

Teens and Sex

How Should We
Teach Them?

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P U B L I S H I N G

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It doesn't take much insight to be concerned about the culture in which our children are growing. Our children are being powerfully influenced by an unbiblical view of life, particularly in the area of sexuality. This lie is being peddled to our children incessantly, from the teen magazines that portray a distorted sexuality to the overtly sexual images of MTV music videos. As Christian parents, we need to be teaching our children the life-transforming truths that expose the counterfeits for what they are. And we must present these truths in a way that is understandable to the average young person. To do that, we must be sure that we as parents are thinking in a genuinely biblical way about teenagers and sexuality. That challenge is the focus of this booklet.

The State of the Culture: Institutionalizing Sexual Idolatry

The overt sexual expression in our culture should not surprise us since it is rooted in a

view of life that has exchanged the worship and service of the Creator for the worship and service of the created thing (see Rom. 1:21–25). This view of life holds these “truths” to be self-evident:

1. People are *ultimate* and *autonomous*. That is, there is nothing more important than the individual. I am free from any authority I do not choose to follow.
2. The highest human value and experience is personal satisfaction and pleasure.
3. I must be constantly vigilant that my “needs” are met.
4. The most important love is the love of self.
5. With pleasure, bigger is better. There is a constant desire for greater stimulation.
6. The here and now is what is important. There is a constant pursuit of instant gratification.
7. The physical person is more important than the spiritual person.

In a culture that looks at people as ultimate, God as absent, and pleasure as the highest experience, it is no wonder that sexuality

becomes such a dominant force. It provides a powerful pathway to instant physical pleasure. It provides false worship (counterfeiting the first great command) and false relationship (counterfeiting the second great command). Every institution in our culture is infected with a distorted view of human sexuality. This being so, our children need us to be radically active in countering it.

The State of the Church: Giving Mixed Messages to Our Teens

Unfortunately, our ability to counter distorted views is hindered by what I see as the church's ambivalence about sex. We need to face the ways this ambivalence has affected our teenagers.

Here is what I mean: As Christians, we say that sex is a wonderful gift from God, yet we are strangely silent on the topic and uncomfortable in the rare instances when it is discussed. This leads to a lack of sexual balance, a lack of sexual openness, and a lack of clear, practical sexual education. Sex tends to get placed outside the boundaries of the normative Christian worldview.

Is it surprising, then, that the typical teenager assumes that Christianity is “sex-negative”? That is, basically *against* sex? The church has been perceived this way for a long time, and it is surely the perception of many teens today.

I can remember taking my nine- and eleven-year-old sons out for pizza to talk to them about sex. After we ordered I opened up the subject, took out a pen and began drawing on a napkin. At first my sons were surprised that I was willing to talk with such openness. Then they figured that if I was not embarrassed to talk with them about sex, they should not be either. My goal was to treat this area in the same way I had treated other areas—as an important piece of the Christian world-and-life view that I was seeking to instill in them. I had every reason to discuss the subject and no reason to be embarrassed or silent.

Why are we as Christians so ambivalent about sex? Why do we tend to give confusing signals to our teens? It seems that this ambivalence is rooted in three biblical misunderstandings:

1. The church has tended to view sexuality as less than good and godly.

2. We have tended to view sin as behavioral and physical, rather than a matter of the heart.
3. We have tended to view teenage choice and behavior as biologically determined.

If the church unwittingly implies that it is “sex-negative,” it loses its authority to guide the teenager’s sexual life. Teens won’t come to the Christian community with their sexual questions, fears, and experiences. They are left with one of three options. (1) They can try to live with the church’s embarrassed silence and cope with their questions, interests, and experiences alone. (2) They can assume that Christians do not have sexual questions or problems, and begin to question their own relationship with the Lord when they do. (3) They can go where information and open discussion are readily available—that is, the world. Here they will be able to ask their questions and get answers, no matter how regrettable they may be.

We cannot live with the ambivalence of the church and allow the world to guide our teens in this or any other area. The Christian community, from the home to the organized church, must be prepared to act, to educate, to

guide, and to restore. Later, I will lay out a practical agenda for dealing with teens in the area of sex.

A Biblical View of Teenagers

One major reason the church has been ineffective in dealing with our teens in this area is that we have bought into an unbiblical view of adolescence. I heard it expressed recently at a conference. "We just have to expect our teenagers to be rebellious; all of us were. We just need to ride it out," a father said. His wife chimed in, "You can't argue with hormones!" This is the view of most Christian parents as they view the teenage years. The question is, Is this a biblical view?

Too often, when it comes to teenagers, we have bought into a biological model of behavior. We talk about our teenagers as collections of raging, rebel hormones encased in developing skin. We see our goal as somehow chaining those hormones so that we all can survive until they reach age twenty. Many parents who talk to me about their teens talk without hope because they see them as victims of biological urges that drive them to do crazy

things. It is implied that for this age span, Scripture doesn't work, the gospel doesn't work, talking doesn't work. But we cannot be satisfied with this view of teenagers. As in all other areas of life, we need a view that is distinctly biblical.

In 2 Timothy 2:22, Paul exhorts Timothy to "flee the evil desires [lusts] of youth." This interesting phrase speaks to the way we view teenagers and the teen years. First, notice that the Bible is not naive about this time of life. There are lusts that uniquely plague youth, particularly powerful temptations that need to be faced. Scripture is urging us to ask the question, What evil desires can grip a person during this phase of life?

Another thing that can be drawn from Paul's qualifier, "youthful" (KJV), is that *each* phase of life has its own set of temptations. The temptations of the young man and the old man are not totally different, yet they are not identical. Paul is reminding Timothy to be aware of who he is and where the pockets of temptation exist around him.

Another thing that can be drawn from this phrase is that teenagers have not been singled out for particular sacrifice and suffering. Each

person at each time in his life, if he seeks to please the Lord, must watch, pray, stand fast, and fight lest he fall into temptation. The young person is called to run from the evil desires of youth, while the older person is called to guard against the temptations unique to age. Each person must accept each stage of warfare in the normal Christian life.

In the first seven chapters of the book of Proverbs, a father addresses his son, detailing what it means to live wisely and foolishly. He warns his son about the particular temptations of his youth. This portion of Scripture establishes a model of teenage struggles that contrasts with the current biological model. We can identify five characteristics of young people from these chapters:

1. *Teenagers don't tend to value wisdom.* My teenagers don't come to me at the end of the day and say, "Boy, Dad, I've been thinking, and I realize that I have an abject lack of wisdom. Can I sit at your feet and glean the wisdom you have received from your years of walking with the Lord?" Most of us would be shocked at such a thing!

Teenagers tend to be closed. They tend to be defensive. They don't love correction or