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A Sexual Ethic for College Students  
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As American Christians we find ourselves in a time of great confusion related to sexuality and sexual morality. The confusion began in the broader culture during the middle of the last century, and has spread into the church. Though it has more thoroughly penetrated the liberal wing of American Christianity, Protestant evangelicals are not immune to the same confusion. This paper is intended as a reaffirmation of the biblical and classical Christian sexual ethic, especially as it relates to college students, and a call to CCCU schools to hold firm to this sexual ethic regardless of prevailing pressures from the broader culture and academia.

I. Getting Started: The Nature of Christian (Sexual) Ethics

If we are doing any species of Christian ethics, we first need a definition of Christian ethics. We also need at least some basic methodology and vocabulary for talking about ethics. That is what we will do in this first section.

After setting the stage with this preliminary reflection on Christian ethics, we will then move to consider the particular social and developmental context in which Christian college students engage issues of sexual morality. In our third section, we will examine the fundamental themes of an overall Christian sexual ethic. Finally, we will consider briefly four particular situations and applications relevant to our college student constituency: pornography, dating, marriage, and homosexuality, and close with a call to fidelity to the Scripture and the consensual witness of the church on matters of sexual morality. An appendix offers numerous recommendations for university action related to issues of sexual ethics on campus.

A. A Definition of Christian Ethics

I want to propose the following definition of Christian ethics:

*Christian ethics is the Spirit-empowered and Kingdom-directed effort of communities of Christian people to understand and to incarnate a way of life that conforms to the will of the God we have met in Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.*

Notice the key themes that are embedded in this definition: Christian ethics is a process of reflection, undertaken by the whole church, and an academic discipline, undertaken by trained ethicists/moral thinkers attempting to serve the church. Its power source is the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:26; Acts 1:8; Rom. 14:17), thus it is not merely a human endeavor, though it is certainly a

human endeavor. It is Kingdom directed (Mt. 6:33), as is every other aspect of Christian existence, rightly understood.

Christian ethics is an effort, often an arduous one, involving considerable difficulties and challenges. In a sense it is an art form, improved with practice but never perfected. This effort is not solely an individual one, but is instead corporate, involving the whole people of God. This work involves coming both to understand and to incarnate, to know and to do, God's moral will. Christian ethics is the quest to understand a total way of life that is fitting for God's people—not just rules, and not just rules pertaining to selected areas of life (Acts 9:2, 18:25-26; 1 Cor. 4:17, Eph. 4:22, Heb. 13:7).

Christian ethics is rooted in God's will (Ex. 20:1ff.; Mt. 5:1ff.), and thus it is not merely the product of rational reflection. But the God whose will we seek out is not just any god, but instead the God we have met in Jesus Christ (Mt. 5-7, 28:19-20; Phil. 2:5-11; 1 Thess. 5:18). To be truly Christian, Christian ethics must be centered in Jesus Christ—who must be understood not just as Savior from my personal sins and comforter amidst my fear of extinction, but as Lord of all aspects of my life and of the world as well (Jn. 1:1-14; Col. 1:15-20).

#### B. Christian Ethics in Kingdom Perspective

The moral norms or convictions that Christian ethics generates (or, better, articulates, because we *discover* rather than invent them) are rooted in the biblical narrative and overall biblical worldview. Christian ethics is therefore not an abstract moral system deduced from first principles but instead a response to the God whose character and conduct are revealed in the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.

I am among those scholars who have concluded that the Kingdom of God should be treated as a, if not the, central motif for understanding Christian existence, including our moral efforts. For me, the kingdom of God, which functioned as the heart of Jesus' own proclamation and ministry (Mt. 4:17, Mk. 1:14-15, Lk. 4:16-19, etc.), should function in a similar fashion for us. This is the argument Glen Stassen and I make at length in our book, *Kingdom Ethics* (IVP, 2003).

The kingdom of God as Jesus taught it is *that state of affairs in which God reigns* (cf. Mt. 6:10). It is rooted in the most significant fact about our world: the Earth is a place created and sustained by God, yet characterized by rebellion against God. This is the epic story that the Bible tells. God created the world, human beings sinned, plunging the world into rebellion and sorrow; God has been acting to redeem this sinful, suffering world through a series of divine-human covenants; that redemptive activity reaches its peak in Jesus Christ, who came with the good news that the kingdom of God—the total reclaiming of God's world for God—was at hand.

Close study of the prophets and other sources that seem to have informed Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God (cf. Isa. 9:1-7, 24:14-25:12, 31:1-32:20, 33, 35, 40:1-11, 61-62) reveals a basic picture of the kingdom or reign of God in which seven things happen.

- \*God will act decisively to deliver his people from their suffering.
- \*God's justice will prevail over current injustice.
- \*God's peace will bring an end to war and violence and the suffering it brings.
- \*God's presence will be acutely felt and experienced.
- \*Healing of the broken and the ill will take place.
- \*Outcasts and the exiled will be restored to covenant community.
- \*God's people will respond with great joy to all that God is doing.

Broadly, the kingdom is the triumph of God in all arenas of life. It is the doing of God's will without opposition or resistance (Phil. 2:10-11), including the healing and flourishing of all kinds of human relationships (Eph. 2:11-22). It begins with the first coming of Christ and will culminate after his second coming (Rev. 21:4-5).

Jesus is the trailblazer for the reign of God. He both demonstrates and teaches kingdom practices. Followers of Jesus—Christians—are those who imitate the kingdom practices of Jesus and obey his kingdom teachings (Mt. 7:21-27). We do so not merely because we want to go to heaven or be decent people but because we have made the reign of God the purpose of our lives and want to participate in it. Sexual ethics takes its place among all other aspects of kingdom living. In all areas, we want to be kingdom people whose lives advance God's reign.

### C. The Nature of Moral Norms

Christian ethics is often reduced to rules, especially prohibitions. But moral norms are broader and richer than this. I propose that in the area of Christian sexual ethics, as in other areas, there are four main questions:

- \**What are the rules that ought to govern human conduct?* These are the concrete moral rules and broader underlying principles that are to govern the lives of kingdom people.
- \**What are the goals that humans ought to strive for?* These are the intentions, purposes, and broader moral vision the pursuit of which sets the direction of our lives as Christ's followers.
- \**What kind of human beings should we be?* These are the virtues that we lift up as normative for people who are striving to conform to the image of God's Son.
- \**What kind of social order should we seek to develop?* This is the social vision that we pursue as Christians, whether in the church, the university, or in society. Ultimately we want a fully redeemed world. The question is how we enter into a piece of that here and now. How do we create redemptive, faithful Christian communities in the area of sexuality?

So when we talk about sexual morality on our campuses, it can't just be in terms of rules, especially rules against various acts and practices: it must *include* specific rules, but also broader underlying principles, our goals or vision for sexuality, some treatment of the hallmarks of high-

quality sexual character, and the nature of the kind of community/communities we are seeking to create. All of these, again, must be situated in the broad context of advancing the reign of God.

#### D. Discerning Moral Truth: Sources of Authority

How do we come to a confident knowledge of God's moral will? How exactly do we find out what the necessary moral rules, principles, goals, character qualities, and community norms should be? This is the question of epistemology, or more informally the question of *sources of moral authority*. Any moral system must answer it. The Christian tradition has produced a variety of proposals, involving various mixes of Scripture, tradition, reason, experience, moral intuition, the spirit of the age, the sense of the community, and so on.

I propose that the most reliable approach is to *search a Bible that is treated as inspired and fully authoritative and is interpreted in disciplined Christian community through the lens of the Kingdom mission and message of Jesus Christ*. With Scripture firmly in place as the premier source of authority, we are free to consult other sources for supplementary and confirmatory (though never contradictory) wisdom. This consultation process, in my view, should begin with the wisdom offered by the orthodox Christian theological/ethical tradition. We must take seriously what has been "always and everywhere believed" by the church, and not easily depart from it. Due to its careful adherence to this classic tradition and its immense theological depth, an important resource in our confused age is the teaching tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, especially as articulated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and in the papal encyclicals of Pope John Paul II.

Other important supplementary sources include the evidence offered by reason, conscience, and nature, prayer and meditation, solid research data and empirical observations, significant personal and historical experiences, and so on. Despite reference to such other sources, most of which are important in any sophisticated ethical reflection, Scripture is the final court of appeal. This is where we get our norms, and we are not free to depart from it (Mt. 5:17-20; Mk. 7:1ff, 2 Tim. 3:16). I think this bottom-line commitment proves decisive for Christian sexual ethics, as it does for most issues. But in a sense it is precisely this question of authority that lies at the heart of current debates over these issues.

## II. Sexual Ethics for College Students in Christian Universities

Ethics is done in contexts. The context we are dealing with is that facing the Christian college student. So we need to situate our thinking as close to their reality as we can, in order that our moral reflections might be of greatest usefulness to them.

### A. Cultural Context 1: The Oversexed Culture

Most (but not all) of our students come to us having experienced broad participation in popular culture, which includes sexually explicit and sexually degrading music; constant degrading and cheap sexual talk and sexual activity on primetime TV (not to mention cable

channels); sex in the movies; sex on computers in various forms; and sexually suggestive ads constantly bombarding them in a variety of venues. This is not a new problem, but it is worsening, and as it does our society is coarsening. It is impossible to have a “normal” American childhood without being exposed to countless sexual images and ideas. It is fair to surmise that most of our children are sexually overstimulated from a very young age.

#### B. Cultural Context 2: The Postmodern, Sexually Plastic Culture

Most (but not all) of our students are quite familiar with a vision of sexuality in which traditional limits to sexual partnership and activity are constantly breached. The image of two heterosexual pop stars, Madonna and Britney Spears, French kissing each other at the MTV movie awards show a few years ago makes for an apt symbol. Nobody really thinks that either of these women is either bisexual or lesbian, but it is now seen as “cool” to breach sexual boundaries, just because they are boundaries. Pop culture is not just promoting nonmarital heterosexual activity in all kinds of contexts, but also lifting up bisexuality and sexual experimentation of all types. For female sex symbols to flirt with lesbian activity is a way of saying that sex is fun, that it has no limits not set by our imaginations, and that it is infinitely plastic. This is postmodern, post-Judeo/Christian sexuality, and it is the context in which we find ourselves.

#### C. Cultural Context 3: The Divorce Culture

Traditional-age college students with us right now were born between 1982 and 1986. The divorce rate doubled between 1965 and 1975, and remains higher than in American history and the highest in the world. So we can assume that many of our students come from contexts of serial monogamy or multiple parental romantic partners. They have seen less stability and permanence in marital relationships than any group in American history. It has swept through the churches as well, including evangelical churches.

Related to this is the rise of cohabitation and various insecure dating, sex, and mating relationships. This instability and lack of coherence is disorienting for young people. They may have learned that relationships are inherently unstable and that sex is something you should get while you have the opportunity. Many are quite afraid of, or even disgusted with, the whole dating, sex, and mating business. This helps to explain the tentativeness and confusion with which many approach romantic relationships.

#### D. The Student Developmental Context

The 18-23 year old student has been sexually mature for at least six years, often much longer. Puberty is happening earlier, as early as 10 years old, and marriage is happening later, at 24-25, leaving a yawning 14-15 year gap.

Given some fluidity in sexual identity formation, especially in the postmodern culture just described, some of our students are certainly unsure about their sexual preference, identity, and interests.

Given the national statistics on premarital sex, it is inevitable that some of our students have already been quite sexually active, whether that has been petting or intercourse or oral sex or whatever. But others are completely virginal and inexperienced, either by conscious choice or lack of opportunity.

We can assume that most of our students are sexually curious, and to some extent relationally curious, but their readiness for either sex or relationships will fall along a wide spectrum. It seems to us at Union University that fewer male students, especially, are ready to contemplate dating, serious relationships, or marriage, even as they move toward the end of their college days.

Unfortunately, given national statistics it is very likely that a high percentage of male students and some percentage of female students are using pornography, even on our campuses and in our dorm rooms. Some are becoming addicted and are coming to us looking for help. Others have used it in the past, sworn off of it, but find it a continuing temptation.

Widespread confusion and frustration about dating and courting means that the “rules” for how one goes about meeting and getting to know someone are unclear. Some conservative Christian kids think that dating per se is wrong, and go for “courting” instead, or just wait for God to zap them with a spouse. Others date in the sense that many of us did coming along. There are many “misses” for every “hit” in the dating scene, and much hurt and frustration. Oftentimes questionable theological notions related to finding God’s will compound the confusion here.

Conservative Christian kids often have been taught a male leadership/female submission vision of gender roles. Students are confused as to whether to believe this, or if so, as to whether that applies across the board in all relationships, including dating relationships. Does that mean a young woman is required to submit to her date, boyfriend, or fiancée in terms of the direction of the relationship or its sexual component? There is much confusion about the gender roles issue in general, and how it applies outside of the marriage relationship.

Surely it is fair to assume that a significant percentage of our students are sexually frustrated and/or lonely. They are in some ways ready for sex and love and in other ways not. Men especially are attracted by their eyes, and given the beauty of the girls and the current Abercrombie & Fitch style in female dress, often have to deal with much incitement to sexual desire. Girls are often sexually unavailable but send what men interpret as signals of their interest and allure, frustrating the guys all the more. Guys, conversely, often send signals of their romantic interest but can’t muster the maturity to sustain a relationship. Differences in male/female relational and sexual makeup contribute to these confusions and frustrations.

On the other hand, some students on our campuses marry early, while in school. The best-case scenario is that they find a good match, fall in love, and are mature enough to move ahead with a reasonable chance of success. The worst-case scenario is that they marry foolishly, often to avoid sexual temptation, have a child, and end up divorced at 26, adding yet another name to the list of the million children a year who go through a parental divorce.

All is not bleakness and misery. Surely all who read this know young people who exercise sexual restraint, are not looking at porn, are capable of sustaining an intimate relationship, find the right person and end up marrying them at the right time (even with our help!). Or they are happily single, indefinitely. I see both types. I do premarital counseling at Union University and have had many successes, many joys in doing so. But it is sometimes a treacherous road to get there.

### III. Fundamentals of a Christian Sexual Ethic

There are many ways to articulate a Christian sexual ethic. A full-blown theology of sexuality would begin with the creation of male and female in the image of God (Gen. 1:27-28), as complementary human creatures who yearn to know and be known, to love and be loved, by another who is alike and yet different (Gen. 2:18-25). It would address the God-given purposes of sexuality (procreation, partnership, and mutual pleasure) and the way in which Scripture embeds the pursuit of these purposes in the cocoon of the covenantal marriage relationship (cf. Mal. 2:13-16).

For brevity I will assume this theological background and use as my paradigm text what Jesus has to say in the Sermon on the Mount. In interpreting Matthew 5:27-30 I will employ what Stassen and I call a triadic interpretation—rather than thesis (“you have heard”/antithesis (“but I say”), the approach we take is to see (1) a traditional Old Testament teaching that reflects God’s intent in one or another area of life, (2) a diagnosis of the vicious cycles or patterns of sin we get into that keep us from obeying God’s will, and then (3) a transforming initiative or step we can take that can break us out of that vicious cycle and move us toward God’s will—every such victory amounting to a victory for God’s kingdom. In presenting this passage, I will have opportunity to touch on a number of major themes in Christian sexual ethics.

#### A. “Do Not Commit Adultery”—The Centrality of Covenant Fidelity

Perhaps the first and most familiar moral norm related to sexuality is the command against adultery. It is of course found in the Decalogue (Ex 20:14; Dt 5:18) and is here quoted by Jesus: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery’ (Mt. 5:27). Thus when Jesus names this particular traditional teaching he reaches into the very heart of the biblical moral witness to covenant ethics. I want to propose that on this basis the fundamental moral norm in any Christian sexual ethic is covenant fidelity. We need to help teach our students how to become covenant-keepers in this, and other, areas of their lives.

A covenant in its full biblical sense establishes or ratifies a relationship between two parties. It spells out mutual responsibilities intended to create or restore community. It involves the freely given declaration of sacred promises or sworn oaths that publicly symbolize the commitments being undertaken. It is declared to be lasting, enduring, even everlasting. God is viewed as the witness and guarantor of biblical covenants, and God stipulates both blessings for covenant fidelity and curses for covenant violation (cf. Gen. 9; Exodus 20; Joshua 24, etc.). In a sinful world, covenants provide stability to relationships and a context in which such relationships can flourish.

A special feature of biblical covenants is their foundation in the mercy and deliverance of God. God makes covenant with Israel at Sinai, but only after having delivered them from Egyptian slavery (Ex. 1-15; 20:1-2). Grace precedes covenant, and covenant is itself an expression of God's grace. Those who work within the biblical tradition must understand covenant based on God's character, which is merciful, just, loving, forgiving, and compassionate. In this way we can see the connection between covenant and Kingdom: God makes covenants in order to advance his reign, and the same characteristics that mark the reign of God will mark God's activities in covenant relationships. Therefore they should mark the behavior of God's people as well.

Faithfulness to covenant commitments is a norm that applies both to our relationship with God and with others. It is clear very early in the biblical record that faithfulness will be a fundamental requirement for any individual or people that would relate to God (cf. Ex. 20:3).

The covenant of marriage is God's intended context for the pursuit of full and joyful sexual and relational intimacy with another human being, and for the conception, birth, and wholesome nurture of children. In scriptural terms, all sexual behavior is morally evaluated with reference to its conformity with God's intention to locate full sexual intimacy within a lifetime covenant marriage relationship. This is clear both from positively articulated biblical teachings that establish this fundamental moral norm, and by a wide range of prohibitions and sanctions associated with violations of this norm (prohibitions of fornication, rape, bestiality, adultery, incest, and homosexual behavior, for example).

When we situate Christian sexual ethics in the context of covenant, it means:

\*Sexual behavior is one aspect of who we are, all aspects of which have been promised to God in the covenant of baptism and affirmation of Christ's lordship. We are covenant-bound to live out our sexuality in a way that conforms to God's will. This is nicely symbolized by the faux wedding rings that some unmarried students wear—an acknowledgment that even though they are not married, they are in covenant with God and need to be faithful to that covenant.

\*Covenant reminds us that our sexuality is not for self-advancement and self-gratification, but is a gift that is to be offered to others in covenant fidelity. When we use other people's bodies for exploitative sex, or even when we use other people's pornographic images, we are not acting covenantally, but instead selfishly.

\*The hope of one day entering into a covenantal marriage relationship with someone helps to constrain the college student or any unmarried person from acting now in ways that could hinder or damage that relationship. This pertains both to a heartfelt desire to spare one's own future marriage from damage, and also a caring concern for the other persons with whom one develops a measure of relational or sexual intimacy, who will one day be someone else's spouse.

\*Preparing for a lifetime covenant relationship involves learning to be faithful to covenant now. It means being honest with any dating partner or boyfriend/girlfriend about the state of the relationship; practicing sexual chastity and self-control (1 Cor. 7:1-6), as these are also required in marriage; and being merciful, forgiving, compassionate, and just in all emotionally intimate relationships.

### B. "Adultery in the Heart"—Pathways to Sexual Sin

Jesus reaffirms the biblical command against adultery. Precisely because of the significance of that command, he goes on to point out the path the human heart takes on its way to the command's violation. He moves from a statement of the command to shrewd observation concerning ways in which we get stuck in patterns of behavior that lead us into sin. This is what I mean by a vicious cycle.

His statement is compact. "I say to you that everyone who looks upon a woman with the intent to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt. 5:28, author's translation). This single sentence is among the most damagingly misunderstood in the entire scriptural record. Most modern translations miss the critical dimension of *intent* that is implicit here. For example, the NRSV reads "everyone who looks at a woman with lust"; the KJV actually captures the nuance more adequately: "whosoever looketh on a woman *to lust after her.*"

If Jesus is saying that the first spark of attraction one has to another person is the equivalent of adultery, then surely the average adult has committed many such acts. If so, the teaching of Jesus is intended simply to show us how far we are from the perfection he demands.

If we read his teaching instead as concrete direction concerning how to do God's will and enjoy Kingdom existence here and now, then he must mean something like what the Greek text actually seems to say. Jesus is identifying an act of human will which leads us in the direction of violating God's will and thus ensnaring ourselves and others in misery.

An accurate description of this process would begin with the acknowledgment that precisely because we are embodied sexual selves, sexual attraction is an inescapable dimension of human existence. When we encounter people who for whatever reason of face, shape, form, or personality are particularly appealing to us, we frequently experience a spark of attraction. This is part of the created order and should not be identified as sinful.

The issue then becomes what happens from that point of “sparking.” With one person, that man or woman who becomes our spouse, that spark is appropriately fanned into flame in due course, with full sexual communion reserved for the marriage bed. With all *other* persons, however, prior to marriage or in the midst of marriage to our spouse, that spark is to be noted, controlled, and duly redirected to other purposes or to our (future) spouse.

The vicious cycle of sexual sin begins with the decision not to redirect that spark of attraction. Instead, the spark is gradually fanned into an ever hotter flame. That process frequently begins precisely as Jesus indicates here: one looks upon another with the intent to desire them (Cf. Job 31:1). We look for further opportunities to encounter the same person. We purpose in our hearts to make contact with them in order to create a sexual opportunity. We seize the opportunity we have created and have the sexual encounter long fantasized and desired (cf. Prov. 6:20-7:27). This can move well beyond a one-time attraction and become a pattern of behavior. We can become people characterized, by “eyes full of adultery” (2 Peter 2:14), the antithesis of sexual integrity.

No wonder Jesus refers to this as committing adultery in one’s heart. It is not the initial spark of attraction that is equivalent to adultery, but instead the downward spiral of behavior resulting from a heart that has turned from covenant fidelity to covenant breaking. This is the vicious cycle that leads to sexual immorality.

Many times, the desire for love, for meaning, or for acceptance is actually the path that leads to illicit sex. That hunger of the lonely heart for community is a powerful, instinctive, and God-resembling aspect of human nature. Community denied; love denied; needs denied; meaning denied—these create a painful vacuum that easily lends itself either to the quest for love or for sex as a substitute for love.

Gender differences are really quite significant on this issue. Men are far more frequently tempted via visual sexual stimulation than women appear to be. Of course, no generalization of this type is without exception but this one appears to hold up quite well. The old saw that women give sex to get love and that men give love to get sex contains a seed of truth that should not be ignored. Jesus’ brief words on sexual sin in this passage are directed to men and indeed seem more relevant to men, especially young men. But there is more than one path to illicit sex, and it may be that *visual* stimulation and response is less profound or important than *relational* enticements based on fundamental human needs gone begging.

Christian sexual ethics recognizes that both physical and relational needs, and physical and relational attraction, can easily tempt us to violate God’s will for sexual expression. The Christian college student needs help in understanding these needs, the temptations they present, and the legitimate ways in which they can act on their God-given sexuality.

### C. “Gouge it Out”—Transforming Initiatives to Prevent Sexual Immorality

Jesus goes on to offer a hyperbolic statement of the transforming initiatives that can free us from the traps and keep us on the path of joyful obedience, in four imperatives: tear out the eye and throw it away, cut off the hand and throw it away (Mt. 5:29-30; for an interesting parallel, see Mt. 18:8-9, cf. Mk. 9:42-48).

No one seriously believes that Jesus intended to teach his followers to pluck out their eyes and cut off their hands if these bodily members lead them into sin.

What Jesus *did* mean by these stark statements is a matter of debate. Some read him simply as reinforcing the seriousness of his teaching. Most contend that Jesus meant to emphasize the fact that sexual integrity is ultimately a heart matter.

It is certainly true that a heart turned toward adultery cannot be healed by self-mutilation, literal or figurative. However, what I see is instruction in preventive initiatives that can be taken to forestall the descent into sexual sin. These are “verses which vividly demand radical sacrifice for the purpose of avoiding occasions of sin” (Davies and Allison, *ICC Commentary on Matthew*, 523).

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.” It is certainly the heart that is the ultimate source of sin, but it is our eyes that we use to participate in that sin. No, we are not supposed to gouge out our eyes. But we are supposed to deal in a very disciplined manner with visual cues that take us in the wrong direction, especially if that is the primary source of our sexual temptation—media, computer, music, etc. If I want to live in obedience to God’s command, and want to avoid doing anything that might begin to turn my heart, I will be very careful about the media that I set before my eyes (or my ears, for that matter).

Another quite relevant contemporary application of this statement has to do with the nature of the touching that occurs between unmarried men and women. The issue is usually handled as a matter of premarital rule-setting for the dating relationship. Yet it is also relevant in terms of the level of physical intimacy that develops between adults who are married but not to each other.

A variety of rule schemes or broader principles have been proposed. For the unmarried young person, the fundamental questions ought to be: what kind of touching (a) constitutes *de facto* sexual relations even if intercourse is avoided, and (b) actually makes it *more* difficult to adhere to a commitment to abstinence from intercourse. (For the married, the issue is perhaps best framed as what kind of touching (a) represents a form of infidelity to the marriage relationship, even if intercourse is avoided, and (b) tempts me/us down the path to extramarital sex.) Setting careful limits on such touch is one way to incarnate this transforming initiative.

The Apostle Paul twice urged his readers to flee (*phewgo*) sexual sin (1 Cor. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22). When in doubt, run as fast as you can in the opposite direction of the temptation coming your way. Such instruction reflects the same intensity as Jesus’ teaching here in Matthew 5. The matter is serious. It is serious because sex is easily misused. And it is serious in its consequences,

not just for individuals and couples but for families, churches, society, and the advancement of the reign of God.

#### D. Summarizing the Classic Christian Sexual Ethic (and its Competitors)

A way to summarize biblical teaching on sexual activity is as follows: sexual intimacy is designed by God to occur solely between a man and a woman within the lifetime covenant of marriage (Gen. 2:24-25; 1 Cor. 7:2-3; Mt. 19:4-6; 1 Thess 4:3-8; Heb. 13:4). While all men and women are not called to, or blessed with, a marriage relationship (Mt. 19:10-12, 1 Cor. 7), all are required to confine their sexual behavior to such a relationship.

This can be called *the classic Christian sexual ethic*, because it is rooted in Scripture and has been affirmed by the church universal for centuries. Beginning in the 1960s, two new sexual standards emerged and were widely embraced. They remain fierce competitors for the allegiance of modern people, including Christians. A “moderate” approach urges that sexual intercourse should be confined to “loving relationships.” Any relationship of love and mutuality, it is argued, is an appropriate environment for sex. Marriage is one such relationship, but not the only one. A more liberal stance claims that sex should freely be enjoyed whenever so desired, as long as there is “mutual consent.”

I think it is fair to say that today the loving relationship ethic is the prevailing stance in the broader culture, at least in polite society, and it is making deep inroads in the church. It is the view most likely to be expressed in an etiquette column or respectable TV talk show. “It’s okay as long as you love each other.” The mutual consent ethic is certainly the one depicted through much of the mass media, including TV, music, movies, etc. “It’s okay as long as you both feel like it.” Neither confine sex to marriage, neither retain the traditional Christian rejection of homosexual behavior, and neither are in keeping with the biblical witness that sex is reserved for the covenant relationship of marriage. Both must be rejected.

#### IV. Situations and Applications for the Christian College Student

I want to conclude with brief comments related to four areas of challenge for college students, at least in my experience, and suggest norms related to each area. My paradigm will continue to be covenant fidelity, thus avoiding vicious cycles and taking transforming initiatives that can help students obey God’s will.

##### A. Pornography

Pornography use is a sin because it is not covenantal sex within marriage, but is instead the purchase of sexual images and words intended for sexual self-stimulation. Pornography is a form of prostitution because it involves paying people to talk about having sex or to have sex on screen or film. It involves the exploitation of the human body for pay. It is often used as a masturbation device. It frequently tempts those who are already engaged in covenant relationships or are moving in that direction to be unfaithful to their relationships.

Pornography use afflicts such a very high percentage of our student population because it is readily available; it comes to us, we don't even have to go find it. Once it is discovered and used, its use can become habitual, then compulsive or even addictive. The results of regular pornography use include displeasing God, guilt feelings, distorted attitudes towards sex and other people, and damage to relationships both now and in the future.

Tackling pornography with any chance of success involves both an individual and a corporate effort to deny students access to porn. Internet filters, accountability programs, disconnecting internet access, and other steps can be taken. Students need to become aware of the particular circumstances in which they are most susceptible to the porn temptation and flee them, with help from concerned brothers and sisters in Christ.

### B. Dating and Sexual Experimentation

Young men and women need an avenue for meeting and getting to know each other that can both prepare them for marriage and also prevent premature sexual activity. The Bible does not prescribe particular courtship rituals or norms, and cultural variations matter a very great deal here. In my view, the Christian college should not try to establish rules that ban dating or impose a particular form on dating relationships. We do, of course, have an interest in creating an environment in which suitable friendships and romances can be fostered, within certain boundaries. The norm, then, is careful and prayerful friendship development, dating, and courtship that can be constructive in preparing young men and women for covenant marriage relationships.

Students need assistance in setting limits on their time alone, due to inevitable temptations to become overly involved emotionally or physically. They also need help in establishing firm boundary lines related to actual physical/sexual activity. The principles that matter here, in my view, are whether the sexual activity is essentially de facto intercourse, and whether whatever is done makes it more difficult to avoid intercourse. The vicious cycle in this arena involves a rapidly escalating pattern of sexual intimacy, often leading to broken boundaries and, indeed, broken hearts.

The relevant transforming initiatives involve setting time boundaries, aloneness boundaries, and sexual intimacy boundaries on relationships. These are obviously only going to work if they are accepted by the students themselves, but the university has a role to play in setting at least some of these parameters. Again, the issue is not only about rules, but about helping students hang onto a covenant vision of sexuality and marriage.

### C. Marriage

An often unrecognized role of the Christian college is as a context in which marriage partners are selected and marriages are sometimes actually begun. The norm we should be pursuing here is to communicate that marriage is a solemn covenant, not to be lightly entered,

and once entered it is permanent and binding. The responsibility of couples for the children they bring into the world is part of the marriage covenant, and is yet another reason why marriage should be entered for the right reasons and in possession of the right personal and social resources.

Vicious cycles related to this issue would include, first, the premature marriage based on sexual temptation, a sexual slip up, or a rapid move toward emotional intimacy. Here the solution is not necessarily to marry rapidly but to ratchet down the overheated sexual and emotional environment of the relationship. Others marry prematurely due to personal and family issues, a desire to escape family traumas and dysfunctions, etc. The Christian college needs counselors and faculty who can help students identify why they are moving toward getting married and perhaps slow them down. Finally, even in the best of circumstances, one service that the Christian college can provide is premarital testing and preparation.

#### D. Homosexuality

Homosexuality is not a subject of much biblical attention. When it is addressed in the Bible, it is addressed negatively (Lev. 18:22, 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:8-10), and there is no question that sexual intercourse was understood in the biblical tradition to be designed by God as a male-female union. Torrents of scholarship in recent decades have raised a variety of questions as to whether the traditional biblical rejection of the morality of homosexual behavior in any and every case should be maintained. In my view, nothing has been discovered or written that ought to overturn the classic Christian stance that confines sexual union to a male-female lifetime marital relationship. (I should hasten to add that the collapse of heterosexual marriage poses as great a violation of this norm today as does homosexuality.)

If our Christian colleges continue to operate on the basis of the classic Christian sexual ethic in this area, we will be alert to helping students avoid homosexual activity, the same as we want to help them avoid non-marital heterosexual activity. We must also provide a hospitable environment where those who are struggling with their sexual identity can find help and hope. We will certainly seek to prevent the development of a student life environment in which homosexual experimentation is considered normative. Meanwhile, a great challenge will be to model love, respect, and hospitality to all students, including those who struggle with homosexuality. This is especially difficult related to this politically and emotionally charged issue.

\* \* \*

We have quite a challenge on our hands, and at the same time quite an opportunity. We can play a key role in helping to shape how generations of young people understand and act on their sexuality. We need a richly informed sexual ethic that goes beyond rules toward a vision of God's kingdom and binding, joyful covenant relationships. While we need to remain in constructive dialogue with broader currents in academia and culture, as evangelical Christians we are not free to abandon biblical sexual morality or the consensual witness of the church for two millennia. If we compromise our standards under the admittedly enormous pressures of

contemporary culture, we will do our students and all who care about our mission an enormous disservice. Above all, we will stand in violation of the will of God as revealed in the text of Scripture.

## Appendix: Practical Action Suggestions for Christian Colleges

- \*Offer clear teaching on biblical and traditional Christian sexual ethics and its competitors, preferably from trained ethicists.
- \*Reaffirm biblical authority and discuss honestly the various forces and factors that challenge it today.
- \*In all venues, treat sexual morality as part of a moral vision rooted in the Kingdom of God.
- \*Offer solid classroom treatment of the issues most relevant to where students are developmentally and where the culture is.
- \*Hire some faculty capable of, and interested in, relating to students where they are, not leaving all of this work to student life staff.
- \*Remember that students are all over the map on sexual issues; we don't need to scandalize the inexperienced by telling them more than they need or want to know. But we do need to offer honest talk to those who are ready to hear it, and need to hear it.
- \*Assume that there is a widespread pornography problem on campus, and act accordingly.
- \*Assume that some students struggle with homosexual desires, and be prepared with resources for counseling such students.
- \*Help pull students back toward a biblical vision of sexuality and away from the oversexed, plastic sexuality found in the culture.
- \*Help students consider their media choices from the perspective of Christian integrity.
- \*Prepare staff to minister to students who come from chaotic and hurtful home backgrounds, and help them get healing and find hope for the future.
- \*Develop and train a significant number of caregivers capable of providing relationship counseling and premarital counseling to students.
- \*Provide a student life environment that supports fragile young marriages for those who are married or get married while still in school.
- \*Create a student life environment with solid rules but also a context that is merciful, compassionate, and solution-oriented when students slip up, as some inevitably will.

\*Emphasize the importance of covenant by speaking that language in our student life environments, not just related to sexuality. Talk about a student life covenant whose terms both sides (all parties) promise to keep.

\*Encourage students to think of sex in covenantal ways, thus de-emphasizing a fixation on “how far is too far” rules, avoiding legalism, and inspiring them to a nobler vision of their sexual identity, behavior, and future.

\*Encourage students to show kindness and mercy to each other by not enticing each other to overdrawn relational intimacy or sexual temptation.

\*Talk honestly with students in appropriate environments about such sensitive issues as masturbation, petting, pornography, etc.

\*Make available excellent resources for students to read that can help direct them away from unbiblical patterns of thought and action.