

SEX AND THE SILENCE OF THE CHURCH: PART 1 OUR NATURE TO PRETEND...

September 15, 2012 by John Freeman

Part One of Ten

In Harvest USA's Fall 2012 newsletter, John discussed 10 reasons why the church (the body as a whole and individual Christians) finds it so difficult to confront and address issues of sexuality. The church's silence is devastating her people, leaving them, as Paul would say, "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind" of whatever is the current cultural position.

This is reason number 1 of John's 10 reasons. You can read each reason over the next 2 weeks. Please feel free to make a comment and let us know what you are thinking!

1. The church is silent because it's in our nature to pretend—to pretend that, "I'm OK – you're OK."

The truth is, in today's highly-charged sexual culture, almost no one is OK in this area. The reality of Genesis 4:7, that, "sin is crouching at the door and its desire is to have you," has never been truer when it comes to ways our hearts seek comfort, relief and life in things of a sexual nature. We don't have to go looking for ways to stain our hearts; it comes looking for us! The pathways to dark and destructive places abound: Internet, cable TV, hotel room adult video offerings, movies and mobile dating apps are part of a culture that beckons us to give in to our feelings and desires, to escape lives of loneliness, routine and stress. Even if you aren't personally struggling with sexual integrity, there are dozens of people sitting in the same church service as you that are struggling.

I've learned that we'll go to any lengths to keep from being honest about all this. Why? Fear, shame, hatred of self, not believing the gospel has any practical answer, guilt, giving up—you name it.

I was having lunch with a businessman from my church, and halfway through he brought up his Internet pornography usage. What happened next was a microcosm of what is happening throughout the church. I asked him when it started. When he was 10 years old. How often do you look at porn? Several times a week, for a couple of hours at a time. Anyone know about this? No. Are you in a men's group at church? Yes. Does this topic ever come up for discussion? No. Would you be willing to bring it up? No way!

Then he begins to backpedal, saying it's not really that big a problem nor is it that damaging. I'm not usually blunt with someone, but I had no choice this time. "You know, what I hear coming from your mouth is addict-speak. You're far worse off than you can possibly imagine. Can you believe that Jesus longs to enter this area of life with you?" He looked at me like a deer caught in the headlights. I don't think we'll be having lunch again anytime soon.

You see, we all like to pretend we're OK, or, that whatever struggle we have will get better on its own. It won't, and it never will — apart from our willingness to die-to-self, to discard our investment in our reputation and image and to open up and walk in honesty and in the light of transparency and vulnerability. That's a supernatural thing to even want to do. Yes, we all need to stop pretending.

SEX AND THE SILENCE OF THE CHURCH: PART 2 WE DON'T BELIEVE THE GOSPEL TRANSFORMS...

September 16, 2012 by John Freeman

2. The church is silent because we really don't believe that the gospel can transform deep sexual struggles.

In other words, when we admit the depth of struggle among our people, it messes up our categories of what we think the “victorious” Christian life is or should be! You know, the kind of life we hear TV evangelists talking about, those peddling the prosperity gospel of you-shouldn't-have-problems-with-sin-kind-of-stuff.

Don't be fooled! It is a false gospel that proclaims, “You can be free of pain, fighting and struggling with sin; you should be free from that type of suffering—now that you're a Christian.” It's a message that we can too easily buy into, that something must be very wrong with our faith if we struggle so much.

Nonsense! If you're fighting against sin in your life, then it may indicate that something might be very right! Throughout the New Testament we read its call to godly living, to redefine our lives, sexually speaking, by the meaning and implication of the cross in our lives. Scripture isn't shy when talking about sex and sexual brokenness. In fact, if you were to take out of the Bible all the places where it speaks to the reality of sexual sin, struggle and temptation among God's people, you'd be taking out large portions of Scripture.

Our sexual temptations and struggles don't take God by surprise, nor do they shock him. Rather, he expects it. He knows our nature is to seek out and fall for false worship; that we give our hearts to “false gods” and pursue them as having ultimate purpose and meaning in our lives, rather than seek out him and his purposes. The results of what happens when people live for themselves, following their own fallen sexual desires, are well-documented in Scripture and in countless personal lives.

What happens, then, when we begin to call Jesus “boss” over all our desires and longings? World War III breaks out in our lives and hearts. Conflict. Adversity. Suffering. Struggle.

I love what noted Bible teacher and author, Martyn-Lloyd Jones said about all this. He wrote in his classic work on *Romans: Exposition of Chapter 6, The New Man*, “There is a teaching today which says that sanctification is quite simple, that the mistake we've been making is that you've been trying to fight the sin in you. It says that what you have to do is to give up struggling, to give up fighting; just hand yourself and your whole problem to Jesus. He'll do it all for you. *But any teaching which tells us that sanctification and holiness are really quite simple (and don't involve struggle and fighting) is clearly not in accord with Scripture*” (p. 164, italics mine).

This is what happened early on in my own life when I sought to follow Jesus. I had many a major knock-down, drag-out fight with God in my small attic apartment. Why are you calling me to a new way of living; why are you asking me to stop practices and walk away from relationships that fill the empty void in my heart? Why are you giving me new desires, desires that are different than those that seem so natural in my heart? What am I to do when I want to look at porn or frequent hang-outs where I might meet someone for a brief encounter that will take away my relational pain?

How did change happen in my life? When I began to hear him speak into my struggle with a heart of compassion and love — for me! He wooed me to himself, to a relationship with him rather than something

else on which to set my heart. When this happened, and when conflict over desires and sin surfaced, I learned to repent. Although it began slowly, and moved forward in small steps, repentance became my new response to sin and temptation. What is repentance? Tim Keller says that repentance is “killing that which is killing me—without killing myself.” Repentance is liberating; not limiting.

Here is the point about whether the gospel has power to transform our sexual struggles. The desire to obey God, no matter how small and weak it may feel in the moment, is the proof of spiritual life. Repenting is what fans that spark into flame. Whether it's repentance with a capital “R” when we first begin to follow Christ, or

whether it's repentance with a small “r,” the on-going, daily repentance to repeatedly turn away from that which you felt gave life and turn instead toward Christ who really gives life; this is the true Christian life and walk. It's an on-going battle.

What's the bottom line here? We avoid talking about sex or sexual sin because we have a faulty, unbiblical theology of struggle and suffering. Regaining a right view of struggle with sin in the Christian life will lead us to say to the members of our churches, “We are not surprised that you are struggling with some type of sexual temptation and sin. Let us know about it; tell us what is going on; let us help you.” This is the exact opposite of being dismayed or shocked over the struggles every Christian experiences.

A flip-side to having a bad theology of sin and struggle is that we often just stop calling sin – sin! We soften our response to it. We become dismayed over the enormity of the struggle. I've seen this happen with pornography usage. Too often I hear a response of compromise: everyone's doing it; it's no-big-deal; it's private and it's not really hurting anyone.

I have heard the same in dealing with the issue of homosexuality. I had an elder in a church recently tell me, “I like what Harvest USA does with the pornography issue —but I don't believe that homosexuality is wrong in every situation.” I asked him to tell me more. He said, “Well, I've just seen too many people struggle too deeply and too long. Christianity seems to have no ability to solve their faith-versus-their-feelings dilemma.” He had given up hope that anyone can experience any type of transformative change, because his theology was faulty. He put sociology over theology; that is, he put the experiences of people and their subjective assessment as the norm of what is acceptable, rather than allow the Bible to set the norm of what is true and right and acceptable to God. Giving in and giving up is not compassionate to strugglers.

SEX AND THE SILENCE OF THE CHURCH: PART 3 THE BIBLE IS TRITE AND PASSE!

September 17, 2012 by John Freeman

3. The church is silent, because we feel that the answers we find in the Bible to all of this seem trite, passé and outdated in today's culture.

For many the answers they think the Bible has for broken sexuality are: Stop it. Don't do it. Just wait until marriage. That's bad. Homosexuality is an abomination. Being gay is a choice. These are all one-dimensional reactions, and they are unhelpful; they don't bring much weight to the discussion or issue. So, how does the Bible help us?

I've never met a ten-year-old who said, "I think I'll be gay when I grow up." No. Youth most often became aware, over time, of unexplained feelings and "pulls" towards their same-sex; attractions which feel strange and shameful, but exciting, and in a strange way, they meet a perceived need-of-the heart, all at the same time. What often follows, though, is a pursuit of these feelings with many small choices and decisions along the way, and it is this process which makes it all seem like it was their core nature to begin with.

That's why, even though the Scriptures speak to many of the underpinnings of same-sex attraction and homosexual desire and practice, an exhortation to just not feel that way, or not be bothered by it, is unloving and unrealistic. Unfortunately, many in the Christian community are very confused on these issues today. We either settle for biblical error on the one hand ("it's a choice") or cultural compromise on the other hand ("if you profess Christ and you feel sincerely that it's OK, then it's OK for you"). We fall for what I hear in more Christian circles today: that the Bible doesn't speak to homosexuality of the kind we see today (i.e. monogamous same-sex relationships).

Truthfully, Scripture does speak with clarity to all this, with both truth and grace. That's also the way we must approach it. When we over-simplify the issue, or vilify it, or even make it more than it is, we fail to speak with Scripture's authority into it.

A pastor recently told me that he went to a counselor for several weeks, seeking to deal with his pornography struggle. The counselor, naively, week-after-week, just kept telling him, "Oh, that's bad—you shouldn't want to do that. You shouldn't be doing that—it'll get you in trouble." He gave him some verses to memorize. There were no attempts to connect this man to the deeper gospel themes about this own life and heart. The result? The pastor walked away more discouraged and feeling more shame, guilt and hopelessness than ever.

You see, we are complicated beings with complicated hearts. We need to see the Scriptures not as a magic pill or a cure-all to life's dilemmas or confusion, but as God's heart toward us about real human struggles and issues of the heart. Heart change takes time. Repentance that is lasting and deep takes time. We have to see the larger-themed sin areas in our hearts, see how they grieve God and the damage they cause us and others around us, before true repentance can happen. That's why, when I've taught a course at a local seminary for future pastors and counselors, I've often warned them about leading people into repentance too quickly. We must see the depth of the hurt we have caused, to our self, to others and to God, or our repentance will be shallow and temporary. Jesus yearns to enter the struggle of our hearts in deeper ways than just getting us to 'stop this' or 'do that.' As a man in one of our bible study support groups put it one time, "Jesus just isn't a self-improvement program."

When we look at Jesus or the Scriptures as a way to just improve ourselves and our situation—well, that just isn't gospel transformation. As the church, we have to be careful not to lead people in a superficial, shallow manner which makes Scripture seem archaic or obsolete. God says that His word is "active, living, sharper than a double-edge sword" (Hebrews 4:12). We must help people apply the gospel to the deeper issues-of-the-heart, which God has gifted believers to be able to do as we seek to minister to the Body.

Sometimes, we feel that the Bible is no longer reliable when it comes to issues of sex and sexuality. We often feel the Bible isn't adequate because of science or pseudo-science. We must remember that science does not pull a surprise on God. The "new discoveries" that media, culture and academia proclaim, about sex and sexuality, must be brought into submission to God's word. Obviously, there will be tension when we hear for instance, that sexual orientation is fixed and irreversible from each of these

three sources. How does that relate to God's word and his call for obedience for followers of Jesus? How do these cultural mantras come in line with Scripture? For believers, God's word cannot be negated or pushed-aside, just because all of culture says it should. We must learn to speak intelligently and compassionately about these crucial issues, recognizing and admitting their complexities, yet at the same time seeing no contradiction in how God calls His people to live.

SEX AND THE SILENCE OF THE CHURCH: PART 4 STRUGGLING WITH OUR OWN SEXUAL BAGGAGE.

September 18, 2012 by John Freeman

4. The church is silent because many of us still struggle with unresolved sexual baggage in our own history, and it continues to plague us and bring us shame.

Failures from our past, especially ones that involve such powerful experiences like sex, can haunt us for years. When those failures continue into the present, even if they are not so large as they once were, they can hinder us from being available to those closest to us who are also struggling. Our on-going struggles fill us with a pervasive gloom of shame, and our conscience freezes us into inaction. "Who are you kidding? You can't speak with truth or authority into anyone's life. Just look at your own heart and record of failure." This cripples us and those around us, because we are unable to speak the truth of the gospel into our own hearts first, and then to others.

I find this the biggest deterrent to speaking to our kids and young people about sex in a redemptive way. Many parents carry around unresolved sexual sin struggles in their hearts and lives, either issues from long ago or current struggles.

The rule of thumb for parents here is to do what flight attendants say to do just before take-off. What do they say about that mask? In case of emergency, if that mask falls, place it first over your face and then place it over the face of your child. In other words, you need to be okay first, able to function in order to bring safety measures to your child!

The same is true with our sexual baggage as adults and parents. We need to seek help for our own issues; we need to follow the desires of our hearts as parents to shepherd our children by having the courage to deal with our own baggage and sins. Until we do so, we will remain silent, wanting to talk with our kids about these critical issues but feeling shamed into silence by our own lack of resolution or progress. We either speak simplistically to them: "Wait until you're married," (good advice, but our kids need a more coherent sexual message, grounded in Scripture, that can compel them to swim against the sexual tide that is washing away so many youth into chaotic and destructive sexuality). Or, worse, we practice denial about what our kids are facing today, and passively allow the culture (TV, movies, Internet, social media) to evangelize our kids, sexually speaking. (We have a minibook that teaches parents how to protect their kids from the dangers of technology as well as how to approach them on issues of sexuality: *iSnooping on Your Kid: Parenting in an Internet World*. Go to <http://www.harvestusa.org> and click on Store/Online Store to order).

Church leaders, as well, are not exempt from this struggle. We like to put our pastors and church leaders on a pedestal, thinking they are more saintly than us. Why we think this way astounds me at times. The culture of the church reinforces that image in a way that is, ultimately, harmful to leaders as well as the

entire church community. We must remember that they are just as fallen and in need of the grace and power of the gospel as anyone else. Tragically, the church culture “forces” pastors and leaders to project an inflated image, and the result is that they are reluctant to speak on these topics or to move their congregation to engage in redemptive ministry to those who struggle because they cannot admit issues or struggles in their own lives. The result? They don’t get help, and their people don’t get help, as well. Men, women and youth are left to continue struggling in silence and shame, wrestling with a faith that they feel is unable to help them with the real issues of life.

What’s the answer for our church leaders? We need to help them to first deal with their own hearts, just as parents need to do. We need to encourage them to be real, and to find a place of safety where they can go and get help. The silence, stress and, often, just the intoxication of ministry keeps leaders from both gospel self-awareness and from seeking and getting help. This is the reason Harvest USA wants to begin Sexual Integrity Groups for pastors only, because they often have no place to go to be honest about the struggles of their heart in this area of sexual integrity. For more info about this or to get a brochure, e-mail me at john@harvestusa.org.

SEX AND THE SILENCE IN THE CHURCH: PART 5 OUR BROKENNESS FEELS HOPELESS.

September 19, 2012 by John Freeman

5. The church is silent because we can’t see how our brokenness in sexuality can be redeemed in and through our brokenness. Our brokenness feels hopeless.

Sin has so tainted everything, even our sexuality that everything that exists is as it should not be. No part of our person, heart or affections has been left untouched by the Fall. All efforts at self-repair don’t work; even our deepest, most sincere vows to try to do right next time always come up short. An awareness of this deep brokenness should give us compassion for those who struggle. While not lowering God’s standards for holy living, we must realize that the ability to obey, out of a heart of joy, just doesn’t happen in a vacuum. It’s both supernatural and interpersonal. God’s people help God’s people walk in holiness! That means we have to own up to what a mess it all is and be willing to jump down into the trenches with others.

I love how Pastor Scotty Smith in his book, *Restoring Broken Things*, describes brokenness. He says that there are two types of brokenness. In **Brokenness “A,”** something is broken to the degree that it ceases to or no longer reveals God’s glory and serve His purposes. Smith says that the main language the Scriptures use to demonstrate **Brokenness “A”** is that of idolatry or false worship. False worship happens when we ascribe to or give anything or anyone the adoration, attention, allegiance or affection of which Jesus alone is worthy. Therefore Brokenness “A” is a worship disorder (p.73).

But there is also a different kind of brokenness of which the Scriptures speak. **Brokenness “B”** is what results when God begins to do His refining, redeeming and rescuing work in our lives. It is characterized by a heart attitude of contrition, humility and repentance in response to the specific ways we haven’t or have ceased to reveal God’s glory (p. 74). In other words, Brokenness “A” is set right or redefined by Brokenness “B.”

The truth is, for most of the people sitting in our pews, whose lives, history and hearts are increasingly marked by some kind of long-term sexual sin and/or continual temptation, their lives cannot ever be lived as if Brokenness “A” had never happened. But they can, with the Holy Spirit and the help of the Body of Christ, the church, turn around what they and the evil one meant for harm and damage, and bring God glory out of it all. But the remnants of brokenness remain, and that is what both drives us to the cross and gives us a heart for others.

If we understand our brokenness from this perspective, we are filled with hope for what God is accomplishing in us, while we still “toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within (us)” (Colossians 1:29).

SEX AND THE SILENCE OF THE CHURCH: PART 6 MINISTERING IN A SEXUAL “MESS” IS THE AVERAGE, ORDINARY WORK OF THE CHURCH!

September 20, 2012 by John Freeman

6. The church is silent because we don’t understand or see how ministry to those who are a sexual “mess” is the average, ordinary work of the church.

This reason is related to the former point. We not only keep silent because of our own secret struggles, we do so because we think we need another kind of gospel in order with these problems. The issues seem so big, so complicated, and so pervasive, that we can’t begin to see how ordinary, gospel-centered ministry can help at all.

In his book, *Homosexuality: Laying the Axe to the Roots*, (unfortunately, it’s out of print), Ed Hurst points out how we’ve failed to see just how the Scriptures speak to sexual sin, especially homosexuality. He writes at the beginning of the book, “The homosexual problem presents itself as one more complex and more deeply rooted than any other. The power of homosexuality lies in the fact that it masquerades as a problem that is larger than life. It begs new answers, new remedies, and special treatment. It invites us to lose heart, give up hope, and to expect failure. It has caused some to reject the Word of God and others to reinterpret it – and still others to doubt that the remedy of Jesus Christ is sufficient for sin. As Christians, our ability to minister or deal with the problem has become weak, ineffective, and, often, non-existent.” (p.1)

Actually, I think we can expand Hurst’s comments to encompass all the various sexual struggles people in our church are experiencing today. Pornography and sexual addictions, along with homosexuality, often seem larger-than-life and too frightening and complicated to tackle. The result is that we either neglect ministry to those dealing with these altogether, or we off-load them to professionals (Christian counselors are an excellent resource of help, but if the church’s only response is referral, then they have abandoned their rightful place of help to the struggler).

I once had a seminar professor tell me 30 years ago that one of the reasons the gay community was one of the fastest growing people-groups in America was due to this hands-off approach by the church. We have either regulated these problems to a category all their own, apart from the Scriptures or the ordinary avenues of help in the church, or we have assigned them to those possessing exceptional or special training.

Church leadership can also allow fear or be overly concerned about what others in the church will think about all this. I once had a meeting with a 10-member church staff that was strongly hesitant about having an adult Sunday school class devoted to different areas of sexual sin and how to address it. One staff member said, "We'll have to poll the church to see if they want something like this." I couldn't believe what I heard. I asked, "Did you poll the people to see if they wanted a study on Romans, on the Old Testament, or on Lifestyle Evangelism?" Of course the answer was no. So I continued, "Why then, would you do that just because it's sex or sex-gone-wrong we're talking about? Aren't you in charge of the spiritual health and shepherding of your people?" We ended up having the class, and about 75 people attended each session.

In speaking to people I often get a response something along the lines of: "I'm glad you're doing what you're doing, but I could never do that." Really? Why not? Someone once said that the Bible can be summed up in three points. It's a book about how we got in the situation we're in. It's about what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ, as Savior, Redeemer, Mediator, and Advocate to deal with it all. And, it's about how it's all going to turn out because of what he has done for us.

In an analogous way, ministry to those scarred by and struggling with sexual issues is the same. We must provide a place and context where people can have a framework for discovering those three points: 1) how they got there and what's gone into the problem or situation they're in; 2) how God in Jesus longs to meet them in the midst of it all in order to bring wholeness, healing and growth; and 3) how walking with Christ relates to their history and future in learning how to love and serve God and others well. That's the ordinary, gospel-centered ministry of the church that for 2,000 years continue to help transform broken lives into living objects of grace and change.

The interesting thing here is that this biblical framework applies for those struggling with pornography, sexual addictions, same-sex attractions—and even for spouses, parents and family members seeking to better relate to loved-ones who live in such brokenness. We have to create safe places in our churches; that is, create contexts and environments where people can begin to look at and apply the gospel to the deeper recesses of the heart, where idols (false gods) as well as pain, chaos, confusion and hopelessness figure in deeply to the person's struggle.

Frankly, this kind of ministry isn't rocket science! But we treat it like it is. Our fears about engaging in ministry of this sort must be named, faced and worked through. We must answer the question why wouldn't we want our churches to be engaged in this kind of ministry. Why wouldn't we want our people—our men, women and youth—to be freed-up from all this? What would it require from the church and leadership to begin, and stay committed to, this kind of ministry? When we begin to face these questions, we often find that fear and issues of unbelief of all kinds, especially on the part of leadership, will surface. Like I said at the beginning of this article, no wonder Steve Brown, one of our Board members, said this would be one of the most difficult things our ministry would ever do!

There is a way and a foundation from which to do this much-needed ministry. It's been my experience that believers who know how much they've been forgiven and what it cost God to forgive them are the people who most seek out those who struggle.

One of the lessons of Luke 7: 36-50, when Jesus receives the anointing tears of the sinful woman at his feet, is that, "he who is forgiven much, loves much." In other words, our appreciation for the cross and our joy for what the gospel of Jesus has done for us leads us to seek out and be available to minister to others, even if their struggles, sins or temptations are different than our own.

This is an important thing to see! You do not need to have struggled with the same issues that someone else has in order to be powerfully helpful to them! I've seen people so moved and transformed by grace, without any personal experience of sexually addictive behavior, be the very best support group leaders, accountability partners, mentors, disciplers and just plain friends to those desiring help with their own sexual struggles. It often just takes stepping-out in faith. Equipping comes later, as ministry will compel one to seek training to better help and support.

We've got to believe the Lord longs to meet our people in the midst of their problems and dilemmas, to bring to them life and wholeness. We also have to believe that we have all we need (yes, with a little help and encouragement) to effectively minister to people. We need to reclaim this fact: that the church (the Body, the people of God) has been, historically, and continues to be, God's chosen instrument for the transformation of people, nations and culture!

SEX AND THE SILENCE OF THE CHURCH: PART 7 THE PANDORA'S BOX OF SEXUAL ISSUES!

September 21, 2012 by John Freeman

7. The Church is silent because, since sexual issues seem like such an overwhelming topic to tackle, there is fear that to do so will open up Pandora's Box.

Again, our own personal history and the scars we bear often forge the path here. When Adam and Eve were faced with the reality of their nakedness and shame, what was their reaction? They hid! It was all too overwhelming and too much to face. Better to hide than to tackle something that we fear may be too difficult or too complicated or too messy to deal with. Just keep the lid on the box and go on with ordinary church business. It's a lot safer.

But the church can and must take the lead in speaking on these issues in every facet of church life. We can be proactive and not have to feel powerless about the moral decay all around us, adopting a passivity characterized by an, "Oh well – what can we do?" attitude. Will there be messes that will be hard to clean up? Will church leaders and members feel at times like they are in over their heads? Sure. But those situations are where we tend to most see God at work, because transformation is a work of the Spirit, not technique. By stepping into a struggler's life with humility and boldness, we are faced with a dependency upon Christ that can transform not just the struggler, but us as well.

Last year I preached at a church in the Norfolk, VA area. We had copies of our men's workbook, *Crossroads: Choosing the Path to Moral Purity*, on our literature display table. A man, identifying himself as an elder, walked over to the table. He picked up the book and said to me, "Oh, we've been using this for the last three years with all our teenage boys in a special Sunday School class." Wow! We hadn't even thought of having churches use this resource in this way. Now here was a church being creative and bold, taking the lead in shepherding the hearts of the young men in their church community.

Again, if we don't do this with our people, there will be ample avenues for them to walk further into darkness, and lose hope every step of the way. I, especially, find that those involved in youth ministry seem to be most hesitant here. We really do want 13-year-old Johnny to be able to say, "I'm doing things on the computer I shouldn't be doing," or, 15-year-old Jenny admitting, "I think I'm a lesbian." Most youth workers are horror-stricken when this happens (or more likely never to bring up the subject of sexuality so

that the problems never surface). But they should welcome such confessions and see them as desperate calls for help. What would it look like for those in youth ministries to say to Johnny or Jenny, “I’m so glad you told me that. Can we talk about it? In fact, would you meet with me every week for a while to talk about it?” Our youth are desperate to talk about sex, to know what healthy sexuality is, and to know why God’s design for our sexuality is the best way to manage it and enjoy it.

This is what needs to happen as we deal with teens and every other age group in our churches. If we did this, I think many would be led away from deeper falls into sin and darker life paths down the line. But if we see all this as too complicated and overwhelming—too messy and uncomfortable—we’ll be failing our people, and missing rich opportunities to see the glory of Christ begin to shine through broken lives and broken families. Remember, that God has, “in his divine power given us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who has called us” (II Peter 1:3). We can talk about these things and don’t have to be afraid of what we will find there.

This means that nothing is too complicated or too overwhelming for us to face, or to help other’s face in their own lives. Here we must again believe that the gospel (look at point 5 again) has substance and power to address any problem and change any life. It’s also why our first response to men, women and youth who do open-up and get honest about these life-crippling problems, is so very important. Again, while we don’t have to be experts about every problem, we must believe we have, by virtue of His Holy Spirit and access to God’s Word, the ability to bring hope and help to strugglers of all types. In this sense, nothing is too complicated for us, as God’s people, to handle!

Not long ago, my wife and I were privileged to teach a one-day seminar at Fellowship Church in Knoxville, TN. Over 3,000 people attend this church on any given Sunday. Fellowship Church is a community which works hard to minister God’s Word faithfully to its people. They are aware that many people struggle with all kinds of problems there. On this particular Saturday over 125 of the church’s small group leaders (men, women and couples who lead any type of home based group), came to learn about how the gospel addresses sexual sin. Why was it important to train these church leaders? Because most people struggling deeply with sexual issues will not go to the pastor for help. But, they will be more willing to go to a trusted small group leader with whom they can confide. Fellowship Church felt that anyone leading a group in the church needed to know how to respond in hope and help to someone who walks into the light of confession. That’s a scary place to be for a struggler! Would that more churches have this attitude to educate all those in any helping or leadership positions in the church! Here again, the emphasis is not on anyone having “the” answer or having to know everything about all the issues, but to realize that, as a Body, we’re all in this together.

SEX AND THE SILENCE OF THE CHURCH: PART 8: WE NEGLECT TO INVITE STRUGGLERS TO COME INTO THE LIGHT

September 22, 2012 by John Freeman

8. *The church is silent because pastors and leaders, so busy with other agenda items, neglect the need for leadership to intentionally invite strugglers to come into the light and ask for help.*

Pastors, elders and other church leaders have a whole lot on their plates. They often have good intentions to deal with the sexual problems they see in their church community. Someday. Then that day never comes, because it's crowded out by other, incoming problems. Here is what churches have to face regarding this matter: That day will never come unless we plan and strategize for it!

This out-of-sight, out-of-mind mentality is deadly. Left unaddressed, the sexual sin struggles among our people will only fester and cause untold damages to hearts, relationships and marriages. There is a tragic collusion of silence in our churches: pastors and leaders who don't intentionally address these issues, who don't invite people to come for help, and the congregation that doesn't come to them for help because no one is talking about it.

Pastors often tell me that no one in their church seems to be coming for help with problems of a sexual nature. Why is that, especially because we all know that there are a large number of people in our congregations overwhelmed with sexual struggles? One answer may be this: that church leadership may not be seen by their people as being approachable on these sensitive matters.

Sometimes my grown children have come to me, as adults, not with bad confessions of hideous sin, but to reveal things they didn't want me to know about when they were 15, 18, or 22 years old. When I inquired why they didn't come to me at the time of their struggles, they replied, "Dad, you were so busy. I didn't want to upset you, or for you to think poorly of me. I didn't want to disappoint you."

Do you see the point? They didn't want my view of them to diminish; they wanted to preserve their reputation, no matter how small the problem or offense was.

Embarrassment and shame kept them from going to me for help.

The same principle is operative in our churches. Leadership needs to understand that this often keeps people from coming to them with their sexual struggles. They don't want to disappoint us. They don't want our view of them discredited or tarnished. After all, they have to face us each week, as we stand in the pulpit or shake their hands at the door!

Being available to help a sexual struggler when, as a church leader, you are not proactively addressing these issues is a recipe for continued silence and denial. Church leaders must cultivate approachability by initiating talk about these matters, and doing so in a manner that really and truly invites people to step into the open for help. The church must give messages, both verbal and non-verbal, that "we can handle these issues around here" –because Jesus can handle them. If we don't do that, we abandon our people to work out their problems on their own, and that is a highway to disaster for a sexual struggler. The best way to increase sexually addictive behavior in a struggler's life is for the struggler to try to deal with the problem on his own!

Neglecting to proactively invite our youth to come for help is even more tragic today, because of the sexual chaos that exists and is promoted on the Internet, where most of them live. A profound lack of initiative, by leaders and parents, leaves them open to and receptive of many, many other voices “out there,” that are more than willing to evangelize them to embrace a destructive sexuality outside of God’s design.

Today, more kids than ever, even at 9 or 10-years old are getting hooked on pornography. They are viewing it with their friends at sleep-overs, camp-outs, even with other kids from church. Also, church youth are increasingly very sympathetic to the gay movement and supportive of gay marriage—due to the silence of the church. How could they not be, when the culture bombards them daily with messages that it’s okay and even a good option? So there is much to lose when the church never seems to get around to dealing with these matters. Silence, in the form of not taking a proactive initiative, is playing Russian Roulette with our people.

SEX AND THE SILENCE OF THE CHURCH: PART 9 WE ARE UNAWARE OF THE DEPTHS TO WHICH THE BIBLE SPEAKS ABOUT SEXUALITY

September 23, 2012 by John Freeman

9. The church is silent because our people are increasingly unaware of the depths to which the Bible speaks about sexuality and the way God designed it.

I remember being at a conference for church youth when a teenager came over to our exhibit table. Obviously influenced by the culture, he said to one of our staff, “I don’t see how you people can say that homosexuality is wrong. Jesus never mentioned it.” Our staff member was able to guide this young man, for just a few minutes, into the Scriptures to look at some texts on what Jesus did say about sex, and how Christ’s view of God’s original design for sex did, in fact, speak about the issue of homosexuality. His next words stunned us. He said, “Well, I guess I should read the Bible for myself to see what else is in it.” We encouraged him to do so.

It’s not just our teens that need to be taught about the content of Scripture. Many of our people, especially those who come to faith as adults, are pretty much in the dark about Scripture. The emerging church and missional church movements have, in some cases, contributed to this phenomenon, with their de-emphasis on education and doctrine. Unfortunately, many churches today think that doctrine divides and so they settle for a short Sunday morning sermon heavy on illustrations and emotionally-laden content—hoping that it will hook people into wanting more—but then they have no venues in place to offer more. The result is a growing illiteracy of the very foundation of Christian faith; that is, the Bible and its story of creation, fall, redemption and restoration.

In many of today’s evangelical churches, there are few places for people to really become educated in content of the Bible. We just kind of hope they will find their way. Is it any wonder many of God’s people are “tossed here and there” by every kind of teaching they hear? If the media speak of the latest scientific or sociological/psychological discovery that is contrary to or contradicts the Bible— guess what wins? More people in the last twenty years have gotten teaching on crucial issues from Oprah, 20/20, Dateline

and the host of daytime talk shows that proliferate like weeds, than from biblical teaching coming from their churches. This is especially true when it comes to sex, sexuality and homosexuality.

I find that people are often shocked when they begin to understand the extent to which the Scriptures speak on sex and sexual issues. When it comes to sex, I have often said that, “If God talks about it— talk then we should be talking about it.” The Bible is full of teaching about sex and sexual relationships. Since sex is a major issue or problem for most believers, God hasn’t left us alone to try to figure it out. He’s lovingly and proactively spoken to us about it. We should be doing the same with our people. Sex has become a cultural battleground upon which the Christian faith is losing, so there is no greater need in the church today than to find multiple ways to talk about sex in the profound ways that Scripture does. We need to be doing that in Sunday school classes, men’s and women’s groups, small groups, youth groups and so on.

A few years ago, Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia held a weekend Urban Missions Conference entitled, “Sex in the City.” Over 400 people attended, primarily between the ages of 20 and 35. I was one of the main plenary speakers and the Harvest USA staff presented workshops all day on various subjects.

After the Sunday service, as I was walking down the sidewalk after leaving the church, I felt a brush of air as a bicyclist rushed by me. As I turned to look, I saw the cyclist throw-on-the-brakes and turn around. A young woman said to me, “Weren’t you the Friday night speaker at the conference?” I affirmed that I was. “Well, I went to this church when I was young, but have been away from it all throughout college. But I think I’m going to be coming back here now. Any church that speaks about these things this boldly and opens up the Scriptures to teach us like this—is someplace I want to be.”

SEX AND THE SILENCE OF THE CHURCH: PART 10 WE DON’T BELIEVE GOD DESIGNED SEX FOR OUR GOOD!

September 24, 2012 by John Freeman

10. The church is silent because we are not just ignorant of God’s design for sex, we don’t believe that he designed it for our good!

There is so much around us that presents sex in a negative and broken sense that we’ve ceased to believe it was all meant for good, or that God wants us to experience it as something good and noble!

Several years ago I was on a short-term missions’ trip to Amsterdam to work with a church-planting team. Amsterdam is a very dark city, sexually speaking. Its reputation for sexual freedoms and debauchery is well known. We’ve all seen pictures of those prostitutes sitting in windows, offering their wares. Pornography shops and prostitution are, literally, on almost every corner in the city-central area.

I remember asking my church-planter friend, “How does anyone here ever have a healthy or godly view of sex or sexuality.” His response surprised me. He said, “I don’t know, and I don’t know if I do anymore either.”

Today, Amsterdam as a metaphor for sexual chaos is in our own backyard. The Internet has turned every computer and every mobile device into an adult bookstore. Like my friend, I now wonder if the average believer has any kind of healthy appreciation for sex as God designed it anymore. As fallen creatures we

either make way too much of it, using it in a selfish and demanding way to meet our own needs, or we think much too little of it, forgetting that it is one of God's good gifts. The evil one is often behind these extremes. He is certainly pleased when God's good gifts are twisted or neglected.

Christians need to reclaim the goodness of God's gift of sexuality and of sex. We need to affirm God's good intention for it and for it as being a soul-uniting force between a husband and a wife, and as something so pleasurable that it is, in the right context, wonderfully intoxicating (think, "The Song of Songs," a book in the Old Testament that boldly proclaims on its every page the beauty of God-designed sexuality).

This message that God is pro-sex is often lost and marred by our own broken histories and struggles with it. We, unwittingly, transfer our own attitudes about sex to those around us, especially our children. We spend more time talking, when we do talk about sex in the church, about all the ways it's gone wrong. I know when we're asked to come to speak in churches; it's rarely to talk about the goodness of sex. It's usually about sex-gone-wrong.

You'd be surprised the frequency we're asked to speak to youth groups, often for the first time, about all this (and they often want us to say everything we can possibly say about it in one meeting). Yet, the leaders often want us to warn (scare?) kids into obedience and doing the right thing. When we're asked to speak to teens, leaders often have little motivation for us to speak about it in larger gospel-oriented themes or in a way which might wake them up to the mysteries, goodness and holiness that God designed sex to be. In wanting to protect our young people from the many destructive ways that they can use sex to derail their lives, we have failed them when we have not taught well from the Bible about the glorious design for sex that God has given to us. All of us, but especially our youth, need a coherent, persuasive and solidly biblical apologetic that can capture our imaginations and enable us to want to live lives of sexual integrity and enjoyment, all for his glory.

Conclusion

Obviously, this list of reasons I've shared for the church's silence is not exhaustive. Most churches can find themselves somewhere in this list. If your church has been committed to silence for the reasons I've talked about, what's the answer? Isn't it coming into the light? Isn't it an awareness and admission that this is what has characterized us as a church or as leadership? We've let our people just find their own way in all this. We've mistakenly—out of fear, our own insecurities or just not knowing what to do—did nothing; naively thinking, "no one here struggles with 'that.'"

The next step, then, may need to be repentance as leaders: imploring God to change our minds about our role to help make our churches biblically healthy places, places where we can both talk about all this and provide our people with much needed help. That always becomes a win-win situation. We have everything to gain if we'll just do that — but everything to lose if we don't.

Harvest USA wants to help your church develop a strategy to begin dealing with this to the glory of God. Let us know how we can help you. The Harvest USA website (www.harvestusa.org) is a good place to discover resources. Where possible, our staff is available to help, at your local church, in education and in equipping your leaders. We are also available to speak, via skype or web to your leadership or board of elders, etc. We would love to help. May the Lord bless you in your desire to build his kingdom.