

PRAISE FOR ***LEADING A CHURCH IN A TIME OF SEXUAL QUESTIONING***

“Bruce Miller is a wise guide in one of the most practical books I have read on this subject. A thoroughly biblical, thoughtful, and grace-filled book, you will find yourself returning to it again and again.”

—DEBRA HIRSCH, PASTOR AND AUTHOR OF *REDEEMING SEX:
NAKED CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SPIRITUALITY AND SEXUALITY*

“As someone well acquainted with the confusing isolation of feeling the need to choose between being gay and being a Christian, I find [this] to be a carefully written book full of meticulous, thoughtful research, but most of all full of love. Miller’s heart to show the radical love of God to all people, especially the marginalized, is apparent through every chapter as he challenges church leaders to employ their ministries as effective instruments of God’s healing love.”

—MALLORY CHAPPELL, ADJUNCT HISTORY PROFESSOR,
BOXING TRAINER, AND NAVY VETERAN

“If you’re serious about dealing with the sexual issues of our day in a Christlike way, Miller will guide you as a theologian, a pastor, and a fellow sexual being into a much needed balance of grace *and* truth.”

—C. GARY BARNES, THM, PhD, LICENSED PSYCHOLOGIST; BOARD
CERTIFIED SEX THERAPIST; PROFESSOR, DALLAS THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

“It’s honest, challenges the genuineness of our biblical conviction of real (Christlike) love and the level of inclusiveness we are willing to embrace. Thought provoking and cutting edge, great depth, well covered, balanced. Disturbing for some because it challenges established leadership habits and some stereotypical teaching. Reflective of our heavenly Father’s heart, convicting. Well done.”

—TERRY PRESCOTT, RETIRED BUSINESSMAN

“I am grateful for your courage to make bold statements. . . .”

—KARI, RETIRED FIREFIGHTER

“I believe this book is a game changer! It is a powerful guide for church leaders and entire congregations. I think it will also be encouraging for parents of LGBT+ kids. Awesome job!”

—BILL HENSON, FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT, LEAD THEM HOME

“I read every word of your manuscript. My response is *amen*! This book is so needed and I think you’ve done an incredible job addressing the issue(s), and providing a process and real help for the church. I’m going to take my staff through your book ASAP. It’s the best book I’ve ever read on the subject.”

—DOUG WALKER, LEAD PASTOR, FELLOWSHIP OF THE PARKS

“Irenic, compassionate, and pastorally astute, this book is a timely entry in an increasingly antagonistic conversation. Instead of getting lost in debates, Bruce Miller returns us again and again to the Christian necessity of love: love for Christ, love for Scripture, and love for people—all people—regardless of sexual orientation or sexual ethics or sexual expression. I pray that many more church communities with a historic Christian sexual ethic come to resemble the church envisioned in this book.”

—GREGORY COLES, AUTHOR OF *SINGLE, GAY, CHRISTIAN*

“This is a book that needed to be written and I can’t think of a better person for the job. You are going the love the way Bruce tackles this super-sensitive topic with skill, passion, balance, and grace. Anybody who plans to step outside into the world we live in today needs to take in the message of this book.”

—RANDY FRAZEE, PASTOR AND AUTHOR OF *THE HEART OF THE STORY*

“This book needed to be written. As Christians who believe the Bible is the infallible Word of God, we cannot—we must not—look the other way. Bruce Miller has not! As a pastor-theologian, he has probed deeply into the Scriptures to discover God’s mind on sexual issues that have surfaced in our present culture. Caution! Read this book carefully from cover to cover. Evaluate the author’s conclusions and his total perspective.”

—DR. GENE A. GETZ, PROFESSOR, PASTOR, AUTHOR

“In this book [Bruce Miller] applies his God-given gift of clarity to one of the most difficult topics we face today. This is a must-read for pastors, parents, and students facing the difficult task of navigating the topic of sexual identity in today’s culture.”

—BRAD SMITH, PRESIDENT, BAKKE GRADUATE UNIVERSITY (BGU.EDU)

“There has been a need for a book like this for a long time. Bruce has wrestled long and hard with questions related to LGBTQ people and the church. With biblical fidelity and a pastoral heart, he addresses the practical and difficult issues churches are facing today. He doesn’t always give easy answers. And you may disagree with him at times, as I do. But I am not aware of any other book that addresses such challenging questions with sensitivity, honesty, and biblical wisdom.”

—SEAN McDOWELL, PhD, SPEAKER, PROFESSOR AT TALBOT
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, AND AUTHOR OF MORE THAN
EIGHTEEN BOOKS, INCLUDING *SAME-SEX MARRIAGE*

“A must-read for church leaders. Bruce’s treatment of a controversial topic is done with grace and biblical truth. . . . I encourage readers to dive in with an open mind, allowing God to change your heart, knowing God’s truth will remain forever.”

—MARK WILSON, CHURCH ELDER AND ENGINEERING MANAGER

“If you are a busy church leader who cares about these issues but does not have the time to read all the books on the topic, Bruce just saved you time. If you only have time for one book, read this one. . . . You may not agree with everything you read, but you will find guidance and wisdom to make your own decisions for your context.”

—STEVE STROOPE, LEAD PASTOR, LAKEPOINTE CHURCH

“With compassion and generosity [Bruce Miller] brings biblical theology into the arena of one of the thorniest topics facing the church in this present culture: human sexuality. I promise you will be challenged!”

—MICHAEL FLETCHER, SENIOR PASTOR, MANNA CHURCH

“A book that walks you through the full array of scenarios a church leader must consider when thinking through issues tied to sexuality. It does so with sensitivity, skill, and clarity. . . . the gift of this book is it will force you to think carefully through this discussion and its myriad possibilities, a real service to us all.”

—DARRELL BOCK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR CULTURAL
ENGAGEMENT, HOWARD G. HENDRICKS CENTER FOR
CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP AND CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT; SENIOR
RESEARCH PROFESSOR OF NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

“I’m so thankful that a book has finally been written from a pastoral perspective that treats faith and sexuality as the truly nuanced subjects that they are. Bruce asks informed, thought-provoking questions that allow you to lean into this conversation and discern what is right for your church in your context—all within sound, biblical theology.”

—TY WYSS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF WALLS DOWN MINISTRY

“Dr. Miller does a great job handling the relevant biblical texts but also interacting with research, sharing stories of those wrestling with all the related issues, and describing productive ways of having meaningful discussions, even with those who may disagree on the myriad issues to address. I commend it highly to pastors and leaders to help them address LGBT+ issues both with their words and with their lives in the coming years.”

—DAVE TRAVIS, DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC COUNSEL TO PASTORS AND
CHURCH BOARDS AT GENERIS; FORMER CEO, LEADERSHIP NETWORK

“As a pastor who has for thirty-one years been leading a large metroplex church through an intense time of sexual questioning, I am deeply grateful to my long-time friend and colleague Dr. Bruce Miller for providing us more than just a new book. This is actually balm for my pastoral soul! . . . You’ll also breathe a sigh of relief as you read Bruce’s commonsense answers for pastors attempting to lead wisely through the many seemingly intractable LGBT complexities in their churches.”

—DR. E. ANDREW MCQUITTY, IRVING BIBLE CHURCH
PASTOR AT LARGE; AUTHOR OF *THE WAY TO BRAVE:
SHAPING A DAVID FAITH IN OUR GOLIATH WORLD*

“As a pastor who is responsible to help our church navigate a whole new sexual and cultural landscape, I’ve found this to be the most helpful book written on the topic to date. Bruce is a pastor/theologian who is able to bring the best of both worlds to this topic. He breaks down very complex issues in ways that are deeply thoughtful, biblically accurate, appropriately humble, and extremely helpful.”

—JEFF JONES, SENIOR PASTOR, CHASE OAKS

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(written with Rowland Forman and Jeff Jones)

LEADING A CHURCH IN A TIME OF SEXUAL QUESTIONING

Grace-Filled Wisdom for Day-to-Day Ministry

BRUCE B. MILLER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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FOREWORD

Questions about faith and sexuality are among the most pressing ethical concerns facing the church today. It is therefore pastorally irresponsible for Christian pastors and leaders to remain unstudied and silent on this topic. Yet, few pastors are willing to engage the topic with truth and grace.

This is why I'm so thankful for Bruce's courage and compassion in not only engaging this conversation with truth and grace, but for doing so in the context of real-life ministry. Bruce is a pastor. Bruce is also a scholar. He's well-studied on the topic of faith and sexuality, but he has also been living out what he preaches, while preaching what he's living out. While there are many books written on the topic, few are written at the intersection of scholarship and ministry. Even fewer are written from one pastor to another, rather than lobbing bombs from one ivory tower to the next.

When I first met Bruce, the first word that came to mind was: *humility*. The second: *authenticity*. Though Bruce is older and wiser than I am, and though he has many more years of pastoral experience under his belt, he immediately wanted to know what I thought about various aspects of how the historically Christian perspective on sexual ethics applies to nitty gritty pastoral questions. He was slow to speak and quick to ask questions. And when he spoke, his words dripped with humility and grace. Bruce is a pastor with a massive heart for people, and it's that heart that saturates every word of this book.

FORWORD

Bruce is also a scholar and a theologian. He's not *just* a pastor who loves people; he's a pastor who loves to study *because* he loves people. You may not agree with everything written in this book. (And you probably shouldn't agree with every word written in any book, save the Bible.) In fact, Bruce, being the humble pastor that he is, does not intend for you to agree with everything in this book. *Leading a Church in a Time of Sexual Questioning* is a discussion starter, not a discussion ender. It's a guide, not a rule book. It's filled with wisdom, not ex-cathedra commands. It's a conversation from one pastor to another about how to go about discipling your people in the most complex and pressing issues of the day. And Bruce is the right person to lead us in this discussion.

You probably picked up Bruce's book because you know you need to start having this conversation in your own church. Or, perhaps, the conversation is already happening and you are looking for guidance. Maybe some gay couples have been showing up at your church, or perhaps a family has come to you asking for help since their child just came out. Maybe you're realizing that there are more gay or same-sex attracted people in your church than you had realized, and you're trying to figure out how to best care for them. Perhaps you're trying to update your policy on marriage and sexuality, or maybe this conversation is much closer to home: your own son or daughter just told you they're gay. Whatever is going on in your life and ministry, this book will help you engage the conversation about faith and sexuality with theological faithfulness and courageous love.

I'm very excited about the journey you're about to embark on as you move your way through Bruce's book. My hope and prayer is that after reading this book, you will consider how you can implement the wisdom you will have gleaned from it. This book is not designed to be read and then left alone. It's designed to help leaders lead well in a cultural moment when Christians are in desperate need of solid, compassionate, truth-seeking, leadership.

Preston Sprinkle
President of the Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender

PREFACE

Language Matters

Language can invite a conversation or shut one down. While we must all be sensitive to the hurtful power of words, on all sides of any issue, there are those eager to pounce on a certain word and use it as leverage for condemnation. Sadly, identity politics and the political correctness movement have so charged language with moral voltage that it actually discourages dialogue by verbal intimidation. It seems that these days no matter how carefully people choose their words, one side or another attacks those words. The emotive power of words changes, and in this sexual arena, often the changes are rapid. So please give me grace in my language. By the time you are reading this book, words that are fine now could have become words some people no longer want to use. And in the event my language offends you, I am still accountable. If that happens, I offer you my sincere apology. I would never want to hurt or offend anyone or cause confusion or misunderstanding with my words.

Let's give each other linguistic grace to hear the heart behind our words. I've chosen to use the acronym LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other [+] sexual and gender minorities), however, my focus is more on lesbian and gay people, and those who might describe themselves as same-sex or same-gender attracted (even the

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term “same-sex attracted” and its acronym, SSA, have been embraced by some and rejected by others). The transgender conversation involves another set of complexities that deserves its own book, so out of respect for the nuances and feelings of those involved, I’ve chosen not to include transgender issues in this book.

INTRODUCTION

As church leaders, we've all sat across from someone in the middle of a difficult, even heartbreaking situation.

"Pastor," in tears, "my daughter just came home from college and told me she thinks she is a lesbian. We don't know what to do."

You know these stories. And you have tried to help as best you could.

"Pastor," with downcast eyes, "I'm over thirty and not married. Am I doomed to a life of singleness?"

You have tried to encourage her.

"Pastor," in anger, "my son just put on Facebook that he is gay and dating some guy—for all the world to see. We are so ashamed. People will ask me about it. What do I say?"

You have seen this pain and given your best spiritual guidance.

"Pastor," in confusion, "a seventh-grade girl told her small group she is bisexual and has a crush on another girl in the youth group. Should we let her come on the overnight retreat next month?"

You have counseled this youth pastor and sought wisdom from your leaders.

"Pastor," in hope and trepidation, "my partner and I would like

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to dedicate our beautiful one-year-old daughter, Charis. Would the church let us do that?”

You have wrestled with how to show grace and stand for truth, and you have agonized over potential perceptions of the congregation and the meaning of a baby dedication.

“Pastor,” with evident frustration, “it has been more than a year since my wife and I have been intimate, and I have no idea what to do. Do I have to stay married to her?”

You have offered all the solutions you know to try.

“Pastor,” in fear and concern, “I think one of the children’s workers is gay. Should we let him continue to volunteer in our children’s ministry?”

You have prayed hard over how to appreciate the servant’s heart of this dear children’s worker while being sensitive to your church member’s concerns. You’ve also worried about the precedents you might set no matter what decision you make.

It would not be hard to list dozens more “Pastor, . . .” questions like these that test our spiritual discernment on how to lead our churches well through this time of sexual questioning. If you have been in church leadership for long, you have already had to address complicated, sensitive, and soul-wrenching issues arising out of sexual differences, orientations, and dysfunctions. These come up in youth groups, small groups, children’s classes, newcomer classes, and leader meetings.

Our responses to such sexually charged questions are amplified, and potentially become explosive, in our combative public discourse. As church leaders, we are keenly aware that our church could face a lawsuit. We also fear that the social media backlash from Facebook and Twitter could be almost as damaging, especially if we put our response in writing. It might be picked up by a reporter who smells controversy, and before we know it we are on the local news. You know someone in the church will get upset no matter what stance

you take, and even a well-intended conviction to protect your church could transform into a backlash against your church.

Ultimately the gospel of Jesus Christ is at stake because the unchurched, especially millennials and Generation Z (those under thirty-five years old), are keenly watching how churches respond to LGBT+ people and their concerns.

My heart is that I might help you navigate your church in these sexually turbulent waters. My hope is that by the power of God local churches will become

- loving communities where LGBT+ people can feel wanted and welcomed and can flourish in the life that Christ offers them by the Spirit.¹
- spiritual bodies where all of us can unite in our common cleansing baptism in Christ, joining our hands and hearts as members of one body.
- spiritual families where *all* of us as blood brothers and sisters in Christ, adopted by the Father into his eternal divine family, can love and be loved.
- pillars of truth where the foundations of marriage are respected as being a lifelong one-flesh bond between a man and a woman.
- lights to the world who shine brightly with love and justice for all people because we are compelled by Christ to radically love family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers despite our belief differences.

My hope in writing this book is to advance the goal of better navigating our churches with spiritual wisdom and Christlike love. Depending on where you are with these issues, certain chapters of this book may be more relevant to you than others.

Our most powerful act of leadership comes in our example (1 Peter 5:3). It's essential for us to wrestle with our own past and

INTRODUCTION

present sexual issues, including our prejudices and wounds, sins, and confusions. When we have personally received the grace of Christ and felt the Father's loving hands cleansing our sin, then we can lead our churches as wounded healers and washed sinners. But sharing our examples raises questions of how vulnerable we need to be with our own stories as we speak, teach, and counsel others. Equally as sensitive, we wrestle with the appropriate level of transparency as we consider sharing stories from our own families: stories about our kids, parents, and extended families. I struggled with these very questions while deciding what to share in this book.

People look to their spiritual leaders to give them truth. On many theological issues, you likely have strong convictions, but you may also have thorny questions about some issues around sexuality. Church leaders need to provide clear theological leadership about sexuality. But few pastors have a robust theology of sexuality beyond the simple moralism: don't have sex before you are married, and when you marry, do it well but only with your spouse, and no porn for anyone.

With this approach, we have made sexual intimacy a bigger deal than it really is. By presenting a brief biblical theology of sexuality, I hope to show that *sex is a good gift, but it is not essential for a good life*. I will develop a brief holistic biblical theology of sexuality as a framework for you to use in your church. In the end, intimacy with the triune God is better than sex.

As we counsel married couples and teach those who might marry someday, we tend to rely on recent evangelical teaching on sex in marriage that has focused on how to have pleasure and not be prudish about it. We have lost the fuller theology of the purposes of sex in marriage that was developed early in the history of the church. As we unfold the richer biblical purposes for marriage, we will learn that sex is not the heart of marriage, but it is important. Sadly, our sexuality in marriage is rarely free of sin, such as when we use sex as a weapon to get what we want.

True Love Waits campaigns (while encouraging purity) build up the wedding night to be such a big deal, which it rarely is. They also have the unintended consequence of signaling to singles that they are missing out on the “big deal.” How can the church help singles steward their sexuality? I invite Christian leaders to rethink a biblical theology of singleness and its implications for our churches. The perspective of much recent Christian teaching has been that a few rare people have the unusual gift of lifelong celibate singleness, but most people should get married. Although I long held this view, I have recently come to a different conclusion. We have so romanticized and idolized sex that we have duped ourselves into thinking it is essential for a good life. So we sideline singles as second-class people.

Working from these foundational insights on marriage and singleness, we will also take a closer look at same-sex sexuality. We need to find clarity on what the Bible does and does not say about same-sex sexuality. As pastors, it’s important we develop our own convictions about being both a Christian and gay. Here we will consider five different ways the term *gay* is commonly used: sexual roles, behavior, identity, attraction, and orientation. The chapter will call us to broaden our view of masculinity and femininity—more than men’s ministry for hunters and high teas for women. Beyond addressing causation, we will dive deeply into the concept of being gay and consider how we can think biblically about the idea of an “orientation.” Then we will consider wise pastoral options to offer people who identify as LGBT+.

While I cannot adequately address the complicated and subtle issues around identifying as transgender, most church leaders will minister to, and with, transgender people and to the important people in their lives, their family members and partners. The broad and confusing issues of gender dysphoria relate to *gender* issues that are categorically different from *sexual* issues. A biblical view of gender affirms the uniqueness and beauty of each gender without either

subscribing to culture-specific depictions of maleness and femaleness or denying that sexual differences exist. As spiritual leaders, we face practical issues, such as what pronoun do we use to refer to people who are in transition? What do we do about access to church bathrooms? Those important issues require another book. Many of the principles in this book, however, will apply to transgender people and other gender and sexual minorities.

As you help your church have conversations about sexuality, and in particular, same-sex issues, we will find guidance from three conversations Jesus had related to sexuality and what we can learn in terms of how to have real-life conversations on these issues: the woman at the well (John 4), the woman caught in adultery (John 8), and the “sinful” woman who anointed Jesus’ feet at the Pharisee’s house (Luke 7). Who we are talking with makes a difference, whether the listener is a mature Christian, a new believer, or someone exploring Christianity.

Many church leaders are caught between two factions. Those in our churches from the most conservative backgrounds (often older boomers) can have a hard time showing grace, and those formed by today’s progressive sexual ethic (often millennials) can have a hard time standing for truth; as a result, they judge each other. Spiritual leaders need to shepherd those in our church families who struggle with a deep discomfort with gay and lesbian people. Many books focus on how to show grace to LGBT+ people, which is crucial, but we also need grace for those struggling with LGBT+ people. We will consider how to shepherd our entire faith community well. We can empathize with fears, especially those stoked by conservative Christian radio, blogs, and newsletters. How can we lead all the people in our churches to become more like Jesus in both showing God’s amazing grace and holding to God’s firm truth as unified church families?

Going further than that, how do we build a church family for much more diversity than the traditional American nuclear family with

mom, dad, and 2.5 kids? We will consider “gracious spaciousness”—focusing on the center, which is Jesus Christ and not the boundaries. The major biblical metaphor for the church is family—so who do we include in our family? From here we will move to a theology of hospitality, welcoming the “stranger.” Our culture makes little space for non-eroticized relationships, so I will call us to a refreshed vision for church “families” that encourage all people, whether married or single, to form deep, spiritual friendship bonds. We will talk about different kinds of living situations with multiple generations and genders. This will include a brief treatment of “fellowship” (*koinonia*) and close relationships, building on Wesley Hill’s recent work on spiritual friendships, and Nate Collins’s suggestions for a wider view of kinship relationships.

I have found that to lead a church through these turbulent waters, it helps to bring us all back to the cross, where the ground is level and where we can all be washed in the cleansing waters of grace in Christ. In our churches we are leading sexual sinners, starting with ourselves, our leaders, and then all members. You can guide your people by helping them understand why the results of sexual sin are so painful and so serious. In unpacking the connections of sexual sin to show how it violates each member of the Trinity, we will gain insights. Then we will move to divine sexual healing in Jesus Christ. Confession and repentance invite refreshing grace that heals and restores.

All the ground we have plowed to this point prepares us to address how we can practically lead churches to show grace and stand for truth in the messiness of a fallen world. We will address tone as well as theology, our personal posture as well as our theological positions. We will focus more on loving people than on writing policies, more on individual stories than on generic position papers. We will point to practical wisdom principles, such as “welcoming all and affirming none.” We will apply theological principles to practical questions related to LGBT+ people, such as how to lead your elders and staff,

the use of language, preaching and teaching, employment, and issues around same-sex weddings.

Finally, we will look at sexual questions and common issues, such as membership, baptism, the Lord's Supper, baby dedications, overnight retreats, and ministry to and inclusion of LGBT+ students.

We will look at who—gay or straight—can serve and lead in the church based on their past experiences and present handling of personal temptations. And I'll address what's been called "church discipline," how to handle sin in the church for all people.

My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will use this book to provide practical, theologically sound wisdom for how to wisely navigate your church through sexually turbulent waters. In Christ there is no tension between grace and truth, so my confidence is that by the Spirit we can show amazing grace without compromising truth and provide space for people to differ and to grow while focusing on Jesus Christ and his gospel to honor the triune God.

Discussion Questions

1. Why are you reading this book? What are you hoping, praying, to gain from it? What are you fearful about as you start to read it and discuss it?
2. What are some of your personal connections to the topics of this book? How would you describe your own sexuality? Who among your family or friends are you hoping this book might help you minister to and encourage?
3. What questions have you been asked in this arena that have challenged you, provoked you, or stumped you? What questions do you hope this book will help you answer?
4. Why do you think this topic may be important for your church? For you?

CHAPTER 1

YOUR SEXUALITY

Setting an Example

You probably picked up this book to help you deal with other people's sexual issues. While we are called to do that as spiritual leaders, we must start with ourselves. If you preach or teach, you've experienced that terrible feeling that you are not living what you're teaching. Inside your head, you hear the Spirit's conviction: "Hypocrite, how can you tell others to do what you are not doing?"

Healthy church leaders honestly face their own sexuality. Spiritual leaders' first job is to "keep watch over themselves" (Acts 20:28) in order to set an example. A leader sets the pace. When we courageously face our own sexual sin, embrace the Father's gracious forgiveness, and forgive others, we grow in Christ ourselves and are able to lead with humble authenticity as we invite people to follow our example.

Paul told the spiritual leaders of the Ephesian church: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). The Holy Spirit gave you spiritual leadership over the people to whom you are ministering, so your calling is to shepherd the blood-bought people of God. This is weighty! This is not *your* class, group, or church. It is God's, bought

by Jesus' blood, and for whom the Spirit gave you responsibility for his people.

In all arenas, including the sexual realm, we are to be examples to the flock, to those who are entrusted to us (1 Peter 5:3). The Greek word used in 1 Peter 5:3 for "examples" is *typoi*, which refers to types or patterns, so we serve as models for the people to follow. How can we serve as *typoi* in the sexual arena?

Face the Truth About You

As in other areas of our lives, we start with confession, facing the truth about ourselves. In twelve-step recovery programs, the fourth step is to make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. Whatever your view of such programs, this advice is consistent with a biblical perspective. King David prayed,

Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting. (Ps. 139:23–24)

Ask God to know your heart in sexual matters, to test you and know your thoughts in this realm. See if there is any sexually offensive way in you. And ask him to lead you in his ways about sex.

Obviously, this can be a painful process, but a necessary one for divine healing, like opening the wound and cleaning out the infection. As I look back over my sexual history, I regret things I did as a teenager. Even decades later some of my sexual behavior with girlfriends remains among the greatest regrets of my life. It's helpful to me in helping others to face how deeply those actions scarred my person, even though I was a virgin when I married.

Growing up I saw almost no pornography, but when we were on the verge of planting our church, I remember scanning through channels on the TV late at night. In those days people called it Picasso porn because, however the technology worked, bits of the images would come through on a channel that wasn't part of our TV package. The images grabbed my eyes and I looked, and looked again. I'd bounce back to other channels and then go back and glance again. Even now I can recall the experience and feel ashamed of it, despite the fact that I know God has forgiven me.

Your sexual history almost certainly contains sin over which you feel horrible. And, not to make you feel worse, but let's widen the lens to include how we have treated sexual minorities. Phrases like "that's so gay" may have filled your conversation. Thinking back, have you used slurs like "faggot," "homo," and "dyke"? Did you ever laugh at or ignore a gay peer as he or she was ruthlessly teased? What about how you have treated women or men? Have you whistled at them? Lusted after them? Seduced them? To one extent or another objectified them as sex objects? Or perhaps you have judged those who judge others in this arena. None of us are without sin.

And it's crucial to face what's going on with us sexually right now. If you are in any role of spiritual leadership, your responsibility before God as a leader is greater (James 3:1). So, if you are caught in a sexual addiction or immoral relationship, repent and take strong action to kill (mortify) that sin. Jesus called us to severe action when he said to metaphorically pluck out our eye or cut off our hand (Matt. 5:29–30). The point is not that you are sexually perfect in this life, but that you are currently clear with God. Since it's almost impossible to break sexual sin by yourself, it is likely that you will need to get professional help.

To set the example by honoring Christ with our bodies requires facing our own temptations and prejudices. You have likely told others to hold themselves accountable and set up safeguards, but have you

done this in your own life? I use Covenant Eyes on my electronic devices that access the Internet. My accountability partners who get the report of everywhere I have been online include my wife, a fellow pastor, an elder, and one of my sons. Believe me, I do not want to let them down! My decades-long friend Jeff Jones, pastor of Chase Oaks Church, and I meet every Monday morning to encourage each other to run the race for Christ, including in the sexual realm. I have cameras in my office and am open with my wife and assistant about my calendar, who I am meeting with and where. Openness and transparency are vital.

Since many pastors speak from a raised platform, springtime is dangerous when we are looking down at female attendees. I've had to confess, in my mind, during a sermon. One Sunday I went a little too far by asking women not to reveal their cleavage. My request revealed my own problem more than a problem with anyone's mode of dress. Really, I want everyone to be comfortable and welcome no matter what they are wearing, so I need to focus on dealing with my own temptation.

Our sexual histories form larger narratives when we include our families. And here we must be even more careful what we share. My sisters struggled with their own sexual issues, including a rape, teen pregnancy, and abuse. My brother is married to his male partner. And if I went beyond my immediate family, the range of sexual issues grows wider. These family experiences have shaped me whether I want them to or not. They impact my spiritual leadership in this arena.

You Know What to Do with It

As a spiritual leader, you know what to do with your sexual sin, but have you done it? Have you repented of your immorality, your abuse of others, your slander, your objectification? Seriously! We give the

advice to everyone else, but have we done it ourselves? When you live in sexual shame and guilt, you cripple your spiritual influence for Christ.

Do what you tell others to do: repent and receive God's amazing grace for you. Let me remind you of what you know already. The Father loves you unconditionally, unfailingly. Jesus Christ died for you not because you are a good person or a spiritual leader, but he died for you when you were a sinner and because you were a sinner, including being a sexual sinner.

While I've known God loves me since I was a little boy and sang the song, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so," it was in 2017 that the Father vividly impressed on me the reality of his unconditional love. After I'd served our church for twenty years, the elders gave me my first sabbatical, just over four months long. It was filled with wonderful times, but the most amazing experience was an encounter with God in which he appeared to me as my Father and I was a five-year-old boy. He held me and assured me that he loved me regardless of my performance, productivity, accomplishments, or lack of them. In my mind, I protested that I sinned and I knew he did not like that. He laughed and hugged me tighter, assuring me not just that I was already forgiven in Christ but that my sin did not diminish his love in the slightest bit, and to think otherwise was simply laughable. I delighted, danced, and reveled in the Father's unconditional love for me. I want you to experience again his love for you, the precious love that you already know is real. When you freshly experience the Father's love for you, you want to shower it on others.

Our personal journeys include not only a long stop to ponder our own sin but also a second stop to remember how others have sinned against us. You may have been the object of sexual slurs or, worse, been abused. Sexual intimidation and all kinds of unwanted sexual behavior can have lasting effects. When the #MeToo movement on social media was everywhere in the fall of 2017, my wife looked at me

and said, “You too.” At first I had no idea what she was thinking of, until she reminded me of a summer in high school when a girl tried to seduce me, including taking off her shirt. I had not even recognized that I, too, was a victim, although my situation involved no power differential or violence.

Depending on what has been done to you, you may have much harder forgiveness work to do to forgive your abuser, a family member, or even to forgive someone for what they did to your spouse or your child. As hard as this forgiveness work may be, it is crucial to your ministry because bitterness will block the power of the Spirit as you try to help others spiritually. I know this from painful personal experience.

Early in our marriage, problems in our sexual intimacy took us to counseling where we discovered my wife’s repressed memories of sexual abuse. When I first found out, I wanted that man to go to hell. I actually had thoughts of killing her abuser for wounding her so deeply. It took me more than a year to begin the process of forgiving him. Decades later there has been much healing. I forgave the perpetrator, who has since passed away. For me to minister freely, I had to face what was done to the one I love the most, and how it impacted us as a couple.

How Vulnerable Should You Be?

When you courageously face your own sexual sin, embrace the Father’s gracious forgiveness, and forgive others, you not only grow in Christ but are free to speak and lead with humble authenticity. But as you lead out in this arena, the question of appropriate vulnerability presses hard.

While you want to be transparent and real, how much do you share and with whom? The apostle Paul confessed publicly, “Here is

a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (1 Tim. 1:15–16). His audience was as broad as it could be, but his specifics were quite vague. While he did not minimize his sin, he did not describe it in lurid detail. As you prayerfully think through what to share, consider the following:

- ***Your audience:*** Will it be the entire church on a Sunday morning, a small leadership team, a single-gender retreat, or a counseling situation? What’s their maturity level and background?
- ***Distance in time:*** How long ago did the experience you might share happen? General wisdom is not to share something very recent—“Last night . . .” You want to have dealt with the matter with God before you share it.
- ***Level of detail:*** There is no need to be salacious, which can tempt others and put the focus on your sin rather than on Christ’s grace.
- ***Who else is in this story?*** Do you have permission(s)?
- ***Reason for sharing:*** What are your motives? What do you gain? It’s good to show humility and authenticity, to model transparency and confession. But it’s not good to scandalize, get attention, shock people, or try to soothe your conscience at the expense of another. The focus should ultimately be drawn to the redemptive power of Christ and not to you.

People cannot follow your model if you do not share your life, so even in this sensitive area, it is important to be transparent when you share appropriately. In the right settings, your level of vulnerability will set the pace for everyone else.

When we are transparent and authentic, we invite others into the open where they, too, can encounter God's amazing grace that heals and restores, his unconditional love that embraces us unfailingly. Encourage others to follow your example in facing their own sexual history and dealing with present temptations. Encourage them to confess their sin, repent, and receive God's total forgiveness that washes them clean. As you forgive others who have sexually sinned against you, you can lead people to forgive as well. As you guard yourself in the present, you model practical steps they can take for their own sexual purity. As you seek God's restoration and receive God's grace, you give hope to others in their journeys.

As a spiritual leader, your first job is to watch over your own life, to set the example as a Christ-follower. The most important gift you can give your church is to be transformed by the Spirit yourself so that you radiate the Father's loyal love to the people God has entrusted to you.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important for spiritual leaders to set an example in the area of sexuality for the people in your church?
2. What sexual sins do you need to confess to God? Then, to the extent appropriate in your setting, what sins could you confess to one another?
3. What practical actions have you taken, or could you take, to guard yourself against sexual sin?
4. What have you done, or do you need to do, to forgive those who have sinned against you sexually?
5. Given your leadership role in your church or ministry, how wise do you believe it would be to share your own sexual past and to what extent? How would different contexts affect your answer?