

Providing Leadership in a Fragmented Area

Today, we're going to talk about providing leadership in a very fragmented area, that whole area of sexuality and sex especially in western culture here. I want to start by giving first of all the big disclaimer. I'm going to share sort of my observations in these various areas, biblically informed. But I would tell you. Keep studying about these things. I've read lots of books from noted Christian authors that inform these next discussions.

I've also had the experience of twenty-eight years of pasturing and leading. Just watching this fragmented area. Some of the conclusions I make might be controversial in your mind. But I'd like to share just be transparent with you where some of my journey led. But I want to encourage you as a pastor to don't get hung up if you would disagree on this area or that area. But just be engaged in these subjects.

First of all, when it comes to sexuality, it's always been a struggle for the Christian church, even in early church history. It wasn't more than a hundred years after the apostle Paul wrote the Epistles that the Gnostics rose up and many of these leaders like argon and others talk about sexuality as evil. At times, the thinking was antibody and even anti-female. By the twelve century, the Catholic church even banned marriage for priests. The reason for that is because of the lower sexual drives brought immorality to the priests. What they really should have fixed was not let the priest be involved with politics but instead they tried to get better priests but taking away that sexuality piece that is marriage itself.

In a lot of ways, a convention developed in Christianity, this convention of not talking about sex. On one level, it's understandable because you want to be modest. You don't want to always talk about sex because the world tends to talk about it almost too much. But what many Christians did is they didn't talk about it hardly at all. What happened is instead a Victorian thinking occurred. When it was talked about, it was talked about in a very shameful way. You don't talk about it. You're not transparent about it. You don't give leadership in any area. So, generations of Christians were sort of raised not talking about that, which is so core-created into our very existence.

Now today, as a pastor, in this given world where now so many people are talking about sex. There's talk about sexuality left, right, and everywhere. We need to give the biblical understanding of human sexuality in marriage in the practices in marriage that really bring health and wholeness, that God-designed gift of human sexuality.

Why should we talk about sexuality? Well, number one, it's biblical. Song of Songs, Proverbs, Genesis, the New Testament. The marriage bed is to be pure. Why we're supposed to talk about it I believe is because of so many twisted understandings. I believe the overwhelming presence of pornography encourages us to talk about sexuality because basically pornography is talking about sexuality and showing sexuality in a way that is not God-honoring.

I believe we talk about it because never before had so much brokenness of practice of marriage, divorce, experiences that people had before marriage. Sexuality is almost saturated in so many places in western thought, in western society. We need to give the biblical understanding of these things. There's issues, controversies, and as a pastor, people will come to you at all sorts of problems. By God's grace, as a leader, we give leadership in this area.

We have to stay sharp in this subject when talking to parishioners to keep excellent boundaries. I probably mentioned before in this class and the boundaries section was mentioned. You don't have sessions with a woman one-on-one if you're a guy. You talk about sexual boundaries. Even in general, be very careful to keep very good boundaries because one of the reasons I think people don't talk about sex that much is because sex has this sort of ability. If you talk about it, you think about it, and then because we're biologically wired as sexual beings, it can create temptations. So really watch your boundaries. Keep yourself pure. Don't put yourself in a position where you can cross the line.

Keep up with those who are studying the subject. Keep reading. This class and these sessions are such an overview and in some ways these are part of my personal journey as a pastor in these areas. But you read about the subject. You find a way to really know how to lead in this area, even know better than me. Always keep humble. Stay away from being the answer person. Always encourage that couple to grow that you're talking to. When they're growing, don't correct them with something different if it's God-honoring that they're moving in that kind of a direction. Be as a pastor where in this subject, you're not like the sexual guru, but yet you're well-informed in this area.

In this particular area in western culture and probably in most places now, there is such a proliferation of false teaching on the area of human sexuality. That false teaching a lot of times displays itself in pornography and sort of pornography problems. What do you do as a pastor when you're faced with some of that? And you will encourage and help people.

How many times has a wife come to me and said, "Pastor, my husband has a pornography problem and I'm thinking of divorcing him over it." I'll hear various things. Years ago, if I heard that, it was mainly, "My husband had a pornography problem." Now they even have it where a woman will have a pornography problem or there is just a pornography problem or "my son, my daughter..." I'm finding more and more that we're facing this.

Basically, this is how I tried to encourage my parishioners. I'll talk about basically the certain extremes and the general sin, habitual sin. What's general sin? General sin is since we're sexually wired, and I will go especially a guy, I've noticed that most guys will have seen pornography and occasionally go where they're not supposed to go and they know it's wrong. They feel bad about it. They confess their sins. They move away from it. The next thing they do is set up good boundaries to not get back involved. There is that.

Then there is also the habitual sin where basically this is what they're into. They're into it secretly and privately. They create a culture around it. So much of their life is based in that. Many times, these habitual problems start when they're young, when they're in adolescence. Those are just habits that don't get broke and that sin that's just kind of secret sin.

As you're facing this with your parishioners, it's good to identify where that's at. If it's habitual, even there it's to set up boundaries that those habits are not energized. If it's something that everyone struggles with, yes. Set up habits as well. Set up boundaries that just don't allow that kind of a thing. I'll give you an example. If I go on a business trip, my wife and I will go on our way to make sure we make love and everything like that. You go alone in a hotel room. It's just seems like there's extra demons there that are just trying to tempt you in certain ways.

Often talk to one another and call each other as husband and wife up. But be on the same team so that things like these habits or things of pornography don't really get a deep root and maybe not even at all. That's what you're shooting for. But understand that just to say, "We don't want to talk about it. It's all wrong." Or on the other hand to talk about it too much is not good. To differentiate between what we're talking about are all very helpful as a pastor.

If a wife says, "My husband was looking at pornography. He cheated on me," as a pastor just throw water right on that fire. You know he didn't cheat on you. It's a sin. "Do you ever worry, woman?" You wouldn't say "woman" of course. "Do you ever worry, Susan?" "Yes, I worry." Well, that's sin too. What you want to give is that gracious attitude of a future, a preferred future that does not include pornography in a marriage that there's enough encouragement from scripture that really guides for a positive, God-oriented and God-glorifying sexuality.

Another thing for pornography is encourage some more support networks if there's a habitual pornography sin and there are actually addiction groups if needed. Keep up on the subject to yourself as pastor or in terms of how to bless people and help people. There's a great web site and you can check them out as well.

Homosexuality. Here's another hot topic that's all over the place right now. Here's the debate on this. Many churches and in Christianity and in many places have sort of said that there's somebody born

with a disposition to be homosexual and that's been debated and there's even reports in various denominations that some people have that, and then some of the churches will then say in reports even if they had a disposition, they shouldn't act on it.

Well, it's everywhere. How do you respond? Well, as I look at that subject, where I'm at on that subject as I looked at the various material, what I basically encourage people and I'll say, "First of all, there's a creational critique of homosexuality." The way the plumbing is is pretty clear that there's a man and there's a woman. There's masculinity and femininity. No offense. We don't have to apologize for it. That's just what we see, what we believe.

Secondly, the Bible again and again frowns upon, discourages, paints as not normative homosexuality. There's a prophetic message there, but that brings me to number three. As a pastor, we can disagree strongly with someone who believes in homosexuality and practices especially homosexuality. But in this given day and age, you have to remember that we are to not disregard them as image bearers. These hate crimes are all over the place now whether it's United States, Canada, Western Europe. There's laws, hate laws that if you will in a violent and degrading way or not give opportunity to someone who's a homosexual in their orientation, you can actually be fined or go to jail.

Pastors shouldn't go down those trails of hate. What I mean by that is we can disagree with people. We disagree with people all the time. We disagree with people within the Christian church but that does not mean we disregard. Keep studying on the subject. My personal belief on the subject is that in our sinful nature, somebody can be whatever they want to be and depending on someone's background and these backgrounds are complicated.

Somebody who was sexually abused by her father growing up and becomes a lesbian and there's a lot of hurt and there's a lot of issues there. To have that person come in connection to you and you're talking in ministry to that person, there's a lot of walls and barriers that have been brought up by sin. It's not just easy to say, "Oh, well, homosexuality is wrong and you're all going to hell for it." No. It's that journey. The Bible critiques the practicing homosexual. The Bible critiques the practice. We don't have to be ashamed of that.

But on the other hand, let's not reduce all the gospel to a social issue. Let's not make homosexuality the mark that makes us Christian and you not. Let's instead proclaim Christ the gospel. Hold firm to our conviction that the Bible does not teach that homosexuality is okay. The Bible teaches that it is not a normative pattern and that we should not promote it. It should not be practiced. When it's done, then we pray for those who are in that situation. But we disagree. We don't disregard.

Here's another subject that comes up to you so often as a pastor. Well then, pastor, what about masturbation? Now, here's the fact. A large percentage of Christians actually have or do masturbate

especially singles. You'll find that 98 percent of single men have masturbated and 70 percent of single women have masturbated. How do you deal with that as sort of a pastor when some of these things come up? In the past, it's been a very simple thing. "Masturbation is a sin. Shame, shame, shame, and all the other stuff." Yet we do see that the Bible itself does not directly deal with the subject. Some people will say, "Well, it's a sin of Onan obviously." Well that is not a sin of masturbation. It's a sin of disobedience.

This is how I encourage parents with children who want to know about this subject or people ask you. Basically, from the Book of Colossians, we read, "Do not be mastered by anything." The sort of message that I'll give is masturbation is there and just make sure you're not mastered by it. I'll add one more thing. Most people when they have masturbated it's connected to imagination. What the secular world is doing right now is create that imagination to be connected with pornography and masturbation with pornography.

But the problem with that is it creates sort of a culture where masturbation and multiple person interests are kind of connected so that sexuality DNA in someone through masturbation is created with multiple partners or more different people or different looks. How I've encouraged the whole thinking in terms of how do you advise or how do you encourage is don't be lorded by masturbation. That's an area between you and God.

But I do know this. Don't imagine with pornography. If possible, prayerfully have that imagination of some composite of a future spouse but not connected to many spouses or not connected to any face or not connected one look. Somehow connect, get that imagination that is not this out of Bible imagination. Now I tell you this area, you may disagree in this area of talking about masturbation and I totally understand that.

All I'm talking about is the years of pasturing where these subjects come up because to just say it's all sin, goodbye, really, the Bible doesn't address it directly. But the Bible does direct talking about impurity and lust. Looking after someone that's not your spouse lustfully. Somehow or other, we have to give leadership in a balanced way, in a way that kind of preserves the one-man, one-woman in marriage in sexuality. Maybe my comments aren't that helpful but maybe a few are more helpful. Just stay involved in studying this issue and stay involved with being positive about these issues as they are confronted or you confront them in your ministry.

In some ways about sexuality, we have to sort of look at this and not run away from this. This area has to be attractive for us to talk about and that blush from it. What we really want is great—or in western culture we call it hot marriages and will promote that kind of a marriage. It seems like in the media right now, I think they said over 90 percent of the sex scenes in movies are done outside of

marriage. What that does is it promotes hot sexuality is not in marriages. Pastors, we promote the best sexuality. The hottest sexuality is in marriage.

We need to continue to engage in that subject in an appropriate way so that this area is just not laying out there for Satan to attack and the world to teach. We need ourselves to keep up. Keep up studying. Keep up growing and learning that we might lead in this area. This area is very controversial but yet we can't shrink back. We need to be encouraging and connecting to other people to encourage that healthy, God-honoring sexuality.