

Look beyond denominational subculture, Baylor prof urges

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ATLANTA—Contemporary ethical debates about sexuality cannot be separated from questions about the nature of the church and whether Christians will be shaped more by covenant community or by culture, a lecturer in Baylor University’s Great Texts program told participants at a [Baptist] Conference on Sexuality and Covenant.

Coleman Fannin called on Baptists to look beyond their denominational subculture and rely on a rich and ancient Christian heritage for guidance, noting, “Baptists have a great deal to learn from Catholic teaching.”

Discussions about sexualColeman Fannin



ethics offer “a test case for whether (Baptists) can learn to live as disciples much closer to the margins of a post-denominational and post-Christian culture,” Fannin told the conference at First Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., sponsored by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Mercer University’s Center for Theology and Public Life.

Fannin, a Truett Seminary alumnus, affirmed his belief in the church’s

traditional teachings on sex, namely:

- Sexual behavior rightly is directed either toward celibacy or heterosexual marriage.
- The inseparable ends of marriage are procreation and “the union of the husband and wife in self-giving love.”

Fannin expressed concern about a perceived “strong current flowing” among moderate Baptists toward viewing those who equate “heterosexism”—a traditional understanding about Christian sexual ethics—with people who practice race, gender and economic oppression.

While he expressed hope that respectful and open conversation on the subject is possible among moderate Baptists, he offered a pessimistic assessment of their ability to unite in any meaningful covenant.

“There is little incentive for Baptists today to stay in the same congregations and denominations with those with whom they disagree, let alone listen to one another’s stories and evaluate another’s arguments,” he said.

Speakers could offer detailed arguments for their understanding of sexuality, drawing on theology, biblical studies, biology and social sciences to support their positions, he noted.

“However, I venture that in the end, arguments will not matter much and that most Baptists will make up their minds—or have already done so—on the basis of personal feelings and especially their respective cultural milieus, which means that they will likely end up very close to where the culture ends up, regardless of whether the culture is right or wrong,” Fannin said.

Baptist of all stripes in the United States have been captive to culture, he

insisted.

“The root of their captivity has been their insistence that the social, political and economic ideals of the United States are fundamentally congruent with Baptist principles,” Fannin said.

He particularly pointed to Baptist emphasis on individualism and American views about freedom.

“I am not arguing that Baptists should discount their personal freedoms or either reclaim or withdraw from the culture. However, although the individual may assert that Jesus Christ is the final authority, it is likely that ‘what the Bible says’ or ‘where the Spirit leads’ will turn out to be what he or she wants the Bible to say or where he or she wants the Spirit to lead, which is actually what his or her cultural milieu has formed him or her to want,” Fannin said.

Both the Southern Baptist subculture and the broadly Protestant culture in the nation have broken down, he noted.

“I am simply convinced that the underlying issue is ecclesiological and that sexuality is a test case for whether (Baptists) can learn to live as disciples much closer to the margins of a post-denominational and post-Christian culture,” he said.

As Baptists seek to cope with that changing cultural and religious landscape, Fannin suggested they look beyond their own denominational culture.

Baptists would benefit from learning more about Catholic theology and practice, he said. While Baptists have a claim to the church’s ancient traditions, Catholicism is more grounded in it, he asserted.