

Christian sex talk: Beyond birds & bees

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In a sex-saturated society, churches that consider conversations about human sexuality taboo run the risk of appearing irrelevant, some Baptists insist.



David Gushee, Christian ethicist [David Gushee](#), understands why many church leaders shy away from open discussions about sexuality. Pastors fear offending members. Diversity of age, values and life experiences among members make consensus difficult.

“I would fault churches for their silence on these issues, but having witnessed churches melt into horrible conflict over what ought to be solvable problems, I find it hard to fault pastors and other church leaders for not walking into this field full of landmines,” said Gushee, distinguished university professor of Christian ethics and director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University.

“Still, the church’s silence leaves a vacuum that is quickly filled by others. What is not talked about on Sunday morning is instead addressed on Saturday night.”

For 14 years as a minister, Jim Coston, pastor of [Calvary Baptist Church in Waco](#), avoided sermons on sex—except to preach “no, no, no” to intercourse outside marriage.



Jim Coston “I never talked about what God has said ‘yes’ to,” he acknowledged.

In recent months, he has made up for lost time. He preached a sermon series on the Old Testament Song of Songs about the joy of sex within marriage. The congregation responded favorably, and he offered a follow-up message on sex as “a gift from God—a blessing from God within the proper parameters.” Too often, the church has presented sex “more as an accommodation to lust rather than an expression of love,” he said.

“Sex within marriage is beautiful—the most personal act between two people. It is fulfilling even as it makes vulnerable. It is a gift. It is a blessing. Within that context, it is good,” he told the congregation. Outside of marriage, sex is “the misuse of a blessing and therefore sinful,” he added.

Popular media and the prevailing culture, on the other hand, have presented a picture of sex entirely as gratification of one’s own desires, he asserted.

“We have made sex entirely physical and transactional, lacking emotional content. ... The great societal irony is that in sexualizing so much, sex has lost its sanctity. It is not viewed as special but seemingly as commonplace as meeting for a cup of coffee or trying on new clothes,” he said.

“While sex is physical, it is also spiritual. It is giving. It is receiving. By relegating it to just a bodily experience, this expression of love becomes instead an act of taking and diminishing. Sex involves the whole self. It is surrender to another. Sex is more than the mere coupling of bodies. It’s a man and a woman connecting in a fundamental way—becoming one flesh.”

Coston hopes Sunday school classes and small groups at Calvary will keep the conversation going in the months ahead.

“We have to talk about it. After all, our culture is doing it nonstop—often in ways that are not very healthy and appropriate,” he said.



Malcolm Duncan Sometimes, cultural change forces churches to confront issues they might prefer to ignore. In the context of debate in the United Kingdom about same-sex marriage, British Baptist Pastor Malcolm Duncan preached a widely disseminated sermon on sex.

“If we cannot talk about this here, then where exactly shall we?” Duncan asked in his sermon at Gold Hill Baptist Church in Chalfont St. Peter, Buckinghamshire.

Duncan called for more holistic view of sexuality that encompasses the human need for interconnectedness with people of the opposite sex spiritually and socially as well as physically.

“We do not have to be sexually active to be sexually fulfilled,” he said.

With regard not only to homosexuals, but also heterosexual couples

engaged in extramarital or premarital sex, Duncan expressed his belief the church must welcome all people, but not affirm behavior the Bible prohibits.

“Acceptance and agreement are not the same thing,” he said.

However, even among Baptists and other evangelical Christians who take a traditional view toward sex outside marriage, changes in society make it imperative for Christians to frame the discussion in different ways.



Roger Olson “Sexual activity belongs within the confines of heterosexual, monogamous marriages. That should be the church’s position,” said [Roger Olson](#), Foy Valentine professor of Christian theology and ethics at Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary.

“But Christians need to become aware that we no longer own the culture. The culture we live in is pluralistic and secular/pagan. Singling out homosexuality as a special kind of evil is perceived as simply stupid by secular and pagan Americans—to say nothing of non-Americans.”

Crusades to “protect traditional marriage” reinforce the widespread impression that evangelical Christians believe they have the right to dictate and legislate morality for everyone, he said.

Olson advocates a separation of the civil and religious functions of marriage. Government should offer civil unions to guarantee shared property rights and rights in regard to partners’ decisions concerning each other. Churches and religious organizations should have “the exclusive

right to determine who is and who is not married,” he said.

Gushee sees “a weakening sense of moral clarity related to what exactly biblical sexual ethics” means in the 21st century, as well as social pressures that make marriage unattractive or even unattainable for some people.

“Today, we see more clearly than ever that marriage is a social institution whose vitality in part depends on factors extraneous to Christian morality or beyond Christian control,” he said. He cites factors such as the average age for the onset of puberty, the health of the economy, professional prospects for young people, the ages at which people reasonably can be expected to enter into marriage, and even how tax policy, social welfare policy and inheritance law treat marriage.

“The overall direction of recent changes in these areas has been to weaken the viability or preferability of marriage as an institution and to de-couple sexuality from marriage for a majority of the U.S. population,” he said.

“It is not just those with same-sex attraction who lack access to marriage in many parts of the country, but those in their 20s trying to get started in a depressed economy and those in their 70s trying to find love after the death or divorce of a spouse. The viability of the traditional Christian sexual ethic keeps eroding, from all sides.”



[Dan McGee](#), a Christian

Dan McGeepsychologist and

board-certified clinical sexologist, agrees with church leaders who call for a more expansive understanding of human sexuality.

“Sexuality is a much deeper mystery than mere sexual behavior. Human sexuality is interwoven biologically, psychologically, socially and spiritually,” he said.

The complexity of human sexuality makes it particularly difficult for Christians to deal with the issue of homosexuality, said McGee, former director of Counseling and Psychological Services for the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Research points to sexuality as a continuum, from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual, with gradations between, he asserted.

Based on more than 35 years clinical experience, he said, “I lean strongly to the notion that there are indeed biological factors involved in the origin of homosexuality, and the closer one scores on to the ‘exclusively homosexual’ end of the continuum, the greater role this biological factor plays.”

McGee sees Christians who support “reparative” or “conversion” therapy for homosexuals as sincere and well-meaning but ill-informed.

“It’s built on pseudo-science that says, ‘Homosexual orientation is caused by overprotective mothers and distant fathers, and we’re here to fix it,’” he said.

While McGee notes, “I certainly believe one’s faith in a loving God can work miracles,” he insists therapy designed to “cure” homosexuals of same-sex desires can cause guilt, shame and depression for gays who find themselves unable to change their orientation.

Nevertheless, in spite of the complex nature of human sexuality and shifting understandings of marriage, Baptist ministers, ethicists and mental

health professionals agreed on the importance of fidelity and commitment.

Gushee particularly advocates what he calls a “covenant fidelity ethic.”

“Emphasizing the wellbeing of children, parents’ covenant obligations to children and their need for a stable, loving family in which to be raised would be an extremely important part of this ethic,” he said. “And in our culture of easy in/easy out relationships, teaching covenant fidelity to everyone would in fact be countercultural.”