

PRUDISH OR PERMISSIVE





THE STORY OF SEX, SEXUALITY, & GENDER

By Chris Parker

“Toto, I have a feeling we are not in Kansas anymore.” Dorothy - *The Wizard of Oz*

A recent newspaper editorial by journalist Louise Roberts, recounted her walking through a supermarket carpark with her daughter and having two teenage boys—“exercising the full teen strut”—walk past them followed by a wolf whistle directed at her daughter. In the article she reflected on all the layers of inappropriateness and awkwardness. She also referred to the rise of child sexual assaults in schools (up 20%), and made other astute observations about our current sexualised culture. However, the kick in the article came when she said that her daughter was only six years old!

Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* vocalised to fluffy little Toto that the new world they found themselves in didn't feel like it used to. The question can be asked: Do we find ourselves as unsettled as Dorothy in our new world, or have we as Christians—and Christian educators—suffered a subtle desensitizing to the hypersexualisation of our culture and the resultant degrading of the good gift of sex and sexuality that God has woven into His wonderful creation? Have we noticed the effect that this is having on our students and their sense of identity, worth, and worldview? In the moments when we have a clear view of this, we might pause to ponder: How do we help our students to navigate through this ‘hot’ new world?

OUR STUDENTS ARE SWIMMING IN A CULTURAL STORY THAT SAYS THEY WILL BE MISSING OUT ON THE BEST OF HUMAN FULFILMENT IF THEY ARE NOT FREE TO ENGAGE IN SEX

HOT NEW WORLD

The patterns and cultural narratives of this new world have the capacity to not only accept but to normalise the following (as examples):

- the cover of a mainstream popularly read magazine featuring an article describing how a wife gave her husband a ménage a trois for his 40th birthday;
- large public billboards for a successful online 'dating' company advertising secret affairs with the slogan, "Life is short, have an affair";
- a magazine sold at the counter at 'Colesworth' featuring a picture of a bikini clad young woman separated at the waist into two halves with the encouragement to comment on their Facebook page which half does the reader prefer and why;
- video clips of the top 20 music hits watched and adored by children—consider "Wrecking Ball" by Miley Cyrus—to have overtly sexualised if not pornographic suggestions and imagery;
- mothers dressing their babies in a T-shirt that reads "all daddy wanted was a blow job";
- mainstream movies at local cinemas promoting friendship-sex with titles like *Friends with Benefits* and *No Strings Attached: Friendship Has Its Benefits*;
- popularity of a phone app being embraced by teenagers—Tinder—that customises and suggests suitable 'hookup' partners near you according to your geolocation;
- the practice of sexting and posting naked and near-naked selfies in potentially public online contexts;
- study findings indicating that 92% of boys and 61% of girls between the ages of 13-16 years are viewing or

have viewed pornography online and an absence of any significant moral and political concern (Werrakoon, 2014).

It is a world of highly sexualised advertising, entertainment media (movies, music, online games, etc.), celebrity commentary, fashion, and even humour, and these are all having a shaping effect on our students and how they see the world, themselves, and others.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Some might argue that, unlike for Dorothy, the sexualisation of our world has happened slowly and subversively. In his book *Sex and the iWorld*, Kuehne (2009) argues contrary to this view, instead suggesting that the change was sudden and involved a revolution—though not a revolution of violence and overthrow, but one of peace, flowers, and free love. Kuehne argues that the sexual revolution of the 60s significantly effected sexual ethics, and indeed, Christian morality. He states, "There is good reason to believe that the sexual revolution has more profoundly impacted the behaviour of twenty-first century Christians than the Bible" (p. 23). No one can deny that we have frequently had examples of un-biblical sexual morals expressed during the history of the West. However, what we find being proclaimed in this sexual revolution is a widespread societal acceptance (including, to a surprising degree, within the Christian church) of a sexual morality that sees only one boundary to sexual practice; mutual consent. Momentum to the revolution was provided by the innovation of reliable, cheap, hassle-free contraception, the rise of a radical new wave of feminism, and a generation of college students consuming the nihilist philosophy of Nietzsche.

It is not insignificant to mention Nietzsche and nihilism as a precursor to postmodern perspectives. Prior to the Enlightenment, western Europe was largely settled in the notion that moral frameworks (including sexual ethics) were knowable and were, in fact, revealed to us by God through the Bible. Modernity, and its development of the scientific method and the rise of scientism, then suggested that all knowledge and truth (including morals) can only be concluded by what could be measured and quantified. Postmodernism reacted saying, 'hang on a minute, both of these epistemologies are based on assumptions, and the only truth—including, and maybe especially, moral truth—that we can truly know is based on individual feelings'. Kuehne (2009) suggests that the end point of this revolution is "unbridled individualism" (p. 63).

SEXUAL FREEDOM

The emphasis on individualism, and the associated suspicion towards all moral assumptions, results in sex becoming unlinked from marriage and childbearing, and linked to individual identity, freedom, and fulfilment. Not only is a person now free to explore sexual expression within the sole boundary of mutual consent, but it has become normalised thinking that our sexuality, and the amount of sex we are having, are pivotal in our fulfilment as human beings. Sex has always been valued—dare I say, even hotly treasured—but at no other time was it seen as being so key to human fulfilment as it is now.

If the sexual revolution of the 60s was the crossing of a threshold and the ushering in of 'chapter one' of the non-Kansas world, then the last decade or two, with the normalising of a hypersexualised worldview easily and

effectively spread with digital media, the Internet, and social networking, is ‘chapter two’. This is the world our students are trying to understand, and the world in which they are exploring their own identity and sexuality—all this with a digital device in their pocket by day and under their pillow at night!

THE EFFECTS ON OUR STUDENTS

We need to acknowledge that our students are swimming in a cultural story that is whispering incessantly and insistently at them—and sometimes shouting—that they will be missing out on the best of human fulfilment and intimacy if they are not free to engage in consensual sex. Even if students don’t articulate this worldview about fulfilment, we need to acknowledge that it will be niggling away at them at a subconscious level—this cultural storytelling is just so pervasive and persuasive.

If we are honest with ourselves, we are also not immune from the coercion of this story. How might you have been shaped by the pervasive outworkings of the sexual revolution? There are, perhaps, implied questions here that are able to be considered rhetorical. However, let me say more openly, if there is something that you need to tell someone, to seek support, prayer, and accountability for, then right now might be the appropriate time to seek out someone you trust.

If you work in a school (or you have a teenage child) you will be aware of the effects that this cultural storytelling is having on young people. An obsession with the body is prevalent. If fulfilment is linked to sexuality, then one’s body is a focal point. If I am not ‘sexy’ then I risk not being fulfilled, and I will be less valuable in a society where sex and body is currency. We therefore see body

sculpting, tattoos, incessant selfies (often without even showing heads/faces, just do a search for #selfie on Instagram and see how many headless, body-obsessed, self-taken images are being posted), and a constant focus on, and anxiety about, body shape and size. Not only is the body the focus of attention but when things are not emotionally well, we increasingly see the body become the focus of self-harm as a subconscious acknowledgement that the body is the cause.

When a consumeristic worldview is overlaid with a hypersexualised worldview we see a mindset of objectification—particularly of, but not exclusively, females. Advertising, computer games, pornography, and pop media consistently tell a story that women are objects for men to play with. We see a particularly sad expression of this when it turns into self-objectification—a person starts to self-identify as primarily a body rather than as designed, made, and loved by God in His image to reflect glory back to Him. We are seeing self-objectification affecting younger and younger children. Can I suggest that there would be girls in your classes that are spending as much emotional and intellectual energy self-objectifying—and therefore worrying about things like what their thighs look like sitting on classroom chairs, for example—as they are giving to the learning opportunity you are presenting.

We could also mention in an incomplete list like this, the increasing amounts of, and increasingly younger engagement with, sexual practice among young people. As a father of a 12 year-old and 10 year-old boy and girl, this is quite an unsettling notion when we take the time to deeply reflect on the physical, emotional, and spiritual consequences.

BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

Let’s ponder the question raised in the title of this article: As Christians (and Christian educators) should we respond to our hypersexualised cultural story prudishly or permissively? I suggest the Bible offers a nuanced alternative to both.

We start by acknowledging that God’s creation is profoundly good to its core. All strands of creation are good and this includes sex, sexuality, our bodies, and ‘flesh’. We remember that God became part of the creation. He himself was willing to become flesh for our sake and Jesus’ resurrection was the first fruits of a promised bodily resurrection for His people.

Sex is good by design. We are sexualised beings and we are gendered beings—God has designed us to be this way. Like all of God’s goodness in creation, this is worth celebrating. However, when we either ignore the good essence of an aspect of creation, or alternatively we idolise it, we may drag the strand out of its good creational design framework. This can result in us not only tending to be outside of the will of God, but also to be tending away from Him and His goodness, glory, and grace. When sex is understood and embraced within the design parameters of the Designer, it is good and will tend toward human flourishing and ultimately glory to God. Outside of these parameters, not only is God as Designer dishonoured, but humans will not experience complete freedom. Living outside the boundaries for sexuality and sex does not bring the freedom that our cultural story proclaims, but ultimately brings the bondage that comes from idolatry and ignorance.

This hypersexualised cultural story is strongly told—and the voices are getting louder. The Christian church has been eavesdropping and has at times

THERE WOULD BE GIRLS IN YOUR CLASSES
THAT ARE SPENDING AS MUCH EMOTIONAL
AND INTELLECTUAL ENERGY SELF-OBJECTIFYING
AS THEY ARE GIVING TO LEARNING

LIVING OUTSIDE THE BOUNDARIES FOR SEXUALITY AND SEX DOES NOT BRING THE FREEDOM THAT OUR CULTURAL STORY PROCLAIMS

been unfortunately shaped towards a tendency of permissiveness with infidelity, premarital sex, support for alternative sexual practices, and even acceptability towards coarse sexual humour being common. Sex is good and we don't want to prudishly deny this profound truth, but we also must avoid celebrating its goodness to an extent that leads to permissiveness. We celebrate the beauty of sexual freedom that comes from the God-given design parameters of life-long monogamous marriage between a man and a woman in the context of family.

TEN THINGS WE MUST TEACH OUR STUDENTS ABOUT SEX

In teaching and discipling our students (and our own children) to have a biblical view of their own identity—especially around their sexuality and sexual practice—I suggest the importance of unfolding the following 10 truths through any and all opportunities:

1. **SEX IS GOOD**
Sex and sexuality is an awesome part of God's good design, but it's not ultimate. Be careful not to idolise this good strand of the creation.
2. **SEX HAS BOUNDARIES**
Consent is not the only constraint to be considered. Ultimate sexual freedom and fulfilment is found within a marriage between a man and a woman.
3. **TALK ABOUT SEX**
It's good to talk about sex; but when we do let's make sure that it is in a manner that treats it with the dignity, honour, and respect it deserves as one of God's good creational blessings (so much of our sex-talk can be cheap).
4. **SEX IS RELATIONAL**
By God's design sex is intimately and profoundly relational. It's as much (if not more) about self-sacrifice than it is about biological urges and desire. Sexual fulfilment requires consent and covenant—a "yes" and a promise.
5. **SEX DOES NOT DEFINE YOU**
Sex and sexual attraction will never ultimately define you. We are 'flesh' and flesh is good (God entered the creation and became flesh to redeem it) but it is not our primary identity.
6. **BODY DOES NOT DEFINE YOU**
God sees you as a whole person (body, mind, emotions, spirit, etc.), so don't think of yourself as anything less and don't allow yourself to be treated as anything less.
7. **SEX IS INTERMESHED WITH FAMILY**
By design, sex is intimately linked to family, children, and parenting. Disconnecting it from this context may not bring full sexual fulfilment.
8. **CELIBACY WILL NOT HURT YOU**
Not having sex has never killed a person, made anyone sick, or even harmed a person. Celibacy does not reduce a human's potential to live a fulfilled life.
9. **BE A SEX TRANSFORMER**
An alternative sexual story is being told to you and your friends constantly. Pray for the courage to be a transformer of our culture's hypersexuality through knowing and telling God's story of sex. Relax in the truth of God's good design and learn to read when you are being shaped by a lie.
10. **GRACE COVERS SEX**
Remember, no matter what we have done with our bodies, expressed with our sexuality, thought in our minds, or felt in our hearts, God's transformative grace and mercy through Jesus Christ is boundlessly offered to all who seek Him.

Suggested Reading

- *Teen Sex by the Book*
By Patricia Weerakoon
- *Pure Sex*
By Tony Payne and Phillip Jensen
- *The Meaning of Marriage*
By Timothy Keller
- *Same-Sex Marriage*
By Sean McDowell and John Stonestreet

References

- Kuehne, D. (2009). *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking relationship beyond an age of individualism*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Weerakoon, P. (2014). *The best sex for life*. Sydney: Youthworks Publishing.



Chris is lecturer and speaker for the National Institute for Christian Education and the editor of the Christian Teachers Journal. Chris and his wife Coco live in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. They have two children and a growing collection of ukuleles.