

God's Good Gift of Sex and Gender

Lesson 6: Challenges for the Church Today

Inverted Morality

This week the Episcopal elected Rev. Charlie Holt bishop of the Diocese of Florida, according to The Gainesville Sun. Holt, born in Gainesville, will preside over an area that includes Jacksonville, Tallahassee, and Gainesville.

The Sun noted that some in and outside of the Episcopal Church expressed disappointment in Holt's selection because of his views on same-sex marriage and gender.

Holt has said, *"Christian marriage is a solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God."*

Here are two of the voices of disapproval quoted in the article:

The Rev. Sarah Locke, pastor at Jacksonville Campus Ministry and assisting priest at Episcopal Church of the Redeemer on the Southside, wrote on Twitter, *"Please keep folks in the LGBTQIA+ community in the Diocese of Florida in your prayers. Today the diocese elected another bishop who will not affirm their full humanity and ... believes marriage is between a man and woman and there are only two genders. What a really sad day for the church."*

Matt Hartley, associate director of the University of North Florida's Interfaith Center, wrote on Twitter: *"Deeply grieved that the Episcopal Diocese of Florida ... today elected a bishop who denies the dignity of LGBTQ people & same-sex marriage. Let's say it clear — this misguided theology harms people, their mental health, their bodies."*

What does this reaction tell you about the modern debates about sexuality?

How should we respond to a culture that is hostile to Christian beliefs?

Options: How to live in a world where Christianity is seen as a threat?

- Withdraw from culture
- Conform to culture
- Attack culture through traditional avenues of power
- Engage culture to convert or persuade

Understanding the Contemporary Narrative of Sexuality¹

1. The oppression of the past. In the past, ancient cultures surrounded sex with all sorts of taboos. In general, sex outside of marriage was forbidden in order to control women, to help men protect their daughters and wives as their property.

2. The need for authentic expression. In modern times, however, we have come to believe in the freedom and rights of individuals, including the right to love whomever we

¹ These five points are extracted from PCA's Report on Human Sexuality

choose in a consensual relationship. Science has shown us that sex is a healthy thing and a crucial part of one's identity. It is also a human right, and therefore we will only thrive and flourish as human beings if that right to choose is equally available to all people.

3. The fight to love whom we want to love. Over the past century a number of brave individuals—usually women, gay, and transgender persons—have heroically stood up to the oppressive culture and said, “This is who I am! Don’t let anyone tell you who you can or cannot love!” Many of the early heroes of this movement were marginalized and many died for their willingness to challenge the cultural elites.

4. The hard-won rights of today. But today we have a culture that affirms the right to have sex outside of marriage, to conduct same-sex relationships and include them in the legal institution of marriage, and to allow people to choose their own genders. In all these changes we are forging the first human society in history which is sex-positive and in which all persons can live as equal sexual beings.

5. The continual danger. Despite these great accomplishments, most places in the world, and many places in our own society, still resist this healthy culture of sexual freedom and justice. Indeed, there are those who would try to turn back the clock and roll back these rights. Under no circumstances must we allow regressive forces—the foremost of which is religion—to take this away from us again.

This modern moral story about sexuality creates a plot-line of a struggle between courageous heroes and bigoted, oppressive villains—all toward a happy ending. This particular moral story, however, is based on several beliefs that are not proven—only assumed.

Given this narrative, what would you expect the response to be if you merely answered the story with a list of morals derived from the Bible?

What other ways can we engage this issue?

Expressive Individualism

In lessons 3 and 4, we detailed the harmful effects directly linked to the unfettered modern sexual morality. These effects are clearly being felt in the culture with the decline of sex and greater awareness of sexual abuse. Though direct link between these consequences and the sexual revolution is not always made, we have enough to begin the conversation.

A deeper critique of the underlying narrative, however, is necessary to lead into a gospel conversation.

The modern view of identity is sometimes called “expressive individualism.” This is the belief that identity is found in one's desires. In the past, people found their identities in their duties or relationships. Today, in order to become your true self, you have to get in touch with your inner desires and pursue fulfillment of them.

Anything that stands in the way of you fulfilling those inner desires is psychologically repressive and therefore unhealthy. They prevent us from becoming our “true self” or our “authentic self.”

Before we offer a critique, what about “expressive individualism” is appealing to you? What about it makes sense?

There is a lot about “expressive individualism” that feels like the right path to finding purpose in life. It is a reaction against the harmful ways others impose onto you their “plan for your life.” It rejects the pressure to conform to a society that often feels ruthless and pointless.

The journey of self-discovery is also exhilarating because it offers explanations about why we act the way we do. We can look back at our own history and understand ourselves and our motives in a clearer way that feels honest and true. No one wants to live in a fake life. We want to be known deeply. God wired us to be known, so knowing oneself is rewarding.

And, while we would agree that low self-esteem is contrary to a person’s dignified worth as bearers of the image of God, the solution is not to build up our self-esteem. Christianity has bought into this modern view of identity and offered a gospel that is primarily about filling up our emotional needs. “The prosperity gospel, churches and ministries without membership and discipline, consumer-oriented mega-churches—all adapt heavily to the culture of expressive individualism rather than challenging it.”²

Exposing the Dark Side of the Modern Self

The dark side of expressive individualism is that the modern self is extremely elusive. Our inward desires shift constantly, making the pursuit of self-knowledge a moving target. This might be stimulating at first, but it will become exhausting.

In addition to that, there is a moral inconsistency in our culture that can set expressive individualism up for failure. In one moment, we are taught to determine right and wrong for ourselves (relativism). But, in the next moment, our culture imposes a very definite set of moral norms. We’re taught that we are free from moral absolutes, but then punished mercilessly for transgressing certain moral absolutes.

We’ve already noted how this inconsistency has brought confusion in the area of sexuality and gender.

Once you decide on who you want to be, it is completely up to you then to achieve it. This means that the modern self is highly performance based. Modern people are experiencing the crushing burden of their inability to achieve the desires that they think are their purpose in life.

² Ibid.

Our sexual apologetic cannot talk only about sex. We need to challenge the undergirding assumptions about identity that make modern morality so appealing. Only then can we present the good news of the gospel and God's gift of sex and gender.

The Good News the Christianity Offers

1. A Grace-Based Identity

Rather than hopelessly chasing an identity through our performance, Christianity offers a new identity that is completely secure and given as a free gift. Affirmation doesn't come through a moral relativism that can be lost when we bump up against a cultural taboo. The gospel allows for ultimate honesty and authenticity as we acknowledge our sinfulness but also the ultimate acceptance and worth. Instead of pointing us inward, it turns us outward toward a loving relationship with God.

2. Grounding for an Equitable Society

Christianity challenges the culture's hierarchy of self-worth based in power not by overthrowing the system, but by acknowledging our equal brokenness and inability to be righteous. We stand as equals, sinners in need of grace, and when redeemed, equally loved and accepted as God's children. The Christian community was the first multi-ethnic religious community that spanned the cultural dichotomies of rich/poor, education, etc. Christianity offers relationship based on self-giving not class or status.

3. A Better Vision for Sex

Sexual relationships within Christianity are not based on performance or power but on love. The trust within a covenanted relationship allows both partners to be self-giving rather than selfish.

The logic of God's intention for sex exclusively between one man and one woman committed together in marriage is reinforced by the reality that only that union can produce new human life. This context of the family (man and woman) allows children of that marriage to grow up in the presence of the full range of our gendered humanity.

4. Gender Diversity³

Christians believe God distributed unique abilities, perspectives, and other gifts across the two genders. We do not believe that men can reproduce all the gifts women have nor that women can reproduce what men have. We believe a marriage between persons of the same gender fails to practice the gender diversity that we wish to see in other areas of life. We believe that the union of male and female in marriage reflects the union of God and humanity through Christ.

5. Super-Consensual Relationships

Christians believe sexual intimacy is not for those who merely give temporary consent for one sexual encounter but for those who give permanent, whole-life consent to each other through marriage. And even inside marriage, sex must be mutually consensual (1 Cor. 7: 1-4). We believe this reflects how we know God—only through a covenant of exclusive love.

³ Points 4 and 5 taken from the Report on Human Sexuality