Jake answers, I do.

Then they seal their covenant with the verbal exchange of the vows they are making:

I, Abby, take you, Jake (repeat), to be my wedded husband (repeat), to have and to hold (repeat), from this day forward (repeat), for better, for worse (repeat), for richer, for poorer (repeat), in sickness and in health (repeat), to love and to cherish (repeat), till death do us part (repeat), according to God's holy covenant (repeat); to this end I pledge you my faith (repeat).

I ask you to notice the nature of the sacred promises that this couple is making:

They are promising a *certain quality of interpersonal relating* of each other, expressed here under the terms love, cherish, comfort, honor, and care.

They are promising to offer such relating to one another *under good circumstances and bad ones*. (“For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, for better, for worse”)

They are promising to offer such

relating *only to each other and not to anyone else*, for this particular kind of promise cannot be made to more than one person (“Forsaking all others, keeping only unto her/him”).

And they are promising to offer such relating to each other *for a lifetime*. They are attaching no conditions or time limit to their promise other than the condition that both must be living. (“As long as you both shall live.”)

There is a reason why it is absolutely critical in a wedding service for the participants to be posed these consent questions and to make these oaths individually, one at a time. Each is making a covenant that binds them for life; but this covenant they must make freely, as an individual moral agent. Having made that covenant agreement, for the couple a new reality exists. Now these are covenantally-bound human beings who exist in a different relationship than they did prior to this exchange of covenant promises.

I am firmly convinced that the greatest challenge facing the Christian/Baptist family at this time is nurturing more Christians who have the confidence, and the willingness, and the capacity, to make and keep such covenant promises. This is closely associated with being churches that have the confidence, and the willingness, and the capacity, to roll up their sleeves and help covenanted couples succeed in keeping those promises over the course of a long and often difficult lifetime.

Why does it matter? Why bother? Why not simply succumb to the realities Jenell Paris discussed and perhaps assume that lifetime covenants of marriage are gone with the wind?

Well, certainly I would begin with the biblical and traditional roots of covenantalism in marriage. It is perhaps most clearly attested in Malachi 2:13-16. It emerged as the predominant model for understanding Christian marriage only after the Protestant Reformation, and especially in the Calvinist tradition. I am not saying it is the only or even the predominant understanding of marriage

in scripture or tradition. But it has a long heritage, and I would submit it is the best model we have available to us from the tradition.

Why is it the best model? First, *because covenant works better for adults*. I see covenant-making as a divinely given response to human nature, human potential, and human sin. Human beings are both sexual and relational. We are wired to desire interpersonal connection, love, and intimacy. We are also wired to desire sexual pleasure, over and over again. Very often in history human cultures or individuals have separated these two functions. Christian covenantalism has welded them together, saying, here is what you are to do with your sexual and relational drives—direct them toward one person, and covenant with that one person to express those drives only with them.

Anyone who goes to a traditional wedding and watches young people make promises binding them for 60 years is struck by the audacity of such promises. It surely is a reach. But it is a reach that is within human capability. My parents did it. Maybe your parents did it. We know it is possible, because we know those who did it and we feel inclined (many of us) to dream that we can do it. My wife and I are at year 28!

So Christian covenantalism, I am saying, is better for adults because it corresponds with our nature, and with our potential. But I would also say that covenantalism shrewdly recognizes our sinfulness as well. If we lived in a sinless Eden—think about it with me—we would not need covenants. Our hearts would be always true. Our relationships would be always sturdy. We would never be so angry as to want to give up. We would never be attracted to another lover. We would just follow our sexual-relational urges to the first available attractive person and then mate for life, like pigeons or ducks.

But we are morally inferior to pigeons and ducks. We need sacred promises to bind us to one another, or we might not stay together. Because we are indeed fickle. We might end up

liking someone else better. We might find someone else more sexy. We might get tired of arguing and think that with this other person there would be no arguing. Covenants are in this sense a concession to sin, a divine provision for sin. Covenants are the best possible arrangement for binding human bodies and lives in this not best of all possible worlds.

As we see in Scripture, covenants emerge only after sin enters the narrative. The first one is with Noah. Covenants are an expression of divine realism about human beings, and they are divinely realistic in our relationships with each other. As Mike Mason wrote: “It is not we who keep our covenants; it is our covenants that keep us.” Thank God for the marriage covenant that has kept my mother and father together for over 50 years, and kept Jeanie and me together for almost 30 years. I am sure there have been moments in my parents’ marriage, as in most marriages, when it was for a season only the covenant that kept them together. When there is little fun, little laughter, little good sex, little but struggle—that is when we need covenant more than any other time. And those hard times come to all marriages.

And covenants are better for children. Now almost 50 years old, I am seeing the big picture in a way I couldn’t have when I was a more gonadally-driven 20-year-old. Covenants constrain adult sexuality so that we voluntarily but bindingly choose to have sex only with this one other person. This is good news for that one other person, and for us—but it is exceptionally good news for the children who might result from our lovemaking.

It is good news for them because they never need to wonder who or where their father or mother might be. It is good news because their father and mother are far more likely to be bonded permanently to each other than in any other adult sexual-relational arrangement. It is good news because it creates the conditions for a covenantal relationship between father, mother, *and children*. I am convinced that there is indeed a natural expecta-

tion of covenant commitment between parents and children. The adults may not be aware of that expectation; but their children are deeply aware of it, especially when it is broken. Children want to know their parents. They want their parents to love them and be involved in their lives. And children want their parents to treat each other right and keep the promises they have made to each other, which is one reason why children of divorce so often fantasize (for a while at least) about their parents getting back together. These are not just vague hopes that children have. They are real expectations, met with bitter disappointment when parents are cruel to each other or absent, faithless, or uncaring to the child. I have written and I still believe that there is something like a covenant bond between parents and the children they bring into the world. And certainly a covenant *between parents* is the best context for that covenant *between parents and children* to be realized.

I began with mention of my parents.

I think of them now. They made covenant promises to each other over 50 years ago. At the time, they burned with the sexuality that most young people do. They took that sexuality and that relationality and gave it over

wholeheartedly to each other in the covenant of marriage. Fifty years later their covenant holds. It blesses them. They age together. They continue to raise grown kids, together. They suffer, together. They laugh, together.

Their covenant blesses their children. The sturdiness of their bond gave me the confidence and willingness to go looking for my own covenant partner, and to believe that marriage could work for me if I found a good Christian woman. I knew what to look for. Twenty-eight years later, not without tough times, our covenant holds. Now our daughter Holly is 24. She is married. She had the confidence to marry because of what she saw as a child. So did her young husband Jonathan. Our son David is bonding pretty tightly to a young lady over at Furman, whose parents' covenant has also held. And so it goes, so it is supposed to go, as covenant blessings bless children's children, across the generations.

We live in a consumer society. We are taught every day that no commitments are permanent ones. Each day we are socialized to trade what we have for something better. We do it in every context of life, including religion. There used to be church covenants—

remember those? It is very hard to teach young people to make lifetime covenants when there is absolutely no other context for doing anything remotely similar. I call on the churches to be better and more faithful covenant communities. Not cut-and-run consumer products but covenanted communities of brothers and sisters in Christ. Only such communities are in any position to talk to emerging adults about lifetime sexual-relational-marital covenants.

These next two sessions explore various dimensions of covenant, and some of the acute difficulties of making covenants and/or marriages in our current social situation. We will be exploring what happens when neither covenants nor marriages are sanctioned or perhaps even realistically available to many groups and individuals either in church or in society. I conclude with this: I don't think our main issue is the fierce and tedious fighting on the boundaries about *which categories of people* ought to be viewed as eligible to make covenants. We have plenty to do, right now, each day, to rescue in our churches the very concept and practice of covenant before it disappears altogether. Let us put our best efforts to that project—all of us. ■

My Parents Divorced When I Left Home

By Emily Holladay

I grew up in a typical American household. In fact, being the younger of two children, I was the final piece in completing our nuclear family. I spent all my childhood years with my mom (an elementary school principal), my dad (a Baptist pastor), my older sister, Meredith (the smartest person I know), and various family pets until my sister went to college when I was in the seventh grade. After Meredith moved out, Mom, Dad, and I struggled together through my awkward and angsty teen years. I wasn't sure that we had the best relationship, or that they had the

most loving marriage, but I always thought I was the product of a "normal" family.

In August of 2005, I left home to attend Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. It was a moderately-sized, conservative Baptist college. Most of my classmates grew up in homes like mine. Very few were from separated households – and if they were, they didn't talk about it. My time at Samford confirmed for me that the family I grew up in was normal, and I was thankful that I could relate to the majority of my peers.

Christmas break. It was the last Christmas before I would graduate from Samford and for some reason, that holiday felt different. I thought it must have been because I was getting ready to graduate and I was afraid of the unknown future ahead of me. I spent the night before I flew back to school crying with my mom and dad – individually – telling them that I didn't think anything was going to be the same again. I knew as soon as I left that something was going to be different, but I couldn't figure out what it was.

Two days later, I was sitting in my

dorm room getting ready for my first day of January term classes. I was the only one of my roommates who signed up for January term, so I had the dorm to myself and was ready to enjoy the space for a while. I had a few minutes before I needed to head to class, so I refreshed my e-mail page one more time to see if anything new would come up.

And that was the moment everything changed. There was one new e-mail in my inbox and it read:

Dear Meredith and Emily,
This is by far the hardest letter I have ever written. Today I have left your dad. The relationship between your dad and me has grown distant in the last few years. I was in personal counseling, we did marriage counseling, and instead of things getting better—they have gotten worse... What I am doing has NOTHING to do with the two of you!! I love you more than you will ever imagine... When the time is right, I will talk to you about everything. I am so very proud of both of you. I know I haven't said it enough throughout the years. You are extraordinary young women. I love you and will always be — your MOM.

I didn't have time to process what I had just read. My class was starting in 10 minutes, and you *cannot* miss a day of "Jan term" classes. So, I grabbed my backpack and walked out the door.

The walk from my dorm room to the classroom seemed to last forever. I was in shock. Should I call someone? Should I tell my sister or wait until she checked her e-mail? Should I tell my professor? Was that e-mail even real? It had to be a joke.

My parents had been together for 31 years. Surely if they could make it that long, they could make it through anything. Being honest with myself, I admitted that I always knew their relationship was rocky; but I thought if they were going to get divorced, they would have done it by now.

How was I supposed to go to class?

How was I supposed to admit to my conservative, Baptist, Samford community that my family was not "normal" anymore?

I walked in the classroom, took my seat, and acted like nothing had happened...

After class, I went back to my dorm and suddenly the "space" I had anticipated felt... empty. I was alone. No one knew what I was going through and the campus full of perfect people from perfect families was taunting me. I had to get out. My heart was breaking and the empty space exemplified the pain.

So I called Aleesa.

Just a few months earlier, I had joined Southside Baptist Church, where Aleesa served as minister of education. While I couldn't imagine verbalizing the e-mail I received that day to anyone on Samford's campus, I knew Aleesa would understand. Without hesitation, she told me to pack my bags and come stay at her house. She knew I did not need to be alone in such desperation.

I don't remember much about the week that followed, but I do know I spent every night at Aleesa's house. She didn't ask me many questions or make me talk about it — she just let me know that I was not alone. Her house became a place of refuge for me — a place where I could be loved — a place where I was allowed the "space" that I had been anticipating that January. Most importantly, it was a safe place for me to process the implications of my mom's decision.

Even though I understood her choice and the years of frustration leading to such a life-altering decision, I could not understand how I was supposed to deal with it. I could not control what was happening to me. I could not make it go away. As hard as I tried to fight the pain, there was no escaping. It seemed like every minute I experienced a different emotion -- from stunned to numb, angry, hurt, sad, ill, you name it. I was too furious to think about calling my mom — or answering her calls; too heartbroken to reach out to my

dad; too confused to try to process anything with my sister. Nothing in my life had prepared me for what I was going through and I didn't know where to turn for comfort.

The memory of January 2008 is still very hazy to me. I spent the majority of the month at Aleesa's house, getting up to go to class, occasionally working at a restaurant in town, coming back to Aleesa's where she forced me to stay awake long enough to finish my homework, and then going to bed. By the end of the month, the divorce was finalized and I still hadn't verbalized the news to more than a handful of people. Nor had I spoken to my mom.

The one night I tried to go back to Samford and stay in my dorm, I decided to call my dad for the first time. I'm not sure how he was actually feeling at that moment, but I projected my own loneliness and heartbreak onto him, and was hysterical by the time I hung up the phone. Both Aleesa and my one other friend from church who knew the situation were out that night and could not answer their phones when I called them. I wanted to go back to her house, but I also wanted to prove that I was strong enough to be by myself. I needed to be alone, but I didn't want to *feel* alone. That night, I cried wet, sloppy, loud tears until I couldn't anymore and my eyes forced themselves shut.

A few days later, my roommates moved back in for the start of spring semester. I still hadn't told anyone at Samford, but these girls were my three best friends and I thought they might notice if I randomly started crying for no apparent reason. So, the first night they were all back in town, I sat them down and told them the news. That was the first and last time until after I graduated I told anyone at Samford that my parents were divorced.

While telling them did not give me the courage to admit to the rest of my Samford community that my family was fractured, it reminded me of the importance of sharing major life events with those closest to you.

So, the first Wednesday night after I talked to my roommates, I shared the pain of the past month with my church family.

I had only been a member of Southside Baptist Church for a few months, but the church members embraced me as if I were their daughter. Telling them was one of the scariest things I have ever done, but it brought me more peace than I could ever imagine. The people at Southside were – and still are – my family. As soon as they knew, a piece of the emotional burden caused by my parents' divorce was lifted. The heartbreak was not over, but my spirit felt lighter.

My friends at Southside committed to pray for me, take care of me, and provide stability when it felt like the world was crumbling around me. They invited me into their homes, made me dinner, and listened when I needed to talk. My deacon, Rusty, and friend, Chris, even sat with me when I called my mom for the first time and consoled me for hours afterward.

When I was at school, I felt broken – *different* from my peers. My definition of normal was changing every day and nothing felt stable. When I was with the people from my church, I remembered what it was like to feel whole again.

I am so thankful I had a place to go for healing, with people to love and care for me. Without them, I would not be able to stand before you and tell this story today.

But, as much as I wanted to, I couldn't stay in the refuge of my church building or in the arms of my church family all the time. Eventually I had to be vulnerable with people outside my Southside community. News like this never stays secret, and it wasn't long before people started asking questions.

After college, I spent two years working for the Passport National Office in Birmingham before starting seminary at McAfee and working in the CBF office. With my dad being a CBF pastor in Louisville and my spending so much time in this CBF world, it's rare that I walk into a

room without someone asking if I'm his daughter. He and my mom were not very vocal about the divorce; so, unlike most hot topics, this news did not make its way around the gossip mill. As a result, I cannot tell you how many times I have been left to respond to, "How are your parents?" or, "When are your parents coming to visit?" with, "Well... my parents are not together anymore," or, "My parents got a divorce a couple of years ago."

Until recently, every time I had to give that response it was like peeling back the old scab, letting the wound air out again.

But it was the way people reacted to the news that shook me up even more. Inevitably, the person would respond with one of two questions:

"So... was your dad able to keep his job?" or,

"Well... are your parents happy now?"

People who knew my parents well might pry a little deeper, asking questions they would be embarrassed to ask either of them. But 99.9% of the time, I was left to say,

"Yes. My dad is still working for the same church," or,

"I think they will be happy."

I don't remember many instances where I was asked about myself and how I was coping or how the event affected me.

Please don't hear me wrong. I am not trying to sound selfish in saying this. I just think people forgot that even though it wasn't *my* marriage, the divorce had a profoundly unsettling effect on my life. Some would even try to distance me further from the situation by reminding me how nice it was that I was already out of the house when it happened.

As a child, as a product of my parent's marital relationship, I was extremely shaken by their broken covenant. And I had no choice in the matter. I could have chosen to check my e-mail later in the day or move the message to my spam as though I never received it; but that wouldn't make their divorce any less of a reality.

There's nothing I could have done to change my parent's decision, but I was and am forced to live with the consequences.

I mentioned earlier that when I was honest with myself, I could not be so shocked that my parents got divorced. Their marriage was never picture perfect. I remember one time when I was in middle school and my mom was driving me home, I looked over at her and said, "Mom... I don't think I want to get married." I'm not sure what sparked me to make such a confession, but when my mom asked why, the only thing I could say was, "You and dad don't make it look like very much fun."

On another occasion, my youth minister's wife was driving me to a Sunday night activity, when I started talking about my grandparents and how "in love" they were even after 50 years of marriage. Near the end of that conversation, I paused and said, "I don't think my parents were ever in love."

I recognize that those statements are unquestionably harsh; but, as a teenager, they were my version of reality.

And I can't help but wonder if anyone else saw things from my perspective. Our church was not large. Surely someone noticed that my parents were struggling. And if they did, why didn't anyone say anything? Why didn't anyone do anything? Where was our community when we were hurting?

Again, I recognize that those are harsh questions to ask of people who practically raised me. But I think we fail as a community when we ignore each other's pain. Even a pastor hurts sometimes and needs support from his or her faith group. Maybe things would have been different if someone had stepped in when my parents needed help.

So, I want to propose a couple points for reflection. First, as faith groups, churches have to do more to support married couples and families along their journeys. Marriage is hard. No one couple can stand alone without the love and encouragement of a

community. Married couples should be able to feel like their church community is a place they can come with all their baggage in tow – for healing and comfort.

I think we do this best when we require pre-marital counseling and support couples along the road to marriage, but we can't end there. If a minister and a church are going to stand behind a couple as they enter into an engagement and counsel them in the months before their wedding, they need to do so throughout the couple's marriage as well. As it is, there seems to be little to no accountability within most churches and couples do not know where to turn when marriage is not as easy as they thought it would be. And since church is where we come in our Sunday best, it is hard to see that they are not the only couple facing challenges.

In signing a marriage license, or performing a marriage ceremony, the minister should be saying they choose to encourage the couple throughout their marriage. Or, in welcoming a couple or family into a congregation, the church should be saying they welcome the couple with all their baggage and commit to walking alongside them as they struggle and as they flourish. So many marriages fail simply because the couples do not have the tools to work through their problems, and they feel their church community would ostracize them rather than support them. We have to change this.

And, practicing what I would call a community covenant with a married couple is greatly beneficial to the body. Through my parent's divorce, I learned that there are more than two people affected by a divorce. At its core, divorce is destructive to an entire community.

The Old Testament contains many laws against divorce and few instances when divorce can be considered legitimate. Among other reasons, these laws were written to protect the health of the Israelite community. Most of us in this room can attest

first-hand to the scars a divorce leaves on the couple's community. Marriage is intended to emanate God's love, and when it ends, society questions God's perfect love. Divorce creates division within a community and pain between family members. Members of the community feel forced to take sides with either of the divorcees, and family members are torn between their parents, children, and the life they were accustomed to.

As a child of divorced parents, I know all too well the hurt that comes from the end of a union, and the pain of growing up in a house with parents in an unloving relationship. There is nothing that has ever made me question the love of God more than daily witnessing unloving behavior and my parent's unwillingness to seek reconciliation.

Jesus teaches in Mark and Matthew's Gospels that Christians are called to view the marriage union as an everlasting covenant. Entering into a marriage is the couple's acknowledgement that they choose to protect God's precious gift and the covenant represented. With the rise of divorce in the United States and its effect on society, faith communities have to reclaim the commitment to uphold and protect the marriage covenant.

I also want to propose that when marriages do end and covenant must be broken, that churches continue to support the couple and family through reconciliatory ministries. Perhaps that looks like a ritual to help the community find closure and move forward together. Or maybe it's developing support groups for the people involved letting them know their community walks even the devastating part of their journey together. The loss of a union should be grieved, and it is important that we do not leave each other to grieve on our own.

Whatever the method, as ministers and lay leaders, we have to teach our churches how to respond to those in the community affected by broken covenant. It could be as simple as knowing the kinds of questions to ask

or how to be present with the grieving parties. Finding closure and moving on is a difficult process. If the community does not know or learn how to respond, the grieving process will be extended and we risk continuing patterns of fractured and broken relationships.

Children of divorced parents also need to see a healthy model of covenant relationships. I think a major reason why divorce continues to be such a problem in the United States is that so many people grow up in broken households; they don't know how to make relationships work, because they don't witness healthy relationships. Divorced or divorcing parents can also get so wrapped up in their problems and struggles that they are not always able to be fully present with their children. As a church body, if we say we are family, we need to stand in when families struggle to provide emotional support for one another. What if mentors reached out to children so their parents were able to grieve and move forward without the guilt of neglecting their children?

In a lot of ways, I am lucky. When my parents got divorced, I was part of a community that supported me and loved me like family. Today, I am surrounded by many models of healthy, loving relationships – including my two parents who are now married to and in love with wonderful people. They have shown me that it is possible to move forward from the hurt of broken covenant, and that I don't have to live with that scar. I have hope for a future relationship, because of their love for their spouses and because of the example my current communities have set for me.

I am so thankful for where I am today, but at times I feel I was left to figure all this out on my own. It is my hope and prayer that as churches and Christians, we can learn how to be a covenant community together and learn how we should respond when individual covenants end, so that children like me and families like mine don't have to grieve alone. ■

Covenant As a Desirable Way of Life

By Jennifer Crumpton

The Christian principle of covenant sexuality has always been widely interpreted. Some focus on a tight interpretation of Genesis 1:24 as the ultimate defining statement: The idea that because the first woman was said to be created from the first man's rib, man ever after would thus leave their father and mother to "cleave" to his wife as one flesh – despite the fact that at the time it was written, women were the ones who could not socially or economically survive without "cleaving" to a man. Others might err toward another vision of holy sexuality as vividly described in the erotic tryst known as the Song of Solomon, also undeniably biblical. Two seemingly unmarried youth frolic, worry- and chaperone-free in vineyards throughout the night, imagining and engaging in all the fruit-juicy joys of expressing the unbridled, energetic sexuality God had naturally granted them to enjoy.

What has often been missed along this spectrum of right-and-wrong beliefs about sex and Christian covenant is that covenant sexuality involves many conditions and implications beyond just sexual intercourse. Other types of human intercourse and cultural norms are much more intertwined in our concepts of covenant and sexual behavior than we may realize. If economic principles in our country are not governed by covenant, our sexual relationships will not be. If our social principles fail to uphold covenant, sexual mores will reflect that. If gender equality is not a true, deep priority, then sex will surely never be treated as a covenant in our society at large; sexual relations and norms will instead stay tipped to meet the needs of aggressive, economically successful, powerful men and to broadly exploit the vulnerabilities and insecurities of women who are sold the wrong "dream" by society. Look at Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former chief of the International

Monetary Fund, finally getting charged for "aggravated pimping" after getting away with all kinds of sexual misbehavior and manipulation for decades. Look at all the women who have fallen prey without believing they have rights, without putting up a fight, or even taking advantage of the attention. Thank God for one brave maid who got slandered in the wake of awakening the world to his maligning of covenant behavior on so many fronts.

Consider the movie musical "Grease." The Pink Ladies and some other girls are home for a Friday night slumber party, curling their hair and having pillow fights, while the boys are out prowling the town in their souped-up cars and starting fist fights. Symbolically, there is a gendered line being drawn between the over-protected, home-bound females and the free, wild, experienced boys who can't – and in many cases won't – be contained... "boys will be boys." There is one girl in the story (there is always one in every story) who senses the imbalance and unfairness of this, who refuses to starve herself of her own curiosity about the world (or her tiny portion of it) and breaks out, sneaks out the window, joins the boys in their expression of energy and their exploration of life. (In the movie she is Rizzo, played by Stockard Channing.)

When she later thinks she could be pregnant, she sings a soulful, heart-rending song of confusion, pain and a mature sense of self-reflection: "There are worse things I could do, than go with a boy or two. I could stay home every night, wait around for Mr. Right, take cold showers every day and waste my life away on a dream that won't come true."

She already knew that the dream young girls like her were sold didn't pan out. Maybe she had seen her mother or her aunt or an older sister's vision of the fairy-tale come crashing

down. The Prince Charming, the epic romance, the sweeping off the feet, the white horse, the white wedding gown, the white picket fence, baby showers, familial bliss, happily ever after. She knew that was rarely how things actually went, and even on the small chance it did, that narrative was somehow unfulfilling to many. Yet it was all a girl could set her hopes on in a 1950s bedroom town in suburbia.

She also wails with such passion because sex is about a lot more than consequences. It is about inexplicable feelings toward another person; it is about an innate desire for intimacy and a hardwired need for sharing oneself fully. It is about mysterious drives that are difficult to understand, much less control. It is about self-worth and the need for feeling desired by someone else; it is about connection, creativity, the sense of being alive. It is about knowing someone and being fully known. It is about fear of being alone, fear of death. If we can be one with another, even for just a moment, we are for that instant relieved of our sadness; we are not alone, we will not die. We don't ask to feel this way, it just happens; it just is the human condition. It's excruciating. Rizzo goes on to sing: "There are worse things I could do ... I could hurt someone like me, out of spite or jealousy. I don't steal and I don't lie, but I can feel and I can cry..."

New York City, NY, 2012. Covenant is not a word with any social cache, whether it be on Wall Street, in the political systems or in the social strata, or on the cut-throat career battlefield, or in relationships of any kind -- much less those of the romantic notion. Girls are climbing out of windows all over the place, and most of that glass did and does need shattering. Men and some women are still out experimenting, taking risks and playing, except now it's as common at 40 as it was at

16. And both sexes are still dealing with the undesirable consequences of isolation, confusion, delusion and pain. There are three main reasons that the modern landscape in cities large and small across the country is increasing in its covenant-unfriendliness: proximity, complexity and technology.

Proximity

There was a time when it was inevitable that the person you married was in your high school graduating class, the “girl next door”, the boy from a neighboring town whom you met at church youth group. They often were raised with similar morals and values, or at least with all the same eyes of the community on them. The typical thing was to stay in and be a part of one community for life, and be held accountable to that community. As more men, and eventually women, went to college, there was more mixing, more distance between a kid and his or her community of origin and less distance between co-eds.

Today, things are different. When I walk one city block in New York City, I see probably over 100 new, different people. Literally, there are thousands of potential meet-ups. Imagine how many people we come in contact with in a lifetime today, how many different types of people we have the opportunity to meet, how more multifaceted. Self-development and exposure to choices lead to more difficulty in believing there is one person who is “right” for you, one person worth waiting for. Online dating puts people from all over the world at your fingertips. We meet more people than ever, but it is harder than ever to hone in on a person you can spend the rest of your life with.

Complexity

It goes without saying that the world constantly increases in complexity; but today it seems to occur exponentially. Children go through puberty at much younger ages today, and therefore begin dealing with sexual feelings and drives earlier. Yet people are also waiting much, much longer to get married. Increasingly we are taught to fulfill our dreams and pursue our goals as

individuals before committing to marriage, which is not necessarily a bad thing. It is actually a lesson learned from the tales of a divorce rate that ends over half of marriages. We are also starting to widely accept the notion that “settling down” no longer means literally settling, closing off possibilities for growth and achievement and movement, for both men and women alike. Therefore, dating and deciding on a life-long mate takes on new dimensions of required compatibility and mutual considerations for interests, goals, and future plans. The fact that we have so many choices, that we change so much in our 20s, that there is such a thing called the “quarter life crisis”, that we seem to get lots of chances in today’s world, that it is a normal thing to re-invent ourselves several times...all lead to a complex lifestyle that is very complicated to fit someone else into...at least permanently. We go through many phases in life, and it’s too easy to let go when someone can’t weather one of those phases with you. But with a divorce rate at a bit over half of marriages, reflected even among the Christian set, maybe we are on to something by admitting this up front. No one actually wants to go through a divorce, after all.

And clearly the expectation that people will wait decades to have sex - if waiting to have sex until marriage is a definition of covenant sexuality - becomes much less feasible in this scenario. People still desire companionship and engage in relationships, but with the knowledge they are not yet able to imagine meeting the requirements of formal marriage. In today’s world of pressure, competition and uncertainty, we need the support of loyal loved ones more than ever, yet do not see marriage as a necessary part of building a family in the context of our adult lives. Groups of adults form friendships that are like families who stick together, supporting and helping one another and being there for each other to mourn, celebrate, and come together to help a friend in need. Since New York City is relatively transient, it also becomes acceptable that these

groups and families change and morph. However, the broad sense of choice in those with whom we surround ourselves in each phase of our lives can potentially lead to an inability to surmount relational challenges toward commitment and covenant.

People change jobs much more often, and even switch careers and cities as a standard at some point in life, and this new norm affects relationships. People can be discarded if they threaten career moves or give the sense of holding back success or enforcing rules that close off opportunities. Many couples live together in the process of considering marriage, so that they can assess whether the other person has the same idea of a supportive relationship that they do. Many consider this a breaking of covenant sexuality. Others consider it a more responsible attempt at covenant.

Then there are our lesbian and gay friends who experience a whole other level of complexity in their relationships because of many religious communities’ views that their relationships of any level of commitment do not qualify as covenant. Nor does our secular society allow same-sex marriages in most states. Covenant relationships have taken on a different form within the LGBT community for decades.

Technology

Technology has affected sexuality in drastic ways. The Internet lets us connect with people across the globe and become close to people whom we would have otherwise never met. Online dating puts the ability to meet new people at our fingertips, 24/7. The ease of privacy of the Web also allows us to hide relationships that are virtual, or even sometimes played out in reality. Websites like AshleyMadison.com exist explicitly to allow married people to find other married people with whom to cheat. They actually advertise on TV, in print and online.

Furthermore, pornography has gone mainstream in our popular culture. It has seeped into a great deal of our regular programming, movies and magazines, lowering our threshold for shock, getting us accustomed to seeing most of what used to be reserved for

a spouse. Bodies and sexual expression are no longer seen as sacred or special. In fact, they become relatively interchangeable, especially women's bodies, often surgically enhanced to be overly sexualized, like a caricature. Pornography is free on the Internet, or people can pay as much as they will to get as much as they want. It streams onto mobile devices, cell phones, iPhones, Blackberrys, anywhere, anytime. Sex on demand makes sex much less of a novel act set aside for something meaningful.

Women are becoming increasingly obsessed with pornography, although not to the same level as men, the largest consumers of porn. A large percentage of men watch porn several times a week; many even watch daily or multiple times a day. Some women use it on their own. Those who don't are still taught to be okay with the fact that their boyfriend or husband uses it regularly, even though it may undermine their confidence and sense of desirability, or even the sense that one's partner even needs us to be sexually stimulated or satisfied. Yet looking at porn and even engaging in virtual sex with strangers via text (sexting) or online is no longer socially and relationally considered "cheating" or "wrong." A few weeks ago, I picked up a *Cosmopolitan* magazine in a waiting room. It's a long-standing, very popular fashion, beauty and lifestyle magazine aimed at women in their late teens, 20s and 30s. In a Q&A segment about "Love," a girl writes in and asks, "I caught my guy chatting with porn stars on a sex forum. I know it's not cheating, but am I wrong for being upset about this?" Listen to her assumptions. Listen to her pain. Listen to what society has convinced her of. Listen to how it is killing her.

The "love advice guru" answers her by saying, "If he were forging an online relationship with one woman, that would be a problem. But it sounds as if he was chatting in an anonymous setting with different women. He probably sees it as interactive porn and doesn't understand

it might bug you." So if it's anonymous, and there are multiple women involved, it's okay and that's not cheating, nor is it detrimental to the relationship? The guru then advises her that if the chatting part bothers her, to "speak up" and to say to her boyfriend: "It's not that I mind your looking at porn, but I don't want the porn to talk back to you."

This is what mainstream society is telling girls today. And when every guy a girl dates presents this conundrum to her, what is she supposed to do? Eventually she may break down and believe that she is the problem. Or in order to relieve her need for companionship and relationship, she will acquiesce to living with the assumptions the rest of her friends live with.

Dating in New York City over the past nine years, I have spent time with a wide range of guys, and dated a lot. Only one man I've met in nine years said he did not use porn and, as a Christian, he felt it was not a good thing to put into his mind, lest he be overcome by it. Every other person I've dated, even qualifying that by going on just one date, has made a habit of using porn. It often actually comes up as a topic on the first date. I dated one guy for nine months, and didn't know until about eight months in that he was addicted to porn. He literally had to watch it every morning before work, else he didn't feel confident and relaxed enough to perform at his stressful financial job. Escort services and prostitution are also rampant in NYC, even among just "regular guys." But honestly, men don't even really have to pay for sex. Young women in NYC know that if they are going to be successful at competing for the affections and attention of men, they are going to have to get pretty wild. Texting naked pictures, sex on the first date (or even NO date...just meeting and "hooking up"), being willing to go to strip clubs with guys, even performing lesbian acts with their friends for the benefit of a man they want to be with, are all pretty regular ways that girls try to

get and keep a man in NYC. Men get used to this, and know that an endless stream of hookups and playful nights out are guaranteed. A covenant relationship seems boring. Why would they want to confine themselves to one person who actually expects things from them? But increasingly, this is a phenomenon that is not limited to big cities. It occurs in towns big and small across the country.

With such exhausting, depressing challenges, why would anyone today bother considering the importance of covenant sexuality?

Summary:

As Christian leaders and ministers, we must understand modern dynamics and address them directly in our teaching as the reality within which we function as the body of Christ. We must reserve judgment on one another and instead listen and act with compassion in consideration of the stressful situations under which young Christians are dating and trying to find life-long love and covenant relationships. Often, if people followed the church's lead on what an appropriate covenant sexuality is, or what constitutes appropriate relationships, they would have to resign to being alone for a long time, if not forever. We must use our hearts to guide us, always understanding that a need for love, acceptance and companionship drives everyone at core, no matter how they conduct themselves outwardly, or how many mistakes they may make.

Furthermore, we must know and admit that covenantal sex is an idea that works in the current structure of modern society only to the extent that covenant is valued and practiced as a concept. Especially when it is identified as a religious practice, we must look at how covenant is continuously broken within the religious communities and among churches in particular. Sexual mores and behaviors are not a separate issue apart from any other social mores and behaviors, but rather part of an interconnected, holistic framework of human behavior and experience.

If society values monetary success

and rewards aggressive and callous business practices in that process, then aggressive and callous sexual ethics will also be acceptable; the ethos will be reflected in art and entertainment, business and economic practices, political campaigning, social policies and even foreign policy. Enforcing covenant is not as effective as modeling covenant in sexuality and is equally important, in every other part of life. The church cannot ask for sexual covenant while ignoring economic covenant or the covenant of equality.

In much the same way that we must

avoid hypocrisy, we must realize that guiltning those who have not always upheld a sexual covenant is not as effective as letting sexual covenant become a spiritual and physical choice associated with specific outcomes of peace, joy, health and well-being as opposed to an enforced measure imposed from yet another system that lords itself over people. We must accept with compassionate understanding that sometimes sexual covenant will be challenged and broken, understand where that push-back comes from within the human psyche and

social experience, and remember that the ultimate goal is to help ourselves live in a way that honors our Creator and the redemptive work and renewal of Christ. Covenant cannot spread its wisdom if it is just another oppressive or repressive thing rather than its being offered in a context of freedom as redemptive and available to people at any point in life and in a person's sexual history. Making covenant a desirable way of life in all aspects is the key to a holistic social transformation that makes a real difference in our hearts toward covenant living. ■

God's Perfect Will: Reflections of a Single Christian African-American Woman *By Roz Nichols*

How do an understanding of God and faith help shape, define and inform a healthy concept of sexuality and sexual practices among 21st century single Christians? What does that healthy concept look like and how is it practiced in real time? How do you address sexual morality in a faithful context that speaks to the intimate relationship concerns of the pubescent teen, the 40-year-old divorcee and the 85-year-old widower? How do we teach and preach in ways that help the single men and women of our congregations to hear what God wants for them in the area of their sexuality? What is the fallout if we continue to avoid faithfully engaging this core concept of humanity?

Let me begin by answering the last question and then work my way up from there. A snapshot of what the fallout or consequence of avoiding this faith and human sexuality looks like can be found in the following comments that spring to memory from various sessions, workshops and discussions on single sexuality among men and women who confess Christ as their Lord and Savior and attend and participate in church on various levels on a regular basis.

"Yes I knew he was married, but we hadn't really done anything

yet. And sharing spouses is as old as the Bible. I don't really see the problem."

"I have a friend who is coming to stay with me for the holidays. Is it wrong when you are single and the holidays are coming up and you just don't want to be by yourself?"

"I am fully grown; my children are grown. Heck! Even my grandchildren are grown. I don't want to ever get married again, but I do miss the companionship of a spouse. What am I to do?"

"He and I love each other and we do plan to get married eventually, I think. How long do we have to wait before...you know? I like sex and it's getting harder to do this celibate thing."

"I have been with this person for 15 years and I've felt guilty every day because we are not married. Are you saying that I can be with this person whom I love and not marry them and it is not a sin?" Confusion is the fallout. And where there is confusion, where there is no guidance that helps people to find their way, Judges 21:25 becomes the order of the day:

In those days there was no king in

Israel;

all the people did what was right in their own eyes.

And the consequences of living by Judges 21:25 are evident in most of the cities, both urban and suburban communities today. They are what we refer to as the ills or crises facing our communities including intimate partner violence, infant mortality, mass incarceration, the continued spread of HIV/AIDS among African-Americans, the lack of quality education and the decentralization of church and faith.

Now, for the sake of transparency, let me give my personal context as I address these questions. I come to this as a single African-American woman of faith, never been married, childless, heterosexual in orientation and without a significant "other" if you will.

I am also a pastor with 16 years of ordained pastoral ministry and 11 years as lead pastor of a small, vibrant congregation. While I feel very fortunate to have a healthy mixture of both married and single congregants, I am keenly aware that in today's church community single life is the majority, while marriage becomes less of the gold standard. I am also a community advocate who has attended, participated in, conducted and hosted

various forums addressing many of the crises that rise from our confusion. And while all of these appear to be growing crises, but not new crises, they are the symptoms of the confusions, but they are not the cause. And although we have worked in the midst of the confusion to be practical, biblical and action-oriented in eradicating the crisis du jour, we have applied a Band-Aid approach to cover a gaping wound.

For what lies beneath the confused comments and community pain is a lack of leadership/guidance resulting in everyone's making up the rules as they go along. What we are lacking is a way to express ourselves in our intimate relationships that is born out of our understanding of our faith **and** our human sexuality. We have the Word of God, but we do not have a word for how to love intimately, as fully human, and inspired by God. To paraphrase Paul's message to the church at Rome, we cannot find our way without someone to lead us and they can't lead us unless God sends them. We need Jesus' prayer to be answered so that the Lord of the harvest will send more workers into this great field.

Therefore as a woman of faith and a seminary-trained ordained minister, I want to be able to intentionally articulate what it means to love another human being intimately and to bring that understanding to bear upon the collective confusion and crises with the hope and desire of serving somehow as a midwife in the birth of a new way for people of faith to be able to be in intimate relationships. I want us to consider our lives and our faith with the same liberating approach that transformed the people in Nazareth, Capernaum, and other surrounding villages 2012 years ago when a young man stood up and read from the prophets saying,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Now having said this, I acknowledge that broaching the subject is not

easy, not for the faint of heart, nor for the poorly trained or untrained pastor. This is not intended to be pejorative or elitist. It is however an attempt to acknowledge that integrity and dedication are required to take first century words, expressions, culture/traditions and interpret them for a 21st century context. It involves addressing many myths and false teachings. It also calls for a willingness to lay one's own presuppositions, biases and false knowledge out for examination, sometimes in solitary private study, often in conversation with trained professionals. All of this is necessary before one seeks to counsel or advise others in a faithful manner. And in order for real life people to take it seriously, it must be presented in a way

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that carries with it dignity and spiritual substance, rather than spectacle and eye-catching antics. *That is not easy in a reality show-based culture where antics are rewarded.* We need one to guide who has been sent.

And so we begin the journey asking for the liberating anointing of the Spirit to set us all free to love and to serve. We seek the Spirit of God as we hear the Apostle Paul say:

^{NRS} Romans 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect..

Over a decade ago now in 1999, I preached the following sermon for

Singles Sunday at Christ Missionary Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn. I use this sermon in order to place the confusion in a particular context and as the starting point of our journey. I have modified it only slightly to help some of the references, such as musical lyrics and vernacular quotes of the day make sense a decade later.

I want us to consider a whole new way of thinking. Amidst the noise as the girl group, TLC, sang "No Scrubs" and rappers Sporty Thievz respond with "No Pigeons," against the chants as Destiny's Child asks "Can You Pay My Bills;" beyond Juvenile and Lil'Wayne profanely suggesting that you back that thang up, as you are experiencing BabyMamaDrama while Erykah Badue advises that you better call Tyrone. As difficult as it may be, given all that we experience, hear and see, I came by to offer a whole new way of thinking. Namely, we need a new way, a renewed way of thinking in terms of our relationships as single Christian, African-American men and women.

And while I know that all single people do not share a common set of cares and concerns, still I believe that for all of us as single African-American, Christian men and women, whether you are 22 or 72, whether you're single, never married, single by divorce, single by widowhood, whether you have children or not, whether you are celebrating or need encouragement, there is a need for us, no matter where we stand in the single scope of life, to consider a renewed way, an entirely new way of thinking about how we relate one to another.

For you see, I am afraid that the many distorted images we see of ourselves in popular culture, coupled with the unresolved hurt we have experienced in our past, have left many of us seemingly alienated and unable to relate in healthy ways.

Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you can discern the will of God what is good, acceptable and perfect.⁸

I don't know about you, but as a sin-

gle person of faith, I want to be able to discern God's will. I want to know what is good, acceptable and, yes Lord, what is perfect in terms of my relationships, including my intimate, personal relationships.

And I believe that underneath all the noise and the rhetoric, all the brouhaha and hype lies an unhealthy attitude towards relationships and human sexuality. And the result is that some of us have gone out looking for love in all the wrong places. Some of us are looking for sex in too many faces. Some can't find happiness apart from marriage; others are just playing the field. Some of us are actively seeking, while others say only if Jesus delivers him/her personally! Some have centered their lives on work, children and community; while others are feeling deeply isolated, abandoned and alone. Some feel that their singleness is a matter of choice, while others feel it is a matter of force. Some are looking at the clock slowly ticking by, while others are looking into tarot cards, calling the hotlines and reading the palms of their hands. Some are working to heal deep wounds, while others are careless in outlook and attitude. Some see singleness as a time to get all you can, while others see it as a permanent state of rest. Some are doing okay, while some are falling apart.

But beginning today, I want us to lay all of that aside in consideration of a renewed, a renovated, a completely changed for-the-better way of thinking in which we, you and I, as single African-American Christian men and women, come together in relationship. I want to shorten the distance between what we know in our heads and what we feel in our hearts so that we walk by faith and not by sight. For you see, there is something wrong with our understanding of what it means to be in relationship when so many of our marriages end in divorce and disaster. There is something wrong in our understanding of relationships when we'd rather follow R. Kelly and *go half on a baby* before we go in together on everything else. There is something wrong with our

understanding of relationships when we lay our bodies down indiscriminately and indiscreetly, and then wonder why nobody is walking us down the aisle. There is something wrong when we piously hold our single status as an armor to keep people away from us. There is something wrong, I tell you.

But I believe in the same Lord who took Jeremiah to the potter's house. And when, as the Word says, *the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in his hands, he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.* I believe God is reworking our understanding of relationships into another vessel that is good, acceptable and perfect in God's eyes. I believe the potter wants to put us back together in relationship again!

Ethics professor Karen Lebacqz hit the mark saying, "Everyone knows how, but we're forgotten why."

It's time out for conformation and time in for transformation. The sexual revolution has come and gone, and we're still all sitting around alone. We have more information on how to do it, and we're still confused. Ethics professor Karen Lebacqz hit the mark saying, *"Everyone knows how, but we're forgotten why."*

We can't go back to what used to be where everything was obligatory and taboo. It's time for a renewed mind. It's time for us to seriously take into consideration what it means for our community when we as single African-American men and women are not engaged in healthy relationships one with another. And more importantly, it means faithfully and prophetically considering what the spiritual, communal, and socioeconomic ramifications are for being in relationship as single African-American Christian men and women. Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit is

saying to the churches.

Help us Holy Spirit.

As Aretha Franklin said back in the day, *"Let's go back, let's go back, let's go way on way back when!"*

The Christian faith was and is a faith for all people. Its uniqueness in the first century world was in its acceptance of anyone who believed in and confessed the name of Jesus as Lord. Men and women, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, bond and free, married and unmarried, all were accepted into the faith. And Jesus made no distinction between the married and unmarried.

While it is our consensus that Jesus did not marry, he took no offense to marriage. Peter, one of his choice disciples upon whom he founded the church, was indeed married, as were some of the other disciples. And one of the women of Jesus' circle, namely Joanna, was married to a politician under the kingship of Herod. On the other hand, we have no reason to believe that Mary of Magdala, or Mary and Martha were married. The Scriptures do not tell us so. And so to be married was not to be esteemed. To be single was not to be singled out. Jesus did not state, demonstrate, nor intimate that either carried a higher or lower place of esteem. Abraham married Sarah, but Jeremiah was told to remain celibate. Moses married Zipporah while Paul chose in anticipation of the second coming not to take a wife.

And to be single did not preclude social interaction. It did not preclude romance and courtship, consecration and devotion. Jacob clearly demonstrated devotion to his first love, Rachel. Single in Scripture did not denounce nor disavow sexuality and sensuality, as both are expressed in Solomon's Song of Songs. Singleness in Scripture did not deny attraction or affection. Boaz was attracted to and affectionate towards Ruth, just as Rebekah was attracted to Issac.

And so it would appear, at least in the Scriptures, that the Lord does not value any more or less those who are married versus those who are single.

While fornication was something from which to abstain, adultery was included in the top 10. And even though Solomon, the writer of Proverbs 18:22, states that *he who finds a wife finds a good thing, and finds favor from the Lord*, it is a good thing, not an exclusive thing, nor I dare say an ultimate thing.

So, is there a definitive message about intimacy and relationships in Scripture? Does the Word offer a word specific to the unmarried man and woman? Let's put it this way: There was no singles ministry in Jesus' day. You were either married, unmarried, about to get married, widowed, or a eunuch. But we do perhaps see a glimpse of one as Paul addresses the concern of the people in his first letter to the church at Corinth.

By way of concession and not demand, Paul suggests:

To the unmarried and the widows, I say that it is well for you to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

Sexuality, it would appear, was as misunderstood then as it is today. And it's understandable why. Sexuality, namely sex, was powerful in that it not only perpetuated the legacy, but it also pronounced favor or disfavor from God. It was used to mete out equity, property, and inheritance. It was therefore powerful in its economic impact. It could mean the difference between financial security, obscurity, and utter poverty. It went to the heart of survival of a tribe, a people, a nation. It therefore needed to be controlled.'

And the same is true today. Far too many married folks are standing in divorce court today because they thought that marriage would somehow sequester their raging libidos.

And they have indeed paid the price in finding out that it did not. And it is not for love's sake that they end up singing along with Johnny Taylor, "*It's cheaper to keep her.*" And in an even more serious context, the socioeconomic fallout of an

unhealthy understanding of human sexuality and relationship is ever before us in the number of our children living below the poverty line. It places us at a perpetual cycle of disadvantage both socially and economically. It's not just a matter of the heart, it is indeed a matter of economics if we elect not to consider the evidence of our unhealthiness. We see it in the number of parents who fight every day in juvenile courts across this land to get support for those same children. We see it in the number of children who don't know their parents; in the number of parents who don't know their children. We see it in the number of young people every day having sex at younger and younger ages, bearing children as children, contracting

Perfect fits, soul-mates, are merely two souls, that choose or elect to be mates. Nothing more, nothing less. Cinderella, Snow Brown, wake up, fantasy over!

sexually transmitted diseases, and selling their souls trying to fill that gaping hole in their souls.

Oh I beseech you brothers and sisters by the mercy of God. Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good, acceptable, and perfect.

Our children deserve to see us offering ourselves to God. They deserve to see us in God's will, engaged in good, acceptable and perfect relationships one with another, as men and women, as single, African-American Christian men and women.

Let the one who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

But what I hear someone saying

is, "*What does that good, acceptable and, dare I say, perfect relationship look like?*"

I'm glad you ask such good questions.

First of all, we must begin by dispelling at least one myth. Every pot may have it's own lid, but every Willie Earl may not necessarily have his Dixie Pearl. While it may make us feel good, it is not based upon any specific Scripture. Jesus did not guarantee a perfect soul-mate for everyone. Why? Because while we have been created in relationship and for relationships, we have power in the choice about with whom and how we engage in those relationships.

Perfect fits, soul-mates, are merely two souls, that choose or elect to be mates. Nothing more, nothing less. Cinderella, Snow Brown, wake up, fantasy over!

We have been called by God and Jesus to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. But this is a command for justice in relationships. This is a command for mutuality in relationships. This is a command to treat others as you would want to be treated. This is a blanket command that applies to all of our relationships; a command that lays the foundation for how we will enter in the intimate relationships in our lives. It is a command that sets boundaries on how we view others when we choose to enter into relationships with them.

To be conformed to this world means I view another human being as a means to an end rather than for sexual gratification or even marriage. A renewed mind however first recognizes the other person as not only human, but as a reflection of one's own self. Following Jesus' command, I am called to stop and consider how I would want to be treated if I were that person.

This helps as we seek to put the powerful role and gift from God in our human sexuality into perspective. It means that by faith I come to understand the expression of my

human sexuality is not about prowess, power or control. It's not merely functional and utilitarian. It's more than procreative. Human sexuality, when expressed intimately between men and women who are seeking to be faithful to God first, is a reflection of the love of God, the acceptance of God, the healing touch of God and the omnipresence of God. It is a pathway to the kind of vulnerability that I believe is as vital to us as breathing. Conversely, when it is not expressed in faithful ways it becomes a poor substitute for what the human heart desires most which is a deep connection with and to another human being as an offering of thanksgiving to our Creator God.

Our human sexuality, when expressed in healthy ways, creates the pathway for us to choose relationships — not out of desperation nor resignation; not for mere self-serving or personal gratification; not because we submit and acquiesce; not because we got caught and caught up; but because it's the right thing to do.

Let the church say, "Amen".

That was the message I proclaimed in 1999. It is a message that still rings true, and yet one that is not easily received. The confusion still exists because most church leaders are unwilling or are fearful of giving their congregants more than *it is better to marry than to burn*, or *fornication is a sin*. However, by limiting single adults to these two options alone for intimate relationships is for me no different than the dispute the religious leaders had with Jesus over which day it was acceptable to heal someone or whether it was right or wrong to eat the communion bread when you are hungry. Without greater discussion and rightfully dividing the Word of truth, we lead people back into the confusion of making things up as they go along.

Our conversation on sexuality from a faith perspective must recognize sexuality as basic to who we are as human beings. It is a part of how we are designed as God's created beings. We are, like all of God's creation, hardwired to crave food, sleep, water

and, yes, sex. When someone has a loss of appetite, it is a sign of poor health. When someone is unable to sleep, it is a sign of poor health. When we become dehydrated, it is a sign of poor health. When we do not have an appetite for sex, it too is a sign of poor health. And yet when it comes to single Christians, what we have traditionally asked them to do is to deny this basic truth.

Now I have said this in the past only to be confronted with many biblical references including this passage:

Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

And it is from this perspective that we, as single persons, begin to consider what is indeed God's perfect will.

When I say that human sexuality is like eating and sleeping, when I say that it is a sign of good health, I am acknowledging that eating and sleeping are both vital to life. The gift of human sexuality is equally vital to life. I would therefore no more tell a person not to desire to have sex and the full expression of his or her sexuality than I would tell them not to eat or sleep. I would not tell them that at any age/stage in their lives, from the pubescent child to the senior well into life. But just as we learn when, where, and how to eat and sleep, we must also consider the same with regard to our human sexuality.

I am therefore not seeking to take away its sacredness, nor am I saying anything goes. On the contrary, I am seeking just the opposite. I am seeking to elevate all that we do with our bodies to the level of the sacred. After all, Paul says that we are the temple of the Most High and that God's Spirit

dwells within us. Therefore what we do with and to our bodies, whether it is eating, sleeping or expressing our sexuality, must begin to come from a place where we recognize ourselves as the temples of God and then begin to see in others that same reality.

And it is from this perspective that we, as single persons, begin to consider what is indeed God's perfect will. This also includes reexamining our understanding and the history of our understanding of fornication. "Fornication" comes from the Greek word *porneia* {por-ni'-ah} from which we derive our word pornography. In a broad sense, we deem something to be pornographic by how we view it as exploiting and objectifying another human being for sexual purposes. We then provide an equally broad list of actions that we label as pornographic, therefore falling under the category of fornication. That list includes adultery, intercourse with a divorced person, intercourse among unwed individuals (namely unwed women), homosexuality, lesbianism, bestiality, incest, and the worship of idols.

To complicate matters more, this list is often taken without consideration for historical time, context and culture. We do not deeply ask and take into consideration why and wherefore, leaving single adult men and women of faith with little of worth upon which to address human sexuality in our 21st century context.

In the other words, we have arbitrarily simplified the complexity of human sexuality and its expression to a narrow definition of fornication as universally solely sexual intercourse among unmarried heterosexual men and women.

I would argue that we consider a renewed understanding of fornication and *porneia* from the perspective of the book of Revelation. I believe it can prove helpful to us both as single and married Christian men and women.

But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of

Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. (also Rev 9, 14, 17, 18, 19)

The verb form of the word, **porneu**, **w porneuo** {porn-yoo'-o}, means *to prostitute one's body to the lust of another; to give one's self to unlawful sexual intercourse; to commit fornication; metaph. to be given to idolatry, to worship idols or to permit oneself to be drawn away by another into idolatry.*

I would argue that we begin to think, and rethink of fornication not merely in terms of not having sex because we are not married, but in terms of how we prostitute ourselves, objectifying others, bartering our bodies in exchange for momentary release from the loneliness. In this regard, we commit fornication not simply because we are not married, but because we have failed to value ourselves and we fail to value the other person.

When the church officer asked me if I thought his actions were wrong, I merely asked, "*How would you want your spouse to behave?*" When the ministry leader asked, "*Is it fornication for me to have someone over for the holidays so that I won't be alone?*" I asked her to consider whether the only reason she wanted this person to come was in order to satisfy her own needs. I asked her to ask herself if she was bartering away her body in exchange for not being alone.

In this regard, we are asked to consider our sexual expressions on a long continuum of how we pervert God's intended will and design for us in our human sexuality. When we place fornication in this perspective, it requires us to consider our actions at a deeper and higher level. To me, this is where Christ Jesus would have us to stand on this issue.

And finally, with this in mind, I believe we are called upon to reflect

and consider God's will in marriage. For marriage to be relevant in our world today, there is a vital need for us to reconsider its place and role in the biblical context and what it means in the life of today's reality. Marriage must be placed in a social context and construct in order for it to be understood through the eyes of faith, so that the single person is not driven by his/her unmet needs and therefore left to feel limited to marriage as the only parameter to get those needs met. Again, I am not merely speaking of sexual intercourse, but the full expression of one's sexuality. It is here that the role of covenant becomes essential for single adults in how they will choose to honor and recognize their relationships as gifts from God.

Adam and Eve did not have a wedding ceremony. They had a covenant with God first, and with one another second. Their covenant with God included God's blessing and a call to their responsibility to one another and to God's creation. They were told to be fruitful and to multiply. We come to understand how they chose to recognize and honor that covenant in Genesis 2:23-24 which says,

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.

This again is not a wedding ceremony, but a covenant relationship. Wedding ceremonies have a historical context. For Jacob, Rachel and Leah, the wedding ceremony gave the groom the opportunity to know which daughter he was marrying before he made the commitment. Wedding ceremonies, such as that at Cana, involved community and the celebration of both the security of a

daughter's future as she left her father, and the expansion of territory for a groom if he married well. The wedding ceremony was a legal, binding contract that insured that properties and heirs were properly managed.

Therefore when the 70-plus year-old asked me *if it was okay for her to have companionship without the benefit of marriage*, I asked her to consider what role the companion would fill in her life. When the woman who had been with the man for 15 years asked if she had sinned by not marrying the man who lived with her and was the father of her children, I asked her about the covenant relationship she had with this man, and how her heirs and property would be managed without the benefit of marriage.

In other words, I believe the confusion we experience comes because we do not want to do the work of truly giving God our best. We wish that it were as simple as the Ten Commandments. If that had been the case, there would not have been a need for Deuteronomy and Leviticus and Jesus would not have had to come and die for our sins.

As a single woman of faith in the 21st century, I have finally found an understanding of my human sexuality as it relates to my faith that empowers and uplifts me rather than shaming and condemning me. I am better able to honor God in the full expression of my life, mind, body, soul and strength. I am also better able to honor my neighbor as myself. I seek to help others do likewise. ■

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What Same-Sex Relationships Teach Churches About Covenant

By Rev. Cody J. Sanders

The questions we are willing to ask really matter. So it is important that we get our questions clear at the outset. As I have thought about the question in the title of this plenary — which reads, “What are the boundaries of covenant?” — I have sensed a bit of my own restlessness with the “boundaries” of the question itself. The very real boundaries of same-sex covenanted relationships include the reality that the vast majority of churches, including most moderate Baptist congregations, have no processes or rituals for recognizing the sacred covenant of same-sex relationships. These boundaries are also indicative of the fact that in all but seven-soon-to-be-eight states and D.C., there is no legal recognition for marriage between same-sex couples.

However, in a climate that largely excludes legal and religious recognition of covenanted relationships for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons, many same-sex partners continue to enter covenanted relationship with one another. This raises another question upon which I would like to focus: Amidst legal delegitimation, religious disparagement, and social disdain, what might churches have to learn from lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons about practices of covenant?

This question alters the course of our inquiry in some significant ways. We are all familiar with the usual apologetic questions (for example, “Can same-sex couples enter covenanted relationships?” “Are we excluded from covenanted relationship because of our same-gender-loving status?”). These place the burden of proof upon LGBT persons to justify our loves, commitments, and lives to a scrutinizing audience. And, if we are honest, these apologetic questions have already been settled by the lives of LGBT people in same-sex

covenanted relationships that are lived out every day with as much “success” as straight, or heterosexual, couples (whether one measures “success” in terms of happiness, longevity, ability to raise children, etc.). If the apologetic questions that require us to defend the legitimacy of same-sex relationships have not been addressed to the *theological satisfaction* of all, they have certainly been decisively answered through the living evidence of myriad same-sex partnerships, covenants, and marriages to which our theologies

Aside from the fact that I am partnered to another man, we have a story that would rival the “chaste” and “pure” stories of most straight Christian couples (and perhaps some 1960s sitcoms).

struggle to catch up.

But this new line of inquiry turns the tables a bit. It prompts us to consider the questions, How are *we* — churches in particular — disadvantaged by our refusal to listen to and learn from same-sex relationships? What have LGBT persons come to know about covenant that would behoove us all to learn? What do the lives and relationships of LGBT persons reveal that may be instructive to churches about the formation and living out of covenant? This is a posture that invites true, *mutual inquiry* and *dialogue* rather than juridical scrutiny.

In some sense, my own relationship with my partner, Ben, doesn’t break many typical relational norms — I

suppose making me a fairly “safe” person to speak to this subject. Aside from the fact that I am partnered to another man, we have a story that would rival the “chaste” and “pure” stories of most straight Christian couples (and perhaps some 1960s sitcoms). We met at a Baptist school, Gardner-Webb University, where we both studied religion. We were in a weekly college Bible study together. We were involved in ministry together in local churches and our campus ministry. We were friends for two years before we started dating. And, to top it all off, our first official “date” was to the Bob Jones University religious art museum. Our relationship developed quite according to the plan laid out for us in the Southern Baptist churches of our upbringing — save for the conspicuous fact that we were both men.

One of the primary commonalities that drew us together in relationship was our commitment to Christ and the church and a shared sense of calling into ministry. What I identify as the emergence of my own calling to ministry started very early in my childhood. The clearest way I can describe this call is to say that God spoke to me through the music of the church. As a five-year-old, I was enamored with choral music, congregational singing, and most especially the organ. This led not only to my childhood insistence upon attendance in the Sunday service (despite my ambivalence toward children’s activities...the music there just seemed too pedestrian), but also to a year of persistent begging of my father and grandfather to build me my own church in our backyard (my earliest experience of a Baptist church-split).

Both of them being contractors, they finally relented and built a small chapel for me complete with a steeple with cross on top and a stained-glass

window previously stored in the basement of our real church. Every child's dream-come-true! And if you thought the saga couldn't get any better, once the story of my childhood church ran on the front page of the Spartanburg Herald Journal, a woman in a neighboring town contacted us to sell us the old electronic organ in her basement that she was no longer using. So at age six, I was getting good practice in my emerging sense of calling to the ministry of the church alongside the able assistance of my other grandfather whom I enlisted to preach.

It was during this same period of childhood that I remember first becoming aware of another newly emerging sense — an emerging sense of attraction to my male peers. While I shared with my male friends in their attraction to girls, I also began noticing that I liked boys just as well. Since I had never heard anyone talk about this phenomenon, I made sense of this attraction in several stages: First, I just assumed that everyone was attracted to both men and women but just had relationships with the “opposite” sex. Later, I began to figure out that this wasn't necessarily the case and perhaps I was in some way “different” from my peers. In my next phase of understanding, while I hadn't heard many people talk about same-sex attraction, I had heard enough to know that it wasn't looked upon kindly by church and society. So I prayed about this attraction in whatever childhood way I could manage until, after some years, the realization emerged that my sexuality wasn't a problem after all.

But while I knew myself that it wasn't a “problem” to be attracted to other men, I also knew I must keep it a secret. This secret-keeping was for two reasons: First, growing up in my small South Carolina town, I knew not one single person who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender until well after I graduated high school and moved away to college. *Isolation facilitates a great deal of secret keeping about sexuality.* Today, a person growing up in my town wouldn't experience *quite* the same degree of

isolation. My sister graduated from the same high school a decade after me and she knew openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual students throughout her high school years. That is a hopeful sign.

But the other reason for my secret-keeping (what many refer to as being “in the closet”) was the tension that had become evident between my emerging sense of sexual identity and my emerging sense of call to ministry. By adolescence, I knew very well the pervasive attitudes of the churches toward LGBT persons and I knew my own pathway into ministry would be greatly hindered by my “coming out.” So I kept my secret, and proceeded on to service in the ministry of local churches. Eventually, after meeting Ben in college and long before we ever even “came out” to each other, we served in ministry together both on our college campus and in local congregations. And at least two years into our relationship, we were still keeping our sexuality and our relationship a secret from others — now attending seminary and continuing to serve in ministry together. We knew that our love for one another might put our potential for fulfilling our callings in jeopardy and, in reality, could very well put our lives in jeopardy.

But while the church worked to keep us “in the closet” for a long time, the church also helped us to find freedom from secret-keeping and isolation. It was a church right here in Atlanta, Oakhurst Baptist Church, where we first experienced not only a faith community, but a community of *any kind* that celebrated our relationship and nurtured our callings, eventually ordaining us both into ministry.

Christian ethicist, Kathy Rudy argues, “Gay people today have become experts at impersonating straight nuclear families; the only thing that is different is that one of us is the wrong gender.” I must say that while my personal narrative informs my own approach to the theology and practice of covenant, it is important to note that my own story should not be taken as a representative norm for the

relationships of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons, nor should it be considered as *the only configuration* of a covenanted relationship that holds instructive potential for churches on matters of “covenant.” In fact, the stories of more radical difference from the “norm” hold the potential to teach us the most.

LGBT persons should be wary of heterosexual impersonation, asking ourselves in whose image we are being formed and for what purpose? Just to get our slice of the pie (or at least the crumbs that fall from the table of heterosexual privilege)? Straight Christians should be equally alert in asking, Are we only willing to learn from, appreciate, and affirm those who look, act, and live in ways that mirror our own ways of being? Indeed, LGBT persons have a great deal more to teach us about covenant than how to best “fit in” to a sexual and relational norm that is defined from a traditional heterosexual perspective.

Learning from Same-Sex Covenanted Relationships

Theologian Elizabeth Stuart offers a guiding thought for our exploration, stating, “The space of the marginalized is often a space where imagination can flourish outside the restricting dictates of the mainstream.” While the prejudice and marginalization that LGBT persons face in this country and around the world must not be seen through rose-colored glasses, the experience of marginalization is the source of imaginative and very necessary creativity for LGBT persons seeking relationship and sexual intimacy.

Perhaps one of the most significant (as well as uncomfortable) contributions that LGBT persons make to our understandings of covenant is the way in which same-sex relationships call into question standard gender norms. “Traditional” marital relationships in the U.S., especially in Christian contexts, come with a host of culturally conditioned gender expectations that are imbued with unequal power relations between women and men.

Theological ethicist, Margaret Farley, argues, “traditional interpretations of heterosexual sex are steeped in images of the male as active and the female passive, the woman as receptacle and the man as fulfiller, the woman as ground and the man as seed.”

Yet, when no predefined gender roles exist to unthinkingly guide how intimate relationships are to be fostered, the *potential* — at very least — is present for covenants forged not according to centuries of gender role residue (much of which has served to subjugate women to male dominance), but instead through commitments to *mutuality* and *equality*. While same-sex relationships are not immune from power inequalities, persons in same-sex relationships must, *of necessity*, give explicit consideration to relational roles and power dynamics when these relationships are not between man and woman, but between men and men or women and women.

These considerations start with the ever-confusing questions straight people wonder to themselves about gay and lesbian relationships: Who does the dishes? How do you know who should pick up the check on a date? Who proposes to whom? But then we move on to grapple with more important questions, such as: Despite our cultural examples, how can a covenantal relationship be formed around an ideal of equality? In what ways does the characteristic of mutuality influence the way we relate sexually? Which cultural lessons about what it means to be a “real man” or “real woman” do we wish to hold onto and which do we want to shed as undesirable cultural baggage that diminishes equality and mutuality in our relationship?

But the lessons to be learned about covenant from LGBT persons extend beyond same-sex romantic, sexual partnerships. There is much to be gained by looking to the ways friendships are formed and community sustained among LGBT people. For numerous LGBT persons — *far too numerous* — the family into which

they are born and by which they are raised turns very suddenly from a source of support into a source of scorn. Perhaps the most poignant example in my own experience of ministry is a young man with whom I once worked who confided in his mother about his attraction to other men and was immediately kicked out of his home during his final semester of high school. Despite attempts to remain in school, this resulted in his having to drop out only a couple of months from graduation in order to support himself.

Many LGBT young people in similar situations find shelter, emotional and economic support, and much needed community in persons beyond one’s biological family. These bonds between LGBT persons are formed not out of sexual desire for one another or even out of the commonality of same-sex attraction. They are formed from circumstances of marginalization that are transformed through covenantal friendships into experiences of mutual care and support.

In this way, LGBT persons help us all recover a way of being in relationship that is true to a very historic commitment of the Christian church. Kathy Rudy argues,

The church has historically attempted to break down the boundaries that exist around primary, particular relationships in favor of relationships and dependencies on a community of believers. Christians throughout the centuries have understood that life in Christ means being responsible to and for many more people than one’s spouse and children. Life in Christ, in the most radical sense, demands an openness to other community members.

This is a commitment to relationship-within-community not unlike that of the earliest iterations of the church, holding all things in common and experiencing mutuality of care amid rejection of family, friends, and society. While I do not believe in anything called “*the LGBT Community*”

(with a capital C) — which presumes some monolithic unity of mind and purpose — I have experienced and witnessed myriad examples of LGBT communities (with a lowercase “c”); expressions of togetherness, love, and covenant beyond the boundaries of nuclear family that might serve as examples of covenanted relationship for us all.

It is evident that the direction of this plenary is intended to focus specifically upon issues of covenant for those LGBT *Christians* for whom covenant is so often not sanctioned and is even actively prohibited by both church and state. But in the particularly Christian flavor of societal scorn for LGBT people lies another unique outcome. While the contempt leveled at LGBT people from Christian churches and organizations is reprehensible, to say the least, it has produced the unintended effect of prompting — perhaps *forcing* — bisexual, transgender, lesbian, and gay persons to *think explicitly* about the connection between sexuality and faith.

Indeed, the religious marginalization of sexual minorities has resulted in the unintended burgeoning of keen and prolific LGBT theologians. Christian theologians, ethicists, and pastoral practitioners working at the intersections of sexuality and Christian theology have written scores and scores of texts. And these only represent “academic” reflections upon sexuality and spirituality. In the United States, no LGBT person is able to escape the necessity of thinking — sometimes painfully — about the intersection of sexuality and faith in their own personal lives.

This LGBT reflection upon sexuality and spirituality is a much-needed example in a social and religious culture that has divided the two such that no theological reflection is needed upon sexual expression that takes place within the cultural norms of male-female sexual relationship. By faithfully living contrary to the heterosexual norm, LGBT persons have cleared away the brush from the pathway of theological, ethical,

and spiritual reflection upon sexuality heretofore overgrown by the unquestioned heterosexual norms in Christian theology.

In much Christian discourse on the subject of marriage and covenant, we have *idolized* particular configurations of relationship — primarily that configuration of the heterosexual nuclear family. Our battles over “family values” have become little more than attempts to maintain the idolized status of this man-woman-children configuration of relationship. Single-parent families, cultural practices of close-knit extended families often living under the same roof, and same-sex families are relegated to second-class status allowed only to strive to live up to a heterosexual ideal/idol of the nuclear family.

In the same way, same-sex relationships should not be idolized. They have the potential for many of the same ills suffered by straight couples, such as domestic violence and emotional abuse. LGBT relationships do, however, invite us to move beyond relationship idols to *relational ideals*. They invite a more intentional reflection upon the theological, ethical, and biblical ideals toward which our covenantal relationships (same-sex or different-sex) should strive; ideals like mutuality, equality, caring friendship, and the reflective integration of sexuality and spirituality.

LGBT Covenant and the Body of Christ

Perhaps what is more remarkable than lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons continuing to form long-term, committed partnerships despite being ostracized by family and friends, shunned by religious communities, and left without legal protection from the government is the astonishing reality that many LGBT persons continue to maintain strong ties and deep commitments to churches.

The questions before us are, of course, not just about LGBT persons “out there,” but LGBT persons *in our midst* — persons like myself and numerous others who have been

formed within not just a common Christian tradition, but a particular *Baptist* tradition. And in a faith tradition built around an emphasis upon *baptism*, we might find our own heritage instructive as we consider questions of covenant within the Body of Christ.

Liturgical scholar Scott Haldeman reflects upon the meaning of a baptism, stating,

I base the Christian vocation in baptism, which, among other things, tempers all claims of kinship, all private relationships by situating them in the midst of communal bonds, membership in the One Body... Those baptized as adults give public testimony of their own faith and

The questions before us are, of course, not just about LGBT persons “out there,” but LGBT persons in our midst — persons like myself and numerous others who have been formed within not just a common Christian tradition, but a particular Baptist tradition.

then submit in the same posture of trust to have their worldly status washed away and become nothing more and nothing less an adopted child of God, a sister or brother or sister/brother to all other members of Christ’s church.

While not erasing other important markers of identity that affect our lives and self-understanding — e.g. race, sexuality, ethnicity, gender — a baptismal identity is a marker of covenant not only between an individual and God, but between the individual and all other members of Christ’s

church. And while some LGBT persons have understandably needed to distance themselves from churches in order to recover from religiously inspired abuse, a remarkable number remain intimately involved in the ministry of local congregations.

With the witness of their very lives, LGBT persons within the church give testimony to the power of baptismal identity to break down the boundaries that are erected around our human particularities and, instead, give rise to peculiar community. A community forged around baptismal identity is formed not in order to mask our particularities but to give expression to a *radical embrace of human difference* now soaked in the baptismal waters.

Next Steps for Congregations

Now, as you continue this dialogue, taking the conversation back into your churches in ways that only you can, what are the next steps? Let me offer three suggestions:

First, we cannot stop talking about (and hopefully working toward) the legal recognition of same-sex marriage equality because it is a significant justice issue of our day. Lest we think this is only a symbolic gesture, we should remember the 1,138 benefits, rights, and protections provided by Federal law on the basis of marital status. But even as this remains a focus of our striving toward equality, we should not believe that this is the final frontier of justice. An ever-present fear of mine is that once same-sex marriage is finally legalized across the country, many will consider the matter closed and their fire for the work of justice will grow dim. We must strive to complexify our view of justice in ways that bring into focus the truth attested to by Martin Luther King, Jr. that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Second, we must develop a sustained dissatisfaction with simple questions. Churches are called to greater complexity than is conveyed by the questions we often ask. Many here will wonder why I didn’t use my time to speak to the scriptures supposedly condemning “homosexuality”

(like Leviticus 18 and Romans 1). The pragmatic reason is that there is far too much to say about LGBT lives than can be addressed by starting back at these texts each time a conversation begins. But a far more important reason rests in the fact that there have been two generations of biblical scholarship about sexuality. For an ever-maturing dialogue to take shape within churches, much self-education is required that should engage not only the written works of scholars, but should *generously* engage the “living human documents” of the transgender, lesbian, bisexual, and gay persons in our midst.

Just as our questions need to exemplify more complexity, so too, our responses must take on a renewed sense of critical thought and theological imagination. If churches are to become dissatisfied with overly simple questions about sexuality (such as “Are gay people ‘in’ or ‘out’ of Christian fellowship?”), LGBT people must develop a sustained dissatisfaction with simple portrayals of *our lives*. Most especially, we must move beyond the trite responses that argue “accept us because we’re ‘born this way’ and we’re really not that much different from you anyway.” While biology and genetics may be an important consideration, we have more to say about our lives and experience than, “we were born this way.” Instead, LGBT persons must lay claim to an insistence that *it is in our difference*, not our sameness, that we have the most to offer one another, the church, and human community.

Finally, we must attend to the ways that Christian rhetoric regarding sexu-

ality is at the root of much emotional harm and physical violence against LGBT people. So long as our LGBT children are bullied in their schools, so long as our LGBT teenagers kill themselves after years of suffering public torment, so long as our LGBT neighbors are victimized by hate crime violence, we must give attention to the ways our Christian tradition and religious rhetoric perpetuate suffering and death in the lives of LGBT people.

LGBT ways of authoring lives and configuring relationships are not properly viewed as *challenges* to “Christian” views of covenant. As we should know, the definition of “Christian” covenanted relationships, like “marriage,” have changed

While biology and genetics may be an important consideration, we have more to say about our lives and experience than, “we were born this way.”

significantly over the centuries of the church. Neither should we consider LGBT covenantal relationships a second-class “Plan B” to a Divine heterosexual “Plan A,” lest we betray our own nearsightedness and historical inattentiveness to the ways our “Plan A” is the result of many shifts in social norms and dramatic evolution in biblical understanding. Indeed,

what we *now* call the heterosexual norm of marriage based upon mutual love and affection, rather than upon gender hierarchy and contractual transmission of property, would be *utterly unrecognizable* to Christians in centuries past.

Rather than a tolerable but undesirable “Plan B,” LGBT relationships are stellar examples of covenant forged in the fires of oppression, marginalization, and violence. Examples from which we may *learn differently* about covenant than we have learned from the examples we take to be the commonsensical “norm.” In this way, LGBT relationships do not stand in *contrast* to a tradition of Christian sexual ethics, but are a part of the ongoing, developing, *living tradition* of Christian sexual ethics — a living tapestry upon which LGBT persons are often relegated to the margins and fringes but of which we are still very much a part.

Churches must engage the living tradition of Christian sexual ethics in ways that create space and appreciation for the differences LGBT persons bring to the tradition. And, lest we be too afraid of changing our minds on matters of Christian sexual ethics, Robert McAfee Brown helpfully reminds us, “A shift of perspective is not unfamiliar in Christian history; it is called conversion.” ■

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The Christian Ethics Today Foundation publishes Christian Ethics Today in order to provide laypersons, educators, and ministers with a resource for understanding and responding in a faithful Christian manner to moral and ethical issues that are of concern to contemporary Christians, to the church, and to society.

Senior Adult Sexuality

By Rhonda Abbott Blevins

Senior adult sexuality is a world of gray. I know this because I serve as a pastor among a beautiful congregation of senior adults. Some of these men and women have honored me by sharing their sexual struggles. It is through their stories that I have grown to understand that senior adult sexuality is a world of gray.

The church I serve is a 1,500 member, interdenominational congregation in the center of a planned retirement community. Probably 95% of my parishioners are retired or semi-retired. Nearly 20% of adults in my congregation are single, most of them widows and widowers. Since they invited me into their lives, I've done my share of listening to stories about golf, grandkids, and gout. I expected that. I didn't expect, however, to spend so much time offering pastoral care around the issues of marriage and sex. For the next few moments I want to offer some stories from the front lines of pastoral ministry with senior adults in order to raise awareness about the struggles of many seniors, to foster compassion for them, and to ask the questions that might lead us to a healthy, Christian approach to senior sexuality. Let's get started.

Stories From the Front Lines

"It's Between Us and God"

Jim and his wife were in their 70s when I met them. They had recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary when Jim's wife was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I visited them at home and through multiple hospitalizations. I prayed with them and for them. Jim stood by her, rising to the unfathomable challenge of caring for his dying wife. When she was sent home on hospice care, Jim did everything in his power to provide for her comfort. When she died, I went to their house. I was there with Jim at the funeral, at the burial, and through

his initial phases of grief.

A few months later, Jim walked into my office wearing a huge grin. He had a lady friend. I rejoiced with Jim as he described his new love—a widow from the church, in fact. I began seeing them together, hand-in-hand, like a couple of kids at the county fair. Then one day I learned that the two lovebirds were living together. I didn't get a wedding invitation because there was no wedding.

A few months passed before Jim and his new roommate received our church newsletter containing an article I had written about some of the "gray areas" related to senior adult sexuality. In the article, I wrote:

There are lots of reasons why a widow and a widower in their 70s wouldn't want the legalities of marriage, right? There are adult kids with vested interests in estates. There are pension issues. There are tax issues. There are all kinds of issues. Procreation (one very important reason for legal marriage) will not be a factor. If two consenting, mature adults want to live together for the rest of their lives without a marriage license, does that have to be deemed 'sinful?' Could the church bless a sacred, covenantal union for them without a marriage license from the state?

That week, Jim came to see me. He told me that I had written his story. He couldn't marry his new love because he would lose his health insurance which was connected with his late wife's estate. Because of a chronic health issue, he couldn't take that risk. A man of faith and integrity, Jim believed that he and his new love were married in God's eyes without the church's or the state's involvement; he had no guilt about their arrangement. "It's between us and God," he asserted.

"The Same Rules Don't Apply"

Sandy is a vibrant, personable lady in her late 60s. I got to know Sandy through her active participation in church life. Divorced several years ago in her 40s, Sandy had been dating Scott, another 60-something divorcee, for a while when she made an appointment to see me. "Scott wants to have sex," she confided. "I've never had sex with anyone other than my ex-husband. I want to have sex with him, but I just don't know. He tells me I'm not 16-years-old anymore, and the same rules no longer apply. I'm not sure what to do. I have very deep feelings for Scott. I want to love him, but I don't want to dishonor God. My gut tells me that Scott is right and the same rules don't apply."

I told Sandy about a question I often posed to college students when I was a campus minister at a state university. In numerous pastoral care encounters, students would ask, "How far is too far?" It seemed an appropriate question for young men and women trying to live as Christians in a highly promiscuous culture. "That's the wrong question," I would advise. "The question should be, 'How can I best honor God through this relationship?'"

Feeling a deep sense of compassion for Sandy and knowing her sincere faith in God, I posed the same question to her regarding her dilemma: "Sandy, how can you best honor God through your relationship with Scott?" After a long silence, Sandy replied, "I'm 68 years old. I don't know how much time either of us has left. The very best way I can honor God is to live my life to the fullest." Sandy believed that meant entering into a sexual relationship with Scott.

"It Feels Like She Died"

George has been married to his wife for over 50 years. He is an active,

healthy 77-year-old. A few months ago George had to make the difficult choice of placing his wife in an Alzheimer's care unit. Most days she doesn't know who George is. He is faithful to visit her daily, taking her out occasionally and to church most Sundays.

George asked to see me after reading my newsletter article about the gray areas of senior sexuality. "There's a lady," he confided. "We've been spending time together, but we haven't had sex. I want to do what's right. Is it wrong to date someone when my wife is still physically alive even though she's emotionally gone? In many ways it feels like she died. It seems so right when I'm with this new lady. Is it wrong for me to keep seeing her?"

These are just three examples of issues that many senior adults face. A discussion about sexual ethics and the senior adult requires nuance and compassion—often the ethical dilemmas for those in this age group emerge from loss, whether death, divorce, or illness. Sometimes this discussion doesn't even involve "sex" per se. "At my age of 77 years, my last concern is 'sex,'" stressed the man whose wife is institutionalized with Alzheimer's. "My primary consideration is companionship." While most healthy adults remain sexually active until advanced old age, it may prove helpful to adopt a broader definition of sexuality which includes genital sex "but refers more broadly to our embodied capacity for intimate connection." This more expansive definition will help guide our discussion of ethical dilemmas faced by many seniors, to which we now turn our attention.

A World of Gray

When Seniors Live Together

Let's consider these three case studies, naming the primary ethical challenge raised in each. In the first story, Jim experienced the death of his long-time spouse, then fell in love and began living with a woman to whom he is faithfully committed "till death do us part," but without a church ceremony or a license from the state. They

have chosen not to marry in order for him to keep his health insurance. Other seniors find themselves side-stepping marriage for other reasons, like adult kids who have interests in estates, or pension and tax issues. The merger of assets assumed in traditional marriages may not appeal to many seniors.

The customary stance of the church, "sex within marriage, celibacy without," places Jim and countless older adults outside the will of God. Traditional social mores suggest that seniors who live together without a marriage license are "living in sin." But are they? Are they "living in sin" if they have made a vow to one another before God to remain united until death? Could the church bless

The customary stance of the church, "sex within marriage, celibacy without," places Jim and countless older adults outside the will of God.

a monogamous union without the state's permission? While some church leaders resist this notion, blessing ceremonies like this already happen in churches across the nation. Pastors and churches must take great caution, however, when performing these ceremonies for at least two reasons: (1) The possibility of procreation may ethically demand legal marriage as "the proper context for sex" in order to protect the legal rights of mothers, fathers, and children; and (2) the church or a pastor may inadvertently condone polygamy if a blessing ceremony is performed for a (perhaps disingenuous) person legally wed to another.

Given these cautions, some churches and pastors may want to consider the merits of "blessing ceremonies" for seniors like Jim. Other churches and pastors will find this approach inappropriate. Either way, the faithful

church and pastor will wrestle with the important question:

Can the church develop an appropriate, compassionate sexual ethic for monogamous senior adults for whom legal marriage is not an option?

When Seniors Rethink the Rules

What about Sandy? Is her gentleman friend correct when he suggests that the rules aren't the same for pre-marital teenagers and post-marital senior adults? So long as it's monogamous, is an "anything goes" sexual ethic appropriate for senior adults? The astounding increase in sexually transmitted diseases in retirement communities across the nation suggests that chastity and monogamy are values from a bygone era. A responsible sexual ethic for the single senior adult must reject the permissive sexual culture of our day while affirming the inherent sexual nature in each man and woman of God. "Sexuality is an essential feature of each human person and is a central aspect contributing to the identity of each as a person." When older adults are denied their sexuality, it cuts away their very personhood. We tend to imagine senior adults as sexless, but that is not accurate. "The expression of sexual needs is not only important at any age but contributes to the ultimate definition of an individual as a valuable and respected human being."

With this in mind, think back to the traditional stance of the church: "Sex within marriage, celibacy without." Karen LeBacqz observes that most churches:

expect that those who are single will get married and that those who have been married and are now single through divorce or widowhood will simply disappear into the closet until they marry again . . . A new ethic for single sexuality is needed, for the tradition that requires celibacy in singleness is not adequate. This situation does not mean that anything goes or that the church has nothing to offer by way of a positive ethic for single people . . . Neither the legalistic approach of

earlier Christian morality nor the permissive approach of contemporary culture provides a satisfactory sexual ethic for singles.

If neither laxity nor legalism provides an appropriate sexual ethic for seniors, what does? *Can the church develop an appropriate, compassionate sexual ethic for single senior adults?*

When Seniors Lose a Spouse . . . Just Not Physically

Think back to George—his loneliness palpable. His institutionalized wife rarely remembers her own name, let alone his. Is it wrong for George to seek companionship, even if he finds it in another woman? Last fall, Pat Robertson, prominent conservative Christian spokesman, suggested that it is permissible for a man to divorce his wife if she has Alzheimer's. Though Robertson faced harsh criticism for this idea, his statement points to a larger reality—an appropriate, compassionate sexual ethic for spouses of those afflicted with Alzheimer's and dementia is complicated. It is not uncommon for these spouses to experience feelings of grief, loneliness, and isolation which may prompt them to explore other relationships. In fact, the Alzheimer's Association recommends that caregivers consider dating. With the number of people afflicted with Alzheimer's expected to quadruple by 2050, the church must work to cultivate a Christian sexual ethic for the spouses left behind, as well as for those who live in residential care settings. *Can the church develop an appropriate, compassionate sexual ethic for the spouses and victims of Alzheimer's and dementia?*

A Timely Discussion

A perfect storm of cultural phenomena makes our discussion of senior adult sexual ethics quite timely. The oldest baby-boomers turned 65 last year. Often called the “silver tsunami,” cultural anthropologists predict that this large wave of retirees will redefine senior adulthood like they have redefined every phase of life. This generation came of age during the sexual

revolution of the 1960s and 1970s and “have always been on the forefront of the sexual revolution,” constantly pushing the envelope related to sexual freedom and empowerment.

Baby-boomers are expected to enjoy better health and longer lives than previous generations of seniors. Medications developed for erectile dysfunction enable more men to remain sexually active during the senior years. Women in this demographic are usually past child-bearing years and no longer fear unwanted pregnancies. These factors create opportunities for lots of sex and loads of moral confusion.

How has the church responded to this changing moral landscape? Unfortunately, it has failed miserably,

If neither laxity nor legalism provides an appropriate sexual ethic for seniors, what does? Can the church develop an appropriate, compassionate sexual ethic for single senior adults?

often dealing with “sexual intimacy by demonizing it or ignoring it.”¹⁷ “It is as if the church has arrested development and has failed to grow into a healthy understanding of the sexual dimension of life.”¹⁸ What would it look like, asks Philip Gulley, if “the church cared more about love and less about sex?”¹⁹ Can the church find a way to meet the baby-boomer libido with a viable Christian sexual ethic that honors senior adult sexuality with respect, dignity, and grace?

The Church as Kinsman Redeemer

Turning to the pages of Scripture as we explore the boundaries of covenant for senior adults, the story of Ruth and Boaz may prove helpful.

Like many of today's senior adults who face moral quandaries, Ruth is a widow. Her story is rife with lost love and subsequent struggle. In her widowed state, Ruth seduces Boaz. The encounter between them on the threshing floor is understood by many interpreters as sensual if not overtly sexual. The day following their rendezvous on the threshing floor, Boaz completes the legal transaction that makes Ruth his wife, becoming her kinsman redeemer and the agent of God's redeeming love. The story demonstrates that “Yahweh cares about widows like Naomi and Ruth.”²⁰ Contrary to conventional Christian wisdom, post-marital seduction proves a powerfully effective conduit of God's grace between Boaz and Ruth.

Like Boaz, can the church become an agent of God's redeeming love for the widowed among us? We're quite skilled at heaping guilt and shame on post-marital seniors who find new love and live into the fullness of their God-given sexuality. With seniors who suffer the emotionally devastating experience of losing a spouse through death, divorce, or illness, the church should offer compassion and comfort, not platitudes from the playbooks of puritanical preachers. “The church must give up its elevated stance of righteousness and enter with its people into the more difficult gray areas of life to seek a basis for decision making that is life-giving, not life-destroying, and is appropriate to the age and circumstances of the people involved.”²¹ That life-giving principle rejects the “anything goes” culture promulgated in American culture, but calls us to discern a standard—some “rules of engagement”—for a compassionate sexual ethic for seniors. What might that standard look like?

Notice the common descriptor from two guiding principles that may prove helpful when considering senior sexual ethics. This first is from Karen LeBacqz:

An adequate sexual ethic for singles must therefore attend to what is needed for appropriate vulnerability in sexuality . . . For

example, a sexual ethic for singles might take one form for those who are very young and another for those who are older. The protections of age and experience may make it sensible to permit sexual encounters for those who are older and single, while restricting it for the very young.²²

A second guiding principle which may inform our discussion comes from the 1977 *Preliminary Study on Human Sexuality* published by the United Church of Christ: "The physical expression of one's sexuality in relation to another ought to be appropriate to the level of loving commitment within the relationship."²³

The common word within these two guiding statements is the word "appropriate." Each situation must be set in context. A "one size fits all" ethic falls short when senior adult sexuality is taken seriously. This is a tension that makes those beholden to a black-and-white theology quite uncomfortable. Good Christian people may reject the proposition that sexual ethics for seniors is a world of gray, but the conventional wisdom of "sex within marriage, celibacy without" is a failed sexual ethic for seniors because it fails to offer compassion for the 16.4 million single senior adults in America.²⁴ It fails to affirm the sexual nature of all men and women. It fails to set an attainable standard for many, and may

even have the inadvertent effect of promoting promiscuity over monogamy. It fails to recognize the growing crisis of older adults facing isolation and loneliness. Simply put, it fails.

Can the church develop an appropriate, compassionate sexual ethic for monogamous senior adults for whom legal marriage is not an option? For single senior adults? For the spouses and victims of Alzheimer's and dementia? I hope so. As a pastor who deeply loves the senior adults in my care, I simply cannot burden them with the hackneyed morality of "sex within marriage, celibacy without." That's a code that denies many of my parishioners the deepest human connection. It's a code that levies isolation and loneliness upon them. It's a code that

With seniors who suffer the emotionally devastating experience of losing a spouse through death, divorce, or illness, the church should offer compassion and comfort, not platitudes from the playbooks of puritanical preachers.

runs counter to Christ's great commandment as I think about a loving response which honors and respects the life-long human need for intimacy. It's not a piece of paper issued by the state that blesses a relationship between two people. That's God's business. I seriously doubt that God cares about the paperwork.

Admittedly, it's a balancing act with appropriateness on one side of the scale and compassion on the other. Too far in the direction of compassion and the church may promote a reckless sexuality that cheapens sex. Too far in the direction of appropriateness and the church slides back to its all too familiar role of guilt mongering. Senior adults need a truly Christian sexual ethic that is both lovingly appropriate and honorably compassionate. May the church shine the light of Christ into the gray areas of senior adult sexuality, offering redemption and grace, rising up to welcome the "silver tsunami" with open arms and open minds. ■

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Human Trafficking

By Lindsay C. Comstock

As we conclude our sessions today on how the church can lead the way in difficult conversations, I want to take a moment and speak to you about something that weighs heavy on my heart. Human trafficking. Many have asked me, “Why is human trafficking being discussed at this conference when there are so many other pressing issues of sexuality that need to be addressed?” I can’t say that I disagree that there are many pressing issues related to sex and sexuality that need to be discussed but, for me, sex trafficking is one of those issues that needs to be considered. “Human trafficking is the fastest-growing, and second most profitable crime on the planet.” It is largely based on manipulation, coercion and power...where sex is most often used as a weapon instead of a consenting exchange between two adults. In my opinion, a lack of education and awareness concerning healthy forms of human sexuality in the public arena is only perpetuating illnesses and industries where the median age of females being trafficked for sex has dropped from 18 years of age to 12. These reasons, to me, are why it is imperative that we talk about sex trafficking at a sexuality conference.

I recently hosted a session on human trafficking at my church in Massachusetts. It was the most well-attended event of our Wednesday night series. People were pulling in chairs from the kitchen and youth were piled up on the floor. One of the most compelling questions that I was asked that evening, however, came just before the session began, not after. An elderly woman pulled me aside and with the most earnest tone, said, “Have I missed something? Where did all this human trafficking talk come from? I feel like I’m behind or something.” This earnest woman’s question raises a good point.

Where did all of this trafficking talk come from? And so, let us begin at the beginning...

“In November of 1999, California real estate tycoon Lakireddy Bali Reddy was called into questioning by the Bay Area Police. Days before, he had been seen, along with a group of employees, putting a 17-year old unconscious girl into a van at an apartment complex -- one of two girls later pronounced dead. Suspecting kidnapping, a bystander reported the incident to the police. Reddy, the

My first encounter with trafficking happened in a city very similar to the city in which we find ourselves today...here on the East Cost.

owner of the complex, convinced officers that the deaths were due to a faulty carbon monoxide detector and that the young girls were family members of one of his employees. He was released, the same day, with nothing more than a petty fine.

Teenagers from Berkley High School were not so easily convinced, however. Following Reddy’s release, two student journalists ran a short article in the school newspaper asking why these young girls, girls who lived in the school district, had never been seen at Berkley High School. In a matter of months, two high school student journalists exposed a criminal network that spanned three continents, five countries, nine counties and involved more than 20 girls from India. Two high school student journalists had just exposed America’s human trafficking industry.”

This was the first reported case of human trafficking on US soil. You can imagine the shock when Americans woke up to newspaper headlines that not only had 20 girls been trafficked to America from India to serve as indentured servants and sex slaves but that this enterprise had been going on for more than 13 years.

Reddy was released on April 15, 2008, after serving only eight years of a 38-year sentence.

“Human trafficking, as defined in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, debt bondage, [sexual services] or slavery. Human trafficking is not smuggling or forced movement. Trafficking does not require transportation or border crossing, and happens not only to immigrants or foreign nationals. To be categorized as trafficking, an activity does not require physical force, physical abuse, or physical restraint. The consent of the victim is considered irrelevant, as is payment.” Human trafficking is based on manipulation and lies. And sex trafficking is the most profitable of them all.

My first encounter with human trafficking was not in the depths of Indonesia, Cambodia or Thailand’s red light districts....though I have worked gathering research in each of these places. No, my first encounter with trafficking happened in a city very similar to the city in which we find ourselves today...here on the East Cost. After hearing of her parents’ decision to divorce, a young girl from an upper-middle class Christian family decided she would run away from home to make her parents pay. After crashing on a friend’s couch

for a couple of days, this young girl received a call from a friend of her boyfriend who said he might have some work for her just one state away. She bought a Greyhound bus ticket and headed north. When she arrived, her boyfriend's friend picked her up in an 18-wheeler. She was immediately driven to a popular trucker stop, given free drugs and passed around like a sex slave for weeks before one of her friends tracked her down through a disconnected cell phone number. She was thrown into a juvenile detention center for prostitution and spent a month trying to plead her case. She now lives in the foster care system and fights daily with the horrible effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and sexually transmitted diseases.

There are dozens of things wrong with this scenario. They include coercion, lies, and deception. But what is more troubling to me is how a lack of awareness, a lack of education about the signs of human trafficking, meant that a young girl, under the age of 18, was seen as a criminal instead of a victim. A lack of education and awareness meant that those closest to this young girl never saw this coming.

Edward Farley, in his book, *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry* asserts that there are "three skewed trends in local church ministry today. 1) The church as a modern bureaucracy: overtly concerned with management, organization, and enlargement. 2) The church for individual fulfillment: concerned with individual satisfaction and appeasement...a church that feeds our culture of narcissism. And lastly, 3) The church as a moralistic meter: concerned with a detailed code of behavior and ethical legalism." In Farley's opinion, what each of these church trends have in common is that they fall victim to the prevailing trends of current secular society. Society, he

says, can be distracted by this or that and the Church follows suit.

The most problematic aspect, in my opinion, related to our prophetic call to alleviate human trafficking is the church as moralistic meter. This kind of church, having decided to preoccupy itself with trivial matters of behavior and activity, most likely sexual activity and also assumed normative codes of sexual conduct, is the church that, in my opinion, is most likely to miss the unstable family situation, emotional vulnerability, and silent cries for help such as this young girl was giving off that made her susceptible to trafficking in the first place. In other words, our sons and daughters are not safe because we have strict rules concerning dating and

I believe there is an intrinsic connection between the Church's avoidance of topics and issues related to human sexuality and the proliferation of sexual misconduct in our world today.

relationships. Our children are safest when we educate them about sexuality and pay attention to their everyday realities.

The Church, having been formed with a disposition towards the poor and neglected,⁵ formed in the very image of a loving God who crossed boundaries and cultural stereotypes is being given a wake-up call. Beginning today, we need to sit down and have some honest to goodness conversations with our spouses, our partners,

our friends and our children about sexuality. Today, we need to hear a sermon from our pulpits on how sex should not be a weapon and how women are not something to be objectified or exploited. We need to encourage our youth ministers when they dare to bring up sex education as a topic for youth group discussion and we need to stop pretending that something magical happens on wedding nights.

My point is simply this: I believe there is an intrinsic connection between the Church's avoidance of topics and issues related to human sexuality and the proliferation of sexual misconduct in our world today. We are allowing MTV, Hollywood movies, and an under-funded public school system to set the agenda. It's time to pull our heads out of the sand and be the Church that Christ has called us to be a Church that is relevant in the world and not pulled here and there by misguided trends and shallow theologies. It's time to stop letting others set the agenda and we, as people of faith, to step into the uncomfortable yet important conversations of this day and become a voice of hope – a voice that looks at each and everyone of the people in this room, regardless of where we fall on a given issue. One thing we can all agree on is that we are sharing the human experience and that each of us, because of that shared humanity, are people of great worth who are loved equally by an enormous God. Thank you. ■

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From Fear to Joy: Our Congregations Journey

By Wendell Griffen

Like many other pastors I know and countless more I don't know, I've learned to be available, responsive, and alert to calls for help in unexpected times and circumstances. But nothing in my ministry formation prepared me for how to respond to the reality of human sexuality, congregational unity, pastoral care, and the various challenges and opportunities to experience and enlarge what we mean by "covenant" when it comes to human sexuality. Human sexuality is as real as anything else one encounters in pastoral ministry. But I wasn't educated about it in church, college, or as part of my seminary studies.

My parents talked with me about sex. But I don't recall any conversations with my parents or youth leaders about human sexuality during my youth. I don't recall any church conferences about human sexuality. I don't think my experience is very different from other congregational leaders.

If my experience is typical, then it's probably safe to say that many—if not a majority—of the people who lead congregations reached adulthood like I did: with a very limited understanding about human sexuality. Perhaps we had conversations with our parents or other elders about sex and sensuality. Youth leaders occasionally and delicately talked about the topic of sex and dating. But I have yet to meet any Baptist pastor who grew up in a family or congregation where human sexuality was mentioned.

It's not unfair or inaccurate to say that when it comes to the issue of human sexuality, religious people in the United States have avoided serious thinking, honest conversation, and open-minded dialogue. I trace our aversion to engage the issue of sexuality by serious thought, honest discourse, and open-minded

conversation to one thing: We have a phobia about human sexuality. We're afraid to admit that we're afraid about sexuality. We're uncomfortable thinking about it. We're uneasy. As individuals, families, congregations, communities, clergypersons, and members of a society where free expression of opinions is supposedly valued, we've been afraid to think, speak, and work to lovingly understand sexuality, one of the basic aspects of our humanity.

Sexuality has historically been left off the list of subjects we recruit

I trace our aversion to engage the issue of sexuality by serious thought, honest discourse, and open-minded conversation to one thing: We have a phobia about human sexuality.

educators to teach in high school. Sexuality has traditionally not been included among the issues seminary faculty and students analyze. In the minority of seminaries that include courses on human sexuality in the curricula, the courses aren't required.

So no one should be surprised that our congregations aren't comfortable dealing with sexuality. This conference has been needed for a very long time. I hope it will mark the start of a new era of candor for Baptists and other faithful people.

I haven't been immune or exempt from the fearful aversion to addressing sexuality. But I'm convinced that the aversion has done great harm to individuals, families, faith communi-

ties, and our desire to be agents of God's love and truth in the world. I've seen firsthand the pain and fear of families faced with the prospect that some aspect of a loved one's sexuality will become known. I've witnessed the anxiety of parents, grandparents, siblings, and other relatives.

And I've witnessed firsthand the way fear and misunderstanding can work cruel results. I have known and hurt for people who were afraid to come to worship because they expected to be shunned or blamed on account of their sexuality. I've tried to protect and comfort family members who were afraid to ask their congregation to pray for a loved one who had been diagnosed with AIDS. I've known the special anxiety young people feel when they are afraid to talk with parents, other relatives, and church leaders about sexuality. I've seen and heard pastors and other clergy demonize vulnerable children, teenagers, and adults simply because those people are different because of sexuality. And I've seen preachers and other church people mount and support political efforts that portray people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender as threats to family cohesion and societal order based solely on their sexuality.

So when New Millennium Church was organized in 2009, I prayed that we would be different. I prayed that we would be people who are not bound by a fear of difference but who are inspired by God's love to be "inclusive, welcoming, and progressive followers of Jesus Christ." But how would we live out that challenge surrounding the issue of sexuality? I will share what we've done and how it has affected us.

We affirm oneness and welcome all persons in God's love during every Sunday worship service. Our congregation recites the fol-

lowing “Affirmation of Oneness and Purpose” each Sunday morning: “*We praise and worship God together. We petition God, together. We proclaim God, together. We welcome all persons in God’s love together. We live for God, in every breath and heartbeat, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as followers of Jesus Christ, together.*” This affirmation is made immediately following what we call the “Greet and Fellowship Moment” following the invocation when everyone is invited to greet and be welcomed by everyone else as we “welcome all persons in God’s love together.”

Why is this important? Almost every person in our congregation has lived through times of legalized segregation and religiously inspired discrimination against people who are different because of race, gender, and sexuality. But we have come to know God’s love as expressed and demonstrated in Jesus Christ. In Christ, we have come to understand God’s love for and acceptance of all persons. In Christ, we have come to realize that humanity involves a wonderful and God-ordained diversity. In Christ, we have experienced the meaning of being one with God and others by the unifying work of grace and the Holy Spirit. Somehow, our congregation was inspired to affirm our commitment to oneness and to “welcome all persons in God’s love” because we sincerely trust that this is what it means to be one with God in Christ.

Pastors have a prophetic duty to proclaim God’s love in ways that welcome all people. Congregational life isn’t defined by the personality of a pastor, but a Baptist pastor has a profound potential on that life by the way we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. I’m struck, however, by how often pastors seem unwilling or unable to grasp and present God’s love for all persons.

I’m no model preacher by any means. But I was led to preach about the encounter Jesus had with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well for the inaugural worship service of New Millennium Church (May 31, 2009).

I tried to present what that encounter meant to her and means for us in a sermon titled, “Give Me This Water!” Please forgive me for quoting myself.

By his deliberate encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus revealed to her and to us that we can never be truly refreshed and rejuvenated by a well and bucket approach to life and faith. We need “living water” that is invigorating, soothing, and cooling as we experience the challenges, conflicts, defeats, insults, and tragedies of our journeys. We need a source of strength and vitality that is bigger and deeper than domestic status, work, culture, and religious ritual. Until we are connected with “living

Somehow, our congregation was inspired to affirm our commitment to oneness and to “welcome all persons in God’s love” because we sincerely trust that this is what it means to be one with God in Christ.

water,” we will keep coming up dry and empty, no matter what is in our family, cultural, or religious water pots and buckets. God’s love is the “living water” that Jesus spoke about to the Samaritan woman. We are designed to be nourished, invigorated, soothed, and cooled by the constantly flowing stream of God’s love. We need the push of God’s unstoppable love in the face of our setbacks. We need the comfort of God’s healing love for our hurts and injuries. We need the assurance of God’s always flowing love as we deal

with obstacles, disappointments, sorrows, and anxieties. You and I, like the Samaritan woman, need to be invigorated, soothed, and cooled by the flowing stream of God’s love.

Here is the good news. **God’s love comes to us!** Despite whatever situations, setbacks, disappointments, insults, conflicts, or frustrations life may present, God’s love comes to us! The meaning of Jesus showing up in Samaria at Jacob’s Well is that God’s love shows up! Her marital history could not keep God’s love from showing up in Jesus. The bigotry imposed on her people could not keep God’s love from showing up in Jesus. The religious turf fight between preachers in her region and other preachers elsewhere about where people should worship could not prevent God’s love from showing up in Jesus. God’s love flows to wherever we are to call us, claim us, soothe us, invigorate us, renew us, and redirect us. We do not need to go to Jerusalem or elsewhere to experience God’s love. **Jesus at Jacob’s Well talking with a Samaritan woman tells us that God’s love comes to us, wherever we are, however we are, to fill our dry emptiness.**

By the love that God has given us through Jesus, we are able to confront injustice. By that love, we draw strength to overcome adversity. By that love, we are called as instruments of peace in the face of conflict. Through that love, you and I are agents of hope to people in despair. As God has given us the living water of divine love in Jesus, God has made us part of that love with Jesus. Like a stream flows to fill dry places, God’s love flows in Jesus to fill us and flows in those who are filled by that love to renew, reinvigorate, redirect, and soothe others. This

is what happened to the woman of Samaria. God's love came to her. Eventually, she became part of that love to others in her community.

If pastors believe that God loves people in whatever aspect of life they present themselves, then we must proclaim that love from our pulpits. And our sermonic efforts should call and challenge people to trust God's love in their relationships with others without regard to ancestral, cultural, ritual, or other bases for treating people differently because of their sexuality.

New Millennium intentionally confronted our phobia and prejudice about sexuality by prayerful study. Rather than use Sunday school quarterly materials and lessons, New Millennium follows a book study approach. I try to prayerfully select books that will stretch us. We studied writings by Howard Thurman (*Jesus and the Disinherited*), Dan Southerland (*Transitioning: Leading Your Church through Change*), Rob Bell (*Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*), Daniel Vestal (*It's Time... a Journey Toward Missional Faithfulness*), and Samuel Proctor (*My Moral Odyssey*) between our formation in May 2009 and the fall of 2010. And during the fall of 2010 and the winter months of 2011, we studied a book that challenged us to prayerfully ponder the ethical implications of being Jesus-followers concerning the issue of human sexuality when we studied a book written by Jack P. Rogers (*Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*).

Like it or not, people act out their beliefs and our fears. The phobia about human sexuality has driven how many people think and act about sexuality—both for themselves and for other persons. But the Bible declares that “God has not given us a spirit of fearfulness.” One of the most frequent commands found in our Scripture is “Don't fear.”

So our congregation prayerfully engaged in months of serious study

and honest conversation about sexuality by following a study guide included with *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. We watched videos that addressed how persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender are perceived and treated by religious people and the efforts of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender to find acceptance and affirmation as they try to live out their faith in God's grace and truth (*For the Bible Tells Me So* and *A Fish Out of Water*). Instead of adopting the usual fearful approach to human sexuality we deliberately, prayerfully, and congregationally chose to study, listen, share, and trust the Holy Spirit.

I didn't introduce the sexuality study to make a political statement

So our congregation prayerfully engaged in months of serious study and honest conversation about sexuality by following a study guide included with *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*.

for the congregation or myself. As pastor, I introduced that study for the same reasons that guided whatever we study. Human sexuality is a reality religious people, including followers of Jesus, cannot deny or avoid. Humans are sexual beings by design. But sexuality isn't a subject religious thinkers have been comfortable engaging. Augustine, considered by some to have been the father-figure of Christian theology, never seemed to be comfortable with the human body. More than a few people have expressed concern, if not regret, “that for many centuries the teaching of the Church on human sexuality has suffered from its adherence to Augustine's distorted emphasis.”

I led New Millennium to intentionally study and confront the religious phobia about human sexuality knowing the study would challenge us. It did. One of our charter leaders eventually left the congregation because she didn't want to participate in it. She left with a clear conscience and remains in contact with us. Although others openly expressed anxieties, they committed themselves to the study because it marked the first time they were part of a congregation where human sexuality was being openly pondered, discussed, and embraced.

At the beginning of the New Millennium study of human sexuality, we agreed that our effort would be guided by some fundamental thoughts:

- Know that every person's opinion counts.
- Respect each other.
- Be open-minded and non-judgmental.
- Have compassion.
- Maintain and protect confidentiality.
- Listen to each other respectfully.
- Disagree agreeably.
- Don't be afraid to grow.

New Millennium Church is a new church. Most of our members are middle-aged and senior citizens. Most of us have been Baptists for decades. But regardless of our ages, varying levels of education, vocational diversity, racial diversity, and other factors, none of us had ever engaged in a serious study of human sexuality and Christian theology. Our study marked the first time we were able to openly discuss sexuality and faith. The study allowed us to follow the Holy Spirit as we listened to each other, as we read and pondered the assigned reading material, and as we intentionally met a same-sex Christian couple whose relationship has endured for more than 40 years. We were able to confront the truth that the Bible has often been misused to justify slavery, segregation, and subjugation of women. We studied principles of Biblical interpretation.

We prayed for each other.

Our study didn't weaken us. It gave us a new courage. We came to understand the importance of testing how Scripture is read and understood according to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Thanks to prayerful study, we were able to have honest conversations about sexuality and faith. We learned to celebrate the gift of sexuality with each other. We moved from fear to joy.

Our experience also has allowed us to rethink and re-envision what covenant means. Covenant involves much more than a ceremony. Covenant is about commitment and relationship. Our study showed that heterosexuals enjoy economic, social, and legal benefits that are denied other people. In our conversation with the same-sex couple who has been together for over 40 years—longer than my wife and I have been married—we learned that one member of the couple was denied the opportunity to be in the other's hospital room overnight following a surgical procedure. Arkansas does not recognize their relationship, despite all its evidence of commitment, as legitimate. They cannot marry. They cannot file a joint tax return. They cannot claim each other as dependents for health care benefits. For a brief time they were legally banned from being adoptive or foster parents. No matter how committed they are to each other, their relationship is not considered legitimate. Meanwhile, people who are heterosexual are permitted to marry—and receive all the social, economic, and legal privileges associated with marital status—whether they are committed to each other or not.

As we became better informed about these and other aspects of heterosexual privilege, we remembered our personal and collective experiences with injustice. We recalled that during slavery, marriage ceremonies did not protect slaves from being sold away from each other and that Baptists misused the Bible to justify human trafficking, chattel slavery, and Jim Crow segregation. We

Arkansas does not recognize their relationship, despite all its evidence of commitment, as legitimate. They cannot marry. They cannot file a joint tax return. They cannot claim each other as dependents for health care benefits. For a brief time they were legally banned from being adoptive or foster parents. No matter how committed they are to each other, their relationship is not considered legitimate. Meanwhile, people who are heterosexual are permitted to marry—and receive all the social, economic, and legal privileges associated with marital status—whether they are committed to each other or not.

recalled that black people and women were denied citizenship and social equality. We remembered the hurtful impact of those injustices.

Above all, we remembered the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. In Christ, those who were once considered spiritual outsiders—and outlaws—have been brought into a covenant relationship with God and each other. The relationship and

commitment associated with it creates and defines the covenant. And at the heart of what that relationship with God in Christ means are the great commandments. We are called to love God with all our being (including our sexuality) and love other persons as we hope to be loved. The essence of covenant is love and justice, not legality.

Months of prayerful study about faith and sexuality made us more aware about heterosexual privilege. We heard about and witnessed its consequences on people who have been branded moral and social misfits on account of their sexuality. We remembered Jesus, the embodiment of God's wonderful love, who embraced people who were considered moral and social misfits.

Through prayerful study, prophetic preaching, and worship that intentionally welcomes all persons in God's love, New Millennium Church no longer lives in fearful silence about sexuality. We rejoice in the diversity God has created, including the diversity of human sexuality. We rejoice that covenant is about relationship and commitment, not ceremony. And we affirm that the love of God we've come to know in Jesus calls us to be agents of love, truth, and justice. We aren't afraid of sexuality. We rejoice in it. We're inspired to be agents of God's love, truth, and justice concerning it in the true sense of covenant.

"We praise and worship God together. We petition God, together. We proclaim God, together. We welcome all persons in God's love together. We live for God, in every breath and heartbeat, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as followers of Jesus Christ, together." Amen. ■

Editor's Note: In order to conserve space, we have not included references and footnotes. To see a full copy of the papers with the citations, go to our website at www.christianethicstoday.com

Congregations Lead the Way From Fear to Joy

By LeDayne Polaski

If you don't think that Jesus has a sense of humor – or at least a finely developed sense of irony – I ask you to reconsider one of the lectionary texts for this Easter season. In the 20th chapter of the gospel of John, the disciples have hidden themselves behind a locked door. They have just been through a week that began with triumphal entry and ended with bewilderment, betrayal, abandonment, denial, and death. Their leader has been crucified, their movement defeated, their dreams crushed. Overwhelmed by the fear that what happened to Jesus will happen to them, some haunted by memories of their own desertion, all questioning what they did and did not do in the final days, and all wondering at the strange stories of an empty tomb -- the disciples are behind the door, locked away from the world. They have gathered with the few people who know where they have been, understand what they have lost, and share their despair and confusion over where they can go now that it is all over. Then Jesus comes suddenly and stands among them – and what does he say?

“Peace be with you.”

“Peace be with you,” he says, not once but twice.

This is NOT the peace the disciples were seeking when they sought shelter behind the fastened door. This peace propelled the One who offers it into the world; it propelled Him into the threat of Jerusalem and the desperation of Gethsemane. This is a peace for which the cross and the crucifixion were not the end, but the fulfillment. This peace, if accepted, will send the disciples into the world even as Jesus was sent into it.

I think we find ourselves in a place much like those disciples. We are locked away in our fear. Even yet, we hear the divine word, “Peace be with you.” And that peace, that odd and compelling peace of Jesus, if we accept

it once again, will propel us too into the world – even though it feels like death to step outside the door.

We have spent our time together these past few days examining the many ways and reasons our world desperately needs to hear from us about matters of sexuality and covenant. I will not belabor that point. I want instead to offer some ideas for how we might step through that door to speak, to listen, and to converse in ways that are helpful and healing about some of the most conflicted issues of our day. I want to speak about how we can move from fear to hope by moving into conflict rather than away from it.

I think we find ourselves in a place much like those disciples. We are locked away in our fear. Even yet, we hear the divine word, “Peace be with you.”

My friend and colleague Dan Buttry travels the world – and I do mean the world – teaching the theology and the skills that people need to move faithfully through conflict. He works in areas torn by open warfare and armed rebellions – as well more subtle but no less brutal situations of failed governments, systemic injustice and grinding poverty. He also works within North America addressing situations such as racial strife and religious misunderstanding. He even (because he's a very brave man) works within the context of church fights. Dan often begins his work with a conflicted group with this exercise: He posts a sheet of newsprint and asks those assembled, “What words, feelings or images come to mind when you think of conflict?” People begin to answer “anger,” “resentment,”

“damage,” “fear.” As they go on and on, Dan writes all their words on the paper. After allowing a considerable amount of time, he steps back and asks them to reflect on what they've said. I have been a part of this exercise several times – and almost every single word recorded is negative. The pages reflect loss, loneliness, alienation, destruction, and pain. And yet, when Dan is done with recording and reflecting, listen to what he does: He takes a big red marker and writes across all the words of negativity and dread and shame these words – HOLY GROUND.

Is it possible? Is conflict potentially HOLY GROUND? Could we – might we – see even the deeply divisive conflicts around sex, sexuality, and covenant as holy? We might here evoke the image of Moses standing at the burning bush. Moses' whole life up until this life-changing encounter in the desert has been shaped and formed by damaging conflict. He was birthed into the midst of a massacre of innocents. He has seen the tearing apart of families, including his own. He has been overwhelmed by the oppression of his people. He has witnessed and committed murder. He fled here to be free from conflict. But now he is given the chance to see a fire that burns but does not destroy. He hears the very voice of God saying, “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And with that image and those words in his heart and mind, he follows God's call to walk back into the very heart of a raging conflict to utter the words of God, “Let my people go.” Those words have quite literally never yet stopped echoing throughout this world. What was it exactly that Moses encountered in the desert that changed not only him but human history? I would say that it was a willingness to enter a way of transforming and being transformed by conflict.

For some time now, the Baptist Peace Fellowship has been drawn to the concept of Conflict Transformation. We have come to see it as the key to nonviolent change; that is, we find it to be the way to walk away from violence without walking away from problems, to creating change without causing harm. What is Conflict Transformation? I often say that it is a concept you can get the basics of in 30 seconds and also a subject in which you can earn a graduate degree. We'll fall somewhere between those two extremes today. Basically, Conflict Transformation is a set of beliefs and practices formed around the idea that conflict is a normal and natural part of human life that can be used to create positive change. It is an understanding that conflict is an inherent part of human life that unlocks an immense amount of energy, and it is a way of responding to that conflict in ways that are constructive rather than destructive. I find the image of the burning bush to be instructive – conflict is a fire, holding within itself the twin possibilities of immense destruction and immense power. It can be light and energy and warmth – or it can lay waste to everything and everyone in sight. Conflict Transformation is a way of responding to conflict that releases its positive power, that channels its tremendous energy toward lasting constructive change.

It may help to distinguish Conflict Transformation from the more common and widely understood concept of conflict resolution. I rely here on the insights of one of the founders of the field – John Paul Lederach – and his very helpful *Little Book of Conflict Transformation*. “Resolution’s guiding question is: How do we end something not desired?” (LBCT, p. 29) “Transformation’s guiding question is: How do we end something not desired and build something we do desire?” (LBCT, p. 30) Resolution is content-centered while transformation is relationship-centered.

When confronted with a specific problem, “Transformation envisions the presenting problem as an oppor-

tunity to engage a broader context, to explore and understand the system of relationships and patterns that gave birth to the crisis. It seeks to address both the immediate issues and the system of relational patterns.” (LBCT, p. 30) “It goes beyond a process focused on the resolution of a particular problem or episode of conflict to seek the epicenter of conflict.” (LBCT, p. 31) “Conflict is an opportunity to know.” (MPC, p. 26)

That all sounds a bit technical and theoretical, so I think a story may help at this point. My friend Dwight, who taught me much of what I know about Conflict Transformation, was once asked to be a mediator for a church conflict. The presenting issue was fairly simple. The church had a history of paying a few especially talented singers to anchor the choir – but some in the church thought this was a blatant misuse of God-given gifts. Some thought this was a good way to glorify God through worship; others felt that it was spitting in the face of God to accept money for using the free gifts of God. The fighting over this issue had become intense and so the church had named three people from each side to negotiate a solution. Dwight was asked to oversee the process. He thought it would take a few meetings. Instead, it took a year. As is often the case, the conflict was more complicated than it first seemed. It turned out that the church was the product of the merger of two congregations. Though the merger had taken place years previously, the dynamics still played out in the congregation. It was members of one of the blended congregations that had decided to pay choir members – and members of the other who were strenuously objecting. The two congregations were ethnically and economically different, so issues of race and class and background and basic understandings of church were woven in. There was a lot more going on than was immediately obvious, and the solutions for the on-going issues were not obvious. It had never been acknowledged much less addressed that the church was essentially still two churches under one

roof. Even yet, the six members of the appointed team met faithfully for a year. Under Dwight’s leadership, they spent most of their time telling their stories – sharing their thoughts – and listening, listening, listening to one another. In the end, they came back to the whole church and issued this report: “We have not come up with a solution. We have, however, cherished the process as we have come to know and love one another to an extent that would never otherwise have been possible. And so, while we have no suggestions for the choir issue, we do suggest that the entire church enter into a year-long small group process so that everyone can have the same experience we have had.” Did they resolve the presenting conflict? No. Did they transform it? Absolutely. They went beyond the episode of the choir issue and entered into the epicenter of their history and their patterns of relationship. And in the process they discovered themselves, each other, God, and the opportunity to truly become a church – and none of it would have happened had they not been willing to wade into the presenting conflict.

Conflict transformation rests on two foundations:

1. A capacity to envision conflict positively, as a natural phenomenon that creates potential for constructive growth, and
2. A willingness to respond in ways that maximize this potential for positive change. (LBCT, p. 15)

“The key to transformation is a proactive bias toward seeing conflict as a potential catalyst for growth.” (LBCT, p. 15) – a chance “to increase understanding of ourselves, of others, and [the structures in which we live.]” (LBCT, p. 18) It is a given that “conflict changes relationships” – our goal is to work with intention to bring to the surface the fears, assumptions, and patterns that undermine relationships so as to minimize poor communication and maximize mutual understanding, (LBCT, p. 25).

Lederach was recently interviewed

on the American Public Media radio program “On Being,” hosted by Krista Tippett. Reflecting on several decades of work addressing bitter and complicated conflicts all over the globe, he observed that it is possible to solve a problem without resolving a conflict. You can resolve a conflict without setting real change in motion, or you can act to create justice and deepen relationships in ways that will make the renewal of conflict less likely in the future. Change, he asserts, always begins with a handful of people in relationship, people willing to sew seeds of new, positive ways of being. Enduring change is seeded not by large numbers of like-minded people, but by a quality of relationship in which we seek to understand even those who do not understand us. (From the On Being e-newsletter January 12, 2012 titled *The Art of Peace*.)

You may be wondering about the actual techniques and tools that have been developed to help congregational leaders transform conflict. As I mentioned earlier, you can get a graduate degree in Conflict Transformation; so you will not be surprised to learn that there is an abundance of resources. Some of the very best have been developed through the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University, which not coincidentally offers a masters degree and a graduate certificate in Conflict Transformation as well as a well-respected Summer Peacebuilding Institute that draws hundreds of students from all over the world. This Center is home to many of the founders of the field. If you are able to attend one of their programs, I highly recommend it. If you cannot, then I encourage you to take a look at some of their very practical publications. I’ll mention just a few. (And I have a list I can share so you don’t have to scramble to write all this down, or you can simply visit Eastern Mennonite University’s web site.)

Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations by David Brubaker
The Little Book of “Cool Tools for Hot

Topics”: Group Tools to Facilitate Meetings When Things Are Hot by Ron Kraybill and Evelyn Wright
The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects: A Practical Hands-On Guide by Lisa Schirch and David Campt

All of these authors are not merely theorists; they are people who practice this work in real-life situations, and you can trust their guidance. I will not spend my limited time focused on the tools since they are easy to find and since you will know far better than I which will be most useful in your own context. I will mention one more resource -- the Baptist Peace Fellowship offers a weekend-long training in the basics of Conflict Transformation. Please speak to me afterwards if that would be of interest

If you decide to walk through that door and lead your church in consideration of sexuality and covenant, the attitude you take with you will make all the difference.

in your congregation. The most recent time I led that training, one of the participants was a retired pastor who had served congregations from coast-to-coast. He came up to me afterwards and said, more than a little sadly, “My entire ministry would have been different if I could have learned earlier to think of conflict as positive.” Perhaps your entire ministry can be different because of what you’ve heard and experienced at this conference.

What then can we say about Conflict Transformation as it relates to sexuality and covenant? We must begin by being clear-eyed and realistic. The epicenter we seek lies at the heart of an

immense pattern of relationships, past and present, that involves the entire history of the Christian church and its ambiguous relationship to anything and everything related to the body. Even within a single congregation, a conversation about these issues will necessarily involve deep and often unspoken issues not merely about sex, but also about history and identity and meaning. Just to name a few, we might encounter questions like: “What do we make of the Bible?” “How did we come to this particular place and time?” “Who are we as a church?” “Who is ultimately in charge around here?” “How do we make decisions together?” “How do we discern the mind of God?” and “Why are you making us talk about this?”

Given this complexity, we need to be mindful of the fact that addressing these issues directly may (in fact, almost certainly will) initially create a greater degree of tension. We know that our response to a given conflict can be destructive or constructive, but we cannot measure an action’s constructiveness by simply seeing whether the conflict lessens. We must instead ask if we are moving toward greater justice and better relationships. (MPC, p. 31) In other words, it will probably get harder before it gets easier.

And yet – there is good news.

The first piece of good news is that the very depth of these issues, the very complexity of the patterns, the very passion with which people approach these conversations is POWER, power which can be channeled in life-giving ways – fire which can burn without consuming.

Drawing on the wisdom of Conflict Transformation, there is much that we can know and much that we can say. We can hold to the truth that this current conflict in and of itself is not sin – conflicts simply happen when people live in relationship. Relationships without conflict are simply acquaintanceships – and we as Christians are not called to be acquaintances but sisters and brothers. We can remember that the conflict inherent in these conversations is a divine gift that can

fuel creative conversations to deepen and widen our relationships. We can know that we have access to power that can reshape us as individuals, as churches, and as The Church in ways that are absolutely necessary for our continued relevance and survival. We can be certain that we have the chance not simply to make sticky questions go away, but to use the discussion of those questions to build stronger, more nurturing, more mature communities. We can recognize that if our congregation has a history of solving conflicts well, then we can build on that. And we can know that if our congregation does NOT have such a history, we can harness the energy in the current conflict to change that pattern in ways that will pay off for generations. We can keep always in mind that we have an opportunity to come to know ourselves, each other, and God in fresh and restorative ways.

There is good news in the fact that we do not have to invent ways to address conflict faithfully and effectively. There are many practitioners of Conflict Transformation who have already tried and tested techniques and tools which we can use.

There is good news in the fact that these conversations do not take place in a vacuum. Our churches have a rich variety of resources. We can dialogue not only through talk but also through music, the arts, rituals, and

shared work. It is a resource not to be taken lightly that we might disagree on Wednesday night and then build a Habitat house together on Saturday and worship together on Sunday.

If you decide to walk through that door and lead your church in consideration of sexuality and covenant, the attitude you take with you will make all the difference. If you walk into this feeling that it is a regrettable but necessary task, well, it will be what you expect. If you decide that you must grit your teeth and bear it, then you'll probably end up gritting your teeth a lot. But if you decide instead to hold and convey a different attitude – if you decide to believe and trust that you have an opportunity to transform and be transformed, then you may indeed find yourself on holy ground. I'll leave you with one more piece of good news – after Jesus had greeted his disciples with that disconcerting word of peace, after he had shown them his hands and his side, he said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." You do not go through that door alone; God's spirit is with you, now and always. Amen. ■

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The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking by Kay Pranis

The Little Book of "Cool Tools for Hot Topics": Group Tools to Facilitate Meetings When Things Are Hot by Ron Kraybill and Evelyn Wright

The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects: A Practical Hands-On Guide by Lisa Schirch and David Camp

The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace, John Paul Lederach

Promise and Peril: Understanding and Managing Change and Conflict in Congregations by David Brubaker

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: A resource for congregations in dialogue on sexual orientation, edited by LeDayne McLeese Polaski and Millard Eiland, available from the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

<http://www.emu.edu/cjp/> -- Web site of the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University

Please share any thoughts or reflections you may have related to these presentations with us. You are invited to send essays, letters, or any other contribution to the discussion to us for consideration. Please email the editor at **drpatanderson@gmail.com** or mail your response to our post office address.

Presenters

Rhonda Blevins

Rhonda Abbott Blevins joins us from the hills of East Tennessee where she serves as an Associate Pastor of the Tellico Village Community Church, an interdenominational church smack-dab in the middle of a planned retirement community. When not envying the boating and golfing lifestyle of her parishioners, she plays wife to Terry and mom to a spirited 4-year-old named Jake. Rhonda is currently enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program at McAfee School of Theology and hopes to graduate one day. Previously, she served as the Associate Coordinator for Missions with the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship and as Campus Minister at the University of Georgia, which was difficult for such an avid Tennessee fan. She survived, however, and continues her pursuit of a Way to a better world, a Truth that sets people free, and a Life that is abundantly full and meaningful.

Melissa Browning

Melissa Browning has a doctorate from Loyola University Chicago in Christian Ethics and her research specialization is in sexual ethics and bioethics. Her current research on HIV/AIDS and African women and asks why marriage has become an HIV/AIDS risk factor in sub-Saharan Africa. The book resulting from this project (*When Marriage Becomes Risky: Reflections from Tanzania on Christian Marriage in an HIV Positive World*) will be published later this year. Melissa is presently an adjunct professor at Mercer University, Lexington Theological Seminary and Kennesaw State University. This summer, Melissa will begin a new position as an Assistant Professor at Loyola University Chicago's Institute for Pastoral Studies, directing the MA in Social Justice and Community Development Program. She lives in Atlanta with her husband, Wes Browning and her daughter Olivia. For more about Melissa's work, you can visit her webpage at: www.melissabrowning.com

Lindsay Comstock

Lindsay Comstock, a North Carolina native, serves as the Minister of Christian Education at The First Baptist Church of Worcester, Massachusetts. She is a graduate of Chowan University with a BA in Religion and Philosophy, a graduate of Baptist Theological Seminary in Richmond with a MDiv and a current DMin candidate at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary studying multiculturalism in the local church. Lindsay is Alliance of Baptists Recognized Clergy, a Board of Directors member for the Alliance of Baptists and seeking certification as an ordained American Baptist minister. Lindsay recently served 3.5 years with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Global Missions in Bali, Indonesia where she served as an Advocate for Women and Children focusing on human trafficking research and child sexual exploitation prevention.

Jennifer Crumpton

Rev. Jennifer Danielle Crumpton received a Master of Divinity in 2011 from Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. Originally from Birmingham, AL, Jennifer's first career was as an advertising executive, working with clients such as Citigroup and MasterCard. Disillusioned with the strategies of consumerism, she left the corporate world to focus on theological precepts of social and economic justice, and pursue her interest in feminist social ethics, activism, and interfaith dialogue. Ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Jennifer is a Pastoral Associate at Park Avenue Christian Church in Manhattan, where she facilitates The XY Factor, the spiritual support and social justice ministry for 20s & 30s.

Sharyn Dowd

Sharyn Dowd is a native of Rome, Georgia and a graduate of Wake Forest University, Southeastern Baptist Seminary and Emory University. She

taught Bible at the university and seminary level before joining the staff of First Baptist Decatur in 2008. Her passion is for the ministry of the local congregation, which she believes is God's "Plan A" for preparing Creation for the Kingdom of God.

Coleman Fannin

Coleman Fannin is a Lecturer in the Great Texts Program at Baylor University. He previously taught theology and ethics at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond and the University of Dayton and earned degrees from the University of Georgia (AB), Baylor University (MDiv, MA), and the University of Dayton (PhD). His research focuses on connections between historical theology and moral theology, particularly with respect to ecclesiology, virtue ethics, natural law, pacifism and just war theory, and environmental ethics, and he has published articles and book reviews in scholarly and popular journals as well as several chapters in edited volumes. He is also the convener of the Baptist Ethicists Group of the Society of Christian Ethics and an occasional supply preacher and Sunday School teacher. His wife, Jordan, is a PhD student in theology at Baylor, and they have a daughter, Cora, and are expecting a son in May. They are members of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco.

Wendell Griffen

Wendell Griffen lives in Little Rock, Arkansas where he's pastor of New Millennium Church (www.newmillenniumchurch.us) and a state court trial (circuit) judge. He's married to Dr. Patricia Griffen (a clinical psychologist and college professor) and they are parents of two adult sons. His passion (shared by the New Millennium Congregation) is to live for God in every breath and heartbeat by the power of the Holy Spirit as a follower of Jesus Christ.

David Gushee

David Gushee was born in Frankfurt

Germany and raised in Vienna, Virginia by beloved parents he will be talking about in his presentation this morning. David attended the College of William & Mary, where he met Jeanie, to whom he has been married for 27 years, and with whom he has raised Holly, David, and Marie. David has taught at Mercer University for the last five years, after 14 years at other Baptist schools. He is the author of 12 books, with three more coming out in 2012-2013. He directs the Center for Theology and Public Life, the co-sponsor of this conference. And he wants everyone to know that he and his son have been in love with the Atlanta Braves since Chipper Jones was a young man.

Emily Holladay

Emily Holladay is a second-year student at the McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, Ga., studying Christian Social Ethics. She graduated from Samford University (Birmingham, AL) in 2008 with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and spent a two years working in the Passport National Office. At McAfee, she serves on the Student Advisory Council and works for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. A frequent speaker, she has served on a panel for the 2011 General Assembly Coordinator's Reflection, was a McAfee "30-Minute Seminary" Retreat Speaker, and led a breakout talk at the 2011 Alabama CBF Fall Gathering. After seminary, she plans to continue her ministry in a local church or by supporting local churches. In her "spare time," she loves to read, run, and play the viola.

Roz Nichols

In 1998 following the death of a childhood friend, as a result of relationship/domestic violence Dr. Nichols organized the 501(c)3 nonprofit, A More Excellent Way, Inc. (AWay) with a mission to help individuals from all walks of life to enter into, engage in and maintain spiritually healthy relationships toward the elimination of relationship violence. In 2001 Dr. Nichols, along with a faithful group of believers, organized Freedom's Chapel Christian Church (DOC). The Freedom's Chapel family

believes John 8.36, "So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed." By God's grace Freedom's Chapel just celebrated 10 years of ministry and we are deeply committed to the belief that freedom in Christ gives us the liberty to live and responsibility to serve. Dr. Nichols was the first ordained clergy woman to serve as visiting professor at the Gweru Baptist Theological Seminary in Gweru, Zimbabwe South Africa. She has received numerous awards including the Memphis Community Leader Award, the Visionaries Trailblazer award and the Henry Logan Starks Alumni Award from Memphis Theological Seminary. She is a 2002 Memphis Leadership Graduate, a lifetime member of the NAACP and a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, Beta Epsilon Omega Chapter. She has travelled throughout the provinces of China and participated in 2008 with Dr. Goatley on a renewal pilgrimage to Galilee and Jerusalem. Currently she is excited to be a convenor for the 2012 Conference entitled A [Baptist] Conversation on Sexuality and Covenant to be held at the First Baptist Church in Decatur, GA.

Jenell Paris

Jenell Paris bio. Jenell is professor of anthropology at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania, and previously taught at Bethel University, a Baptist General Conference university in Minnesota. She has researched and written extensively on issues including women's role in the church, contraception, and homosexuality. She has published four books, most recently "The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is too Important to Define Who We Are", and she'll do a book signing after this talk at (TIME, LOCATION). Jenell and her husband James are in over their heads raising their three sons, ages 6, 6, and 5.

LeDayne McLeese Polaski

Rev. LeDayne McLeese Polaski is the Program Coordinator of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America (BPFNA). She has worked with the BPFNA for over 13 years. LeDayne was the co-editor of *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: A resource for congrega-*

tions in dialogue on sexual orientation which was published by the BPFNA and the Alliance of Baptists in 2000. She is a certified Conflict Transformation trainer and has led trainings in both church and secular contexts throughout the U.S. She lives in Charlotte, NC with her husband Tom and daughter Kate. She and her family are active members of Park Road Baptist Church in Charlotte. She enjoys reading, running and hiking and says that April is her favorite month since it is the beginning of both Spring and baseball season.

Cody Sanders

Cody Sanders is originally from Duncan, South Carolina, and was educated at Gardner-Webb University, Mercer University, the McAfee School of Theology, and Brite Divinity School. Cody engages what he believes to be God's passion for justice and concern for the well-being of all creation through his work on the intersecting nature of oppressions and the reduction of violence. Cody and his partner of seven years, Ben Curry, now live in Fort Worth, Texas, where they are active in the life of Broadway Baptist Church. Ben and Cody are both ordained Baptist ministers and are living out their sense of call through the practice of hospital chaplaincy and pastoral counseling, respectively.

Guy Sayles

Guy Sayles grew up in Atlanta, and has served as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Asheville, NC since September of 2001. He's also an adjunct member of the faculty of the Divinity School at Gardner Webb University, an author, a conference and retreat leader, and a consultant in the areas of professional ethics and leadership. His theological education includes a Doctor of Ministry from the Candler School of Theology of Emory University. He's particularly interested in the intersections of culture and kingdom, and in helping people to experience integration of body, mind, soul, and spirit. He is married to Anita Plunkett Sayles, and they have two grown children.

Christian Ethics Today

A Journal of Christian Ethics

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