

PROSPECTUS

A [Baptist] Conference on Sexuality and Covenant

Co-sponsored by Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and
Center for Theology and Public Life, Mercer University

First Baptist Church, Decatur, Georgia
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A Needed Conversation

Contemporary social trends are raising profound and often painful challenges to traditional Christian sexual ethics. Many Christians and churches are today struggling to discern God's intention in the area of sexuality. Because sexuality is such a complex, personal, and sometimes controversial topic, it is often difficult to discuss. But just because issues are difficult does not free Christians from the responsibility of discussing them. Offering teaching, counseling, and moral formation related to sexuality is one essential component of Christian discipleship. This Conference on Sexuality and Covenant aims to provide Baptist Christians, and other interested Christians, the opportunity to have the realistic, honest, and compassionate conversations we need to undertake.

The Traditional Christian Sexual Ethic

Most Baptist Christians have at some point in their lives been taught a sexual ethic that looks something like this: *Sexual expression is a sacred gift from God that is reserved for the lifetime marriage covenant between one man and one woman*; therefore, sexual contact in any other context violates God's intention as revealed in Christian Scripture.

Contemporary Challenges

While still adhered to and cherished by many, every aspect of this traditional Christian sexual ethic currently faces profound challenges:

- The *sacredness of sex as a gift of God* is challenged by cultural trends that demean sex as mere body function or make it an object of commerce and entertainment, as in pornography, prostitution, sex clubs, and sex trafficking, all of which are noticeably present in American culture. Additionally, the steady lowering of restraint in all other forms of media such as television, movies, social media, and music confirm these trends.
- The *reserving of sex for marriage* is challenged not just by changes in cultural attitudes toward premarital sex, but also by the fact that individuals increasingly delay marriage, and growing numbers of young people lack confidence in marriage as an institution.
- The *steadily high divorce rate* suggests that the American population in general and the churched American population specifically, include millions of sexually experienced single adults who still long for the intimacy and sexual expression they have already enjoyed earlier in their adult lives.
- The *growing percentage of adult Americans that cohabit* for extended periods of time without any plan or intention of marrying raise acute questions about the future of marriage.

- *Gays and lesbians seek religiously and culturally sanctioned forms of sexual expression.* The question of whether there can be any morally legitimate gay or lesbian sexual expression within God's will divides Christian congregations, denominations, and the Church as a whole.
- *Polls and life experiences reveal sharp fissures in attitudes about these matters along generational lines.* For example, Christians under the age of 30 seem far more accepting of the morality of committed same-sex relationships and cohabitation than do older Christians. These generational differences strain our Christian communities and bewilder many.

These kinds of issues affect everybody, including every Christian. As individuals, we all must discern what vision (among many competing visions) of sexual morality will govern our lives and how we will adhere to that vision amidst difficult circumstances and unprecedented cultural shift. What will we teach our children?

The issues also affect every community of faith. Churches face related pastoral challenges, such as whether to welcome cohabiting or gay and lesbian couples to church membership. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing congregations is the ability to talk about matters of faith and sexuality in meaningful and formative ways in a cultural seemingly unable to have a civil conversation.

A Family Conversation

This conference on sexuality assumes a traditional Christian sexual ethic that is being challenged in the ways described. The other pivotal assumption is that even as this traditional sexual ethic is being challenged, some believe that a broader covenantal sexual ethic has the potential to offer resources for our contemporary situation that have not been adequately explored and seldom embraced.

This conference offers a context for a renewed consideration of Christian sexual ethics that attempts to pray and reflect on questions around such issues as pre- and non-marital sex, traditional marriage, cohabitation, and same-sex relationships, all through the lens of biblical covenant.

The organizers of A [Baptist] Conference on Sexuality and Covenant believe that Baptist Christians need our own kind of “family conversation,” in the terms and style of our shared tradition. Plenary speakers will be chosen from Baptist churches, academia, and other contexts for their realism, honesty, expertise, sensitivity, and demonstration of the fruit of the Spirit. In a context of [Worshipful-Work®](#), they will offer their best insights as a catalyst for unhurried and fair-minded small group dialogue.

There is no preconceived agenda. There are no plans to draft a closing statement or pronounce a sexual ethic for all Baptists. No political or public-policy issues will be scheduled for discussion. Organizers will make every effort to encourage dialogue that is Christ-like, personal, intergenerational, respectful, informed, and loving. The goal of this Conference is the equipping of intergenerational congregational leaders (lay and clergy) for meaningful personal and congregational dialogue and discipleship as it relates to Christian sexual ethics.

For more information or to register, visit www.thefellowship.info/conference or email your questions to conference@thefellowship.info or gushee_dp@mercer.edu.