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—a prejudice that lingers to this day in churches that admonish their young people to abstain 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 in sexual relations—Viagra-induced or not—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 God wants people to take pleasure in their youth—and 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 youths realistically could—and often did—result in pregnancy, today’s young people have a variety of contraceptives at their disposal to minimize that risk. What’s more, young couples generally practice “safe sex” to prevent sexually transmitted diseases.

Second, for all kinds of good reasons, people today tend to remain single a decade longer than their parents and grandparents did. During their 20s, many people are in a semi-dependent financial state and perhaps are still in school. They generally do not feel ready to marry and start a family before they reach their 30s.

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 are more likely to solve this dilemma by deciding to move in 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, or sex that’s divorced from intimacy and commitment. One form of that is “hooking up,” the one-night stand in which two people meet one another (often in a bar), strike up a conversation, find they like each other, and go home to have sex. Nothing is considered other than the 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 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? How does the church decide how far young people should go? Should the church decide this question? Is the church competent to decide?

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? How intimate and committed should their relationship be before they can afford to have sex?

I’m not persuaded that recreational sex or “hooking up” is valid behavior for young people, let alone for Christian young people. 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 premarital cohabitation, recognizing that such relationships enable single adults to respond in a responsible way to the times they live in.

In the meantime, many young people have long decided to ignore the church and make their own choices for sexual behavior. I believe it’s fair to suggest that most young people are responsible enough to distinguish between “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.

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Where Do We Draw the Line?

By Harry Van Belle