A THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN SEX EDUCATION

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A THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN SEX EDUCATION

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Evangelicals continue to promote abstinence-only sex education in public schools. Critics of such programs question whether teenagers have the ability to voluntarily abstain. They question the wisdom of neglecting to provide reliable contraception when sexual activity is an undeniably common choice among that population. Many studies have measured the long-term significance of the two most common approaches to sex education. These conversations typically adopt a strong utilitarian ethic, leading proponents of both perspectives to conclude that the right approach is the one that most consistently reduces teen sexual activity, sexually transmitted infections, and unplanned pregnancies.

The present study examines the ethical and theological basis for Evangelicalism’s support of abstinence-only sex education programs. We will ask the question, “On what basis do Christians teach Biblical virtues and sexual ethics to nonbelievers who reject their religious premises?” How this question is answered ought to radically influence the Church’s response. We will evaluate the current cultural situation and the proposed solutions to the problem of teen sexual activity. We will address the inadequacy of these solutions to provide the theological conclusion that the Church can and should advocate for nonbelievers to abstain from all extra-marital sexual activity by appealing to Natural Law and by bearing witness to God’s redemptive purposes for His creation.
A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SEX EDUCATION

Several economic phenomena in the last one hundred years have necessitated educating adolescents about their sexuality. The industrial and post-industrial economies impacted adolescents significantly. As the American economy shifted from agriculture to manufacturing, the role of children in the workforce changed dramatically.\(^1\) Carrie Miles argues that families no longer depended on many children to guarantee economic stability.\(^2\) This, over time, allowed the traditional nuclear family model to dissolve. Sex and procreation were divorced.\(^3\) Therefore, Miles notes, “The sexual revolution, rising rates of out-of-wedlock births are the results, not the cause, of the breakdown of the traditional family.\(^4\) Adherence to traditional family institutions reflected economic necessity, not Christian virtue. Therefore, simply addressing the symptoms of divorce, premarital sex, or radical feminism does not address the results of the curse described in Genesis 3.

During the Great Depression, adolescents were systematically removed from the workforce and over the next fifty years the marriageable age continued to rise.\(^5\) The establishment of this prolonged period of incubation between sexual maturity and marriage was marked with a rise in teen sexual activity. This has accelerated the spread of sexually transmitted infections and increased the number of unplanned pregnancies involving teen mothers. The combination of the


\(^2\) Carrie A. Miles, *The Redemption of Love: Rescuing Marriage and Sexuality from the Economics of a Fallen World.* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 127.

\(^3\) Miles, *The Redemption of Love*, 129.


\(^5\) Hine, 287, 292.
dissolution of family norms, the removal of teens from the work place, and the resultant increase of teen sexual ….

(Note: several pages have purposely been omitted here to condense paper for review)…..

…necessary for the healthy continuance of society. Following a very similar pattern, Heimbach references the sociological conclusions of Unwin, “Without exception…if a social group limited sex to marriage, and especially to lifelong monogamous marriage, it would always prosper.”

Therefore, growing sociological data appears to establish a case for abstinence and monogamy—one which is further supported by additional awareness of STIs.

Hartwig has strongly rejected the above description. He argues that chastity and abstinence are insufficient standards for Christianity’s sexual ethic. He proposes a drastically different interpretation of the sociological and anthropological data:

The Church cannot propose as authoritative a teaching that is inconsistent with the best information at hand about humanity. [Instead, he asserts later,] …A Christian sexual ethic is first and foremost one which enables human beings to flourish and achieve excellence with respect to one dimension of their lives, sexuality. A Christian ethic cannot be genuinely Christian if it proposes norms which undermine the well-being and flourishing God intends for us to enjoy.

Unfortunately, Hartwig does not apply explicit teaching of Scriptures to the question of sexuality, enabling God’s intention of our enjoyment to be defined by our own interpretation of

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6 Boyd, A Shared Morality, 114.
7 Heimbach, 347.
9 Hartwig, 15.
10 Ibid, 121.
well-being.\textsuperscript{11} Riley, arguing via Natural Law for the necessity of traditional chastity for the preservation of society, agrees that restriction of “genital contact to husband and wife” is not a satisfactory definition of chastity, “Fidelity, therefore, did not suffice. It had to be inspired by a self-sacrificing love of the kind Christ had shown in climbing Calvary.”\textsuperscript{12} Consequently, Natural Law does not provide a fully formed Christian ethic. When the Scriptures are rejected as the authoritative interpretation of the world, humans can draw contradictory inferences. To summarize, Natural Law supports monogamous heterosexuality and this is confirmed by Scripture.

**Why Christian Sex Education Needs Natural Law**

As we noted above, Natural Law provides the theoretical foundation for addressing an unbelieving population with a moral argument. Natural Law not only justifies this project as worthwhile, it also makes such an effort possible by providing a framework for conversation with others’ presuppositions. Hollinger notes that Christians can only address unbelievers by appealing “to a remnant of God’s design that is often still embedded in the hearts and minds of even fallen humanity. To be sure, this type of Natural Law approach has its own difficulties” but the possibility remains open.\textsuperscript{13} Boyd describes this as being “bilingual, at times speaking the language of Zion, which undergirds the specifics of our ethics, and at times also speaking a broader language that is not dependent on the particularities of biblical faith.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} Hartwig, 160, suggests that were “Ken” to pursue a brief sexual relationship with “Robert” during his long-term committed relationship with “George”, “it’s possible that it might not have any real impact on his and George’s relationship. [Since] Robert is a jerk, and Ken would soon find that out.”


\textsuperscript{13} Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 254.
CONCLUSION

In this study we have recognized the ongoing debate over how best to educate teenagers so they can avoid STIs and unplanned pregnancies. We briefly described comprehensive and abstinence only educational models, concluding the ethical basis for each was insufficient and/or unclear. We then considered the possibility of Natural Law theory as an explanation of how the Church can teach an ethic of abstinence, monogamy, and fidelity to unbelievers. Because Natural Law remains operative in the world, we concluded that the Church can and should advocate for nonbelievers to abstain from all extra-marital sexual activity by appealing to Natural Law and thereby bearing witness to God’s redemptive purposes for His creation.

Our present study is deficient in several ways. First, we did not consider the ramifications of the noetic effects of the Fall on a human’s awareness of the Natural Law or the prevenient role of common grace. Second, Natural Law theory tends to eliminate the possibility of redemption outside of the Church. Within the model of Creation, Fall, and Redemption, Christians are able to further articulate the redemptive purposes of inviting unbelievers to submit to God via Natural Law. Thirdly, having claimed that current proponents of abstinence-only sex education programs have not sufficiently articulated their theological motivation, this study should provide an argument identifying how the influence of Natural law would affect abstinence-only programs’ goals and methods. These deficiencies aside, Natural Law provides a promising re-articulation and clarification of why Christians would be involved in sex education and how such involvement is even possible.

14 Hollinger, Choosing the Good, 254.

15 MacIntyre, Whose Justice?, 181, notes that for Aquinas, the only solution to enduring disobedience to the Natural Law is divine grace, a point that should nuance our understanding of Natural Law’s relationship to the unbeliever. Rejection of God’s revealed will has required His gracious intervention since the beginning.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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