

IS TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN TEACHING ABOUT SEX A PROBLEM FOR MISSION?

The statistics make depressing reading. The Church is in decline. It seems more difficult by the year to do effective evangelism and win people to Christ. The culture appears to be hardening in many places against the gospel. Some versions of secularism hold that faith is not only weird and irrational but potentially dangerous or 'toxic'.

According to some, the diagnosis of the problem and its cure are simple. The fault is Christianity's failure to adapt to modern ideas, and in particular its old-fashioned and offensive views about sexual morality. No one will listen to our message – the argument goes – if we appear to be anti-gay.

So how do we go about mission?

Firstly, there are some who suggest that we need to be more in step with contemporary philosophy and culture. In other words we need to adapt the historical teaching of the Church and to allow the understandings of the times to refresh it.

Others suggest what might be seen as a head-in-the-sand approach: namely, not to talk about sexual ethics from the pulpit.

A better – and third – approach is to recognise two facts and then to respond to them with appropriate and biblical teaching.

Fact 1 – there are plenty of evangelical churches around the country who are teaching an orthodox Christian ethic about sex and sexuality and still seeing many people coming to living faith in Christ. This suggests that teaching an orthodox biblical view on sexuality does not stop people coming to faith.

Fact 2 – Enormous amounts of robust evangelical scholarship are still convinced that an orthodox interpretation of sexual ethics is entirely biblical. We therefore have no choice but to teach in keeping with it. The question is ... how best can we do this?

Tips

Here are four suggestions that may help you to teach about sexual ethics without undermining the missional impact of your church.

1. Be honest in your teaching/preaching about sexual ethics (as you would be with all subjects). It's helpful for preachers and teachers to be honest and (appropriately) transparent in talking about their own experience. None of us is perfect. Our imperfections and struggles need to be shared in ways that are appropriate so that people wrestling with very real issues have safe spaces in which to discuss under Scripture their experience and struggles.
2. Teach positively. It is important that we derive our teaching on sexual behaviour from a doctrine of marriage and sexuality that is 'good'. God's gift of sex, sexuality and marriage to humanity was a good gift – and our teaching needs to be offered in such a way that that is made apparent. Evangelicals have sometimes focused too much on the 'Thou shalt not ...'.

3. Our teaching on sexual ethics needs to include a range of related and important issues, not just sexual intercourse. Singleness and fulfilled celibacy are two obvious examples.
4. Paul understood that the gospel itself was offensive to the Jews and incomprehensible to the Greeks. But he never withdrew from its presentation – even when its ethical implications were demanding and countercultural. We must do the same – in love, with respect and sensitivity and with urgency.

RESOURCES:

[Real-life stories from Living Out: Sean and Gaby](#)