

# Christian Sexual Ethics

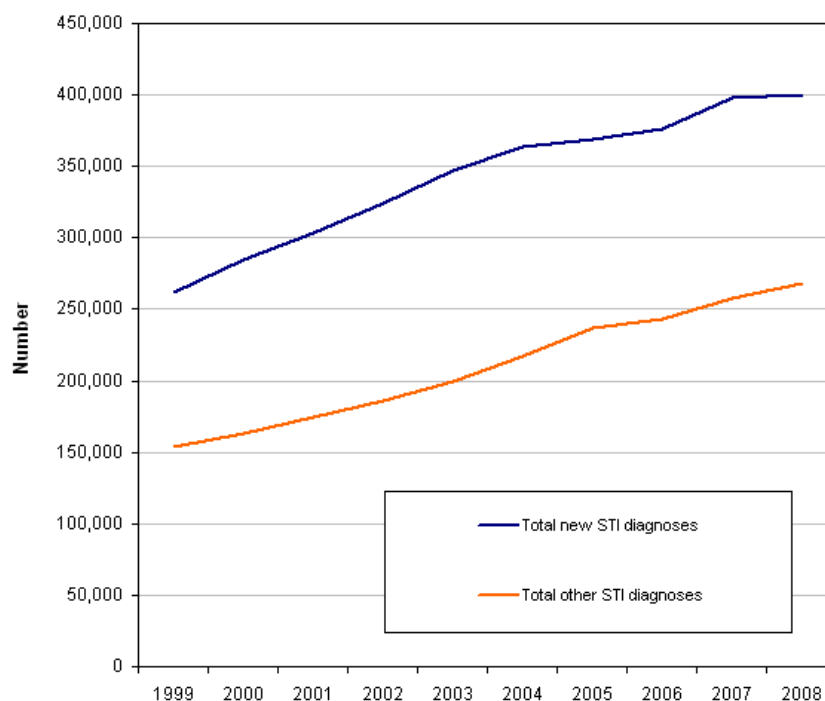
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## The Problem

In 1960 the oral contraceptive pill became available. It was the first reliable form of non-surgical contraception, but more significantly it empowered women to control their own fertility and conclusively separated sexual intercourse from reproduction. Few could have predicted the huge impact that this separation of the physical act of sex from its social consequences would have on the sexual behaviour of the Western world. I would suggest that present-day UK society is facing a crisis in sex and sexuality for at least five reasons.

### 1. Increasing rates of sexually transmitted infections, especially among young people

Figure 1. Trends in diagnoses made in GUM clinics in the UK, 1999-2008 <sup>1</sup>



Rates of diagnosis of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the UK continue to increase. Although some of this increase is due to greater readiness of people who suspect they may have a STI to attend genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics, there has also been a general deterioration in sexual health, especially among young people and those engaging in homosexual activity. The most common STI in the UK is now the bacterial infection Chlamydia, whose potential consequences include Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID) in women, which can result in infertility. However, because STIs can often be asymptomatic, many people go undiagnosed. The rates of Chlamydia are higher among younger people than older age groups. For example, recent surveys of young people attending GP clinics <sup>2</sup> found a Chlamydia prevalence of 8.1% among those under 20 years old, and 5.2% among those 20-24 years old. Rates of infection with Syphilis have also increased in recent decades and, although the rates remain low compared to Chlamydia, this is particularly worrying because of the long terms risks of Syphilis and because it had been thought for

<sup>1</sup> Health Protection Agency, <http://www.hpa.org.uk/hpr/archives/2009/news2909.htm#stis08> [accessed 31 Aug 2012]

<sup>2</sup> Adams, E.J. et al. 2004. 'Chlamydia trachomatis in the United Kingdom: A Systematic Review and Analysis of Prevalence Studies', *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 80 (5): 354-362

years to be under control in the UK.<sup>3</sup> There are in excess of 1.5 million attendances at genitourinary medicine clinics in the UK each year, a number which has been growing by at least 15% annually.

What response has the UK Government made to this rising problem? In November 2004, UK Health Secretary John Reid, responding to the fact that rates of STIs had trebled in the preceding decade, announced proposals for a £300 million campaign to tackle the rapidly increasing rates of sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>4</sup> He said:

Prevention messages are not getting through [...] We need to act now on sexual health – and make it a priority.

£130 million of the funding was directed towards the modernisation of GUM clinics, with £40m pledged to contraceptive and other preventative services. £50m was to be spent on a TV awareness campaign aimed at young people, supposed to be the largest campaign of its kind since the 1980s "Tombstone" adverts, although this amount was later slashed to £7.5 million. The basic message of these advertisements,<sup>5</sup> as of all Government literature, is:

Condoms are essential wear: Always use a condom every time you have sex, as this is the best way of making sure you don't get a STI

The government has assumed that people will not practice abstinence and therefore aims to make condom use normal. There is a fundamental question here as to what counts as 'safe sex'. From the government's protective it is sex in which the risks of STI transmission and unwanted pregnancy are minimised, but this neglects the social and emotional dimension of sex. Furthermore, the claim that using a condom is the best way of avoiding an STI simply isn't true. The best way to be sure of avoiding STIs is to have only one sexual partner who themselves has only had one sexual partner. In other words, it is to remain abstinent until ready to commit to a lifelong relationship (marriage) with another person who has also remained abstinent until that point.

## 2. Teenage sexual activity and pregnancy

On 12th May 2006 the *Daily Mail* reported that a girl was about to become Britain's youngest mother at the age of 12 years 8 months after becoming pregnant at age 11.<sup>6</sup> The girl smoked 20 cigarettes a day despite being eight months' pregnant. She conceived when she lost her virginity to a boy of 15 on a drunken night out with friends. The 15-year-old was charged with rape by police. Her 34-year-old mother, who gave birth to her youngest child eight months ago, said she was 'proud' of her daughter. Another lady, Amy Crowhurst, who gave birth to her first child in 2002 at the age of 13 after a one night stand with a 15 year old<sup>7</sup> said in 2012 that getting pregnant so young was 'the smartest thing I ever did' since it allowed her to get pregnancy out of the way early so she could retain a six 6 figure and go out clubbing with friends.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately these examples are all too common. Although teenage pregnancy rates are in decline, reaching their lowest level since 1969 by 2010, there are still around 35,000 teenagers becoming pregnant every year in the UK.<sup>9</sup>

Even among Christian young people sexual activity prior to marriage is a real problem. In several of his books Josh McDowell includes the results of research in 1994 about physical contact with people of the opposite sex among church youth in the USA.<sup>10</sup> The results are shocking:

<sup>3</sup> When I was a medical student we were taught that the only cases of syphilis we should expect to see were tertiary effects in elderly people infected decades earlier.

<sup>4</sup> Daily Mail, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-328413/300million-fight-sexual-health-crisis.html> [accessed 31 Aug 2012]

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the government archives on the planning of this campaign: [http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_111079.pdf](http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_111079.pdf) [accessed 31 Aug 2012]

<sup>6</sup> Daily Mail, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-385968/Girl-11-Britains-youngest-mother.html> [accessed 31 Aug 2012]

<sup>7</sup> Daily Mail, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-147562/This-girl-just-12-pregnant-boy-15.html> [accessed 31 Aug 2012]

<sup>8</sup> Daily Mail, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2171070/Britains-youngest-mother-Amy-Crowhurst-insists-getting-pregnant-aged-12-smartest-thing-I-did.html> [accessed 31 Aug 2012]

<sup>9</sup> BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-17190185> [accessed 31 Aug 2012]

<sup>10</sup> McDowell, Josh, and Bob Hostetler. 1996. *Josh McDowell's Handbook on Counseling Youth* (Nashville: W Publishing), p.281

Activity	All	Age 11-12	Age 13-14	Age 15-16	Age 17-18
Held hands	89%	74%	84%	92%	95%
Embracing and some kissing	73%	39%	65%	80%	86%
Heavy 'French' kissing	53%	15%	38%	61%	74%
Fondling of breasts	34%	4%	20%	41%	55%
Fondling of genitals	26%	2%	14%	30%	44%
Sexual intercourse	15%	1%	8%	18%	27%

Given that this research was conducted nearly two decades ago and in the socially and religiously more conservative USA, the rates of such activity in modern day UK are likely to be at least the same and probably higher. Our young people are living in a highly sexualised age, and many are falling to temptation.

### 3. Marriage and fertility

The average age of marriage in the UK has been steadily increasing in recent decades. For women it rose from 23.1 years in 1981 to 30 years in 2009 and for men from 25.4 years in 1981 to 32.1 years in 2009.<sup>11</sup> Paralleling this increasing age of marriage there has been an increase in the average age of women at childbirth. The *Office for National Statistics* reported that the mean age of women giving birth in England in Wales was 29.5 years in 2010, compared with 28.5 years in 2000, while the average age for women at first birth was 27.8 years compared to 26.5 years in 2000.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the percentage of births outside marriage in England and Wales rose to 46% in 2009, up from 25% in 1988 and 11% in 1979.<sup>13</sup> UK birth rates have risen since 2001, partly due to higher fertility rates among women born outside the UK but also because of a modest increase in UK born women,<sup>14</sup> there is a crisis across the in birth rates in many other countries. The European Union average Total Fertility Rate (average live births per woman) across the 27 member states was 1.59 in 2009 and, although this was an increase from the all-time low of 1.45 in 2002, it remains concerning.<sup>15</sup> The highest rate in the EU is in the Republic of Ireland (2.07), and the lowest of the 27 member states was Latvia (1.31). The UK rate was 1.94. According to the CIA World Fact Book, "A rate of two children per woman is considered the replacement rate for a population, resulting in relative stability in terms of total numbers. Rates above two children indicate populations growing in size and whose median age is declining."<sup>16</sup>

The only thing keeping the EU and UK's populations from falling is continued immigration. The overall result is that the EU population is predicted to fall from 469.5 million in 2025 to 468.7 million in 2030. By contrast, the population of the USA is set to increase by 25.6 percent between 2000 and 2025. Of the five largest member states, only Britain and France are set to grow in population in the coming years, while in some countries the population will start falling by 2015, with a drop of more than 10-15 percent by 2050. Ireland and Denmark are also nearing the fertility rate necessary to renew the population. The European Commission blames the impending crisis on changes in society which are constraining family choices – late access to employment, job instability, expensive housing and lack of child-rearing incentives through family benefits, parental leave, childcare and equal pay. It adds that the changes have major implications for prosperity, living standards and relations between the generations. Between now and 2030, the EU will lose 20.8 million (6.8 percent) people of working age as the number of over-65s will rise by more than 50 percent and the number of people aged between 15-64 will decrease by nearly 7 percent. To offset the dramatic rate at which people will drop out the job market, the EU will need an average employment rate of more than 70 percent.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/8415852/Average-age-for-women-to-marry-hits-30-for-first-time.html#>

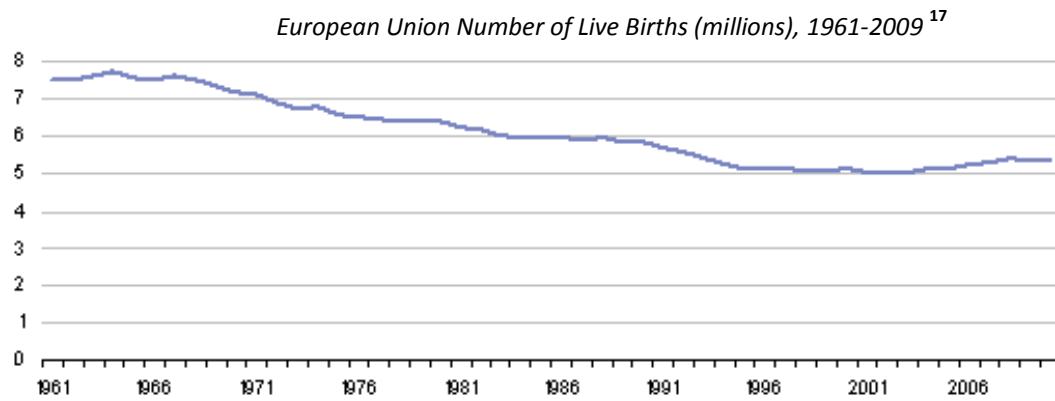
<sup>12</sup> Daily Mail, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2051374/Average-age-women-having-baby-climbs-29-start-family-later.html#ixzz257mdJsbP> [accessed 31 Aug 2012]

<sup>13</sup> The Telegraph, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/8078478/Nearly-half-of-all-children-born-out-of-wedlock-official-figures-show.html> [accessed 31 Aug 2012]

<sup>14</sup> Tromans, Nicola, Eva Natamba and Julie Jefferies. 2009. 'Have women born outside the UK driven the rise in UK births since 2001?', Office for National Statistics, *Population Trends* 136

<sup>15</sup> Eurostat, [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php/Fertility\\_statistics](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Fertility_statistics) [accessed 31 Aug 2012]

<sup>16</sup> CIA, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2127rank.html> [accessed 31 Aug 2012]



Since communism collapsed, the Russian birth rate has more than halved. At the same time, the death rate is soaring – with Russian men living to an average of just 59 years -14 years less than a typical Western European man. In 2001, the head of the *World Health Organisation*, Dr Mikka Vienonen said that his country was facing a demographic crisis, unprecedented in a developed country in peace time. He was reported as saying:

Russia has been relatively generous with population, there has always been so much so that she didn't really need to bother if some people died, there were more to be born.

The lowest fertility rate in the world is Singapore (TFR 0.78). Both Japan (TFR 1.39) and China (TFR 1.55) are facing the problem that many young professionals do not want to marry or to have children. This is especially true for young women who have rejected traditional roles in society and prioritise career and leisure over family life. The fact is that many women who are postponing childbirth to focus on their careers means they are taking a serious risk of never having children. A woman's fertility rate starts declining in her late 20s. In the USA one third to one half of professional women are childless at age 40, and only a small percentage planned it that way. The number of women having children in their 30s and 40s has increased sharply over the last 20 years, at a time when the birth rate has dropped for younger women.

#### 4. Wider acceptance of pornography

In recent years the 'Playboy' brand has emerged onto the high street in the form of a stationery range. In 2005, WHSmith came under criticism for positioning the range alongside products that were clearly targeted at young girls. The company's head of media relations, Louise Evans, said:<sup>18</sup>

Playboy is probably one of the most popular ranges we've ever sold. It outsells all the other big brands in stationery [...] by a staggering amount. That should give you an idea of how popular the brand is. We offer customers choice. We're not here to act as a moral censor.

Pressure group, Object, campaigned against WHSmith's promotion of the Playboy brand to children. It said:

We are challenging the normalisation of porn into mainstream media. We feel that the move by WH Smith to sell Playboy items and direct this merchandise to young girls is wrong. In doing so, it is giving out the message that it is acceptable to have girls as sex objects. Object is not against sexuality, but it is against exploitation. [...] Playboy's logo clearly represents pornography. The magazine routinely features sexualised and full-frontal images of naked young women. It also promotes pornographic videos and strip shows. Playboy is about men buying women and presents this as natural and normal male behaviour, together with fast cars, football and male role models (not shown naked). WHSmith is therefore endorsing pornography to young, impressionable and possibly underage girls.

<sup>17</sup> Eurostat, [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics\\_explained/index.php?title=File:Number\\_of\\_live\\_births,\\_EU-27,\\_1961-2010\\_\(1\)\\_million.png&filetimestamp=20111130165640](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php?title=File:Number_of_live_births,_EU-27,_1961-2010_(1)_million.png&filetimestamp=20111130165640) [accessed 31 Aug 2012]

<sup>18</sup> These quotations are found in the Guardian's coverage of the story: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/aug/15/pressandpublishing.genderissues> [accessed 20 Sep 2012]

Meanwhile, Mizz magazine, which is targeted at preteens and teens, promoted Playboy stationery on its cover and as a free giveaway inside. Editor Lucie Tobin defended her choice of giveaway:

The Playboy brand extensions are one of the most popular with our readers - to them it is a cool stationery and clothing brand. They love the colours and the logo which is given added cool by its association with American hip-hop stars. To them, it is a fashion range and they are unaware of its history. We reflect our readers' tastes, not tell them what they should like... Our readers are 10 to 14 and relatively unworldly. Under my editorship, we do not cover sex in Mizz and pride ourselves on being parent-friendly and responsible.

Mainstream and teen media have embraced so called 'glamour girls' like Abi Titmuss, Jodie Marsh and Katie Price. Little girls now see becoming a glamour girl as a viable 'career option'.

This development parallels the increasing availability of pornography in newsagents and especially online and the proliferation of sexually explicit and suggestive material on television and bill boards. Sadly, many Christians, including a significant percentage of pastors have been ensnared by pornography. Pornography is a serious problem for Christians for a number of reasons:

- Those producing pornography are involved in sin – sex outside monogamous marriage
- Many women and young people are involved in pornography under coercion or because of desperation
- Pornography causes problems for the person viewing it:
  - Guilt, fear and shame
  - Addiction – it can lead to neglect of other responsibilities
  - Undesirable memories – visual images are hard to dislodge from the memory
  - Unrealistic expectations of sex in marriage – because pornography is not real!
  - Disrespect towards women
  - Loss of openness and trust in marriage – this can destroy a marriage over time

We will return to some practical advice as regards dealing with pornography later in this study.

## 5. Acceptance of homosexuality

The first civil partnerships for homosexuals in the UK took place in Belfast on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2006, granting couples similar rights to married couples. More recently, several countries have legalised same-sex marriage and the Republic of Ireland has become the first country to do so through a popular vote. The growing acceptance of homosexuality in many Western countries is evident in every aspect of the media. This did not happen by accident, but has been the result of a concerted campaign, probably the most successful campaign for societal and political change in history by any minority group. It has been aided by the relatively high number of homosexuals in the arts and media: one study of the biographies of 1004 eminent people showing that homosexual and bisexual people represented 11% of the sample, especially among poets (24%), fiction writers (21%), and artists and musicians (15%). This compares with a rate in the general population, according to the Office for National Statistics, of 1.4% of people who are either homosexual or bisexual.<sup>19</sup> It has now become extremely difficult to speak against homosexual activity without being branded immediately as homophobic. Unfortunately, Christians have too often invited these accusations through an ignorant and arrogant response to the issue. We will consider how Christians should respond later in this study.

## Sex Education

A 1997 review of available evidence on sex education by York University's NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination concluded that good, comprehensive sex and relationships education which starts before the onset of sexual activity does not make young people more likely to have sex and that, in fact it helps them to delay starting sex and makes

<sup>19</sup> Office for National Statistics: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/ethnicity/measuring-sexual-identity---evaluation-report/2010/index.html> [accessed 20 Sep 2012]

them more likely to use contraception when they do.<sup>20</sup> This was reaffirmed by the Health Development Agency's review of the evidence of interventions to prevent teenage pregnancy. As Christians we should not be afraid of good sex education in schools. There are, however, three major concerns from a Christian perspective:

### 1. The primary responsibility for sex education rests with parents

Modern societies rightly place great emphasis on professional education, but this has expanded in recent decades to include matters of sex and sexuality. Professional education can never replace the importance of good sex education in the home. Although it is not easy, it is vital that Christian parents take the lead in educating their children about these matters. Since sex education in schools begins earlier and earlier, it is vital that Christian parents are aware of what their children are learning and discuss this with them from a Christian perspective.

### 2. Sex education is never 'value-free'

Developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind has observed that adolescents interpret sex education that pretends to be 'value-free' to mean that adults are neutral about teenage sexual activity. She adds that this is unfortunate, because "promiscuous recreational sex poses certain psychological, social, health, and moral problems that must be faced realistically."<sup>21</sup> The fact is that sex education is never 'value free'. If there is no moral framework underpinning it, then children will conclude that there are no moral restraints concerning sexual matters. The only reasons to postpone having sex become practical – to minimise potential psychological harm, contraction of STIs and unplanned pregnancies – rather than principled.

### 3. Abstinence should be included as a sensible option

In the USA abstinence pledges have gained popularity as an alternative form of sex education. Teenage pregnancy rates in the USA have been falling since 1991, though they are still much higher than in the UK.<sup>22</sup> Research in 2010 by the Alan Guttmacher Institute suggested that 75% of the decline was due to improved contraceptive use amongst sexually active teenagers, but the remaining 25% was due to more teenagers remaining abstinent.<sup>23</sup> It is unclear whether abstinence teaching makes any difference to sexual activity among teenagers who have no personal moral or religious conviction about sexual activity, but it has been clearly demonstrated to increase the age at which young people first have sex by an average of 18 months.<sup>24</sup> Encouraging use of contraceptives may reduce unplanned pregnancies, but the real underlying reason for America's high rate of teenage pregnancies is social, with girls in some communities choosing extramarital motherhood because they have no hope of educational and economic advancement.<sup>25</sup>

The simple fact is that the only way to be 100% sure of avoiding pregnancy and STDs is not to have sex. This is indisputable, and yet opponents of abstinence try to play this down on the basis that young people simply will not be able to keep abstinence pledges in the face of the pressures of discovering their sexual passions and in the face of peer pressure. It is amazing that so few of these people realise that we need to make changes to society to reduce the number of positive messages about sexuality that young people receive from the media. In the UK

<sup>20</sup> NHS CRD, <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/crd/EHC/ehc31.pdf> [accessed 20 Sep 2012]

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Myers, David. 2012. *Psychology*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition, New York: Worth Publishers, p.434.

<sup>22</sup> 'Trends in Teen Pregnancy and Childbearing', *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*, <http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-health-topics/reproductive-health/teen-pregnancy/trends.html> [accessed 23 June 2015]

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/USTPtrends.pdf> [accessed 20 Sep 2012]

<sup>24</sup> Jemmott, John B., Loretta S. Jemmott, Geoffrey T. Fong, 2010, 'Efficacy of a Theory-Based Abstinence-Only Intervention Over 24 Months: A Randomized Controlled Trial With Young Adolescents', *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 164(2):152-159.

<sup>25</sup> Kearney, M.S., and P.B. Levine, 2012, 'Why is the teen birth rate in the United States so high and why does it matter?', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 26(2): 141-66.

there is a firm resitence to abstinence from many groups which can only be explained by hostility to a moral position regarding sexual activity. This is despite the fact that Uganda, unlike other African countries has been able to create a dramatic decline in the spread of HIV over the past decade or so by producing a three-way shift in sexual behaviour: abstinence, condom use **and** monogamy.<sup>26</sup>

## Homosexuality

### Sexual orientation

Throughout human history some human beings have engaged in homosexual activities. In recent decades this has been explained in terms of 'sexual orientation', which is the belief that we express the direction of our sexual interest through an enduring sexual attraction toward members of a particular gender. There is no record of any culture that has not been predominantly heterosexual and so homosexuality has generally been regarded as abnormal or at least a minority tendency throughout history. Our modern society is remarkable in terms of the degree of prominence of homosexuality and its widespread acceptance. Furthermore, although forms of homosexual relationship were accepted within some cultures historically, modern Western counties are unprecedented in regarding homosexual partnerships as marriages in the same category as heterosexual marriage. It is vital that Christians can respond to this trend in society in a distinctively Christian way. Before commenting on the Christian response we must first consider the facts about homosexuality.

### Prevalence of homosexuality

Until recently, the popular press assumed that 10% of the population were homosexual. This figure was based on the Kinsey reports (published in 1948 and 1953), but they failed to take account of the fact that Kinsey's research was not based on random samples from the population, and that he interviewed male prisoners in disproportionate numbers. In the early 1990s several national surveys in both the USA and European countries suggested that a more accurate figure is about 3 or 4% of men and 1 to 2% of women, but a larger number of adults reported having had an isolated homosexual experience and most people said they had had an occasional homosexual fantasy.

In a survey of 180,000 adults in the UK in 2011-12 conducted by the Office for National Statistics, 1.1% of people (0.7% of women and 1.5% of men) self-identified as homosexual and 0.4% said they were bisexual.<sup>27</sup> Comparing regions, the percentage of people identifying as homosexual was highest in London (2.5%) and lowest in the East of England (1.0%) and Northern Ireland (1.1%). Rates also vary significantly across age groups, with only 0.4% of over 65s reporting as homosexual compared with 2.6% of those aged 16 to 24.

The current theory is that people fall along a range of sexual orientations from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual. In other words, most people are capable of either homosexual or heterosexual attraction.

### Types of homosexual relationship

Same-sex relations have been, and continue to be, organised in distinctly categorical ways by different societies in different eras:

<sup>26</sup> Hogle, Janice A., 2002, 'What Happened in Uganda?: Declining HIV Prevalance, Behavior Change, and the National Response', *U.S. Agency for International Development*, <http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/files/WhatHappenedInUganda.pdf> [accessed 23 June 2015]

<sup>27</sup> 'Integrated Household Survey April 2011 to March 2012: Experimental Statistics ', *Office for National Statistics*, [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778\\_280451.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_280451.pdf) [accessed 23 June 2015]

- **Egalitarian** – two partners with no relevance to age and both playing the same socially-accepted sex role as heterosexuals of their own sex. This is exemplified by relationships currently prevalent in western society between partners of similar age and gender.
- **Gender structured** – each partner plays a different gender role. There is a tradition of this style of relationship between men in the Mediterranean Basin, the Middle East and Central and South Asia.
- **Age structured** – partners of different ages, usually one adolescent and the other adult. This is exemplified by pederasty among the Classical Greeks, relationships between novice samurai in Japan with more experienced warriors, southern Chinese boy-marriage rites and ongoing Central Asian and Middle Eastern practices.

In any society one form of homosexual relationship normally predominates, though others may co-exist. As a byproduct of growing Western cultural dominance, egalitarian homosexuality is spreading from Western culture to non-Western societies, although differences persist between cultures.

## Causes of homosexuality

Homosexual groups describe sexual orientation as being similar to handedness. The following statement by psychologist David Myers illustrates this claim:<sup>28</sup>

Most psychologists today view sexual orientation as neither wilfully chosen nor wilfully changed. Sexual orientation in some ways is like handedness: Most people are one way, some the other. A very few are truly ambidextrous. Regardless, the way one is endures. Nor is sexual orientation linked with psychological disorder or sexual crime.

In 1967 consenting homosexual sex between men over the age of 18 years was legalised in the UK and by 1973 the American Psychiatry Association removed homosexuality from their list of diagnostic categories in mental illness. The general perception among the public today is that homosexuals are 'born that way' rather than choosing to be that way. In this section I will briefly list some current scientific theories about the causes of homosexuality:<sup>29</sup>

- **Genetics** – despite occasional claims that a 'gay gene' has been discovered, the idea of one single gene that causes homosexual orientation is wrong. Some evidence from twin studies suggests that genes do play a part, but behaviours and attitudes such as homosexuality are unlikely ever to result from a mutation in a single gene. More recently, the focus of research has shifted from genetic variations to the influence of epigenetics, which refers to the way in which genes are expressed depending on environmental factors.<sup>30</sup>
- **Prenatal hormone exposure** – exposure to the hormone levels typically experienced by female fetuses in the womb may predispose the person (whether female or male) to be attracted to males in later life.
- **Older male siblings** – the greater the number of older brothers a man has, the higher the likelihood of him having a homosexual orientation. It has been suggested that this effect may be due to an immune response by the mother to antigens in the male fetus resulting in impairment of masculinisation in later male fetuses.
- **Physiological differences in homosexuals** – Several recent studies demonstrate that there are notable physical differences between heterosexual men and homosexual men, primarily in the brain, inner ear and sense of smell. One scientist discovered that approximately 10% of homosexual male brains were physiologically different from their heterosexual counterparts. However, his research did not take into account that these men died of AIDS (which decreases testosterone levels in men and may have caused the brain differences he saw) and that it is also impossible to say if these differences are the cause or a result of homosexuality.

<sup>28</sup> Myers, David. 2012. *Psychology*, 10<sup>th</sup> edition, New York: Worth Publishers, p.428

<sup>29</sup> For sources of these theories see the following articles: Burton, Simon, 2006, 'The Causes of Homosexuality: What science tells us', *Jubilee Centre*, <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/causes-homosexuality-science-tells-us-simon-burton> [accessed 23 June 2015]; Gooren, Louis, 2006, 'The biology of human psychosexual differentiation', *Hormones and Behavior*, 50(4): 589–601; Heffner Christopher L., 2003, 'Homosexuality: Nature or Nurture', *AllPsych*, <http://allpsych.com/journal/homosexuality/#.VYmnc43bLIU> [accessed 23 June 2015].

<sup>30</sup> Blue, Laura, 2012, 'New Insight into the (Epi)Genetic Roots of Homosexuality', *Time*, Dec 13, <http://healthland.time.com/2012/12/13/new-insight-into-the-epigenetic-roots-of-homosexuality> [accessed 23 June 2015]



- **Parenting styles** – studies have found that adult homosexual males tend to report having had less loving and more distant fathers than their heterosexual peers. However, these reports have been criticised, particularly because they cannot say if this difference is a cause or effect of homosexuality and also because they don't explain relatively constant rates of homosexuality across cultures irrespective of traditional roles of father. Another suggestion, which is also hotly disputed, is that dominant or overly protective mothers may contribute to development of a homosexual orientation.
- **Trauma arresting sexual development** – Sigmund Freud believed that all human teenagers are predominantly homosexual and transition to heterosexuality in adulthood. Those who remain homosexual as adults had experienced some traumatic event that arrested their sexual development.<sup>31</sup>
- **Gender non-conforming behaviour in childhood** – again it is difficult to say if this is a cause or effect.

## Risks of homosexuality

Homosexual activity is harmful to health in every sense:

- Physical** – anal intercourse carries risks of damage to the body that are not the same as vaginal intercourse, including traumatic damage to the relatively thin lining of the anus and a higher rate of transmission of HIV and STIs.<sup>32</sup>
- Mental** – homosexuals have higher rates of alcohol abuse, depression, self-harm and suicide attempts when compared with heterosexual adults.<sup>33</sup> Although it is sometimes claimed that this difference is entirely due to the additional social pressures homosexuals face, the increase in rates of mental health problems is actually greater in societies where homosexuality is most accepted, suggesting that homosexual activity itself either causes or tends to be found alongside other mental disorders.
- Spiritual** – from the Christian perspective, homosexual activity has spiritual consequences (see below).

## A vital distinction – orientation and action

There remains little conclusive evidence regarding factors that result in homosexual tendencies. It seems clear, however, that there is no single cause and it is likely that a number of factors interact in any given case. It is important to realise that, from a Christian perspective, the acceptance that some people are predisposed by their nature to homosexual attraction is not the same as saying that it would be morally acceptable for them to act upon these desires. The fact that something seems natural to the individual only makes that thing acceptable if a strict naturalistic worldview, in which all of our actions are determined by our physical and social make up and there is no objective standard of morality, is accepted.

From a Christian point of view, just because people have a desire to do something does not mean that it is morally acceptable or that they are incapable of resisting that desire. Christians, and the vast majority of non-Christian philosophers, insist that human beings are morally responsible creatures and that our actions are not determined by our genes. We have a real choice to act on our desires or not. Furthermore, Christians believe that our actions should not be judged as 'right' or 'wrong' simply on the basis of whether they feel right to us or harm others, but against God's standard, which also reflects the best and healthiest way for us to live.

<sup>31</sup> de Kuyper E., 1993, 'The Freudian construction of sexuality: the gay foundations of heterosexuality and straight homophobia', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 24(3-4): 137-44.

<sup>32</sup> NHS Choices, 'Does anal sex have any health risks?', <http://www.nhs.uk/chq/Pages/3050.aspx> [accessed 23 June 2015]

<sup>33</sup> King, Michael et al., 2008, 'A systematic review of mental disorder, suicide, and deliberate self harm in lesbian, gay and bisexual people', *BMC Psychiatry*, 8: 70.

## The Bible on homosexuality

The Bible says nothing about homosexual orientation. In fact, Scripture does not talk in terms of sexual orientation at all – it simply speaks about some types of sexual activity as morally acceptable because they are approved by God and others as unacceptable because they are contrary to God's purpose for us. The idea that people can or should be defined by their sexual preferences is foreign to the worldview of the Bible, which, instead, describes every individual as a precious creation of God, reflecting God's image, but also as a fallen person damaged by sin. Rather than fixed orientations, the Bible speaks of desires which are either godly, when they are directed towards what God approves, or ungodly, when they lead us against God's will. Desires are not themselves sinful. We may not be able to choose what desires we have, but ungodly desires are a temptation to act in sinful ways. Nowhere does the Bible condemn anyone for attraction to a person of the same sex, although Jesus' warning that looking lustfully on a woman equates to adultery (Matthew 5:28) means we must distinguish between an initial attraction and dwelling upon it or imagining acting upon it. Scripture recognises that human beings have various different desires and that these become sinful when they are not subject to God's rule and are directed away from Him. It is on our actions and the attitudes of our minds that we will be judged.

Several narrative passages in the Bible mention homosexual activity. Perhaps the most famous is Genesis 19, where the men of Sodom wanted to rape the two male visitors who had come to Lot's house. This case historical led to homosexuality being described as 'sodomy', but this label is mistaken and misleading. Sodom was an extremely sinful city (see Genesis 13:13), but homosexuality was not their only sin and it was not solely because there were homosexuals in the city that God decided to judge it but because the extent to which sin typified the society as a whole was so great (Genesis 18:20). The horrific example of homosexual gang rape was simply an indicator of how steeped in sin the city was. Ezekiel 16:49-50 reveals that God's judgement on Sodom had at least as much to do with their oppression of the poor and their pride as with the "detestable things" they did. The "sin of Sodom" was rejection of God, not homosexuality alone. There is a similar example in Judges 19 with the addition in that case that a woman was given in the place of the man the men of Gibeah wanted to rape and she died as a result of her injuries. In that case the village was also judged, although through civil war rather than fire from the heavens. The evidence of biblical narratives is that homosexual activity is

In addition to these narrative accounts, there are a number of didactic passages which contain direct commands or comments upon homosexual behaviour:

- **Leviticus 18:22; 20:13** – these verses within the Old Testament law state that homosexual acts are sinful and detestable to God and such acts should be a capital offence in Israel. The wording is quite clear that the offence is for a man to have sexual relationships with another man as he would with a woman.
- **1 Corinthians 6:9-11** – Paul lists homosexuality together with other vices as a sin that will exclude people from the Kingdom of God. Paul uses two words here that refer to homosexual activity. There is considerable debate among scholars as to the precise meaning of these words. The consensus view is probably that one word refers to the active partner and the other to the passive partner. It has been suggested that Paul is not issuing a blanket ban on homosexual actions here and that he is actually speaking against engagement in homosexual activity with male temple prostitutes. There is no indication in the text itself that his meaning should be limited in this way and if this had been Paul's intention he was highly careless in his choice of language. The natural reading of what Paul says here is that homosexual actions are sinful and the fact that this is consistent with the Old Testament law and Paul nowhere speaks of a relaxing of that standard is significant. It has also been suggested that Paul is speaking against casual or promiscuous homosexual activity outside a long-term committed relationship. Again, there is no evidence of this in the passage and there is no suggestion in either the Old or New Testament that same-sex marriages are acceptable to God. One other point should be noted from these verses. In verse 11 Paul says that some of the Corinthians used to live in this way before they were washed clean. This suggests that some of the Corinthian believers had been involved in homosexual activity before their conversion, but they are included in the church as fully functioning members. This should mean that there is no discrimination within the Church on the basis of previous behaviour that individuals have now repented of and that people who describe homosexual attraction who choose to live celibate lives should be involved fully in the life of the Church.

- **Romans 1:24-27** – this passage shows that homosexuality may be called a ‘marker sin’ – widespread acceptance of homosexuality in a society is a sign that its culture has moved far away from God. This section, from Romans 1:18 onwards, describes the slide of human societies from initially ignoring God (v18-21), to then replacing Him with other objects of worship (v22-23, 25), to widespread sinful actions (v24, 26-31), to actually legislating in favour of those who practice such things (v32). Paul explains that when human beings reject God, God allows us to follow misdirected desires to sinful ends.

The Bible is consistently negative about homosexual activity. Those who are committed to a ‘high view’ of Scripture as the authoritative, inspired word of God must recognise that sexual activity between two people of the same sex is against God’s will.

### Can sexual orientation change?

There is considerable debate over this question, with some Christian groups claiming to offer programmes that have some success and some psychologists insisting that by adulthood sexual orientation is essentially fixed. Claims that some therapies can ‘convert’ people have proved highly controversial and there is little objective evidence of approaches that can be proven to work. This is an area where more research is needed, but it will be difficult to have unbiased research given the strength of feeling over the issue. From a Christian perspective we ought not to rule out the possibility of change, since we trust in a God who is powerful and actively involved in lives, but we will also accept that God does not always remove sources of temptation from us and that we cannot expect that every person with homosexual tendencies can find release from them. Christians must hold open the possibility of real and lasting change in individuals through God’s help, but there is no reason to expect from a biblical perspective that everyone who struggles with homosexual attraction can change.

It might be more important to ask whether it is desirable for a person to hope to change in this area – is a homosexual orientation something we seek release from or not? Most importantly, we must emphasise that even people who have a lifelong same sex orientation can play an active role in church and in God’s purposes. The realisation that different factors interplay in different individuals should also cause us to accept that homosexual orientation is more deeply ingrained in some people than in others. Some people, who experience some degree of attraction to both sexes, may be able to choose to follow their heterosexual desires rather than homosexual ones, but others may be unable to choose heterosexual orientation. The fact that many people are capable of either heterosexual or homosexual attraction does suggest, however, that there is a large degree of personal choice about how people express their sexuality.

### A Christian response to homosexuality

Sadly, Christians have often failed to respond in an appropriate way to the issue of homosexuality. In too many cases the response has been driven by fear and ignorance and there has been hypocrisy in singling homosexuality out above other sins that many within the Christian community may also be guilty of (for example oppression of the poor, pride or heterosexual lust). A truly Christian response will hold in balance the two great qualities of God’s character: grace and truth. It will hold unswervingly to Biblical truth and yet will be full of compassion. There are several important aspects to a helpful Christian response:

1. **We must not compromise our moral position** about the sinfulness of homosexual acts. We do need to campaign peacefully and graciously but firmly about the moral issue, and to resist further changes towards acceptance of homosexuality (especially its inclusion in sex education).
2. **We must embrace those who struggle** with homosexual temptation (orientation) and offer them affirmation in God’s loving community. It is important to emphasise that this temptation is no different from other temptations and that those who do not struggle at all with it are not superior to those who do. In this sense, the church must accept people who identify as ‘homosexuals’ even if we do not condone homosexual behaviour. As we do so,

however, we should subvert the dominant account of sexuality by refusing to accept that people should be defined as one thing or another on the basis of their desires. Rather than speaking of 'homosexuals' we should, instead, speak of people who experience same-sex attraction or who struggle with homosexual desires.

3. **We must uphold chastity as an alternative** to sexual activity for those who cannot find fulfilment in heterosexual relationships (see 1 Corinthians 7:1). Homosexual tendencies are not sin, just as no temptation is sin, but acting on these tendencies is sinful.
4. **We must overcome evil with good** by actively seeking ways to show compassion to practicing homosexuals, even those who are unrepentant and hostile to the Christian position. One obvious way to show Christian compassion is to be actively involved in caring for people who suffer from AIDS irrespective of how they contracted the HIV virus.
5. **We must affirm those who have repented** of past involvement in homosexual activity in God's forgiveness on the basis of Christ's death for them and God's power to overcome temptation in future (1 Corinthians 6:11). Restoration is possible through Christ, and the Holy Spirit can empower us to change.

## A Scriptural View of Sexuality

Many passages of Scripture teach us about God's intentions for human sexuality, but for the purposes of this study we will focus on just one: 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:9. The church in Corinth was troubled by many issues, but one of the most significant was serious sexual immorality among its members. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul makes it clear that serious sexual sin in the absence of repentance must lead to breaking of fellowship with the guilty person. In the passage under consideration some key biblical principles about sexuality emerge:

### Sexual desire is a natural appetite of the body (6:12-13)

God is not opposed to human sexuality. In fact, sexual desire is a normal appetite of the human body just as our appetite for food is. This is the comparison Paul makes in 6:13 when he speaks of food and the stomach. The idea that sex is somehow unclean or wrong in itself, which has been seen in some strands of Christian tradition, is not based on the Bible. This thinking, which led to the requirement for celibacy among priests, nuns and monks in the Roman Catholic system, came into Christianity from Greek dualistic philosophy. Within traditional Catholic thought, sex was basically seen as unclean, something that should be done (almost reluctantly) for the sake of procreation – hence the Catholic position that contraception is wrong in itself because it removes the possibility of reproduction.

Scripture never describes sexual activity as being merely for the purpose of producing children. Instead there are three purposes for sex in God's design:

- *Procreation* – so that children can be conceived and born.
- *Recreation* – for the mutual enjoyment of both partners.
- *Creation* – the sexual act expresses physically, and strengthens, the bond between husband and wife. It is the physical expression of the reality that the two are now one flesh.

The biblical book Song of Songs, according to most modern interpreters, is a dramatic depiction of romantic love between a husband and wife. Part of their dialogue describes their desire for sexual intimacy, including poetic phrases that almost certainly refer to sexual activity. This is seen as good and healthy. Sex is a good gift from God.

### All appetites of the body must be controlled and used appropriately (6:15-20)

Sex is a good gift from God and, as with every gift, we must exercise good stewardship in how we use it. This is the thrust of Paul's argument in 6:19-20 where he reminds us that our bodies belong to God since we were bought at a price, and so we are accountable to God in how we use our bodies. The body was not given as a way for us to gratify

our desires or to indulge ourselves. Every natural desire we have can be used in a way that honours God or in ways that do not. Eating is good, but over-eating is bad. Sex is good, but sexual immorality in all its forms is bad. Because the sexual act expresses physically the spiritual reality of the bond between husband and wife, in spiritual terms a man is married to whatever person he has sex with. Even the most casual and meaningless of sexual encounters, that between a man and a prostitute, has a deep spiritual significance (6:15-16). We must understand this principle and apply it. This is the reason why premarital sex is so harmful. The young couple are expressing with their bodies something that they are not ready to express with the soul or in words – the loving surrender of one to the other in mutual sacrificial self-giving. It is no wonder that there are so many emotional problems for young people who engage in pre-marital sex.

### **Heterosexual, monogamous marriage is the proper context for sexual activity (7:2-3)**

In 7:2-3 Paul makes it clear that only marriage between a man and his wife is the appropriate context for sexual activity. Although there are many examples of polygamy in the Old Testament (David and Jacob spring to mind) the New Testament is absolutely clear that the Christian position is to have only one wife or husband and, indeed, the fact that Genesis 2:24 speaks about monogamous marriage in the context of God creating one woman (not many) to Adam's suitable partner suggests that the Old Testament examples of polygamy were departures from God's intention. Scripture is also consistent in maintaining that sex outside the marriage relationship is sinful (it is, in fact, a contradiction) and that adultery is wrong (see Exodus 20:14). It should also be clear from the nature of marriage as described here that a Christian should seek to marry a Christian – otherwise we would be uniting Christ with another who is not part of Christ and we would find ourselves in a situation where we cannot share the deepest level of our being with our spouse.

### **Celibacy is a commendable state for those who are called to it (7:1, 8)**

The New Testament upholds celibacy as a valid station of life for those who are called to it by God (7:1, 8). Those who remain single throughout life should never be made to feel inferior or abnormal. In fact, there are some situations in which it is advisable for young people to remain single, such as when the church is under severe persecution (see 7:25-35). Some people may be called to celibacy so that their lives can be focused on Christian ministry. The bottom line is that, contrary to the message of 21st Century society, a person does not need to be sexually active to be a normal, fulfilled human being!

### **Lust is sinful (7:9)**

As we have already said, temptation is not sin. It is important to say this in the context of temptation to heterosexual sin. To see another person and to admire their beauty or to recognise that they are sexually attractive is not sin. However, Paul speaks about "burning with passion" (7:9), which is clearly harmful, and Christ taught that to look at a woman who is not one's wife with lust is equally sinful as committing adultery with her (Matthew 5:27). It is important that we understand what lust is. Lust means to dwell on the initial sexual attraction and to begin to fantasise about acting on it. To do this is wrong. This is part of the problem with use of pornography and the fundamental problem with masturbation, which often (perhaps always) is connected with lustful thoughts or fantasies. We need God's power to exercise self-control over our thought life. It is vital that we seek to be under the control of the Holy Spirit if we are to have this kind of self-control (Galatians 5:22).

## **Sexual Abuse and Paedophilia**

There is great awareness of sexual abuse of children and the disturbing phenomenon of paedophilia in our modern society, especially in light of the exposure of historic child abuse within the Church, among celebrities and within the

establishment. Society is still, quite rightly, overwhelmingly scandalised by such revelations. It is worrying, however, to realise that some people are prepared to see paedophilia (sexual attraction towards children) as a valid sexual orientation, rather than a psychological disorder on the same basis that homosexuality is justified.<sup>34</sup> Paedophilia is often said to be the sexual orientation of a similar percentage of men as homosexuality (1-2%) and some researchers suggest that up to 20% of men are capable of some sexual attraction to children while there is little consensus in the scientific community that paedophilia is universally harmful to children.<sup>35</sup> There are reports of cultural settings, such as southern Afghanistan, where paedophilia is acceptable.<sup>36</sup> Australian judge Garry Neilson hit the headlines in 2014 when he made comments suggesting that both paedophilia and incest may become acceptable in society.<sup>37</sup>

The vast majority of people in Western cultures, both those who identify as homosexual and those who are heterosexual, will react with abhorrence to the suggestion that paedophilia become acceptable. Yet we might ask on what basis they react this way. If homosexuality is accepted despite all the indications (physical trauma, emotional damage, inability to procreate) that it is 'unnatural' it becomes difficult to explain why paedophilia is wrong. In the absence of agreement that it is always harmful, the only clear difference is the fact that children do not consent to the acts of a paedophile but the question of consent and ages of consent is open to debate and possible reinterpretation. The Christian perspective, by contrast, says categorically and without exception that paedophilic activity is sinful and abusive on the basis that all sexual activity outside the marriage relationship is wrong. Only when a person is old enough to enter voluntarily into a marriage bond, which must be approved by others, are they old enough to engage in sexual activity without the risk of abuse and only when this happens within the marital relationship is it healthy and appropriate. Sexual activity without consent, even within marriage, is also abusive within a Christian view of sexuality, since mutual consent is a biblical principle.

I do not intend to discuss sexual abuse or paedophilia in any depth here, but as I touch on these sensitive subjects I am aware that there may be some who read this paper who have been the victims or the perpetrators of child abuse. If you have been the victim I would urge you to talk to someone respected about this if you feel able to do so. You should speak to a mature Christian of the same sex as you and also consider reporting it to the relevant authorities (police or social services). In particular, if you are still actively being abused I would urge you to escape that situation and report your abuser. Reporting abusers is important not only for your own sake (to see justice done) but for the sake of others (to prevent them doing it again to others). Most importantly, you must realise that you are not in any way guilty in the matter. Child abuse is sinful and unjustifiable, and it was not your fault. I pray that you can discover God's healing in your life as you grasp His grace towards you.

If you have been the perpetrator of abuse, then you **must** confess this sin to someone **and** go to the authorities. You must not go to the person you abused to do this, but you owe it to them to see them finding help from those who can help them. You must seek God's mercy. If you discover that someone else has been the perpetrator of abuse you should encourage them to report to the authorities themselves but if they will not you must report what you know yourself. You cannot deal with this confidentially, even if the person claims to be repentant. In fact, part of the evidence of true repentance on their part will be a desire to confess what they have done and submit to the authorities for judgement.

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<sup>34</sup> Kane, Laura, 2013, 'Is paedophilia a sexual orientation?', *The Star*,

[http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2013/12/22/is\\_pedophilia\\_a\\_sexual\\_orientation.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2013/12/22/is_pedophilia_a_sexual_orientation.html) [accessed 23 June 2015]

<sup>35</sup> Henley, Jon, 2013, 'Paedophilia: bringing dark desires to light', *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/jan/03/paedophilia-bringing-dark-desires-light> [accessed 23 June 2015]

<sup>36</sup> Farmer, Ben, 2011, 'Paedophilia 'culturally accepted in south Afghanistan'', *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/8257943/Paedophilia-culturally-accepted-in-south-Afghanistan.html> [accessed 23 June 2015]

<sup>37</sup> RT, 2014, 'Outrage as Australian judge says incest, pedophilia 'may be accepted' by society', <http://rt.com/news/171868-australia-judge-incest-homosexuality/> [accessed 23 June 2015]

## Christian Stewardship of Sexuality

In addition to the suggestions above about a Christian response to homosexuality, it is also important for Christians to think about how they exercise stewardship of their sexuality within a heterosexual framework. The following are just a few practical suggestions:

- **Seek forgiveness for past sexual sin**

In I Corinthians 5 when Paul had to tell the Corinthian Christians to expel from their fellowship an unrepentant man who was guilty of having sexual relations with his father's wife (v1), the aim is not to humiliate this man or to abandon him, but to see him coming to repentance. The aim (v4-5) is to see him saved on the day of the Lord. There is forgiveness for sexual sin in Christ. Even if you have fallen you can be restored, and God can still use you for His purpose. If you have been guilty of premarital sex or lustful thoughts then you must repent and seek God's leadership for your future. If you have committed adultery there is the added dimension of your relationship to your spouse to consider. You must seek forgiveness not only from the Lord but from your spouse. There is the hope of restoration with God, but only if our repentance is genuine.

- **Avoid situations of potential temptation**

As fallen human beings we are all at risk of sexual temptation. We must heed Paul's warning concerning temptation in 1 Corinthians 10:12:

if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

Too many Christian men have thought themselves above sexual temptation only to fall into adultery. Too many Christian teenagers have believed they could resist the temptation to be sexually active with their boyfriend or girlfriend only to find themselves committing sexual acts before marriage that they live to regret. If you are married you must ensure that you remain faithful to your spouse. To ensure this I would advise never meeting alone in private with a person of the opposite sex who is not related to you. This is particularly important for those in Christian ministry who may be expected to offer pastoral care to people of the opposite sex. I make it a rule in ministry that I do not meet women alone except in a public place, and only then if it is impossible to have a female worker with me (preferably my wife). If you experience sexual attraction to people of the same sex you may also need to extend the principle to all meetings alone with individuals (or with individuals you know to have same sex attraction).

For unmarried people I strongly urge that you set limits to protect your virginity. Rates of sexual activity among Christian young people are shockingly high. This is largely because we live in a 'sex-mad' society and because we do not have many of the restraints that previous generations had. I would recommend the following:

- *Do not flirt* – flirting is really harmful for others. It can lead to all sorts of confusion and hurt and can even lead some people to stumble by causing them to have lustful thoughts. Keep your interactions with the opposite sex appropriate and remember that even if you have no feelings for the other person they might have them for you, no matter how unlikely that might seem to you. I would advise that your closest friendships should be with people of the same sex rather than those of the opposite sex.
- *Delay dating* – studies have shown that people who start dating early are more likely to engage in premarital sex. It is wise to delay dating until you are ready to begin to think about marriage, as marriage (not pleasure) should be the aim of Christian dating. I would recommend that you consider making a vow not to date before the age of 18, or at least 16. This will give you plenty of time to develop appropriate friendships with people of both sexes and to understand your own body and the nature of relationships before entering into one yourself.
- *Avoid being alone* – never be alone in a closed room or building with your boyfriend or girlfriend. This is for two reasons: so that you can avoid temptation and so that you can maintain your Christian witness. Even if you do not do anything behind those closed doors, others may think that you have. This can ruin your

Christian witness to non-believers and may cause some weaker Christians to follow your example and so stumble. It may be inconvenient at times to keep to this standard, but it is wise and God will honour it. For this reason I would advise strongly against sharing a house with your boyfriend or girlfriend before marriage or sharing accommodation on holidays.

- *Set limits on physical contact* – agree firm limits on physical contact and keep to it. I recommend that holding hands, simple hugging (not cuddling) and possibly a simple kiss on the cheek or (and this is debatable) on the lips is a reasonable limit. You should discuss this and promise to one another that you will keep to this limit – when one of you is tempted, the other one can say ‘stop’ and you will listen and respect what they say. More intimate forms of contact including ‘French kissing’ and touching in intimate places are asking for trouble. I would also advise that you never lie down beside each other as this can too easily lead on to more intimate contact. Sometimes people think that it doesn’t matter if they engage in more intimate contact as they intend marrying the person. This is misguided, as until you actually marry the person you cannot be sure that you will marry them. Keeping more intimate contact until marriage will be rewarding. Research shows that those people who remain virgins in the strict sense (no contact with the genital region of another person of any form) are more likely to have successful marriages that last and that are happy.
- *Seek accountability* – ideally you should have older Christians to be accountable to. This could be your parents or a youth leader or pastor. You should ask these people to give you advice about what is and isn’t appropriate and give them the authority to ask you if you have stepped over your limits.

- **Have nothing to do with pornography**

We have already mentioned some of the harmful effects of pornography on the individuals involved in making it and also those who ‘consume’ it. Pornography has never been more prevalent or more acceptable in society, but for the Christian it should be avoided in every form. We must “avoid every kind of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22), and pornography is certainly a form of evil! The test of our thought lives should be as Philippians 4:8 – true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable. Pornography falls down on every one of these tests, and should have no place in our thoughts. It makes others into objects rather than treating them as people worthy of respect. How can we deal with the problem of pornography? I have three tips:

- **ACCESS for yourself and your children should be limited**  
We must take measures to make it difficult for ourselves to see pornography. This will include avoiding having televisions or computers with internet access in our bedrooms or any other place in the house that is out of public view. Parental controls should be engaged on all devices, even if only adults use them as this will limit the likelihood of you visiting inappropriate sites. Protection from pornography is especially important for children. It may also mean installing software to limit what we can view or activating parental controls. Josh McDowell quotes a study of 600 male and female 11-14 year olds in the USA. 91% of males and 82% of females had already been exposed to hard core pornography. Although it may be nearly impossible to protect our children from this highly harmful influence, we must do everything we can to reduce the likelihood of it happening or of it becoming a habit. If you are a teenager and you have a computer or television in your bedroom I would encourage you to make the decision to move it out to a public area.
- **ACCOUNTABILITY to others**  
It is very wise if you know you are tempted in this area to make yourself accountable either to an individual who can ask you about this issue or to a group who are committed to helping one another avoid this temptation. Another possible way to achieve this as regards internet pornography is to use software like *Covenant Eyes* or *X3 Watch*, which alerts two designated accountability partners when you view inappropriate material, although unfortunately there is a cost for this service. You can find out more at [www.covenanteyes.com](http://www.covenanteyes.com) and [www.x3watch.com](http://www.x3watch.com).
- **ACTION: Replace temptation with positive action**  
Temptation is never resisted by simply trying to fight it. The problem with doing this is that we end up focussing on the temptation and thus become more likely to become obsessed with it. The cycle of



temptation, struggle, defeat, sin, guilt, temptation etc. will be familiar to most of us in some area of life. To break this cycle we must replace the struggle with positive action. We must ask God for the power He promised to help us overcome temptation or for the way out to escape it (1 Corinthians 12:13). If you are tempted to view pornography I suggest switching off the computer or television and going out for a walk, picking up your Bible to read or phoning a friend for a chat as good ways to replace this temptation.

## Not by Might nor by Power

Zechariah 4:6 contains the Lord's words to Zerubbabel to encourage him to keep building the Temple in Jerusalem. Faced with such a great task Zerubbabel may well have grown faint of heart and felt powerless to complete it. God's answer was clear:

**'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,'** says the LORD Almighty.

We are faced with a great task when we consider how to control our sexual passions. The answer is the same for us as for Zerubbabel. If we try in our own strength we will be doomed to failure, but by the power of the Spirit we can have victory. May He fill us and transform us, and may he fill us with such a passion for the Lord's glory that all other passions become secondary. May we learn to glorify the Lord through faithful stewardship of our sexuality.