What’s Going On While We Were Avoiding the Subject

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Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
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 intergen-erational 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...
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, fractioning 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 holiness 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 sinless, 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