



# *Let's Talk About Sex in Church*

*Rev. Rich Tafel*



*September 2020*

Last month's scandal with Jerry Falwell, president of Liberty College, America's largest Christian college, plays into a narrative of the hypocrisy of Christians when they preach one thing and live quite differently. Sex, a gift from God and something most people think about daily, is also something you are very unlikely to hear a sermon about these days. As one older pastor once told me, "sex is a no-win topic" and one to "stay away from". This topic does take some courage, but we need to engage in the discussion.

*What role should the church play in helping people navigate their sexual lives?*

Traditional Christian moral teachings are now almost entirely irrelevant to most of the young people I speak with. The church, for them, has pretty much forfeited any guiding role in some of the most important moral decisions they face in the realm of their sexual life. Traditional teachings from the church have been that "sex is an act between a man and women for reasons of procreation". Sex outside of that is often considered "not procreative" and "sinful". This has included masturbation, pre-marital sex, sex outside of marriage, same sex activity, pornography and divorce.

Those guidelines are now almost completely irrelevant to the world of most young people I encounter. Fear of shame and judgement forces people to either conceal their concerns and questions or just write off the church as a place to find guidance. Pastors need to work very hard to restore trust with those who face moral questions.

*Lessons from Public Health*

My background in public health opened my eyes to the complicated nature of this. People often preface what they are going to say with, “Please don’t think less of me when I tell you...” When I assure them there’s nothing I have not heard or seen they relax and share. In 1991, I became involved in Adolescent Health work for the state of MA at 29 years old. With a master’s degree in theology I was pretty much totally unqualified. But knowing I needed to learn, I set up a series of focus groups with kids around the state who were at-risk for health related issues. The focus groups were eye-opening and taught me to keep a straight face.

I remember one young gay man writing down a suicide hotline number on the bottom of his shoe. I’ll never forget doing a discussion with teens in the western part of the state when one girl asked me, “Is it true you can’t get AIDS if the person you are having sex with is in your family? That’s what my dad says.”

Gulp. Trying to show no shock, I calmly explained that you actually could get it from family members. I also explained that sex within families could be dangerous and that whenever you have sex there should be consent. The leader who gathered the group told me afterward that if she told her pastor about it, he’d likely say “submit to your father”. Together we planned a follow up with that young girl. The world was much more complex than I’d been led to believe. In that role, I participated in a campaign to allow the availability of condoms in schools. We held a town hall meeting where parents yelled at me. I honestly understood where they were coming from that by allowing

condoms we were condoning early sex. The local Catholic diocese joined in their criticism.

When I met with their kids under the promise of confidentiality, all admitted they were very sexually active, but their parents didn't know. The church leaders were later caught up in the MA pedophile scandal. The gap between public morality and private activity was wide. This gap leads to seeing church leaders as not trustworthy. As a gay activist in the 90's, I noticed a pattern of the large number of my opponents who we'd later find tied up in marital infidelity and pedophilia. Yet the need for some pastoral guidance on topics of sex today is large and unmet.

I've been a bit surprised by some of the questions I receive. Recently, a mother asked my advice. She was concerned that her daughter, who had been with the same boyfriend since high school, and wanted me to suggest to her daughter, who trusted me, that she should try dating other guys. "Hold it", I thought, "a mom is asking me to suggest to her daughter she should sleep around. Huh?" That's quite a different way of looking at things from just thirty years ago.

Though most of the young professional Washingtonians and urbanites I've met over the years would not think of going to church for guidance on their sexual morality, they have created a fairly sophisticated moral guidance system of their own. These values are quite different than what you might find in more rural, socially conservative areas. Their morality is focused on free will. The word they'd use is consent. Anyone who acts without the consent of the other party is evil. Acts done consensually among adults are pretty much considered okay. Honesty would be another important value

they operate under. It's not so much who sleeps with who as much as were you honest and transparent about it. Loyalty is another value that emerges as foundational. People who betray their partners are bad news. Abuse is another red-line. Cross that one and you're immoral. Sexual behavior that leads to disease and unwanted pregnancy are to be avoided and those involved are asked to be responsible. These values seem quite practical and moral to me.

Going deeper, many of their values are conservative. Many are locked into monogamous relationships at a relatively young age and they stick with it. Most would call themselves pro-choice for others, but personally would not get an abortion and see the issue as more than an issue about a women's body. Sex before marriage is not seen as bad and often seen as practical, though many argue the happiest marriages are those without premarital sex. Birth control is the rule. They'd encourage you to stick it out in a relationship, but when it doesn't work, it's okay to move and do your best to be friends. They often don't have stigma around divorce. However, these rules apply to a more educated affluent group of people. Among younger people I worked with in MA, they are more likely to be dealing with the outcome of early sexual experiences, such as, teen pregnancy.

Pornography is one of the most complicated areas for men. First, it is incredibly easy for anyone to access it any time. Young men report to me growing up with it as so much a part of their life that they feel addicted. Real women who come into their life don't live up the models they've been watching. Many of the acts they see in videos don't lead to healthy relationships with real people. A generation, particularly of mostly young men, have reported serious issues related to the dependence on it. But again, for the most part, they wouldn't think of their faith or their pastor as anyone who they

could turn to for guidance on it. The rise of new avatar technology (robots) and sexual desire will combine for serious challenges for the next generation. Will church have any role in helping them navigate it?

*What does the Bible say?*

Like most issues, the Bible can say pretty much what you want to hear. Clearly, the ten commandments speak against having sex with another man's wife. Religious sexual rules in Leviticus, most often used against homosexuality, have a plethora of other sexual rules that are completely ignored. Sex with slaves is common in the Bible. Abraham, the father of monotheistic religion in the world, had sex with his slave, Hagar, when his wife, Sarah, couldn't give birth. When Sarah did give birth, Abraham kicked out his slave and her son Isaac into the desert facing possible death.

David, the greatest king of Israel and author of the Psalms we read each week, was diabolically awful when it came to sex. Upon seeing a girl he wanted, he used his power to arrange for her husband to get killed in battle without any military protection. Imagine today how we'd respond to a leader who killed a man to get his wife. His son, Solomon, whose temple was the greatest, was a major polygamist having hundreds of wives as sexual slaves. These "heroes" of the Old Testament led sexual lives that no one today would look to as moral, but do give us a clear message that God loves us and can work with us where we are.

*How about the New Testament?*

Jesus does speak to marriage when he says a man should leave his parents and through marriage male and female become as one. He clearly understood and condemned religious hypocrisy when he saved a prostitute from being stoned and told her to get out of the business. He also condemned divorce, rarely quoted these days.

Most traditionalist look to the writing of Paul for their guidance particularly when he criticized Romans for engaging in same-sex activity, though some argue he was speaking about the temple prostitutes. Paul's letters tell women to submit to their husband and slaves to obey masters. Almost never quoted though is Paul's command that men not get married unless they can't control themselves. Paul incorrectly believed Jesus would physically return in his lifetime and didn't see the point in wasting time getting married.

There's a lot to pick from here. The overarching message of Jesus is compassion, free will, honesty, loyalty and avoiding hypocrisy seems more aligned to the values emerging among today's young people.

### *What about Swedenborg?*

Swedenborg didn't see Paul's writing as divinely inspired, but he shared his own sexual morality in his book "Marriage Love". If you read the quote below from his book you'll see he didn't pull any punches in his defense of traditional sexual morals. However, in some of his writings, he makes allowances for men to have a concubine, but not women. That's a complicated suggestion. Swedenborg is complicated too in his own personal life. It appears that as a young man, he was an elite dandy traveling

through Europe on his family's dime and enjoying the good life, which some have suggested included a very sexually active life.

Like most people, his sexual morality seems to get stricter as he himself gets older and more removed from it. Marriage, which he speaks about quite a bit, was an institution he never was part of. A couple of women were pushed toward him by their families, but when he realized they were not into him, he didn't pursue it. He did have his eyes on one woman who was married, but he believed he'd marry her in heaven. He suggested many marriages on earth were not spiritual and that could be worked out in the next life where you meet your soulmate.

*What role should church play in the realm of sexuality?*

First, we need to realize that we are not relevant. This is not a suggestion that the church needs to be morally relativist to be cool. It means if we are not a space where this topic can be discussed, people will go elsewhere. The role of the church should be to help people best figure out how to increase their compassion and forgiveness. It should be a place where anyone can go without shame to share where they are and seek guidance on where they need to move from. By coming across as judgmental and hypocritical, the church is failing to be a relevant voice for a healthy sexual moral development.

The best-selling Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber has stepped into these waters and, not without controversy. Her book, "Shameless: A Case for Not Feeling Bad About Feeling Good (About Sex)" is a brave start. Rev. Branden Robertson, who



attended our Spiritual Entrepreneur gathering at the church a few years back, has also spoken out on this topic. He tweeted,

“I’ve never gotten more hate messages from evangelicals then when I said I didn’t think premarital sex was necessarily sinful. Out of ALL of my theology, THIS common progressive view is what has caused them to get vitriolic. Why is Evangelicalism so sex focused? It’s so strange...”<sup>1</sup>

Even more so than politics, this arena is one that church leaders learn not to avoid if they want to keep their jobs. We need to be more courageous. It’s less important for us to say we’ve got the only book of rules when it comes to sexual living, and more important to be a place people can be honest. We can start the discussion and be a place that meets people where they are and help them apply timeless Christian teachings on love, honesty, kindness, respect, free will and the beauty of sex in our lives. It’s time for the church to move from being self-assured and irrelevant to a place people can trust to share and grow without shame and fear.

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<sup>1</sup> Brandan Robertson. “I’ve never gotten as many hate messages...” Twitter. December 4, 2018, <https://twitter.com/brandanjr/status/1070195097692594176?lang=en>. @BrandanJR (Brandan Robertson).