



## Setting the Stage for Important Conversations: Human Sexuality

September 7, 2018—Vol. 12, No. 36

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If you happen to live near Findlay, Ohio, you may have heard that a new Chick-fil-A restaurant opened in Findlay this week. While many folks are excited by this news, some have expressed anger about Chick-fil-A's history of donating to organizations that oppose same sex-marriage as well as the restaurant's past donations to organizations who support "conversion therapy" for those who identify as gay. Even something as simple as trying to eat a good chicken sandwich is not as "simple" as we may prefer.



Dr. Brent Sleasman, WTS President

I counter-balance this social media post with an ongoing conversation I'm having with some local church leaders about the stance of Winebrenner Theological Seminary's position on sexuality in our present culture. On one hand, we have a neighbor who believes our views are too restrictive. On the other hand, there may be a collection of leaders who do not believe our position is restrictive enough.

A few weeks ago, Lance invited me to write a *CGGC eNews* blog post about engaging in important and, often, difficult conversations. In that post, I suggested that we need to invest the necessary **time** and create the needed **space** to work through topics like the one I just introduced above [if you haven't read that post you can access it by clicking [here](#)]. Anytime someone chooses to engage in a topic of significance – issues related to ethnicity and race, the events taking place at our nation's borders, political concerns – there needs to be a willingness to invest the time to talk about the issue.

I ended that post with an offer to think through a specific issue and how we can remain faithful to biblical teaching in 2018 and beyond. In response to Lance's invitation, I'm writing today to help us think through some broad issues related to human sexuality in our contemporary context. As Winebrenner's President, part of my job is to make sure our seminary classrooms serve as places in which students can have important conversations that will inform their ability to lead these conversations in congregations and other ministry settings. Hopefully you find some of what I have learned in this role helpful as you move forward in your local context.

Before proceeding, I want to offer a disclaimer: The purpose of this blog post is to give you some tools and ways to think about this topic that you may not have considered. Ultimately, I hope to create space so that you can have important conversations. My goal is not to offer a definitive answer. As the title suggests, this is about setting the stage for important conversations. The best response you can have to this is to have a conversation with someone as you seek to make sense of these ideas in your local context. Reading this blog does not take the place of conversation and real-time engagement with others.

One of the immediate temptations is to become cynical about our culture and the role that Christianity plays within it. Conversations about whether the United States is (or ever was) a “Christian nation” often lead to unhelpful conclusions that never actually address the core issues. This kind of conversation can effectively derail a good discussion that is more important than some peripheral issues.

Our task, as followers of Jesus Christ, is to engage the world as it actually exists today and not how we wish it would be. My first challenge is to resist succumbing to the cynicism that I often hear expressed by phrases like “things are so different now...” and “I wish we could go back to 19\_\_” – if we truly examined how things “used to be” we may discover that the past isn’t as positive as we would like to remember. Some have expressed despair that the world they once knew will never come again. I recognize that this creates genuine grief and makes it difficult to find hope for what may come to exist in the future.

Before setting the stage for one particular issue, I need to address a concern I have about how we prioritize what we believe is important and, therefore, what we spend our time talking about. Jesus frequently used parables to explore various aspects of money (one commentator suggests 16 of 38 parables address this topic). Jesus was often found with “the last, the least, and the lost” (Lance asked me to write about this last year – you can read more by clicking [here](#)). Equally, in Paul’s letters to Titus and Timothy he makes some intriguing comments about slavery. My point here isn’t that we should only talk about money, or spend all of our time with prostitutes and tax collectors, or advocate for slavery. However, as a point of self-awareness we need to challenge ourselves to consider any topic within the broader context of Scripture and what it means to be a Christian in today’s culture. Another way to say this is that sometimes we “major in the minors” and “minor in the majors.” Many of the conversations where we invest significant time and emotional energy do not seem to be those where Jesus invested his time as recorded by the Gospel writers.

The remainder of my comments will be exploring human sexuality and how we can respond to what we are experiencing in our churches, families, and local communities. I have chosen this topic because it continually emerges as a point of conversation; however, it should be noted that Jesus was almost silent on questions that the Church places such high importance upon today.

First, we cannot explore what it means to be gay without giving consideration to larger questions about human sexuality. This is back to the concerns I raised about prioritization: Paul clearly calls sexual relations outside of marriage a sin – it doesn’t matter whether those engaged are the same or different gender. Sex outside of marriage is a sin. However, my experience is that we are much more comfortable identifying the sin of someone who is gay as opposed to the sin of the Sunday school teacher who may occasionally spend the weekend at his girlfriend’s house.

Second, harassment and abuse is not appropriate in any context nor between any two people. Recently, accusations against Bill Hybels, founder and former Senior Pastor at Willow Creek Community Church have connected these conversations to the local church in ways that, until very recently, many may have believed were impossible to ponder. Sadly, a great deal of harm has been

done recently within the evangelical community by *heterosexual* pastors; note that one's sexual orientation is irrelevant when seeking to prevent those in positions of power and influence from abusing and manipulating others.

I strongly affirm the centrality of the Bible in making sense of this topic. However, the Bible does not "speak for itself" – the Biblical text always needs to be interpreted. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit our role as Christians is to allow the Bible to form us and we, in turn, respond to the people and issues as they emerge. The mass production of the Bible brought about by the printing press has, in most ways, been a wonderful thing. However, I strongly believe that it was never God's intention for someone to retreat to a chair and attempt to read the Bible and interpret all alone. The Bible is best interpreted in a community and our reading of Scripture should drive us *toward* others and not cause us to retreat to a group of like-minded people.

We need to recover our ability to talk with someone who may have a different opinion or orientation than our own. (Sadly, many who have strong opinions about homosexuality have never, to their knowledge, met a gay person, much less had a conversation.) This is not to suggest that all opinions are equal or okay. But, it is to suggest that God is bigger than our opinions and, ultimately, God does not need us to be His defender. No one is beyond God's reach. Our churches need to be welcoming environments for all who seek Him. He needs us to place ourselves in a position of humility that honors others and recognizes that we need to treat each other with dignity and respect as we seek His truth together.