

TEEN SEXUALITY: A REPORT AND STANCE

A Research Paper

Presented to

Dr. Kenneth Magnuson

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for 29250

by

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April 24, 2007

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TEEN SEXUALITY: A REPORT AND STANCE

America is more than a melting pot of ideas and culture. Though much of the world views the United States as Christian, the media driven expression of sexuality proclaims that America is unbiblical. Europe sees America as sexually repressive and the Middle East condemns the practices which destroy centuries old traditions of familial life. What ethical views regarding sex and sexual promiscuity do people adhere to? What impact does this have on teenagers? What should be the church's response from the Word of God and how should they give practical help for troubled teens? Teen sexuality or premarital sex should be prohibited because it corresponds to God's plan, and the church should respond appropriately. I will demonstrate this through the following historical and moral examination of teen sexuality.

Ethics of Premarital Sex

Changing Historical Attitudes

Sexuality is a major element in the value system of any culture. Every culture contains rituals and institutions regarding sexuality. Ancient Greek culture included temple prostitution. The oldest story found, Gilgamesh, speaks of taming the wild man using sex. Marriage of some shape and form pervades all cultures. Differences can be radically different and change over time. Likewise, America has seen a cultural shift from traditional (Christian) values to the unbiblical morality today.

In the first half of the twentieth century, there was a general consensus on the matter of sexuality. The general consensus consisted of the belief that incest, adultery, and divorce were

wrong and lifelong monogamous marriage was approved. However, two unbiblical elements existed: a double standard and a degraded view of sexuality. Culture tolerated a man who broke the rules but condemned a woman who did not. Also, people of that era attributed the God-given, natural impulse to the lower aspects of human nature, resulting in the view that sex is something that must be done to procreate and not for pleasure.¹

The discovery of penicillin and the Pill after World War I removed three of the most undesirable consequences of promiscuity, “infection, detection, and conception.”² The resulting Sexual Revolution caused people to look down on monogamy. “Since that time, the proportion of the population engaging in premarital sex has steadily increased.”³ The Feinbergs identify six factors that have influenced the culture’s attitude toward sexuality.

First, secularism influences society’s view of sexuality. Secularism removes God from all areas of human thought and activity. It also removes biblical and theological reasons for moral behavior. Thus, debates about value-free sex education exist. “Without divine absolutes governing sexuality, one is left to personal preferences.”⁴ Personal preferences and hormones do not necessarily coincide with God’s absolutes.

A second factor is privatization. “That’s my business” is a common phrase. In western culture many areas of life, including sexuality, is one’s own affair. Another is scientific frankness, where sex is a “thing” to be studied, analyzed, and modified. It loses its

¹ John Feinburg and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Illinois: Crossway, 1993), 150

² Ibid.

³ Stephen A. Grunlan, *Marriage and the Family: A Christian Perspective* 2nd Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 83.

⁴ John Feinburg and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 151.

mysteriousness.⁵ One can trace this idea to Freud, who saw the repression of sexual desires as psychologically harmful. Therefore, one should release the pressure in order to stay sane.

Media exposure is the fourth factor. Media exposure both shapes and reflects society's attitudes.⁶ With the advances of technology and visual media, one cannot go many places without being barraged with messages with the appeal of sex. Because sex is so commonplace, people are desensitized to its effects, and "depersonalized, seductive sex seems normal."⁷ The treatment of sex only inside of marriage is rare. The Playboy mentality plagues the culture with the once unthinkable.

Next, the fifth factor is existential schizophrenia; reality and personal meaning are divorced. Science measures what is real and since emotions cannot be measured, they are not real. In turn, this concept emphasizes personal meaning too much. Society advocates ideals like love and community, but the responsive behavior rest in the individual. Sex is now for personal gratification without any thought of the other person.

Lastly, the changing therapeutic values that govern the counselor become the values of society as a whole. "The counselor must never condemn any expression of one's feelings and needs as wrong."⁸ Though this might have a limited place in counseling, the moral obligation does not change.

Grunlan adds one more factor, extended adolescence.⁹ Extended adolescence is the lengthening of the time between puberty and adulthood. Before the Industrial Revolution,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Grunlan, *Marriage and the Family*, 84.

⁷ John Feinburg and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 151.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Grunlan, *Marriage and the Family*, 85.

adolescence was virtually nonexistent. Puberty came later and adulthood came sooner. Now the average age for beginning puberty is twelve and marriage is 26.¹⁰ Most postpone marriage for economic reasons, mainly to “get established.” This practice is not optimum for holiness, because the God-given desires are not righteously satisfied when He designed them to be.

Three Ethical Stances

When one’s values change, behavior changes. After studying teen sexuality, Chap Clark reports,

“Nearly every late adolescent has had sexual intercourse, especially males. Research has shown that the number of teenagers having sex has increased 63 percent in the last twenty years. Seventy percent of males and 60 percent of females have had sexual intercourse by the age of seventeen, and the numbers are 85 percent and 76 percent, respectively, by age nineteen. One survey, the national Survey of Adolescent Males, reported that 85 percent of nineteen-year-old participants acknowledged they were sexually active.”¹¹

The upcoming generation does not ground its ethic in the authority of the Bible or traditional culture. Three views on pre-marital sex are significant in determining behavior: the natural impulse view, the affection view, and the abstinence view.¹²

The first view is extremely liberal. The natural impulse view advocates that sex is a natural human impulse or instinct. One common form is the Playboy mentality. Now that one can effectively avoid pregnancy, sex is a purely pleasurable physical experience. As one can enjoy good food in a variety of settings, so sex can be without deep feelings of love and affection. No burden of moral guilt is on those who get whatever pleasure they can as long as the

¹⁰ This statistic is a summation from statistics heard in classes and pulpits at Boyce College. They are not far off.

¹¹ Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 130.

¹² John Feinburg and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 152 -160. The whole section information and framework comes from this source unless otherwise cited.

partner consents and is not deceived or hurt.

This view is hedonistic utilitarian; one ought to act to maximize pleasure. The underlying belief from Rousseau, says humankind is spoiled by society so he should return to his unspoiled, wild state and not repress those desires. Repression could result in psychological problems including insanity.

Clearly, from a Christian perspective this approach is unacceptable. Not only is the Bible clearly against it, but the basis for the arguments are futile. First, humans are not obligated to maximize pleasure, because many times one must perform an act that is painful, such as paying off a debt. Next, what is wild? Because of God's image, humans form groups and societies and put limits on sexual behavior. Even if one accepts the hedonism view, premarital sex does not bring maximum pleasure. For example, a teenage couple might lack a private place to perform the act, which entails the worry of being caught. Other unfavorable outcomes that reduce pleasure are unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, and the ripping of the emotional attachment from the act.

Next, the affection view emerged over the last twenty-five years. The difference in this view is that proponents are moderately positive toward marriage. "Sexual freedom is praised, but it is not an end in itself."¹³ Proponents differentiate between intimacy and love. Intimacy just happens and one cannot plan it; but it is a feeling that can last a short or long time. When it happens, one knows it. Half of churched teens adhere to this view saying that they would be more likely to have sex with someone if they "were in love with that person."¹⁴ Like the previous view, this view contains no absolutes to guide behavior, but only attitudinal ones such as

¹³ John Feinburg and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 156.

¹⁴ Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Right From Wrong: What You Need to Know to Help Youth Make Right Choices* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994), 56.

openness and caring. The relationships among this view are a testing ground that can eventually be made official by marriage.

Support for this view is easier to obtain, because they view sex as good, completely good if expressed with someone one loves. The ideal is an expression of a loving and caring relationship. The affection view retains each person's independence where the relationship is based off compatibility, not a covenant. If two are no longer compatible, they can divorce, no strings attached. Again, there is no double standard; women and men treat each other exactly equal.

While an improvement over natural impulse, the affection view has serious flaws. The definition of love, intimacy, and affection are weak to deal with the impulses that make up human sexuality. "It is like walking a lion on a leash. Sometimes he goes where you want him to. Sometimes he will not. Sometimes he turns around and devours you."¹⁵ A Christian ethic places one's will at the heart of human behavior and views true intimacy as developed through persistent self-sacrifice. In addition, sex involves the total person and grows out of lives that are fully shared. Already mentioned is the bonding that occurs in sex. Another objection is that sex has added significance if reserved for marriage. "Sex in marriage-in-marriage cannot be tried outside of marriage. The essential ingredients aren't present, and so what one 'tries out' is something else."¹⁶ The affection view avoids some dangers, but the ones it leaves can destroy a person, here and hereafter.

The final and biblical view is abstinence; it is commonly justified with Scripture and examples of personal and social behavior. However, advocates of abstinence do not necessarily

¹⁵ Feinburg and Feinburg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 157.

¹⁶ Robert McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale Publishers, 1995), 239.

support the position from the authority of divine revelation. C.S. Lewis states the view succinctly: “Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.”¹⁷ Lewis claims that the restriction of sex encourages strong marriages and maintaining family units.

Scriptural support is easy because the Bible is the revealed word of God and it teaches abstinence in both the Old and New Testaments. The list of verses that teaches premarital sex and adultery as wrong is vast: Exodus 20:14; 22:16,17; Leviticus 18:20; 20:10, 14; 21:13; Deuteronomy 22:15, 17, 20-21; Proverbs 23:27; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:9, 13, 18; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8. “Given the biblical understanding of sex and marriage once can understand why the themes of sex and marriage are inseparable in the Scriptures.”¹⁸

In conjunction with the Word of God, one can argue that the pleasure of extramarital sex is trivial and fleeting. However, the act involves the whole person, physically and psychologically, where as the other views underemphasize the psychological and emotional effects of sex. Abstinence also encourages individuals to get married and stay married which produces a solid family unit. This unit in turn stabilizes society. Lastly, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases are greatly reduced. McQuilkin rightly concludes, “Sexual relationships before marriage damage the fulfillment of God’s purposes in marriage.”¹⁹

The Fienbergs conclude the section with a final observation. “Society has always required that lovers make their promises public” (160). Private promises are rarely reliable; therefore, the commitments made before church, state, family, and Creator strengthen the support

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillian, 1943), 89.

¹⁸ Michael Hill, *The How and Why of Love: An Introduction to Evangelical Ethics* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2002), 153.

¹⁹ Robert McQuilkin, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 232.

and resolve of the relationship. Sex should be a promise made public and unashamed. How can one do that without a commitment to fidelity?

Unbiblical Views' Impact on Youth

Sexual innocence has been raped from youth, and the impact is vast. Media influences youth culture the most by solidifying the youth presuppositions, which do not include a just and moral God. Adolescents scream because they hurt, but the church at large is deaf and not responding to the needs they have.

First, students do not understand what sex is or does because of the mixed messages. MTV, school, teachers, and church competing with one another skew what sex means. The term “technical virginity” is thrown around like a baseball in warm-ups. The term means that one is technically a virgin as long as vaginal penetration does not happen. The concept throws out any considerations of the emotional oneness from even in “outer-course” activities like oral sex or taking baths together. Clark records that many students do not feel guilty because they are “staying pure” because “that is what God has called them to do.”²⁰

Another impact of sexual promiscuity is single parent families and fatherless homes. With more children being born out of wedlock, the family situation is unstable. In 1993, nearly one-third of Bridgers (those born between 1977 and 1994) were living in one-parent homes or with other relatives.²¹ God has ordained the family unit as preparation of life and for a nurturing environment of unconditional love (Deut 6:7; 1 John 4:7-8). However, many homes do not protect their children because the single parent must work long hours to make ends meet. Sexual promiscuity damages the make-up of the family unit, which in turn creates a ripple effect

²⁰ Chap Clark, *Hurt*, 132-133.

²¹ Thom Rainer, *The Bridger Generation* (Nashville; Broadman and Holman, 1997) 54.

throughout society. Not only is the family make-up damaged, but trust in the families is damaged and, at times, severed. If a trusted father commits adultery, a wedge of doubt is thrust into one's mind forever. A teenager caught in promiscuity can never build back the trust with his parents. In addition, the promiscuous teen will need to tell his future mate the reality of his or her virginity. Emotional scars permeate these and similar situations.

Josh McDowell categorizes other psychological and relational problems involving premarital sex concentrating on teens.²² Guilt occurs with disobedience to God's commands, like any other form of sexual immorality. One has sinned against a holy and righteous God, so guilt is a natural response for any Christian. Emotional distress is another result. "The emotional costs are immeasurable... It breeds suspicion, disappointment, sorrow, stress, emptiness, and many other destructive emotions" (285).

Church Response

The church that has ears let them hear the cries of this hurting generation of students. The church should not be dormant. Matthew 16:18 records, "the gates of hell will not prevail against it [the church]." Gates do not move, therefore the church is attacking. Along with a vibrant church youth ministry, here are some specifics for the church to address the needs of youth.

First, create a sexual safe haven for students.²³ Background checks on leaders are a must, as well as taking seriously any reports of teenagers making propositions to one another on church campus. The goal is to create an atmosphere where the students are loved for whom they are and not pressured in any way.

²² Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Handbook on Counseling Youth: A Comprehensive Guide for Equipping Youth Workers, Pastors, Teachers, Parents* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1996), 284-286.

²³ Original concept from Thom Rainer, *The Bridger Generation*, 63.

Second, teach the Bible expositionally. Topical lessons do have their place and the annual “sex talk” must be done. However, expositional teaching develops a culture of Bible reverence and knowledge. This paradigm of teaching facilitates students learning how to study the Bible for themselves and find their ultimate fulfillment not in sex, but in the person of God.

Third, teach the dangers of dating not only to kids but to parents. Parents are still the biggest influence on their teenagers. Many have never considered how the dating game can scar their kids. Joshua Harris’s book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*²⁴ contains an excellent categorization of the dangers. Teach parents to take the opportunity with their kids to speak about emotional virginity along with sexual virginity.

Lastly, advocate getting married young with short engagements. This view is not popular, but taking into account Bible, biology, culture, and the author’s personal experience with courtship, the best way to guard against promiscuity is to develop mature adults that are able to get married close after high school graduation. The students should be ready to be married when most sexually ready biologically. The church must adjust its expectations.

Conclusion

Sexual fidelity is rare today. The time to act is now. Understanding these ideas will aid in the counseling of troubled teens, especially those flirting with danger. One-on-one counseling or mentoring might be the most effective context for correcting wrong ideas planted through the culture. Corrective action begins with a correct worldview and ends with a plan for every Christian teen to navigate the cesspool of youth culture, especially its dangerous dating. The only safe sex is God-honoring sex.

²⁴ Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Oregon: Multnomah, 2003).

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