

Discussion Guide for Small Groups

to accompany videos from

A [Baptist] Conference on Sexuality and Covenant

Plenary One

Jenell Paris

1. What are the implications for Christian sexual morality of the fact that Americans are today much less likely to marry than in previous generations, and are marrying later? Is "just say no till marriage" a viable ethic in this context? If not, what would we replace it with? On what authority?
2. Jenell reports that one in five women having abortions in the US is evangelical or born-again Christians. Why do you think that percentage is so high?
3. Test this claim against your own experiences: "As parents' church attendance increases, frequency of communication about sex decreases. When talking does happen, it's mostly about morality, not information about biology, health, society, birth control, pleasure, intimacy, or relationships."
4. Following Christian Smith, Jenell suggests that religious communities have 3 types of resources available to help guide us toward sexual holiness: religious teachings, learned competencies, and social/organizational ties. Discuss.
5. Discuss this claim by Jenell: "Engaging internal pluralism with love is a loss of power (if you or your group was in a power position in the era of relative consensus). It's a turning toward community, toward dialogue, toward tolerance for difference. It's NOT a turning toward relativism, or moral chaos, or dismissal of Scripture. "
6. Jenell names three "cultural shifts" that are deeply affecting the church: 1) a turn from exemption to implication 2) a turn from relative consensus to internal pluralism 3) a turn from abhorrence to tolerance. Discuss this claim.
7. A major thesis of Jenell's book is that it is time for us to stop making so much of sexual identity. That claim surfaces here in this line: "Refusing the social belief that sexuality is an identity-constituting element of life; instead putting sexuality in its place – an important place, but one that doesn't eclipse the real truth of human identity, that we are made and loved by God."

*videos accessible at <http://www.thefellowship.info/conference>.

Plenary Two

Guy Sayles

1. Discuss this important claim about the role of scripture for us as Christ followers: "The Scriptures serve this formative and transformative purpose far more than they function to provide detailed answers to our thorny ethical questions or to solve our complex moral problems. Reading, studying and living God's story, centered on Jesus, fashions us into people who can be burdened by, and trusted with, the privilege and responsibility of making decisions in harmony with our understanding of the will and way of Jesus. We are like jazz musicians who play our parts in response to a strong central theme."
2. Guy emphasizes congregational decision making in 'sacramental' type issues such as marriage, remarriage, and ordination. Discuss the significance of our congregational polity and the difference it might make for our people in wrestling with sexuality and covenant.
3. Reflect further on Guy's central claim that God is like Jesus. What does that have to do with the themes of this conference?

Sharyn Dowd

1. Discuss: "Scripture can only be interpreted in a circle of understanding of which Christ is the center and humility is the circumference." Sharyn says we cannot merely disagree with each other by quoting scripture and calling it discernment. We need a particular kind of community, characterized by surrender, mutual love, and transparency.
2. What is the church: a mixed bag of saints and sinners or a holy and set apart community? How does that affect our approach to all kinds of issues, including but not limited to sexual morality? What do you think of Sharyn's suggestion that our churches need an increase in accountability?
3. Consider Sharyn's suggestion that at different times and in different contexts different churches are called to different roles. Could it be that our goal in CBF life should not be a shared vision but a congregationally specific vision? Could we live with that?

Plenary Three

Coleman Fannin

1. Coleman argues that "perhaps the defining characteristic of Baptists in America [of all types]--has been cultural captivity." What does he mean by cultural captivity? Do you agree? How might cultural captivity be affecting Baptist conversations about sexuality?
2. Coleman suggests that moderate Baptists face an identity crisis, and that this crisis is fundamentally ecclesiological--it concerns the nature of the church. He situates the discussion of sexuality as a test case, and like every other issue, as being related to our problems with understanding the nature, location, and significance of the church. Discuss.
3. Coleman suggests the need for human communities, such as the church, that "recognize that human desires are affected by sin and that they must be restrained and redirected." Compare and contrast this view with Melissa's suggestion that the Christian tradition has erred in not sufficiently affirming the goodness of the body and of sexuality.

4. Consider the very different approaches to the continuing value of Christian tradition in the two presentations in this session.

Melissa Browning

1. Melissa situates Paul's teaching on sexuality in a 1st century context filled with mistrust of the body, sex, and passion. What is the impact of that contextualization on your understanding of his writings about sex?
2. Discuss this statement and its meaning to you and for Christian teaching and practice: "The bodily experiences of women abused and raped within their marriages reminds us that a marriage document alone carries little moral weight... fidelity to an unfaithful, abusive marriage can never be a virtue."
3. Consider the idea that both fidelity and abstinence are "servant virtues," which "must serve life and love," and are not good in themselves apart from the goals that they serve.

Plenary Four

David Gushee

1. David says that "covenant is a, if not the, single best way that has emerged in Christian tradition to talk about what we are supposed to do with our sexuality and our relationality." Having heard his talk, do you agree? Why or why not? Or do you propose a different standard/norm?
2. David emphasizes our freedom to make a covenant but then our subsequent lack of freedom to break it. But are people really free in this way when they make relational or marital covenants? Aren't they/we affected by all kinds of factors that actually limit our freedom or set scripts for us that we feel bound to follow?
3. David suggests that our greatest challenge today is "*nurturing more Christians who have the confidence, and the willingness, and the capacity, to make and keep such covenant promises.*" He says this is true because covenant is biblical, and also because it works better for adults and children. Do you agree?
4. Discuss the idea that in a consumer society we are trained not to make covenants, and that there is hardly any context in which anyone learns how to make and keep a covenant—including the churches.

Emily Holladay

1. Emily suggests that churches need to make a kind of "community covenant" with married couples within the fellowship. What are the possibilities of, and the obstacles to, such an approach? What level of intimacy and accountability would be required in church life for us to actually engage in discussion of the health of one another's marriages?
2. Were you surprised at how heartbreaking Emily found her parents' divorce, even though she was already "out of the house" as a college student? What does this teach us about the marriage covenant? Is divorce a breaking of covenant with that couple's children?
3. How is divorce affecting the sexual, relational, and marital choices of those affected by it directly or even indirectly?

Jennifer Crumpton

1. Discuss Jennifer's depiction of the New York dating scene. How does that compare with your own experience? What implications does it have for Christian sexual ethics?
2. Discuss: "If society values monetary success and rewards aggressive and callous business practices in that process, then aggressive and callous sexual ethics will also be acceptable." Jennifer draws the connection between our non-covenantal society and church and says our sexuality simply follows suit. Consider the significance of this claim.
3. Discuss the new challenges facing emerging adults who experience puberty earlier and marriage later, if at all, than any time in history.

Plenary Five

Roz Nichols

1. Roz says that in her community "single life is the majority, while marriage becomes less of the gold standard." What is the impact on sexual ethics of a context in which marriage increasingly fades into the experience only of a smaller and smaller minority of congregants?
2. Roz claims that in scripture romance, courtship, sensuality, and even sexuality are not entirely confined to marital relationships, citing Song of Songs, Boaz and Ruth, Jacob and Rachel, and Rebecca and Isaac. What do you make of this claim? Dig around in the texts and discuss what you find.
3. Discuss this line from Roz's presentation: "Far too many married folks are standing in divorce court today because they thought that marriage would somehow sequester their raging libidos. And they have indeed paid the price in finding out that it did not." What does this teach about the relationship between sexuality and covenant?
4. Roz suggests that we may need to reconsider the meaning of fornication: "how we prostitute ourselves, objectify others, barter our bodies in exchange for momentary release from the loneliness. In this regard we commit fornication not simply because we are not married." What do you make of this rethinking of the meaning of this term?

Cody Sanders

1. In keeping with Cody's main question: What are some of the things that Cody's presentation communicated about the practice of covenant among LGBT people?
2. What was your reaction to hearing Cody's personal story, and his effort to make sense both of his sexuality and his faith and call to ministry?
3. Cody's is one of several presentations linking traditional heterosexual relationships and marriage to defined gender roles that have historically subjugated women. Respond to this critique.
4. Discuss Cody's reflections on the 'power of baptismal identity to break down the boundaries that are erected around our human particularities.' Compare and contrast with other visions of the church articulated so far at the conference.

Rhonda Blevins

1. Rhonda's paper raises the question of whether social and economic considerations such as tax and estate issues are creating a situation in which senior adults can and maybe even should covenant together and yet not marry. Discuss whether any space can or should be opened between covenant and marriage.
2. "The very best way I can honor God is to live my life to the fullest." So said senior adult "Sandy." Discuss.
3. What does Rhonda's presentation reveal about the place of sex within the broader range of purposes of romantic or covenantal relationships?
4. Is there an appropriate sexual ethic for spouses "left behind" due to Alzheimer's and dementia?
5. What do you think of a rethinking of Christian sexual ethics in terms of "appropriate vulnerability" rather than marriage alone?

Plenary Six

LeDayne Polaski:

1. LeDayne suggested the benefit of rethinking conflict as positive, even as holy ground, rather than as negative and destructive. Think about this claim in light of your own experiences in personal and church life.

2. Discuss this argument from LeDayne's presentation: "the very passion with which people approach these conversations is POWER, power which can be channeled in life-giving ways – fire which can burn without consuming."

Wendell Griffen:

1. Wendell argues that Christians have simply been afraid to talk about sex, and that the subject was avoided in his home, church, and ministry training. Is that your experience?

2. Consider this statement: "As we became better informed about these and other aspects of heterosexual privilege we remembered our personal and collective experiences with injustice. We recalled that during slavery marriage ceremonies did not protect slaves from being sold away from each other and that Baptists misused the Bible to justify human trafficking, chattel slavery, and Jim Crow segregation. We recalled that black people and women were denied citizenship and social equality." Wendell and his (predominantly African-American) congregation concluded that a parallel existed between the historic experiences of white privilege and heterosexual privilege and that both needed to be rejected. Discuss.

Lindsay Comstock:

Discuss how the human trafficking problem might or might not be related to the US church's failures to address human sexuality adequately.