

Introduction

Good afternoon. Welcome to *A Better Story: God, Sex, and Human Flourishing*.

In this series of teachings our goal is to dig down to the assumptions beneath our approach to sex, and our views on gender. And we want to take seriously the beliefs and feelings, the ideas and intuitions people in our society have about these issues. And also, we are here to learn the Christian vision of sex and gender, and what it looks like to be a part of that better story that God is telling, a story of human flourishing at this particular point in time.

If you have a Bible, find **Proverbs 4:23**, *“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”*

This is a really helpful passage of Scripture for what we saw last week. Remember the work of Jonathan Haidt,¹ the social psychologist, who has shown that

- typically, we don't reason our way to our moral views,
- and so we have a hard time explaining exactly why we see something as morally right or wrong.
- We just know in our gut what's right and what's wrong, what's good and what's bad.

And so our views about sex and gender are

- typically based on **moral intuitions** not reasons.
- And these moral intuitions reside at a deeper level than our heads, our minds, our intellect...they reside in our hearts, in our guts, in our instincts.

And it's this same basic view of humans that is operating in **Proverbs 4:23**, *“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”*

Now what forms our moral intuitions? How do we get them? If they don't come from reason, where do they come from? **They come from stories. Humans are fundamentally storied creatures. Our moral intuitions are shaped by our most beloved stories.** Because these stories do more than entertain us; over time, they capture our imaginations, our hearts, they get embedded in our psyche.

And when it comes to the issues of sex and gender, there are **three fundamental stories** our society tells that form our sense of what's right and what's wrong.

Last week we looked at the stories our society tells so well about **identity**. That in our age of authenticity, one of the most important things in life is to find your deepest dreams and desires and to bring those out to the world. And our sexual desires are a part of that.

Our sexual desires are **both** a **marker of our true self**, and a **primary way of expressing our true self**.² So you've got to be true to yourself, no matter what others say. And if anyone puts pressure on you to change that about yourself, they are oppressing you, they are threatening your health, your flourishing, your core personal identity.

That was last week. This week, tonight, we're going to focus on the stories our society tells about **freedom**. Next week, we'll look at the stories of romance and love that we tell in our society today. But tonight our focus is on freedom.

1. Sex and Freedom Today

And when it comes to the stories our society tells about freedom, a great place to start is with sports. After all, one of the ways our society tells its deepest stories is through the rituals that surround sports.

For example, at the beginning of most major sporting events someone will sing "The Star-Spangled Banner." And youtube is filled with various top ten lists...typically, folks love Whitney Houston's version of the song at the 1991 Super Bowl. And with equal passion, people love to hate Roseanne Barr's version at a San Diego Padres game in 1990.

But whoever is singing, almost always the climactic moment of the song is when the singer belts out the phrase, "**O'er the land of the freeee...**" And in most renditions, it's this elongated high note. And that's when the crowd starts really cheering. Even though the song goes on to talk about "**the home of the brave,**" that's really, in the narrative arc of the song, just an afterthought. Because both the melody line and our society highlight freedom as **the** main theme. It's our national anthem.³

In fact many people who study American society say that freedom is our most important value.⁴ "The right to be 'free' has become our consummate cultural cliché, a banner under which we live our entire lives."⁵

And **what does freedom mean for America** at this particular point in our Secular Age? It means **removing "limitations or constraints..."** The **fewer the boundaries** we have on our choices and actions, the **freer we feel** ourselves to be."⁶

Think about advertising.

- Tinder: "Single does what single wants."
- Old Navy and Keke Palmer: "You do you boo"⁷
- Burger King: "Have it your way."

"Right at the heart of modern culture is the **ideal** of personal freedom:

- that we can live well and truly be ourselves
 - only if we are free” to choose for ourselves.⁸
- We will have the greatest level of happiness and fulfillment
 - when we have this freedom to choose,
 - when “no one is constraining our choices.”⁹

Okay, so how does this play into our moral intuitions about sex and gender?

Well to understand that, we need to step aside from **sociology** for a moment, and turn our attention to **technology**.

Up until the year 1960, one of the primary boundaries, not the only one, but one of the primary boundaries set up around sex was “fear: fear of pregnancy, fear of social stigma and punishment, and fear of disease.”¹⁰

But something happened in 1960. And it was in the field of technology. Scientists created something that came onto the market in 1960, and it changed the world. Some people, speaking with a little hyperbole, but not much, have even gone so far as to say that this particular piece of technology created the most profound change ever in the history of the human race.¹¹ **Does anyone know what it is that I’m talking about?**

The Pill. That’s right. Artificial, hormonal, contraception.

On June 23, 1960 the FDA approved the Pill for contraceptive use. And for the first time in world history, “reliable contraception, and, in particular, forms of contraception that women could take charge of themselves, such as the Pill, the diaphragm, and” and other technologies.¹²

The cultural effect of this, among others, has been to **disconnect sexual intercourse from procreation** in the minds of many Americans.

Before [1960], having sex meant knowingly taking the risk of becoming a mother or father. After the 1960s, that connection faded, at least in the cultural imagination. [And] sex...increasingly came to be seen as a normal element of any close or perhaps even casual relationship and had nothing to do with having a baby.” And so sex, is now, in the imagination of most people, “a kind of recreational activity.”¹³ **An activity we associate fundamentally with pleasure not procreation.**

Remember, prior to the 1960s, one of the primary boundaries to sex outside of marriage was fear, primarily 3 fears:

- #1, “fear of pregnancy,
- #2, “fear of social stigma and punishment,
- #3, and fear of disease.”

But then, “the Pill and its cousins...substantially undermined the first two strictures...while modern medicine has largely erased the third.”¹⁴

And so, **for the first time in history** society thinks of sex as something you can do without any serious consequences.¹⁵

Alright, at this moment in our Secular Age, what all this adds up to is that we tend to think that:

1. we “should freely express with our bodies what we feel in our hearts;
2. how we feel about someone should determine how far we go with him or her sexually.”¹⁶
3. And so when it comes to sex, each person should do what seems best to him or her.

“Mutual **consent** rather than a marriage [covenant] between a man and a woman is the **new moral foundation** for sexual relations.”¹⁷

Transition: Now I need to back up for just a moment. Because I’m being very negative about the Sexual Revolution. But it’s not all bad. In fact, there is so much good that has come from this development in our society.

2. The Bright Side of the Sexual Revolution

For example. Human societies and cultures, historically, “have known that sex is both powerful and potentially destructive. So every [society and culture]...has devised ways to regulate sex.

[And] typically, the social regulation of sex throughout human history has involved the exercise of patriarchy, repression, domination, coercion, and exploitation. [In other words,] the social control of sexuality has not always or even often benefitted the individuals involved. [And so we must recognize that] the sexual revolution of the 1960s and ‘70s was in part an attempt to remedy some of those problems, to lift former restrictions on sexual expression and leave more up to individual choice and happiness.”¹⁸

And this is part of the larger movement focused on “individual freedom in Western society [that] has done **incalculable good**.

- It’s **led to a far more just and fair society** for **minorities** and **women**.¹⁹
- A significant part of the sexual revolution has been the work of feminists, fighting “for women to be seen as individuals, as adults, as worthy of participation in the social contract despite centuries of history in which female biology was seen as a reason for female subordination. Only recently has society begun to regularly acknowledge women’s agency, sexual and otherwise, and see women as equals to men.”²⁰ This is a gift from God to our society that come through the labors of feminists and the winds of the sexual revolution.

- Another massive benefit is the relationships of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are no longer criminalized. And there has been a remarkable decline in homophobia across the West. Prior to the Sexual Revolution, many Western societies perpetrated terrible cruelties against gay people, not to mention unwed mothers.
- The sociology and the technology driving the sexual revolution have played a significant role in reducing the **gender wage disparity** and the **educational gains** of women.²¹
- And we need to see that the Sexual Revolution has confronted a traditional approach to marriage and sex that too often **trapped people in abusive or toxic relationships**.
- It has exposed the fact that far too often the traditions around sexuality and gender have been used to disadvantage and disempower.

The Church must recognize that the good old days failed miserably at times for far too many people in the whole area of relationships. **“There was so much relational dysfunction and so little attention paid to relational healing and growth that the” good ol’ days “left millions [of people] disillusioned and yearning for more.”**

- And so “for those whom [traditional society]...trapped in toxic relationships” our Secular Age “provides a welcome release.”
- And so once again, just as I did last week, I’m saying that it is vitally important to realize that there are some very **good** reasons that our society has come to this point where we currently find ourselves.
- The good old days had their chance. And we live in the generation that rejected those days, and it’s not only about sexual hedonism. The Sexual Revolution **“represents the hopes and dreams of millions if not billions of people who see in it their best hope for”** a better life, a “way of life superior to any that preceded it.”²²
- And there are other very good benefits of the Sexual Revolution that I’ll talk about next week.

Transition: But the “the sexual revolution has not” been good for everyone, it “has not freed *all* of us...it has [only] freed some of us, and selectively, and at a price. Which is exactly what we should expect from any form of [significant] social change.”

And so, I am trying to help conservative people learn to see the good in the post-1960s era, and I’m particularly concerned to push back against those who think that “returning to the 1950s is either possible or desirable.”²³

But I’m also trying to help those who see only the good in the Sexual Revolution to recognize the deep harm that is happening because of the Sexual Revolution.

And for all of us, conservatives and liberals, I want to articulate “an alternative that” is **even better**, an alternative to both the 1950s and our current climate, an alternative that **even “more fully** satisfies the longings of the human heart”²⁴

3. The Dark Side of the Sexual Revolution

So let's look at three ways in particular that the Sexual Revolution is not living up to its promises.

1. We're Having Less Sex

Let's begin with this rather ironic fact. One of the promises was that once we are set free from the shackles of shame imposed by religious tradition, the revolution promised that we would enjoy the freedom for sex, more and better sex.²⁵ But ironically, it's not happening. We're actually having less sex and less satisfying sex.

In her now famous essay, which was the cover story of the December 2018 issue of *The Atlantic*, Kate Julian wrote: “The share of Americans who say sex between unmarried adults is ‘not wrong at all’ is at an all-time high. New cases of HIV are at an all-time low. Most women can—at last—get birth control for free, and the morning-after pill without prescription. If hookups are your thing, Grindr and Tinder offer the prospect of casual sex within the hour... Sex is portrayed, often graphically and sometimes gorgeously, on prime-time cable. Sexting is, statistically speaking, normal. *Polyamory* is a household word. Shame-laden terms like *perversion* have given way to cheerful-sounding ones like *kink*... [And] with the exception of perhaps incest and bestiality—and of course nonconsensual sex more generally—our culture has never been more tolerant of sex in just about every permutation.”²⁶

And yet, Americans are having less sex. And it's not just Americans. It's also the British, Australians, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Japan. In fact, most countries don't track their citizens' sex lives closely, but those that try to do surveys and compile the data, are reporting a decline in sex since the onset of the sexual revolution.²⁷

Isn't this ironic? “From the vantage point of... fifty years ago” it seems that we “have reached an apex of sexual freedom. And in many ways, we are more unfettered when it comes to sex than ever before: less risk, less stigma, more opportunity, more options.” And yet, all the data seems to indicate that instead of a sexual renaissance, we are, as Kate Julian so memorably put it, in a “sex recession.”²⁸

Transition: And, in addition to less sex, there is a growing set of data that **behind the rhetoric of choice and freedom**, behind the **cultural regime of easy sex** are real frustrations, hurts, regrets, confusion, grief, anger, and shame.

2. *We're Getting Hurt More*

That's another piece of irony.

For example, the **devastation following romantic breakups**. I'm not talking about "the standard middle school and high school splits that sweep through the local rumor mill, create a lot of drama, and leave somebody crying for a day or two."

Christian Smith, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame writes about this in his book, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. Smith writes about young adults who are sexually involved and who are living together or semi-living together, and when they breakup we are seeing, in his words, "real emotional and physical trauma. Some dumped partners" spend days "sleeping and crying or lying in bed immobilized with depression, [and] the anguish of being cheated on or otherwise betrayed."

In his interviews, people "spoke of profound struggles with self-doubt, self-criticism, and hopelessness lasting for months, of uncertainty about being able to trust another man or woman who they may love in the future." And at one point, Smith wrote: "Their accounts seemed analogous to the experience of going through a difficult divorce, though without ever even having gotten married. For many, the pain and fear linger even as they try to pick up the pieces and move on with their lives."²⁹

And then there's the whole library's worth of data coming out on loneliness, and insecurity.

A few years ago, a group of researchers from Harvard University's Stem Cell Institute and the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and the University of North Carolina published a series of articles in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* where they established two facts:

- (1) #1, when teenagers and college students have sex it significantly raises the risk for depression and suicide.
- (2) and #2, despite common presumption, young people are not self-medicating with sex and drugs, it is sex and drugs that lead to depression and suicide.³⁰

In other words, there are real, demonstrable negative consequences to the Sexual Revolution, and "its weight has fallen on the smallest and weakest shoulders in society" while simultaneously giving "extra strength to those already strongest and most predatory."³¹

Transition: I'll come back to that. But first, perhaps the deepest irony is that the Sexual Revolution, with all of its gains for **women**, has been, overall, not a gift, but a burden to women.

3. *The Casual Sex of the Sexual Revolution Disproportionately Disadvantages Women.*

This is “one of the most fascinating aspects of the sexual revolution...Its presumed beneficiaries [—women—]...turn out to have problems and issues that their supposedly benighted, prerevolution forebears did not.”³²

In 2009, two Wharton School economists, Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, published their ground breaking report, “The Paradox of Declining **Female** Happiness.”³³

“Using thirty-five years of data from the General Social Survey, they observe that, given the many social and economic transformations of modernity that would appear to benefit women—a closing gender wage gap, an educational attainment that now tops that of men, the sexual freedom conveyed by artificial contraception, and [so on]...—one would reasonably expect to see those who are the beneficiaries of these trends registering increased happiness. Instead” we’re seeing the reverse: “Over the past thirty-five years, ‘women’s happiness has fallen both absolutely and relative to men’s in a pervasive way...such that women no longer report being happier than men and, in many instances, now report happiness that is below that of men.’” And their data shows this is the case throughout “much of the industrialized world.”³⁴

In a stunning sociological survey of the pain of romantic love in our Secular Age, Eva Illouz, the renowned sociologist from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem...she concludes her study, the title of it is, *Why Love Hurts*, she concludes her study by observing that **“women are... in the odd historical position of having never been so sovereign in terms of their body and emotions, and, yet, of being emotionally dominated by men in new and unprecedented ways.”**³⁵

As Christine Emba, a columnist for the Washington Post, wrote in her recent book, *Rethinking Sex*, just published this year, Emba writes that “for all the talk of liberating women by equalizing opportunities for sexual pleasure, men seemed the biggest beneficiaries.”³⁶

And as Rebecca McLaughlin wrote in a wonderful little book published last year, *The Secular Creed: Engaging Five Contemporary Culture Claims*,

“The sexual revolution...was sold to us as the liberation of women. For centuries, men had been finding ways to sneak around marriage and have commitment-free sex. Thanks to the pill, now women could as well. But in the last 60 years, despite gains in freedom and opportunities, women’s self-reported happiness in America has declined. Why? [Well, a significant] part of the reason is that commitment-free sex is a poisoned chalice.”³⁷

In a study published in the May 14, 2020 issue of the *Journal of Mental Health and clinical Psychology*, significant evidence was produced that shows “stable marriage correlates with mental and physical health benefits for both men and women. But being married seems to be a particularly significant factor in happiness for women.”³⁸

And “conversely, multiple studies have shown that for women in particular, increasing...[your] number of sexual partners correlates with worse mental health, including higher levels of sadness, suicidal ideation, depression, and drug abuse.” And this is not “because women are uninterested in sex. But,” study after study has indicated that “married people experience more and better sex than their unmarried peers do. In fact, a recent study found that women in *highly* religious marriages (couples who pray together, read Scripture at home, and attend church, and so on) were twice as likely as their secular peers to say they were satisfied with their sexual relationship.”³⁹

At the end of the day, the sexual revolution is bringing an approach to sex that “is causing a lot of pain.”⁴⁰ A lot of people, especially women, are “having bad sex. Unwanted, depressing, even traumatic [consented to sex]...Something is deeply wrong...There is something unmistakably off in the way we’ve been going about sex.”⁴¹

Transition: So what about the Christian vision of sex. Is it any better?

4. The Christian Approach to Sex and Freedom is Better

Well, here are three ways in particular that the Christian vision of sexuality, of sex, and gender can help us move forward, maintaining the good developments of the sexual revolution, while pushing past the negative parts of it.

(1) The Christian Approach to Freedom and Sex is Better because it is More Realistic about Freedom

First of all, the Christian approach to freedom can help us, because it’s more realistic about the way in which constraints and limitations and boundaries and expectations are good for us.

“In the late nineteenth century, one of the founders of sociology, Emile Durkheim,...gathered data from across Europe to study the factors that affect the suicide rate. His findings can be summarized in one word: constraints.”⁴²

“No matter how he parsed the data, people who had fewer social constraints, bonds, and obligations were more likely to kill themselves. Durkheim...found that Protestants, who lived the least demanding religious lives at the time, had higher suicide rates than did Catholics; Jews, with the densest network of social and religious obligations, had the lowest. He examined...the family...and found the same thing:

- People living alone were most likely to kill themselves;
- married people, less;
- married people with children, still less.

Durkheim concluded that people need obligations and constraints to provide structure and meaning to their lives. “The more weakened the groups to which [a man] belongs, the less he depends on them, the more he consequently depends only on himself and recognizes no other rules of conduct than what are founded on his private interests.”⁴³

Now that was over 100 years ago. But the studies conducted since then have confirmed Durkheim’s diagnosis. “If you want to predict how happy someone is, or how long she will live (and if you are not allowed to ask about her genes or personality), you should find out about her social relationships. Having strong social relationships strengthens the immune system, extends life (more than does quitting smoking), speeds recovery from surgery, and reduces the risks of depression and anxiety disorders.”⁴⁴

In other words, fulfillment is deeply related to the constraints put on us through relationships. So the way in which the deep stories of our culture are presenting the vision of freedom as absolute freedom from constraint...and the way we equate freedom with choice...if I don’t have choices, then I’m not free...this is a dangerous distortion. As Durkheim established, and as most of us know, the person “who always keeps his options open is the” person whose life is empty and meaningless.⁴⁵

And this is where Christianity story is so much better than the story our society is telling. In Christianity we learn that “real freedom comes from a strategic loss of some freedoms in order to gain others.” Real freedom “is not the absence of constraints but it is choosing the right constraints and the right freedoms to lose.”⁴⁶

In Christianity we learn that “the only freedom worth having, a freedom that does not finally trivialize our choices, is a freedom that acknowledges its limits and does not seek to be godlike. That freedom, **a truly human freedom**, will acknowledge...the limits to which” our nature gives rise.⁴⁷

Transition: A second reason that Christianity can help us find a better story is because the Christian vision is more realistic about sex.

(2) The Christian Approach to Freedom and Sex is Better because it is More Realistic about Sex

You see, our current cultural regime of casual sex fails to see “that sex is not only often pleasurable, sex is also definitely powerful—often in ways beyond individual control.”⁴⁸

“Over the past several decades, our culture...has gone a bit irrational on the question of sex, attempting to hold two opposing opinions about what was once seen as obvious. On the one hand, modern sexual liberals have mainstreamed the idea that sex means nothing, or at least not very much. Sexual desire is a physical, biological urge that is pleasant to fulfill—orgasms are nice!—and we don’t need to read more into it than that.”⁴⁹

On the other hand, as we saw last week, “our society has come to the conclusion that sex means everything, or close to it... Having an active sex life is a sign and symbol of health and—especially for women—a political statement signifying power and... liberation as a class, gender, or generation. Sex is a key construction of our individual identities: we mull over our sexuality in public and in private, identifying ourselves by our orientations and affinities in the same way that we do by our race or nationality.”⁵⁰

So which is it? Sex means nothing? or Sex means everything?

Well Christianity helps us with this conundrum. The Christian vision offers us a better way of recognizing, on the one hand, the profound nature of sex.

- A better way of understanding why rape is so horrible, why it affects people so deeply.
- Why sexual assault is such a violation of self-sovereignty, and so uniquely painful.
- Why it is that when “we try and pretend that sex has no special value... then we end up in some very dark places.”⁵¹
- Why sex touches something deep and intrinsic in us.

And here’s the catch. As I began to point out last week, and I’ll point to much more in the weeks to come, Christianity helps us to see the power of sex without, on the other hand, putting sex on a pedestal as the ultimate expression of agency. The Christian vision of sex recognizes both that our sexuality is uniquely meaningful and that sex isn’t everything.

Transition: Third, the Christian approach to freedom and sex is better because it tells a better story about consent...

3. The Christian Approach to Freedom and Sex is Better because it is More Realistic about Consent

...in two ways:

- (1) first, the Christian view of sexuality and gender is better at producing true consent, and
- (2) second the Christian vision of sex is better because it recognizes that while consent may be a good legal threshold, it’s not an adequate moral threshold.

To begin with, the sexual revolution has been right to insist on consent. This is a victory for which we should all give thanks.

- After way too long, and thanks to the great feminist campaigning efforts of the last century, we have begun to see the rape of women as a crime committed against the women rather than as a property crime committed against a woman’s male kin.

- And also, finally, marital rape has been criminalized in the West.
- The fight to define rape as sex without consent has been so important, so needed.⁵²

Sex must involve freedom. Because it “involves such complete and vulnerable mutual self-giving” it must be freely given. The gift of sex should never be “conditional; it cannot depend on the partner meeting this or that condition. Sexual love cannot be...coerced.”

As we'll see in a couple of weeks, the Christian vision is that sex reflects something about the unconditional love that the Creator has for us. And if sex is to reflect that unconditional love, “if sex is to reflect something about the free grace of relationship with God, then it...[has] to happen in freedom.”

And in fact, “the marriage bed — a place of equality, mutuality, delight, covenant love, and consent — is the [only] context for that kind of freedom.”⁵³ In the Christian approach, we can have true consent.

Let me show you what I mean. And I'm going to quote a lot, without telling you when, from Beth Felker Jones' amazing book called, *Faithful: A Theology of Sex*. I showed you the book at the end of my lecture last week. And the manuscript of my lecture will have all the appropriate footnoting.

Here's how it goes.

Marriage, you see, is the context that removes the dynamics that force false consent “because marriage is that covenant context in which [a person] should be loved, **no matter what**.” In other words, there should be no reason for sex in a marriage to be contaminated with the subtle form of coercion that occurs when sex is given in “the hopes of winning love or of keeping the other person around.”

Now, obviously, in a sinful world, marriage is not always what it should be. I know that. I'm a pastor. I too often grieve with people over the sad reality “that force, assault, and rape happen in marriages, but this is a distortion — an utter perversion — of what marriage ought to be.”

“I also know that it is tempting to use sex as a bargaining chip in marriage.” But “this is antithetical to what marriage should be. The fact that marriage can be and is distorted does not undo God's good creative intention for marriage. Nor does it undo the possibility — the reality — that good, faithful marriages do happen in this world.”

Okay, so marriage is the place where consent, real and true and strong consent can happen in a way that no other context makes possible. This is true because of the covenantal nature of marriage, but it's also true because marriage is a public institution.”

“Marriage is profoundly public. Part of what we do when we marry is to stand up before our friends, family, and church and say, ‘see this man? (or see this woman?) — I'm having sex with

him tonight.” And “this making-sex-public builds into marriage a set of safeguards, a kind of accountability, which cannot exist in a private, individual agreement.” So a marriage is the place for “truly free love — and truly consensual sex.”⁵⁴

But there’s more. And this brings us to **the second way that the Christian vision of sex and gender and sexuality is better at consent**. Consent may suffice for a legal defense, but it’s not adequate for a moral defense.

The Christian vision helps us to see that **consent is merely a baseline** when it comes to sex. To be clear, consent must be present in any sexual encounter, otherwise it is immoral.

- Nonconsensual sex is always wrong.
- **But, consensual sex is not always right.**

And this is because sex is relational. And so “consent [alone] does not make sex physically, emotionally, or psychologically safe. An attitude of uncritical sex positivity neglects this fact.”

- Consensual sex can still “hurt people in lasting ways.”
- It can still “betray their dignity.”⁵⁵

Just because someone desires something and another person consents, that doesn’t mean no one is hurt. Desires should not be exempt from critique. A sexual ethic that only focuses on consent is not enough.

There are some desires that “reinforce oppressive structures and stereotypes, and that by breathing more life into them we are likely to make society worse for all.”⁵⁶ Some desires are worse than others. Some sex acts are bad, bad for the individuals involved and bad for society.

And this is one of the things that came out of the #MeToo movement, this “outpouring of rage and sorrow” over a “sexual culture that wasn’t working for women.” So many of the stories that came out were about unambiguous criminal behavior, “but there were also a lot of women who described sexual encounters that were technically consensual but nevertheless left them feeling terrible.”⁵⁷ And so the Christian vision of sex enables us to better recognize and resist the full range of abuse.

To make consent the sole criterion for good sex fails in two important ways.

First, it fails to recognize “the competitive nature of the sexual marketplace, overstating the extent to which any of us can make truly free choices in a system in which we are all radically restricted.”⁵⁸

- It fails to recognize “the extent to which participants in the sexual free market may be subjected to more or less **subtle coercion**, just as workers in an economic system act in response to incentives and constraints.”⁵⁹
- It “falsely assume[s] that, with...[the] taboos removed, then we would all be liberated and capable of making entirely free choices about our sexual lives, sampling from a menu of delightful options made newly available by the sexual revolution.”⁶⁰

What I’m saying is that “when we strip back all sexual morality to the bare bones, leaving only the principle of consent, we leave the way clear for some particularly predatory” people.⁶¹ “The consent framework is nowhere near robust enough to protect” us from harm.⁶²

And **second**, relying on consent alone fails to **push us to ask what we owe** each other.

The sexual revolution has helped us to finally get consent as a fundamental requirement, and that has helped shrink the double standard around sex. But “the actual practice of sex,” we are learning in study after study, and story after story, seems to be “less pleasant than it did before, when there was at least a little held back. Rather than expanding our happiness, liberation seems to have shrunk it. We’re not giddy with enjoyment or drunk on pleasure.”⁶³

We need to build on consent, and move higher, to a sexual ethic that takes seriously what is not only agreed to, but is actually good for the other person, and for culture. A sexual ethic that deals seriously with the fact that too much of what our “culture considers ‘normal’ sexual behavior is often harmful to women.”⁶⁴ “We should prioritise virtue over desire.”⁶⁵

The Christian vision of sex offers a counter revolution, one that recognizes “other human beings as real people, invested with real value and dignity.”⁶⁶ It presents a view of sex that is good for society, good for our partners, and good for ourselves.

Conclusion

Does the Christian vision bring more satisfaction, security, freedom, and fulfillment than the vision on offer from our Secular Age? I believe it does.

The Christian vision gives us norms that can liberate “us from the enslavement that parades itself as sexual ‘freedom’ today.”⁶⁷

And the Christian approach delivers the desired goal of freedom that the hook-up culture fails at so terribly.

There have been so many good things in the recent sexual revolution, so many things that we must be thankful for, so many gifts. But at the same time, there has been such very intense pain, destruction and disparity.

The Christian approach to sexuality and identity offers a quality of love and intimacy that is more fulfilling than our Secular Age can offer, even at its very best moment.

Once we begin to take seriously the benefits and the costs of the Sexual Revolution, we can't just bury our heads in the sand.

“The technology shock of the Pill led” our society to the prideful “assumption that our society could be uniquely free from the oppression of sexual norms and could function just fine. The last sixty years [however] have proved that assumption to be wrong.”⁶⁸ The Christian vision of sex teaches us that:

- Sex must be taken seriously.
- Some desires are bad.
- Consent is not enough.
- Loveless sex is not empowering.
- And, marriage is the best place for sex.⁶⁹

And yes, marriage has “been used as a vehicle for the control of women by men, and...most marriages do not live up to a romantic ideal...[And] the marriage system that prevailed in the West up until recently was not perfect, nor was it easy for most people to conform to, since it demanded high levels of tolerance and self-control.” And yet, there is no system that works better.⁷⁰

Resource to Recommend to the Church at the End of this Session

Kuehne, Dale S. *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship beyond an Age of Individualism*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009.

If you are interested in learning more about the negative consequences of the sexual revolution, here are three options.

The first is polemical and narrative.

Mary Eberstadt. *Sex after the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012.

These two books by young female feminists who are fed-up with the pain women are enduring in the current sexual climate

Christine Emba. *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation*. New York: Sentinel, 2022.

Louise Perry. *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution: A New Guide to Sex in the 21st Century*. Medford, MA: Polity, 2022.

These two are sociological reports and analyses.

Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Christian Smith, et al., “The Shadow Side of Sexual Liberation” in Christian Smith, et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

- ¹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2013), 3–31.
- ² Philip Turner, “The Episcopalian Preference,” *First Things*, November 2003: 31.
- ³ Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016), 97.
- ⁴ E.g., Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), xlvii—xlviii.
- ⁵ Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015), 55.
- ⁶ Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 101.
- ⁷ Talking about her song, “I Don’t Belong to You,” Palmer explained: “I don’t belong to anyone else but myself. I have to make my own decisions. Happiness is defined by me. My sexuality is defined by me. And that can change, and this can change, and I can make it hat I want to make it because I’m the one who makes the choice. So that’s what ‘I Don’t Belong to You’ is saying. This song feels right, and it’s telling who I am. And it captures my identity” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keke_Palmer#Personal_life).
- ⁸ Grant, *Divine Sex*, 55.
- ⁹ Keller, *Making Sense*, 109.
- ¹⁰ Mary Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve after the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 96.
- ¹¹ Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 227 n 31. Referencing Vanessa Grigoriadis, “Waking Up from the Pill,” *New York Magazine*, November 28, 2010. <http://nymag.com/news/features/69789/>.
- ¹² Louise Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution: A New Guide to Sex in the 21st Century* (Medford, MA: Polity Books, 2022), 6–7.
- ¹³ Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14.
- ¹⁴ Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve*, 96. And Eberstadt goes on to write, only a decade ago, the presence of HIV/AIDS was a stunning exception to the idea that you could have any “kind of sex at all without serious consequence.” But one of the amazing advances that the technology of medicine has made is that HIV/AIDS is “a ‘manageable’ disease in the affluent West, even as it continues to kill millions of less fortunate patients elsewhere.”

¹⁵ The Sexual Revolution “was a movement of mostly young people who came together over opposition to the Vietnam War, and in addition to being a peace movement, sexual freedom was central to their politics. [And] while their antiwar efforts had some success, their sexual politics have changed the world” (Dale S. Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship Beyond an Age of Individualism* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009], 21).

¹⁶ Grant, *Divine Sex*, 60.

¹⁷ Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld*, 44. And Kuehne goes on to write, “Even the personal health consequences of engaging a wide variety of sexual partners are regarded as an acceptable result of freedom of choice. [And so] the results of individual relational choice on children, parents, spouses, and third parties are considered of secondary importance to the happiness and autonomy of the individual adult.”

¹⁸ Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 193.

¹⁹ Keller, *Making Sense*, 100.

²⁰ Christine Emba, *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation* (New York: Sentinel, 2022), 68.

²¹ Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve*, 47.

²² Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld*, 92.

²³ Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 7.

²⁴ Kuehne, *Sex and the iWorld*, 93.

²⁵ Harrison, *A Better Story*, 92.

²⁶ Kate Julian, “The Sex Recession: Why Young People are Retreating from Intimacy—And What this Means for Society,” *The Atlantic* (December 2018). Published online as, “Why Are Young People Having So Little Sex? Despite the Easing of Taboos and the Rise of Hookup Apps, Americans are in the Midst of a Sex Recession,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/the-sex-recession/573949/>.

²⁷ In her article, Julian points to “one of the most respected sex studies in the world, Britain’s National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles.” David Spiegelhalter is a British statistician and Winton Professor of the Public Understanding of Risk in the Statistical Laboratory at the University of Cambridge. He’s actually, Sir David John Spiegelhalter, because he’s received both the OBE (the Order of the British Empire) and on top of that, he’s also a Fellow of the Royal Society. This is the British award granted to people who make significant contributions to, basically, science. Think about Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Winston Churchill, Alan Turing, Stephen Hawking. Okay, so Spiegelhalter has drawn together convincing data that shows we are **not** living in a sexual paradise of ‘free love.’ In fact, in one of the great ironies of history, since the sexual revolution began, people are now having less sex. the frequency of sex has declined since the Sexual Revolution. And the trend is so precipitous, that Spiegelhalter observes, “At [this] rate of decline...a simple, but extremely naive, extrapolation would predict that by 2040 the average person will not be having any sex at all. I rather suspect this will not be the case, but this still leaves the crucial question: why is there less sex going on?” (Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex & Human Flourishing* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2017), 92. Citing David Spiegelhalter, *Sex by Numbers: What Statistics Can Tell Us About Sexual Behaviour* (London: Profile Books, 2015), 20).

²⁸ Christine Emba, *Rethinking Sex: A Provocation* (New York: Sentinel, 2022), 22. And near the end of her book, after surveying the data, Louise Perry, in her book, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, argues that we have entered into an era of cultural death grip syndrome. “‘Death grip syndrome’ is a term used to describe the impotence that can result from excessive porn use. It’s partly a physical problem caused by aggressive masturbation leading to desensitisation, but it’s also partly a psychological problem caused by an overload of sexual stimuli. Sufferers of death grip syndrome – almost all of them men – become incapable of having sex with a real person because their responses have been gradually deadened” (Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 154).

²⁹ Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 155.

³⁰ Denise D. Hallfors et al., “Adolescent Depression and Suicide Risk: Associations with Sex and Drug Behavior,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 27, no. 3 (2004): 224–31; Denise D. Hallfors et al., “Which Comes First in Adolescence—Sex and Drugs or Depression?,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 29, no. 3 (2005): 163–170.

³¹ Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve*, 16.

³² Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve*, 36.

³³ Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, “The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 1, no. 2 (2009): 190–225.

³⁴ Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve*, 46–47. Quoting Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, “The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness,” 190. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that all women are suffering. I’m sure there are women who genuinely enjoy casual sex and who decide, having weighed the risks and benefits, that it is in their best interest to pursue it. What I’m saying is that our “culture of casual sex is” harming women as a whole, and many, many women in particular (Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 73).

³⁵ Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 239. Regnerus has demonstrated the same phenomenon in *Cheap Sex*; and then there’s the research of Lionel Tiger, the Charles Darwin Professor of Anthropology at Rutgers and co-Research Director of the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation. He has repeatedly argued that the sexual revolution has altered the balance between the sexes in disturbing new ways that is producing trouble, not solving it. E.g., Lionel Tiger, *The Decline of Males: The First Look at an Unexpected New World for Men and Women* (Darby, PA: Diane Publishing 1999).

³⁶ Emba, *Rethinking Sex*, 41.

³⁷ Rebecca McLaughlin, *The Secular Creed: Engaging Five Contemporary Claims* (Austin, TX: The Gospel Coalition, 2021), 72–3.

³⁸ McLaughlin, *The Secular Creed*, 73. Citing...

³⁹ McLaughlin, *The Secular Creed*, 73. Citing...

⁴⁰ Emba, *Rethinking Sex*, xii.

⁴¹ Emba, *Rethinking Sex*, xii–xiii.

⁴² Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 132–33.

⁴³ Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, 133. Citing Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*, trans. by J. A. Spalding & G. Simpson (New York: Free Press [1897] 1951), 209.

⁴⁴ Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, 133.

⁴⁵ David McIlroy, "Infinite Choice."

⁴⁶ Keller, *Making Sense*, 102.

⁴⁷ Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians*, third ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1996, 2005] 2013), 5.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 193.

⁴⁹ Emba, *Rethinking Sex*, 100.

⁵⁰ Emba, *Rethinking Sex*, 100.

⁵¹ Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 160.

⁵² Christine Emba identifies twelve European countries using this definition. Emba, *Rethinking Sex*, 12. Regarding the shifting understanding of rape as a property crime against the male kin of a woman versus a crime against the raped woman herself, the foundational text is Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975). For an important critique of Brownmiller's important book, see Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 22–44.

⁵³ Jones, *Faithful*, 92–93.

⁵⁴ Jones, *Faithful*, 78–9.

⁵⁵ Emba, *Rethinking Sex*, 149.

⁵⁶ Emba, *Rethinking Sex*, 139.

⁵⁷ Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 12.

⁵⁸ Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 79.

⁵⁹ Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 50. And see especially, Emba, *Rethinking Sex*.

⁶⁰ Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 52. For example, "If I am...a young female student looking for a boyfriend at my twenty-first-century university, and I don't want to have sex before marriage, then I will find my options limited in a way that they wouldn't have been seventy years ago. When sex before marriage is expected, and when almost all of the other women participating in my particular sexual market are willing to 'put out' on a first or second date, then *not* being willing to do the same becomes a competitive disadvantage. The abstinent young woman must either be tremendously attractive, in order to out-compete her more permissive peers, or she must be happy to restrict her dating pool only to men who are as unusual as she is. Being eccentric carries costs" (Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 52–3).

⁶¹ Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 64.

⁶² Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 64.

⁶³ Emba, *Rethinking Sex*, 35.

⁶⁴ Jessica Valenti, "#MeToo is about more than stopping rape," 31 January 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/31/me-too-we-demand-more-jessica-valenti>, cited in Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 13.

⁶⁵ Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 67.

⁶⁶ Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 20.

⁶⁷ James K. A. Smith, "Foreword," *Divine Sex*, 10.

⁶⁸ Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 189.

⁶⁹ This list is taken from Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 189.

⁷⁰ Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*, 184–85.