
The Way of the Wise: Teaching Teenagers about Sex

by Paul David Tripp

It doesn't take much insight or cultural awareness to realize that we need to be concerned about the culture in which our children are growing. The philosophies of materialism, autonomy, entitlement, and hedonism beckon them at every turn. The popular media is able to beam these philosophies into our homes by means of powerful drama, engaging comedy, visually frenetic music videos and 30-second, attention-commanding commercials. All of this is to say that our children are being powerfully influenced, and the view of life being propagated is decidedly unbiblical. We need to be actively engaging our children with the life-transforming truths that will expose the counterfeits for what they are. These truths must be packaged in a way that is understandable to the average young person.

One of the places where our culture has most obviously exchanged the truth of God for a lie is in the area of sexuality. This lie is being peddled to our children incessantly, from the teen magazines that portray a distorted sexuality to the overtly sexual images of MTV music videos. How important it is for us to be in the battle! To do that we must prepare ourselves by thinking in a genuinely biblical fashion about teenagers and sexuality. That is the purpose of this article. My goal is not to do an exhaustive critique of sexuality in Western culture but to lay out a biblical conceptual base and to suggest practical strategies for discipling teenagers in this area. I will start by examining the culture and the church, move next to a biblical view of teenagers, then to a biblical model of sexuality, and finally to practical strategies for dealing with our teenagers in this area.

The State of the Culture:

Institutionalizing Sexual Idolatry

The presence of overt sexual expression in our culture should not surprise us since it is rooted in a view of life that has "exchanged the worship and service of the Creator for the worship and service of the created thing."

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The view of life from which modern sexual expression emerges holds these "truths" to be self-evident:

1. That people are ultimate and autonomous. That is, there is nothing more important than the individual; I am self-sustaining and free from any authority I do not choose to follow.

2. That the highest of human values and experiences is personal satisfaction and pleasure. I am entitled to my share of pleasure and comfort.

3. That I must be constantly vigilant that my "needs" will be met.

4. That the most important of loves is the love of self. Without this I will be unable to function.

5. That bigger pleasure is better—a constant desire for greater, more effective stimulation.

6. That what is important is the here and now, leading to a constant pursuit of instant gratification.

7. That the physical person is more important than the spiritual person, leading to an inordinate body focus.

In a culture that looks at people as ultimate, God as absent, and pleasure as the highest experience, it is no wonder that sexuality becomes such a dominant force. It provides a powerful pathway to instant physical pleasure. It provides false worship (counterfeiting the first great command) and false relationship (counterfeiting the second great command). We must realize that our culture will never provide a balanced view of sexuality to our children if it does not also abandon its roots in a philosophy that leaves God out and makes human satisfaction its single focus. Each institution in our culture is infected with a distorted view of human sexuality. It can be seen in marriage, at school, in government, in commerce, and in entertainment. This being so, our children need us to be radically active in countering it.

The State of the Church:

Giving Mixed Messages to our Teens

It is important to recognize the ambivalence of the church when it comes to sex. We need to acknowledge how this ambivalence has affected our teenagers.

As Christians, we say that sex is a gift from God, yet we are strangely silent on the topic and uncomfortable in the rare instances when it is discussed. We treat this area in a way that is uniquely different from other important areas of life. This leads to a lack of sexual balance, a lack of openness, and a lack of clear, practical sexual education. Sex tends, in other words, to get placed outside the boundaries of the normative Chris-

tian world view.

From the vantage point of the typical teenager (who doesn't consider the underlying issues or give the benefit of the doubt), Christianity appears to be "sex-negative." The church has been perceived as viewing human sexuality as less than good for a long time, and it is surely the perception of many teens in and around the church today. I can remember taking my nine- and

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eleven-year-old sons out for pizza with the purpose of talking about sex. After we ordered I opened up the subject, took out a pen and began drawing on a napkin. At first my sons were surprised that I was willing to talk with such openness. Then they figured that if I was not reticent to talk with them about sex, they should not be either. My goal was to treat this area in the same way I had treated other areas—as an important piece of the Christian world and life view that I was seeking to instill in them. I had every reason to discuss the subject and no reason to be embarrassed or silent.

If the church unwittingly implies that it is "sex-negative," it loses its authority in the teenager's life as an available and reliable resource for understanding, guiding, or correcting his or her sexual life. Teens won't (and often don't) come to the Christian community with their sexual questions, fears, and experiences.

Why are we as Christians so ambivalent about this area? Why do we tend to give confusing signals to our teens? It seems that this ambivalence is rooted in three biblical misunderstandings. As long as these distortions are present in the evangelical church, we will fail our teens in our role as God's agents to develop sexual godliness in them. These three misunderstandings will be discussed in this article:

1. The church has tended to have an unbiblical view of sexuality as less than good and godly.
2. We have tended to have an unbiblical view of sin as behavioral and physical rather than a matter of the heart.
3. We have tended to have an unbiblical view of teenagers; seeing teen choice as biologically determined.

If our ambivalence has implied to our teens that the church is sex-negative, what options are left for them? (1) They can attempt to live with the church's embarrassed silence and cope with their questions, interests,

and experiences alone. This is not a workable option. (2) The teens are left thinking that Christians do not have sexual questions or problems and begin to question their own relationship with the Lord when they do. Do we really want our teens to think that sexual temptation and sin are not part of the Christian's normal struggle? (3) Finally, teens can go where information is readily available and open discussion the norm—that is, the world. Here they will be able to ask questions and get answers, no matter how regrettable they may be.

We cannot live with the ambivalence of the church. We cannot allow the world to be the primary source of guidance for our teens in this or any other area. The Christian community, from the home to the organized church, must be prepared to act, to educate, to guide, and to restore. This article will lay out a practical agenda for dealing with teens in the area of sex. My hope is that it will serve as a guide to all who are involved in teaching, parenting, counseling, and restoring our teenagers.

A Biblical View of Teenagers

One of the major reasons the church has not been more active in dealing with our teens in this area is that we have bought into an unbiblical view of adolescence: It is not hard to figure out what most parents expect of a child this age. I heard it recently at a conference. "We just have to expect our teenagers to be rebellious; all of us were. We just need to ride it out," a father said. His wife chimed in, "You can't argue with hormones!" Those two comments give us the current view of most Christian parents as they view the teenage years. The question is, Is this a biblical view of this period of life?

Too often, when it comes to teenagers, we have bought into a biological model of behavior. We talk about our teenagers as collections of raging, rebel hormones encased in developing skin, and we see our goal as somehow chaining those hormones long enough so that we can survive until they reach age twenty. It's a survival mentality that exposes the poverty of this view. Many parents who talk to me about their teens talk without hope because they see them as victims of hormones that drive them to do crazy things. It is implied that for this age span Scripture doesn't work, the gospel doesn't work, talking doesn't work (i.e., "You can't talk to hormones!"). But we cannot be satisfied with this view of teenagers. As in all other areas of life, we need a view that is distinctly biblical.

In 2 Timothy 2:22, Paul exhorts Timothy to "flee the evil desires [lusts] of youth." This interesting phrase speaks to the way we view teenagers and the way we define the teen years. First, notice that the Bible is not naive about this time of life. There are lusts that uniquely plague youth, temptations that are particularly power-

ful. These need to be faced. Scripture is enjoining us to be strategic, to ask the question, "What are the evil desires that grip a person during this phase of life?"

Another thing to be drawn from Paul's qualifier, "youthful," is that each phase of life has its own set of temptations. The temptations of the young man and the old man are not identical. Paul is reminding Timothy to be aware of who he is and where the pockets of temptation exist around him.

Another thing that can be drawn from this phrase is that teenagers have not been singled out for particular sacrifice and suffering. Each person at each time in his life, if he seeks to please the Lord, must watch, pray, stand fast, and fight lest he fall into temptation. The young person is called to run from the evil desires of youth, while the older person is called to guard against the temptations unique to age. Each person must accept each stage of warfare in the normal Christian life.

When seeking to understand the tempting desires of youth, look at the book of Proverbs. In the first seven chapters, a father addresses his son, detailing what it means to live wisely and foolishly. It is a father warning his son about the particular temptations of his youth. This portion of Scripture has particular areas of focus and helps us establish a genuinely biblical model of our teenagers' struggles in contrast to the current, popular, biological model. Several characteristics of young people emerge from these chapters.

1. Teenagers don't tend to value wisdom. My teenagers don't run to me at the end of their school day and say, "Boy, Dad, I've been thinking about it today, and I realize that I have an abject lack of wisdom. I would love to sit at your feet and glean the wisdom you have received from your years of Scripture study and walking with the Lord." Most of us would be shocked if such a thing happened!

Teenagers tend to be closed. They tend to be defensive. Teenagers don't tend to love correction or long for wisdom and understanding. Teenagers tend to be much more externally focused, more concerned about physical things than spiritual things. So the father in Proverbs says to his son many times and in many ways, "Get wisdom!"

2. Young people tend to be unwise in their choice of companions. What parent hasn't winced as their teenager has brought home their latest, greatest friend who looks like a prison escapee! The parent struggles to be polite while thinking, "I don't want you to ever see this person again!"

Teenagers don't tend to make mature evaluations of their relationships. They tend to be unwise in choosing those who have influence in their lives. And they tend to get easily hurt if you criticize their friends. Again, the

early chapters of Proverbs emphasize the impact of relationships on who you are, what you think, and what you do.

3. Teenagers don't tend to focus on the heart. In the middle of this section of Proverbs the author says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (4:23). He is telling his son that the heart needs to be the focus of his concern, yet it is the very thing that teenagers most easily ignore.

Teenagers tend to be experts in instant gratification, not long-term outcomes.

As a father, I want to make my children aware of the issues of their hearts. That is not what my children are interested in naturally. As sinners, they tend to bring a natural legalism to our relationship. They want to know what the rule is and how close they can get to the boundaries without getting in trouble. They want to know what will happen if they actually cross the boundaries. Their view of God's law is the exact opposite of what Christ expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48). Teenagers tend to focus on the letter of the law and not the spirit. If we are unaware of this and ignore the heart that lies beneath the behavior, we may be encouraging the kind of Pharisaism that Christ is confronting in His sermon. We may be raising children who "honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from Him."

4. Young people don't tend to have an eschatological perspective. I have never had one of my teenagers come to me and say, "You know, Dad, I was really faced with temptation today; but I looked at the temptation in the light of eternity, and I thought, Dad, that the 'suffering of this present moment'..." The view of life that brings godly responsibility to one's sexuality is rooted in eternity, but for the teenager eternity is distant and irrelevant. Teenagers tend to be experts in instant gratification, not long-term outcomes. Their perspective is most often dominated by the moment, with few looks to the future. Thus, this first section of Proverbs uses many eschatological metaphors like harvesting, inheriting, paths, and the "ends" of things. The message of the father to his son is, "Remember, Son, this is not all there is. Live for the future; do not let the desires of the moment trick you into forgetting what is to come. The seeds you plant now you will harvest later."

5. Teenagers tend to be uniquely susceptible to sexual temptation. No issue gets more attention in this Scripture portion than this one. There is warning after warn-

ing to guard against sexual sin. Proverbs 5 and 7 are entirely dedicated to this issue. Any parent knows that there is an explosion of awareness and interest in sexuality during the teen years. Suddenly our children realize that it is significant that there are two sexes. They see and feel things that they never have before. They have come alive to an important dimension of human life, yet often without the maturity to deal with it in a self-controlled and godly fashion.

To summarize, it is important when dealing with our teenagers about sexuality to remember who they are. We do not want to buy into the biological hopelessness of our culture. At the same time, we do not want to be naive about the real struggles of this time of life. The five characteristics noted above contextualize the teenager's struggle with sexuality for us. They remind us of what the teenager brings to moments of sexual temptation and personal sexual desire. They show us how the world tends to look from a young person's vantage point, giving us a sense of the issues we need to deal with as we seek to help them. Each characteristic shapes the way a teenager thinks and acts in this important area of life.

Honestly examining each of these characteristics should remind us not of how utterly different teenagers are but of how much they are like us. Each of us can relate to being blind to issues of the heart, to living for the moment, to rejecting wisdom and correction. In their purest form, these are issues of the fallen nature, not just issues of a particular phase of life. At that level we can humbly bring the hope of the gospel to our teenagers instead of the harsh judgment that comes when we forget who we are.

A Biblical Model of Sexuality

Three things are critical to a Christian model of sexuality.

Sex is a key way that a person expresses worship (Romans 1:18-27)

Romans 1:21-27 portrays sex as a principal way in which a person reveals who or what is really ruling his life. Sexual sin is by its very nature idolatrous; that is, it is a place where we refuse to live for God's glory, where we exchange worship and service of the Creator for worship and service of the created thing. Sexual sin is driven by the sinful desires of the heart rather than a desire to live by God's principles for His pleasure. It is a place where a person exchanges the protection and freedom of God's truth for a host of self-serving lies.

It is significant that when Paul talks about the sinner's rejection of God's revelation and glory, the primary fruits he discusses are inordinate sexual desire and

sinful sexual behavior. Sex is presented in Scripture as a principal way a person expresses his submission to or rebellion against God. He submits his heart and body to God's higher agenda or uses heart and body to get what is pleasurable when and where he wishes.

Our teens need to see life as worship. They need to look at life from a covenantal perspective. They are either living actively in covenant with God, hoping in His promises, obeying His commands, relying on His grace, and desirous of His glory, or they are living in an idol covenant where some aspect of the creation has replaced the Creator, and they live for personal pleasure and the glory of self.

Sadly, few parents or youth leaders have conversations with teenagers on this level. Teens are not given a covenantal perspective on life that can provide them with a practical, diagnostic window on all that they do. In the absence of this critical perspective, Scripture is reduced to a fire escape for the future and a list of do's and don't's for the present. The Christian life is reduced to a Pharisaical "do this and please Jesus" religion.

Sex is a key way a person expresses his identity (1 Corinthians 6:12-20)

In the final analysis, human beings live out one of only two identities: that I am ultimate and autonomous or that I am created and dependent on God. All human thought, motive, and behavior are expressions of one of these two identities. In matters of sexuality, the question becomes, Will I live out my identity as a creature of God (and for the believer, as a child of God) or will I live as my own god with no higher agenda than my own satisfaction? It is easy to see how this perspective is a natural corollary of the worship perspective previously discussed.

In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul roots his entire discussion of sexual immorality in the identity of the believer. It is as if he is saying, "If you are ever going to remain sexually pure, you must understand who you are as a child of God, and you must make choices that flow from that identity." There are four statements of identity in that passage which provide wonderful boundaries in which to live, not only in the area of sex but in every area of life. Another way of saying this is to say that one of our most powerful tools in dealing with teens about sex is to get them to look at sex and themselves from the vantage point of the gospel. Here is the Christian's fourfold identity:

1. *I am a servant of Christ.* "Everything is permissible for me, but I will not be mastered by anything." Christ has freed His children from bondage to the cravings of the sinful nature, not to self-directed liberty but to the wonderful freedom found only as they accept their

slavery to Him. He is the Master who has freed His children from the tyranny of any other master (see Romans 6:1-14). We do not have to give the members of our body to be used as instruments of evil any longer but are free to give our bodies as instruments of righteousness. Our sexual lives will express either a joyful submission to Christ or an allegiance to another master.

2. *I am an eternal being.* "By His power God raised the Lord from the dead, and He will raise us also." The identity of the believer reminds him that this is not all there is; there is more to come. Neither the sufferings nor the pleasures of this present moment are worthy to be

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compared with the glory that is to come. A future hope changes the way a believer looks at the pressures, opportunities, and responsibilities of the moment. He lives patiently, not for the seen but the unseen, and conscious of the eternal value of every sacrifice he makes in the present. (See my article on Psalm 73, "Keeping Destiny in View," in the *Journal's* Fall 1994 issue for a fuller discussion of this subject.)

3. *I am one with Christ.* "Do you know that your bodies are members of Christ Himself? He who unites himself with the Lord is one with Him in spirit." Believers are actually joined to Christ in an inseparable union. We must never think or act as if it is just ourselves alone. Everything we do must consider Christ, for our union with Him is eternal. Since our spirits are one with Him, our bodies belong to Christ as well. All of this is so that our lives would practically express the will of Christ. We must reject any thought, any fantasy, and any delusion of independence. We are one with Christ; to act any other way is to deny the gospel.

4. *I am the property of Christ.* "You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body." Paul reports a significant redemptive fact that has implications for the present. God bought us on Calvary when He paid the price with the blood of His Son. We belong to Him. We do not belong to us! Whenever we act as if our lives belong to us and we can do what we want when we want, we deny our identity as the children of God. Peter says that we are "a people for God's own possession." If we are owned, our obligation and joy is to please our Owner.

These four aspects of our identity provide boundaries that promote sexual purity and expose sexual immorality. They speak with power to the realities of sexual struggle. A believer must not let himself be

mastered by anything other than Christ, and we realize that sex can be a life-dominating master. We will not let ourselves live for just this moment, and we realize that sex creates a narrow focus on present pleasure with little awareness of the future. We will not allow ourselves to function in independence, and we realize that sex draws us to meditate on what we want and "need." We will not allow ourselves to function from a position of ownership, and we realize that sex is often about power, control, ownership, and entitlement.

We need to realize how a biblical sense of identity can function as a powerful tool against "youthful lusts." If our teens buy into the cultural definitions of identity, biblical morality and the worshipful sacrifices it demands cease to make any sense. However, few people working with teens address the problem at this level. Much of our work seems to be done out of context because it is not rooted in larger biblical themes and a comprehensive Christian world view. We must do more than keep our teens "out of trouble." We should settle for nothing less than their becoming "partakers of His divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4).

Sex is a key revealer of a person's heart (Ephesians 5:3-7)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ declares sexuality to be an issue of the heart. It is not enough to say, "I have not physically committed adultery; therefore, I am pure." For Christ, lust breaks the command against committing adultery. There is another way of saying this: A person's behavior in the area of sex is a key revealer of what is ruling his heart. This is why a denial of God's revelation and a rebellion against His authority and glory result in all kinds of sexual sin. Paul states it very plainly in Ephesians 5. The sexually immoral person is an idolater. Sex always involves the thoughts, motives, desires, demands, expectations, treasures, or idols of the heart. When we deal with our young people in this area, it is not enough to "keep them out of trouble" if by that we mean keeping them from committing physical sin. We must help our teens uncover the heart sins that their physical sexual sin reveals.

Sex is a key revealer of my need of grace (Romans 7:7-25)

Sex confronts me with my inability. As I examine myself in light of God's standard of absolute purity, I fall down with Paul and say, "I know that nothing good lives in me; that is, in my sinful nature" (7:18a). As a believer, I see God's holy standard. I recognize that it is good, yet my heart wanders to fantasy worlds where I rule with no higher agenda than the pleasure of self. It is here that I am led to cry, "What a wretched man I am!

Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" It is when I am confronted with my utter inability to meet the demands of God's standard that I am also confronted with the reality and majesty of His grace. "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (5:20). Sex reveals my need of grace. God's call to sexual purity is as impossible for me to achieve without His help as it would have been for me to save myself.

It is important to help our young people connect their sexual struggles to these larger gospel themes. Here their need of Christ is clearly demonstrated. Here they will not find victory alone. Here they can develop a new dependency on and love for Jesus Christ. Here the teenager can learn both to mourn his sin and revel in His grace. Here the lies of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness are exposed. Sexual struggles in our teens present us with an opportunity to bring the hope of the gospel to them in ways they have never before grasped.

Establish Biblical Goals for Teens and Sex

There has been a renewed interest in virginity both in and outside of the church. Christian and community groups are rallying teenagers to sign abstinence contracts, committing themselves to virginity until marriage. On the surface, I am supportive of such an agenda. I, too, want my children to abstain from sexual intercourse until marriage. But this agenda does not go far enough. Let me delineate two deficiencies and lay out another agenda from the Sermon on the Mount.

Where does the physical abstinence agenda fall short? First, it moves toward a less-than-biblical definition of moral purity. To be physically abstinent is not the same as being morally pure. Moral purity is a matter of the heart. If the heart is not pure, the body will not be kept pure for long. Our young people need to be confronted with God's agenda here: to recapture the hearts of His people to serve Him alone. He will settle for nothing less (Ezekiel 14:5). We cannot allow our teens to relax because they have kept the letter of the law while breaking the spirit. We cannot let them be content with the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:17-20).

Another problem is that the physical abstinence agenda tends to skew an evaluation of our teenagers' relationships with the opposite sex. Are we really prepared to say that because a teen is physically abstinent the relationship is good? Is a physically abstinent relationship automatically a God-honoring relationship? A person could have a constellation of idolatrous goals for a relationship and yet be physically abstinent. We want our teens to do a much more thorough biblical examination of their relationships. We don't want them to be

comfortable with self-centered, manipulative, and self-aggrandizing relationships simply because they have abstained from sexual intercourse.

Let me demonstrate the paucity of the abstinence goal. If you set abstinence as the standard for any other relationship, it makes no sense at all. For example, just because I don't have sexual relations with my children, you would not conclude that my relationship with them is all that God has designed it to be. In fact, the physical

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abstinence issue is so obvious that it is not even one of the primary standards used to evaluate the health of parent-child relationships. I suggest that the same should be true in this case. Abstinence should be, at most, a starting point from which we move to assess our teens' relationships in the light of Scripture (See Colossians 2:20-23 versus cultural emphasis on virginity.)

Positively, what we are dealing with here are boundary issues. In sexual matters, where do we set the boundaries for our children? Christ gives us the needed direction in Matthew 5:27-30. Here He contrasts the original intent of the law with its interpretation by the scribes and Pharisees. Christ charges that the teachers of the law put the boundaries in the wrong place. They erected the boundaries of sexual purity at the edge of behavior. In so doing they misunderstood the law's intent. Christ placed the boundaries squarely within the heart. This was the original intent of the law. If a person does not set them there, he will not be successful in maintaining the physical, behavioral boundaries.

We must place the boundaries where Christ does. Keeping within the physical boundaries is not a high enough goal. We must set the goal of living within the heart boundaries and not settle for culturally popular, humanly doable goals that encourage self-righteousness without solving the problem. We must in faith and courage uphold God's standards and watch His Spirit recapture the hearts of our children.

A Three-fold Plan for Helping Teens

Prevention: Responsibly Educating our Teens

It is important to place sexuality in the context of a larger Christian world and life view. These perspectives lend sense and order to the practical sexual agenda to which you will call teenagers. Without them the responsibilities and sacrifices of godly sexuality will seem hard and unnecessary. Some perspectives that I would in-

clude in talking with teenagers are:

1. An emphasis on God as Creator and the importance of understanding His original purpose for all things (Psalm 24).

2. That people are the creatures of God and, therefore, responsible to Him for all we are and do. The goal of life is to live for His pleasure and glory (Genesis 1, Colossians 3:17).

3. That people are unified beings. This means that sin is at once spiritual and physical; at once a matter of the heart and behavior (Romans 8:1-17).

4. That life is worship. All that I do expresses worship to God or something else. The deepest questions of human life are not questions of my pain or pleasure but questions of worship. What I worship sets the agenda for how I deal with all the situations and relationships of life (Romans 1:18-32).

5. That God's way, no matter how hard, is always best. As the Psalmist says, all the ways of the Lord are right and true, while the way that seems right to man leads to death. I will not always understand how God's way is best. That is why I need a heart of humble submission to His commands and humble belief in His promises (Psalm 19:7-11).

6. Because the goal of life is to live in conformity to the will of God and to live to His glory, there is always a higher agenda in every situation and relationship than momentary personal pleasure. (Titus 2:9,10 uses the example of work, and 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 uses the example of one's sexual life.)

7. That Jesus Christ came not only to protect us from external evil but to free us from slavery to the desires of our own sinful nature so that we may live under the control of the Spirit (Ephesians 2:1-5, 2 Peter 1:4).

There are practical implications from these perspectives for teen sexuality, including the following:

1. God does not single out teenagers for sacrifice and suffering. Rather, He calls them to experience the joys and blessings found by serving Him in the everyday relationships and situations of life.

2. Since God, as Creator, formed our bodies and created sexuality, we will never properly experience this aspect of our life until we understand His plan and purpose.

3. God's plan is that we would, within His revealed boundaries, enjoy this area without ambivalence or shame.

4. We are unified beings, so our sexuality is never isolated from the other parts of us. Sex can never be defined as a physical act alone; it is always a matter of the heart. It is not enough to ask whether a couple or individual has had sex yet. We should also be asking about the desires, motives, thoughts, and treasures of

the heart that shape the way this person approaches a relationship.

5. We must always examine the thoughts and motives of our hearts in the area of sex: "Have I accepted the sexual lies and the idols of the culture around me?"

6. A person's approach to sexuality must always be shaped by the Two Great Commands. That is, all that we do in this area must be an expression of love for God first and love for our neighbor as ourselves.

*This side of Heaven, temptation
will always be an issue.*

Restoration: Counseling Teens who have Misused Sex

For teens who have fallen into sexual sin, I suggest this step-by-step counseling plan.

1. Establish a commitment to honesty and accountability. The entire counseling process will fall apart without such a commitment from the teen.

2. Do not be embarrassed to do careful and specific data gathering. Make sure you know what you are dealing with; do not allow yourself to make unwarranted assumptions.

3. Always move toward issues of the heart. Don't focus only on the shocking issues of behavior and their life-altering consequences. Deal with root issues as well.

4. Identify the voices in the teen's life. Who is influencing this teenager? What are they saying? How much has this teenager embraced their perspectives?

5. Call the teenager to biblical repentance (Joel 2:12ff) that includes the "rending of the garments and the rending of the heart." Where has the truth of God been exchanged for a lie? Where has worship and service of the Creator been exchanged for worship and service of the created thing? Lead the teenager through the following steps of repentance:

Consideration: A willingness to look at my sexual life in the light of Scripture.

Confession: Claiming responsibility for my sexual sin before God and resting in His forgiveness.

Commitment: A determination, in the strength God gives, to live a new life in the area of sex.

Change: An examination of my life that identifies changes that will conform my sexual life to God's will, and that makes plans to bring about those changes.

6. Identify places where ongoing temptation will occur and develop plans to deal with that temptation.

7. Teach the teenager biblical friendship. Explain God's plan for relationships and encourage the teen to

meet the demands of the Two Great Commands in each relationship.

8. When restoring a teenager who has been involved in sexual sin, avoid comfortable generalities. Be direct, concrete, and specific in the questions asked and statements made.

9. Make your agenda a balanced “put off and put on.” In the area of sex, we often emphasize the “put off” aspect without giving teens a positive “put on” agenda. What are practical, godly goals for their relationships with the opposite sex?

Strategizing: Helping Teens Plan for Godly Relationships

Many teens are confused by the cacophony of voices that give them discordant messages about relationships. We need to help them deal with this confusion by offering them a clear understanding of God’s will for their relationships. We need to show them how to apply those principles to their daily lives. Your efforts would include the following:

1. Give teens a biblical view of relationships, especially cross-gender relationships, that results in a positive, practical plan for friendships that are pleasing to God. Capitalize on the opportunities that present themselves as the teenager talks about or struggles with relationships, since the teen often won’t initiate this kind of conversation. Take the initiative and draw out the teen. Teach them not to be afraid of honest talking by being understanding, by honestly admitting your own failure, and by pointing to the beauty of God’s standard and forgiveness.

2. Encourage parents within your circle of influence to be committed to honest, ongoing communication with their teens about sexuality. Parents need to take responsibility to keep this communication going. Teach parents to be open and unembarrassed, to be willing to invest the time necessary for a robust and honest friendship with their teens. Teach them to examine them-

selves, asking what they are doing specifically to encourage or discourage such a friendship.

3. Always keep the issue of temptation on the table when working with teens in the area of sex. This side of Heaven, temptation will always be an issue. Know where your teen is being tempted, know how he is dealing with temptation, and make plans that anticipate temptations to come.

4. Encourage teens to take the long view of relationships. Rather than focus on the joys and pains of the moment, have the teenager start from the perspective of a God-glorifying marriage and work back. What steps need to be taken now, what habits need to be developed now, what things need to be forsaken to prepare me for God’s best? Teach teens to assess their relationships from the vantage point of the sowing and reaping principle in Scripture: The relational seeds that they are planting now will result in what kind of harvest? Now is the time to be investing in a God-honoring future.

What is our agenda as we deal with our teenagers and sexuality? We want to be realistic about who they are, realistic about the tempting world in which they are living, realistic about the contradictory voices they are hearing, and realistic about our own ambivalence about sex. But we especially want to be sure that our realism is in the context of the hope of the gospel. This hope is what motivates and shapes the work we do with teenagers. This hope is expressed well by the apostle Peter:

“His divine power has given everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Peter 1:3,4).

To settle for anything less in the sexual lives of our teenagers is to deny the gospel and to fail in our calling as God’s instruments of change in their lives.