

THE LEGITIMACY OF SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION

A few years ago when I was doing my Rheumatology course, I had to sit through a whole day's teaching on rheumatology and sexuality. Frankly I disremember a more embarrassing day. We spent most of the day discussing a 'Sexual Response Quiz' that we had to fill in (which was supposed to be a matter of fact approach to sex, but naturally became a free-for-all comment on the personal intimate sexual history of everyone present) and then discussing the 'origins and rationales' behind such ideas as: homosexuality should be forbidden; anal sex is unnatural; children should not be taught about sex; women are passive receivers of male sexual advances etc. I remember so well the agonies of indecision I went through as I sat there wondering whether I should just get up and walk out, wondering how to challenge the filth I was hearing without sounding like a stuffy old prude, the grief I felt that God's good gift should be so abused and his values laughed at, and the feelings of frustration choking me as I challenged the lecturer at the end of the day as to exactly how an understanding of what characterises an orgasm for men and women would help me to improve my ability to care for my patients.

Sadly this is not a unique testimony. In his book 'Meltdown', Marcus Honeysett recounts the true story of a student nurse who found herself in a sexual health tutorial having to touch each other inappropriately and lick each other. She came under such extreme fire from her classmates when she tried to explain her distaste that she capitulated and did all that she was told to do.

The reality is that sexual health education has gone beyond issues of primary and secondary health care where the focus of training was on diagnosis, treatment and preventative education. We are no longer studying in an environment where it is easy to have divergent moral opinions on a topic yet still learn side by side to care for someone. When a clinical focus gives way to an emotional one, then personal experience and value judgements come to the fore. The need to ask 'why' and the constant search for knowledge which drives the educational and research process, expressed in an environment that rejects the notion of authority and external rights and wrongs, is bound to end up relying increasingly on techniques that depend upon personal experimentation and reflection. This makes emotion the vehicle for understanding and places each of us at the helm; but without a highway code to guide our conduct, we end up in head-on collisions and in a dead lock with everyone refusing to give way.

As Christians how do we conduct ourselves in this kind of environment?

Well, from a simply pragmatic perspective, we should remember that our opinion is just as valid as anyone else's. One of the problems we face is that other people tend to assume that when as Christians we express an opinion we are judging anyone who does not hold to the same values as we do, yet when they are expressing an opinion they are simply expressing their opinion, which they are quite entitled to do. Do you see the distinction? The consequence of this for many Christians is that we just keep quiet. We keep our heads down, keep our opinions to ourselves and go with the flow. However as Christians this isn't an option. If someone misrepresents my sister or my friend in my hearing, I don't sit there in silence. Because I love them and am concerned that their values should be faithfully represented I will challenge the person in error. How much more, if I love the Creator of the universe and my Saviour, should I be concerned to correct and proclaim his values when

they are misrepresented? As Christians we are Christ's witnesses to the world – what kind of witnesses are we that say nothing? I would encourage you to be bold and speak up in lectures, whatever the personal cost or consequences. After all, like Timothy, we have not been given a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power that should not lead us to be ashamed to testify to Christ (2 Timothy 1:7-8). However I know in saying this many people will quake at the knees and reject this as an impossibility for them. If this is you why not start with something you consider more manageable – speak with your lecturer afterwards, as I did, or talk through your reservations and reasons behind them with some of your non Christian classmates.

The second thing I think we need to understand when facing these kinds of issues is where we stand biblically and doctrinally on them – after all we can hardly challenge the world views of our lecturers and colleagues if we haven't got our own understanding clear.

I don't think sexuality is an illegitimate topic for us to be discussing, as nurses and in relation to our patients, but I think the Bible is clear that there should be boundaries. The apostles in Acts are obedient to the authorities until such a point as they are being asked to do things displeasing to God. I think this is a helpful reminder for us in lectures on sexuality.

God created us male and female and as such I think it is legitimate for us to consider what effect illness has on our self-image - and that includes our understanding of ourselves as sexual beings. However the Bible also tells us to flee sexual immorality and to fix our minds on things above. If our lecturers are asking us to perform anything that could be considered as sexually inappropriate or we are being encouraged to dwell upon things that again are sexually inappropriate and have no immediate relevance to the care we offer to our patients, then we have biblical authority to challenge them and to walk away.

The other reason I think it is important to get our doctrine straight on issues relating to sexuality and relationships is because this goes to the very heart of the gospel. The creation accounts in Genesis home in on the fact that individually and corporately men and women are made in God's image and that only woman was a suitable helper for man. Not only do we bear God's image as individuals, but there is also something particular about the male / female marriage bond that also expresses the image of God. In Hosea God shows Israel her unfaithfulness towards him and what he intends to do about it through the marriage of the prophet Hosea to the adulterous Gomer. Not only is Hosea's marriage a worked-out picture of Israel's relationship with God, but God goes on to explain Israel's unfaithfulness and his intentions in marriage language. In Ephesians chapter 5 marriage is explained in gospel language - the relationship between husband and wife is to reflect the relationship between Christ and the Church. And in Revelation the destiny of the saints (Christians) is revealed as they compose the bride of the lamb. These are some of the most striking examples, but they are by no means exhaustive. Again and again in the Old and the New Testaments marriage is held up as a reflection of God's relationship with his people, and goes to the very heart of his and our identity.

This is why as Christians we mustn't swallow the lie that the Bible is a culturally crafted masterpiece and that as we move into the 21st century we need to bring the Bible's code of behaviour up to date. Of course we mustn't ignore culture, but we must be aware that the big picture of the Bible transcends culture. Marriage in this case doesn't just have human or cultural relevance – it has eternal significance. Paul says that if a man is acting

inappropriately towards the girl he is engaged to then they should marry straight away (1 Corinthians 7:36). Sex and the expression of our sexuality in ways designed to stimulate one another is to be reserved for marriage – they are part of this gospel picture and are not to be abused.

Sexuality, sexual health and the impact of different illnesses on our perception of ourselves as sexual beings are not illegitimate subjects for us as Christians to be studying; however we must remember that those teaching us, if they are not Christians with minds controlled by the spirit, will be victims of futile thinking and darkened understanding – no matter how many courses they have taken on the subject. So do not let them win you over or shout you down with fine sounding arguments about tolerance. If your teaching environment is being governed by opinion, personal preference or experience, then at the very least your perspective is as valuable as anyone else's and should be 'tolerated'. Remember though that sexuality has a special place in God's engagement with his people and be ready to defend and proclaim his values in your speech and in your behaviour. You might face some serious flack, but you might also save a soul. I began to investigate Christianity because I saw a friend wrestling with God's teaching on sexuality and seeking to take him seriously in the way she lived her life.