

# Are Preachers Too Silent About Sex?

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More sex in the pulpit? That's the call from the Religious Institute -- a liberal organization that advocates "progressive" understandings of human sexuality. The group has issued a new report, "Spirituality and Religion 2020" that spells out goals for the next decade.

As a *Religion Dispatches* press release about the report explains, "While conservative pastors preach against homosexuality, pre-marital sex, and abortion, in the nation's more progressive pulpits, church leaders offer little or no guidance regarding human sexuality, leaving their flock without spiritual guidance as they grapple with these often wrenching issues in their private lives."

So, when this group calls for more talk and teaching about sex in the churches, it has in mind a very specific message. In 2000 the Religious Institute issued a "Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing." As the group explains, that document "urged religious leaders and faith communities to promote comprehensive sexuality education, sexual and reproductive health, and the full inclusion of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons in religious communities and society at large."

Looking back over the last decade, the Institute marks gains. They point to a growing acceptance of homosexuality in the mainline Protestant denominations and count 3,300 churches as "welcoming congregations" that advocate the full inclusion of lesbian and gay persons. As evidence of how the sexuality issues have evolved in the larger society, this new report points to the fact that the 2000 declaration did not even call for same-sex marriage (just the blessing of same-sex unions) and did not use the word "transgender." Both of these are now included in a revised edition of the declaration.

The approach taken by the Religious Institute reflects in good measure the status of these questions within many of the mainline Protestant denominations, which have for decades now been almost consumed with debates over sexuality. In recent months, both the Episcopal Church USA and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have adopted more liberal positions on the ordination of openly-homosexual ministers and the blessings of same-sex unions.

Liberal theologians and biblical scholars have offered assistance in this process, inventing new arguments that circumvent scriptural injunctions against homosexual acts and other prohibited forms of sexuality.

As the report states:

*Ethicists, clergy and scholars across a range of faiths have challenged long-standing conventions and championed new religious teachings on sexuality that recognize the scientific insights and sociological realities of the modern world. Feminist, queer and liberation theologians have used the tools of historical criticism to develop new ways of reading and interpreting religious texts, and derived richer understandings of sexuality from the Bible and other sacred sources.*

This is a rather candid and honest statement of what these liberal scholars have done. They have used what they claim as "scientific insights and sociological realities" to trump the clear teachings of the Bible on issues of sexual morality. Anyone familiar with contemporary biblical scholarship will know exactly what is going on when the report speaks of "feminist, queer and liberation theologians" using historical criticism in order to turn the Bible on its head -- referred to here as developing "new ways of reading and interpreting religious texts." What is called "historical criticism" can be used to undermine the meaning and authority of any text, but the issue here is the binding authority of the Bible within the church. While liberal scholars have done their best to subvert the Bible's authority on these questions, most church members know better. They read the Bible and have absolutely no problem understanding its clear teachings on human sexuality.

The Religious Institute, following the lead of other advocacy movements, defines its work as seeking justice. They call for pastors to be "prophetic about the right of all adults to make responsible and ethical sexual decisions" based on a call to justice. They tie their notion of sexual justice to other social issues: "Because all injustice is rooted in oppression, religious leaders must seek to eradicate not only sexism and homophobia, but all forms of oppression that undermine equality and right relationship, including racism, poverty and economic injustice."

The report celebrates gains made in liberal seminaries and theological schools, but calls for more intentional programs of sexuality education:

*The problem is not that sexuality is not discussed. Feminist and queer theologies, coupled with social justice activism on behalf of women and sexual minorities in religious and secular life, have had a definite influence at many seminaries. Sexuality is often addressed within a framework of intersecting justice issues, such as economics, environmental concerns, racial/ethnic diversity and disability issues. But when it comes to preparing future clergy and religious professionals to deal with sexual abuse, infidelity, professional boundaries, sexual orientation and gender identity, sexual dysfunction and a host of other concerns, seminary education often is sorely lacking.*

This paragraph is very revealing -- offering a view into what drives so many liberal seminaries and consumes their attention. They have been influenced by "feminist and queer theologies" and by a host of other ideological perspectives. But as this report seems to admit, the people in the pews are not buying the argument -- at least not in sufficient numbers.

Nevertheless, this report from the Religious Institute is directed specifically at pastors, calling for more teaching on sexuality from the pulpit. The report documents the concern that most liberal pastors, while holding to "progressive" understandings of human sexuality, just do not talk enough about sex.

Evangelical Christians will see this report as further evidence of the theological accommodationism and biblical revisionism that marks liberal Christianity -- and that is an absolutely necessary judgment. This is indeed evidence of the continued subversion of biblical authority and confessional integrity that characterizes the revolt against orthodoxy in so many churches.

But evangelicals should consider our own responsibility in teaching about human sexuality. Far too many evangelical pastors teach virtually nothing about a biblical understanding of human sexuality. This leaves much of the Bible unpreached and a congregation woefully untaught. It is not enough to believe the right things about what the Bible teaches concerning sex and sexuality. It is necessary to affirm the Bible's truthfulness and authority in every dimension it addresses, but this is not enough. Congregations are filled with people who need a word from the Lord on this matter that is so central to human identity and so ubiquitous in our culture.

Our pews are filled with people worried about their sexuality, wondering how to understand these things, struggling with same-sex attractions, tempted to stray from their marriages, enticed by internet pornography, and wondering how to bring their sexuality under submission to Christ.

The Religious Institute wants liberal preachers to talk more about sex. My guess is that they will. But what about evangelical pastors? Where is the teaching about God's gift of sexuality and the glory of God in marriage? Where is the teaching about the Bible's grace in telling us what is sin? Where is the acknowledgment of human brokenness? Where is the honesty about the struggle to bring all things under submission to Christ? Where is the preaching about how the Gospel lays claim on every dimension of our lives? Where is the teaching about how sex relates to sanctification and holiness?

Evangelical Christians will rightly reject just about everything found in this new report from the Religious Institute, but they should not avoid its urgency in calling pastors and Christian leaders to teach and preach about sex and sexuality. It is not enough to know the truth and believe the truth, we are called to preach and teach the whole counsel of God -- and that includes all that God has to say about sex.

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