

Van Belle Sex, intimacy, and the single person jh

Sex, Intimacy, and the Single Person

Perhaps it's time for the church to take another look

TC Line:

Editor's note: Christians agree that sexuality is a gift from God. But should the church provide guidance on people's sexual behavior? If so, what principles should it use? Until now, the position of churches, has been primarily limited to the prohibition of sex before marriage. But how, then, are single people supposed to live out their sexuality? Here are two perspectives to begin the conversation.

Are We more Hung Up about Sex Than God is?

****or: Where do we draw the line****

by Harry Van Belle

The record of the church when it comes to sex has not been stellar. It has, in fact, been characterized by the denial of sex. For much of its history, the message of the church to young people has been one of abstinence. If you wanted to become a full-time servant of God, your best bet was to become a nun or an unmarried priest. This prejudice lingers to this day in churches that admonish their young people to abstain, to hold off from sex until marriage.

This admonition about lovemaking is ironic, as anyone who practices sexual intercourse knows. That's because good sex can only happen in a relationship where the partners are able to let go, to passionately surrender to one another. By contrast, the North American obsession with performance, Viagra-induced or not, in sexual relations spells death to a relationship where you need to know yourself received, warts and all, by the other. The real goal of lovemaking is not the pursuit of technical expertise but the enjoyment of romantic intimacy, as the Song of Songs so poetically unfolds.

Nor is this prohibition about sex biblical. If I read Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs correctly, then (a) God wants young people to take pleasure in their youth; and (b) that pleasure most certainly includes lovemaking. Could it

be that God is less hung up about sex than we are, especially in North America?

Premarital Sex

Whether Christian single people should or should not practice premarital sex is a question that may have been relevant two or three generations ago, but the situation today has changed.

First, whereas in earlier times the practice of sexual intercourse among unmarried youth realistically could—and often did—result in pregnancy, with all of its dire consequences, today’s young people have a variety of contraceptives at their disposal. This reduces to a minimum the risk of pregnancy. What’s more, most people who have intercourse generally practice “safe sex”—a choice that’s supported by the cultural media. So we should recognize that the sexual behavior of many young people today is generally and responsibly geared toward avoiding pregnancy and HIV contamination.

Second, for all kinds of good reasons, people today tend to remain single a decade longer than their parents and grandparents did. During their twenties, many people are in a semi-dependent financial state and perhaps still in school. They generally do not feel ready to marry and start a family before they reach their thirties.

Their situation is comparable to that of their grandparents in Europe several generations ago when, because of a severe housing shortage, young couples were often engaged to be married for longer than a decade. In the meantime they did have unprotected sexual intercourse, resulting in a large number of what used to be called “shotgun marriages.” Young couples today often solve this dilemma by deciding to move in together, establishing a cohabitate relationship that includes the practice of sleeping together. Many North American churches frown upon such relationships.

The question is whether they should.

Recreational Sex

An increasingly common form of premarital sex in our culture is recreational sex—sex that’s divorced from intimacy and commitment. One form of that is “hooking up,” the one-night stand in which two young people meet one another, usually in a bar, strike up a conversation, find they like each other and go home to have sex. Nothing is considered other than the amount of pleasure each gives to the other.

How should we judge these practices of casual and committed sex? What criteria can we use to evaluate these situations?

The prohibition of sex before marriage uses the criterion of behavior. We say single people should not engage in sex—period. But this criterion raises many questions. What exactly do we consider premarital sex? Where do we draw the line? Is it hugging or kissing, with or without the tongues touching? Is it touching each other's genitals or mutual masturbation? Is it oral sex or penetration, with or without ejaculation? How far can people go and still abstain from sex? So how does the church decide and legislate how far young people should go? *Should* the church decide this question? Is the church *competent* to decide? My view is that the church should stay miles away from such unseemly questions.

Maturity and Commitment

Better criteria for evaluating people's sexual behavior, I suggest, are maturity and commitment. Whether or not to engage in premarital sex should depend on the strength of the personal maturity of single people and on their level of commitment toward one another. These criteria, I believe, are much more appropriate ones for the church to consider in providing guidelines for sexual behavior. How mature should young people be, and how intimate and committed should their relationship be before they can *afford* to have sex?

This means that I still need to be persuaded that recreational sex, or hooking up is valid behavior for young people, let alone for Christian young people. To me sex belongs within an intimate, committed relationship between two reasonably mature young people. But I do think, based on these same principles that the church should change its stance on cohabitate relationships, recognizing that such relationships enable young single adults to respond in a responsible way to the culturally and historically changed times they live in.

In the meantime, many young people have long ago ignored the church and have made their own choices for sexual behavior. I believe it's fair to suggest that most young people are responsible enough to distinguish between sex as mere "hooking up" and sex as an expression of committed intimacy.

With respect to guidelines for sexual behavior, as with other contemporary issues, I fear that the church is playing catch-up in defense of a status quo that no longer exists instead of leading the next generation with biblically

grounded insights. You may well differ with me on what those principles should be. This isn't the final word on how the church might provide guidance in the area of sexuality. But it's a beginning.

Harry Van Belle is emeritus professor of psychology at The Kings University College in Edmonton and a member of the Inglewood CRC

NOTE to the Editor:

Thank you very much for your editorial work. It makes the article much more readable. I have made some minor revisions and am comfortable with the revised version. (Word count: 1151)

I understand that a young female was asked to respond to my article. I am glad that someone else who is younger and female is also writing about this topic. But I would be more comfortable if she were to write a stand alone article in response to the given topic like I did . Responses to my article (and hers) in my view should be confined to the letter to the editor pages.