

It's Time for the Church to Grow-up about Sex.

Roger Wolsey



I serve as a campus minister at the University of Colorado in Boulder. This city is over a mile above sea level and many young adults end up getting their stomachs pumped due to alcohol poisoning – especially in the fall when students who are living away from home for the first time and without their parents control drink – a lot. I

make it a point to tell as many of these young people as possible about the nuances involved in drinking at higher altitudes. There is less oxygen in the air at higher elevations. “Many of you gathered here grew up in places at lower elevations in the flat lands. If it takes you 3-4 drinks to get buzzed back home, it will only take 1-2 drinks to get buzzed here – depending upon your weight, your sex. and how much protein you’ve eaten, etc.”

I consider **sharing this practical advice to be part of my ministry to this population.** More conservative campus ministries teach 100% abstinence and quite frequently it is the students receiving those more rigid teachings about alcohol who end up in the ER. A similar dynamic is seen when it comes to sex. Teaching young people about safe sex techniques leads to a reduction in abortion and STD/I rates compared to teaching “abstinence only”. It seems clear that **rigid, authoritarian, paternalistic, and dogmatic approaches to drugs and sex are more harmful than helpful.** They, in fact, are counter-productive.

My twin sister will be completing her 49th trip around the Sun this summer (Congratulations Sis!). I celebrate her graceful aging process, and occasionally this leads me to consider my own aging (*but only occasionally as I suffer from a bit of denial about this*). There is a meme that often appears on social media asking, **“What advice would you give your younger self if you could offer insight from where you’re at today?”**

Whenever I see it, I think to myself, **“Get laid”**, or put with more nuance, “Start having sex younger than I did, and have multiple lovers along the way before you get married”; and with, *even more nuance*, “Don’t take so long to start embracing the fact that you are **an embodied human being** – you are a **sexual being**. Make a point to learn about sexuality, about healthy relationship, about attachment theory, about what you like and don’t like sexually, and how to be a good sexual partner to others – BUT you’d do well to consider avoiding the sexual activity that can lead to pregnancy until you feel you are at a place in life where you can make grown up decisions about bringing a child into this world and raising it – or about the possibility of aborting a pregnancy – and dealing with all of the emotional challenges that go with it.”

With this in mind, in addition to free coffee, tea, and cookies, we also have a condom bowl in the chapel lobby with a sign saying, **“Love is Good. Sex is Good. Sex with Love & Safe sex are better.”** I inform the students (same teaching as my 17 year old son) about the couple I know who I married back when I was a pastor in Minnesota. These newlyweds ended up getting pregnant within the first 3 months of their marriage even though she was taking the pill and even though he was using a condom. Neither of those measures are 100% effective. Since this incident really happened, what makes them think it can’t happen to them? There are lots of ways to express our sexuality – and **perhaps it’s a good idea to focus on the ones that don’t have such serious possible consequences at this point in**

their lives.

Going back to the advice I'd give my younger self. I was a virgin when I got married at the age of 26 – just before my last year at seminary/grad school. I didn't really avoid having sex because of any rigid religious teachings, I was confirmed in and active with a liberal United Methodist congregation. Rather, I was a late bloomer and frankly looked like a dork until I grew into myself in my late 20s. **Basic lack of opportunity more than anything.** But I was sexually active as a teen. I masturbated – a lot. The internet wasn't a thing back then so my use of porn was limited to a copy of *Playboy* and a copy of *Penthouse*. The pages were well worn before I threw them out. At any rate, my marriage of 10 years wasn't sustainable.

Most Americans start having sex around 18 years of age and have had about 7 sexual partners during their lives. Most of those sexual experiences with other people take place between 18-30 years of age. And most people get married (the first time) around 28 years of age. So, most people have done their work in figuring out what they are looking for and needing before getting married. I only had one, brief, girlfriend before getting married. To be clear, I didn't make a mistake. I did fall in love – deeply, and a beautiful son was a fruit of that marriage and he truly is a gift to the world. **Praise God.** She and I remain good friends and have been a wonderful co-parenting team. I, however, have to do my dating catch up work on the other side of that marriage.

I recall being most impressed by the bold witness of one of my clergy friends. Scott was a friend from years in seminary/grad school and he was engaged to his then fiancé and when he went before his Board of Ordained ministry and they asked him, “Will you vow to be celibate in singleness? Will you vow to not have sex before marriage?” He replied, “No. I'm having sex with my fiancé.” So, they didn't ordain him – then. They ordained him months later

after he got married. I suppose one could call that a “win-win.” Both he and his denominational power structures and traditions maintained their integrity.

But the thing is, **maintaining the integrity of certain power structures and traditions is toxic to the health of the Church. It is a stumbling block to the future (and present) of Christianity.** Fewer and fewer citizens today are Christian and a not small part of it is due to our archaic beliefs and practices around human sexuality. Simply put, **it was none of that Board’s business asking Scott about what he does in the bedroom,** and they surely shouldn’t have been prohibitive and discriminatory about ordaining him. Pastors are not monks. Martin Luther already fought that fight and a big part of the Protestant Reformation was allowing priests to marry and not be celibate for life. Monks (and nuns) are people who take an intentional season of their life (or most all of it) to focus on God in a certain way that involves not having romantic partnership with fellow humans. Fine and well. But **to impose the vows of the monastery onto the entire priesthood is a recipe for disaster.** There is much, too much, in the news to back that up.

There are many people who want nothing to do with Christianity in large part because of the Church’s historic conventions of saying who gets to have sex with who, how, and when. Today’s young people give that **a collective “Fuck that.”** And I think rightfully so. More and more denominations have embraced the insights of contemporary science and as a result, knowing that there are over 1500 animal species where homosexuality is practiced – many involving life-long partnerships, they have come around to **embracing Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, and more, persons** as being **fully loved, accepted, children of God.** These churches have been part of the hard fought fight to get our nation to the point where the U.S. military embraces homosexual troops; the Boy Scouts of

America now embraces gay scouts and leaders; and marriage for homosexual persons is now the law of the land in all 50 states. ***Halleluiah!***

Progress has happened and successes have been made. Good. But there is more work to do. More evolution to take place. Some have been saying that **“embracing polyamory should be the next cause to champion”** now that gay rights have largely been secured. I don't currently feel called to that fight. But I do feel called to another. One of the main reasons that I have been such a strong advocate for LGBTQ rights over the past few decades is because **I realize that as I fight for their liberation, I fight for my own.** I'm a divorced Christian who hopes to marry again someday and I jolly well will have sex with a future lover prior to getting married again some day.

Some will see this and go, “Abomination!” “Heresy!” “Sinner!” “False teacher!” or otherwise get their knickers in a twist and feel symptoms of constipated bowels full of rigid, un-evolved, crap. So be it. **I am called to invite us into a conversation – a needed one.**

The Church has often taught that “divorce is sin” and that “sex outside of marriage is sin” and that “God hates divorce.” Let's look at why. Some of this harkens back to the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures – particularly Leviticus – where certain behaviors were proscribed for the struggling ancient Hebrews – primarily to help them survive in lands surround by hostile parties. Every Hebrew life mattered and practices were put into place that both made them distinct from the others (the gentiles/”greeks”), and helped them to have a competitive edge in survival. If you live in a place without freezers or refrigeration, it's best to avoid shellfish and pork as those things can easily turn foul and harm or kill you if not properly stored and prepared. Similarly, if you live in a culture where women are the property of men – first by their fathers, then by their husbands, and if that culture thinks of women as valuable if they are virgins and as “damaged goods” if they are

not, then *OF COURSE* God would “hate divorce” because if a man divorces his wife back then, she would end up resorting to prostitution or begging to get by in life as no man would want to marry her as she is considered damaged goods by others. But, if you live in a culture where women are liberated, emancipated, and enfranchised; and where women will not have a hard time finding a spouse if she is divorced, then the context has changed and “WJWD” is different in that what is most loving has changed. **Jesus employed an ethic of love that was a form of moral relativism – i.e., a form of principled consequentialism. Do what is most loving, most compassionate, in any circumstance.**

To the extent that I’ve given consideration to a Christian approach to polyamory, let me say the following. Polyamory in the form of bigamy (having multiple spouses) is seen all over the Bible – with approval. The only exception to this is found in a pastoral epistle, 1 Timothy 3:2, where it states that high leaders in the Church (bishops) should not have more than one wife. Such persons are plenty busy and have enough drama, conflict to deal with, and fires to put out without having more in their personal lives. I suppose I could be okay with allowing Christians to have more than one, perhaps with a max of two, spouses. But I personally wouldn’t want more than one mother (or father) in law in my life as a matter of practicality and self-preservation. And I can imagine, or at least fathom if I squint really hard, a mature Christian couple allowing each other to have occasional sexual explorations with other people as part of their unconditional love for each other, as part of their “compersion” – their delight in their lover’s delight, and with concern and intentional care for their partner’s sexual healing, well-being, growth, and satisfaction (realizing that it would be the truly rare couple that can attain this selfless, non-jealous sort of state).

The bottom line is that we are sexual beings and the Church simply cannot continue to operate with such a rigid, and ironically gnostic (a

rigid dualism that posits that “earthly/human = bad, divine/spiritual = good” and ergo, “sex = bad, non-sex = good”), ascetic disposition and set of rules and regulations that enforce it. Yes, it takes a village to raise us well and we do well with accountability to help us be at our best, but we don’t need to be micromanaged or controlled by a nanny or police state **ecclesiology**. **Let’s be grown-ups.**

Today’s people are seeking religious and spiritual paths that help them to be the best, most conscious and evolved adult humans they can be and the forms of spirituality that are most evolved on these matters are the ones they are flocking to. **What people are yearning for and needing is help with learning how** to self-individuate; to evolve; to learn about their personality and attachment styles; how to own, vent, and integrate own shadows; how to have good, deep, truly penetrating (real intimacy not merely fucking) sacred sex; how to guard people’s hearts and our own; how to develop and balance our divine masculine and feminine sides; and how to communicate effectively and nonviolently with our lovers; and how to end relationships with grace and sensitivity – and learn lessons from the gifts they were.

Friends, I’m not calling for **antinomianism** or anarchy. I’m not saying that anything goes. I am saying that sex before marriage isn’t necessarily sinful. In fact, **if it’s sex in the context of consenting adults in mutually caring relationship – it isn’t sinful at all. Not. At. All.**

Jesus said of those who cause any of children who trust him to stumble, *“it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.”*(Matthew 18:6). In the past, the Church has sought to honor this teaching by erroring on the side of attempting to prevent people from being harmed by establishing rigid, sweeping policies about sex and strict taboos about talking about it – relegating sex to the realm of secrecy and shadows. As we saw with the

Prohibition of alcohol, such puritanical rigidity leads to even worse dysfunction and chaos. Many, too many, people have felt massive waves of guilt and shame about their explorations and experiences in the truly natural and God-given gift of sexuality due to what's become the conventional dogmas of Christianity that have colored and poisoned our culture. We've come to a place where the protective mechanisms we employed in the past have in fact become the stumbling blocks that prevent many people from having life-saving experiences of wholeness/salvation by making them feel rejected by the Church – and **thus they reject the rejector. It's time for the Church to get out of the rejecting business.**

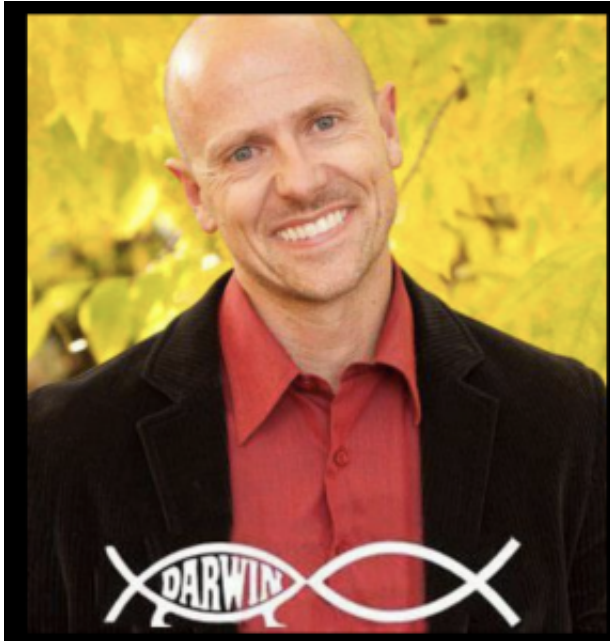
Look, **the vast majority of American pastors have officiated countless weddings where the couples were living together (and having sex) before they got married.** I've performed some 90 weddings over the past 20+ years and only 2 of them were couples who were not living together. I highly doubt if my experience is much different from the majority of pastors. **Be honest y'all.** Only the most fundamentalist, or hypocritical, of pastors would dispute this. Moreover, some 25-40% of Protestant American clergypersons have divorced and/or remarried. The Church already gives tacit consent and approval of these people and their love and their choices – and **I'm calling for us to make that consent overt. I'm calling for the Church to grow up and be relevant in the 21st Century. I'm inviting us to engage in a conversation that is long overdue.**

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– xx Roger



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