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Sex Education for Christians?



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It is probably an understatement to say that our society has a skewed view of sex. One only has to look at the covers of our leading magazines, at television programs, and movie ads to see its manifestations and ramifications. Young people seem to be very well informed about the details of birth control methods and how they work, even long before they are ready

to get married. Venereal disease incidence has taken a sharp rise in the last number of years, and it involves increasingly younger people. It has been recognized that venereal disease has reached epidemic proportions, which by itself is a strong indication of the moral decline of our nation. Indulgence in premarital and extramarital sexual activity is evident on a large scale.

Preoccupation with Sex

Why is there such a preoccupation with sex in our culture? Is it not taking the place of something else, something more significant which we have lost in the last generation or so? And is the currently strong emphasis on sex education in our nation's schools merely a result of fear of ignorance about sex? I am sure that, basically, we all agree that ignorance is undesirable. But what kind of facts and perspective are to be conveyed by our school teachers to the children? At what age should they be informed? And by whom should they be told the facts of life? Apparently we do not all agree on these questions, and it appears that many of us are casting about for more satisfying answers and more clearly stated objectives.

Children in the grade school, or even in junior or senior high school, do not first of all need to know all the anatomic details of the reproductive organs and how they function. Neither do they first of all have to know about sexual intercourse, nor about the latest techniques of birth control and venereal disease prevention. Let them first learn about the role of male and female, about genuine love, about chastity, and about living a clean and pure life before the Lord our Maker. Then, in addition, let them also learn about the biological aspects of reproduction which are so important in their lives.

It is because we have lost sight of the proper view of sex, and because our basic premises are wrong, that we cannot solve the problems regarding sex which force themselves on Christians as well as unbelievers.

What is Sex?

Contrary to the opinion of many, sex is not something you do. It would be more correct to say that sex is something you are. This is not to say that sex is everything in life, nor that it is most important. Rather, sex has to be seen against the full

background of a meaningful life, and in order to make this clear I like to use the term sexuality, indicating that each person is either male or female, and that this fact is reflected in everything we do in life. And if we see ourselves as sexual beings, in the light of scriptural ordinances, we may be able to come to grips with the real issues that confront us, also in the Christian community.

Biblical View of Sexuality

In the beginning God created us male and female. God said that it is not good that man should be alone, and therefore He created man and woman to complement each other. But this very fact means that sexuality is good; it is His gift to us, and we are to use it to His glory and develop it to the best of our ability. But how to handle our sexuality properly is a multi-faceted question which is not answered easily, particularly in our complex age.

We should recognize that sexuality involves not only anatomical and physiological differences which set men and women, and boys and girls apart. Sexuality encompasses many aspects of life, including some which seem to have little to do with procreation. Our sexuality expresses itself in our physical make-up, but also in the ways we act and react in life's situations. Our ambitions, our sensitivities, and our abilities are often determined or conditioned by the fact that we are male or female. This is meant not in a deterministic way, neither in the sense that we behave that way because society has brainwashed us into fixed behavior patterns, but in the sense that we are filling a role as male or female persons. We are so constituted that there really is a difference between male and female, not simply in the animal sense, but in that we are masculine and feminine, two kinds of people, basically one as humans, yet different complementarily. When we go about our business from day to day, these differences should be apparent in many, though not all, of the things we do and say.

Informing the Children

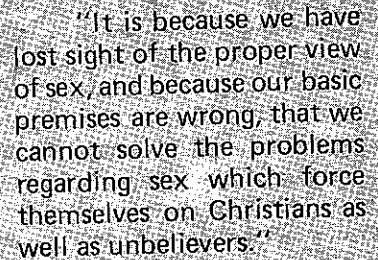
As children grow up, all the various aspects of their sexuality must gradually come to expression as these individuals are molded into mature male or female persons. They must learn to assume their proper role in life as real men and true women. Boys must learn to exercise their growing masculinity, and girls must develop their feminine potential to the fullest possible extent, so that they may be better able to live as fulfilled Christian men and women when they reach adulthood.

To growing children it is very important to know what they are, and where they are going, sexually. It is crucial for them to know what happens during puberty, and to know that these events are normal and good, and that they are part of God's plan for their development. They must learn to anticipate the adult roles for which they are preparing in life, so that they will be able to praise the Lord for these processes and events which are so mystifying and awesome as well as natural and beautiful. Not to know what is happening, or why, or what to expect in the years ahead, creates unnecessary fears and initiates debilitating attitudes which may hamper a person throughout life.

How much should children know about procreation when they are young? This question is, of course, more complex than we are sometimes willing to face. Eventually they should know all the important facts of life. But there are also several aspects which are of such a private nature that to discuss them would rob them of their beauty and sacredness: Just when are children able to handle all the necessary information? Being overinformed is detrimental to a healthy view of sexuality. Yet, we cannot put off answering the children's questions until "they are big enough," because that time simply will never come. And if that time should come, the children will be too old to begin being informed, because their street companions and school mates will have

informed them already. And, like it or not, that information will be from a perspective which is unwholesome, because of its secretiveness and "dirtiness," and will be such that parents would not approve of it. It will also put the parents in the unenviable position of having kept from the children the answers to questions which at that age are very important to them, thereby having lost a certain amount of their confidence.

It is a must, therefore, that we educate our children at home, from a wholesome point of view, on the basis of God's Word. We must start with this as soon as they



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show that they are ready for simple explanations, which is probably around the age of three or four. And if the children do not ask these questions on their own, we might do well to relate to them certain interesting facts about plant or animal life which will stimulate their curiosity. It is all-important to establish a communication pathway so that meaningful exchange can occur. When talking about the facts of life, we can be quite comfortable if our attitude is natural. As long as we answer the child's questions at the level they are being asked, we can be assured that their understanding will grow, one step at a time, and that both the children and the parents will be comfortable with it. This way the children will also be most likely to accept the Christian perspective of the parents, and thereby may avoid any real basic hangups about the whole process

Role of the School

Knowing that not all parents have the background or training to explain at a highly technical level what happens in our bodies, the Christian school teacher may have to amplify the home's instructions. A Christian elementary school teacher can more easily convey to the children, with plant fertilization and seed formation, or with the use of classroom pets and trips to a nearby farm, what the facts of life are like in a concrete, real-life situation. Details about physical growth processes and chemical and hormonal relationships are better left until high school, because of greater relevance and better comprehension.

Two factors which seem very important in this regard are 1) that the teacher should have the same perspective as the parents, so that no basic conflict would arise through the teacher's presentation; and 2) that the students freely discuss this material with their parents, so that real integration of facts and perspective is possible, benefiting both parents and children.

Other Concerns

But is it sufficient to know where babies come from, especially in our age? Is that really all there is to sex education? Should we not also answer some ethical, moral, economic and other related questions? Should we not continue to grow and develop maturely Christian thinking in our age of technological developments? It is our duty, as adults and as parents, to be well informed, and to have a well-articulated view on the various sex-related problems of our age. One outstanding area of concern, which clearly needs closer attention, is that of birth control and contraceptive methods. While some of the age-old methods have been discussed for years, there are two methods of family growth regulation which merit further discussion, namely the hormone pill and the intra-uterine device.

It probably should be said first, that

all family restriction methods, of whatever kind, have some problems in common. In each instance we may ask whether, in principle, it is ever right to limit the size of the family voluntarily. And if it is at times permissible, we may further ask, for whom, and under which circumstances. Who should be allowed to make these decisions, and what are the criteria? Are children not a gift of God, and is it up to us to turn down such magnificent gifts? Is our physical potential the primary criterion for setting family size goals? And in any case is it right to use either birth control methods, or abstention? After raising these questions, and admitting that their importance is of the first order, I am going to pass up this opportunity to discuss them, so that we may single out the two birth control methods mentioned above, namely, the hormone pill and the intra-uterine device.

The Pill

When we speak of the Pill, we have in mind, of course, not just one brand of pill, but a whole group of medications which come in various kinds and different strengths. What lies at the basis of the use of these hormone administrations is the regulation of those hormones which are involved in the growth and release of eggs from the ovary and in the development of the womb lining for reception of a new individual. In essence, the Pill prevents ovulation, by maintaining a high estrogen level in the mother's blood, and, since no egg is released, there can be no union of egg and sperm. At this technical level we would probably have little difficulty justifying the use of this method. When we consider, however, the side effects which hormone pills tend to have on the mother, more caution is needed. Since it can cause the health of the mother to be impaired, as in the formation of blood clots and other circulatory problems, the use of the Pill should be discouraged strongly. And if for some good, medical

reasons such hormone treatments are necessary, they should be administered under the close supervision of a competent physicians only. And although no major problems have arisen yet, the longterm effects are still unknown, and women who are presently using the Pill are part of the research by which to find out.

Intra-uterine Devices

Intra-uterine devices (IUD) have gained much popularity in the last decade. An IUD is a device, made in many different shapes, and constructed of plastic or stainless steel, which is inserted into the uterus. The feature they all have in common is that they irritate the uterine lining, which appears to be the factor which prevents child birth.

We do not know for sure how the IUD works, but the two most common opinions are 1) that fertilization of the egg is probably prevented, and 2) that implantation of the ovum is probably prevented. If the device actually does prevent fertilization, for some unknown reason, and if this can be demonstrated, then it probably does not differ, in essence, from the Pill, except in its side effects. But we have not been able to demonstrate that the IUD only prevents fertilization, and we may, therefore, not assume that this is how it works. We do know that mothers have become pregnant, and in fact have given birth to normal, healthy babies, with an IUD in place during the entire pregnancy period.

Side effects of the intra-uterine device seem to be minimal, except for occasional serious situations such as uterine infection, or hemorrhage due to perforation of the uterine wall. But presumably, more careful design or more skilled insertion by the physician might overcome this objection to its use.

The real problem arises when we consider the second hypothesis of how the IUD works, namely, that it prevents implantation of the ovum. An egg is fertilized in the far end of the Fallopian tube. The fertilized ovum then takes from three to four days to travel down the Fallopian tube, before it gets to the uterus (Fig. 1). During this time it divides a number of times to form a mass of cells (Fig. 2). After it enters the uterus, it remains unattached to the uterine lining for an additional three or four days, during which further growth and differentiation occurs, so that a hollow blastocyst is formed. This structure has an inner cell mass, which forms the embryonic disc from which the embryo develops, and a surrounding trophoblast which develops into membranes around the embryo. On the eighth or ninth day after conception, this blastocyst, which represents a new human individual of more than one week's development, is normally implanted into the lining of the uterus, constituting the beginning of a nine-month close relationship between mother and baby.

We see, then, that fertilization has

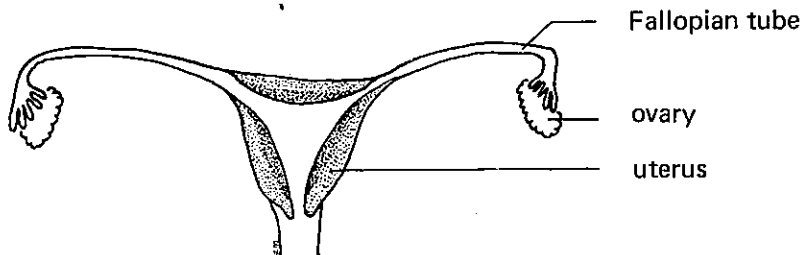


Fig. 1. Female reproductive structures.

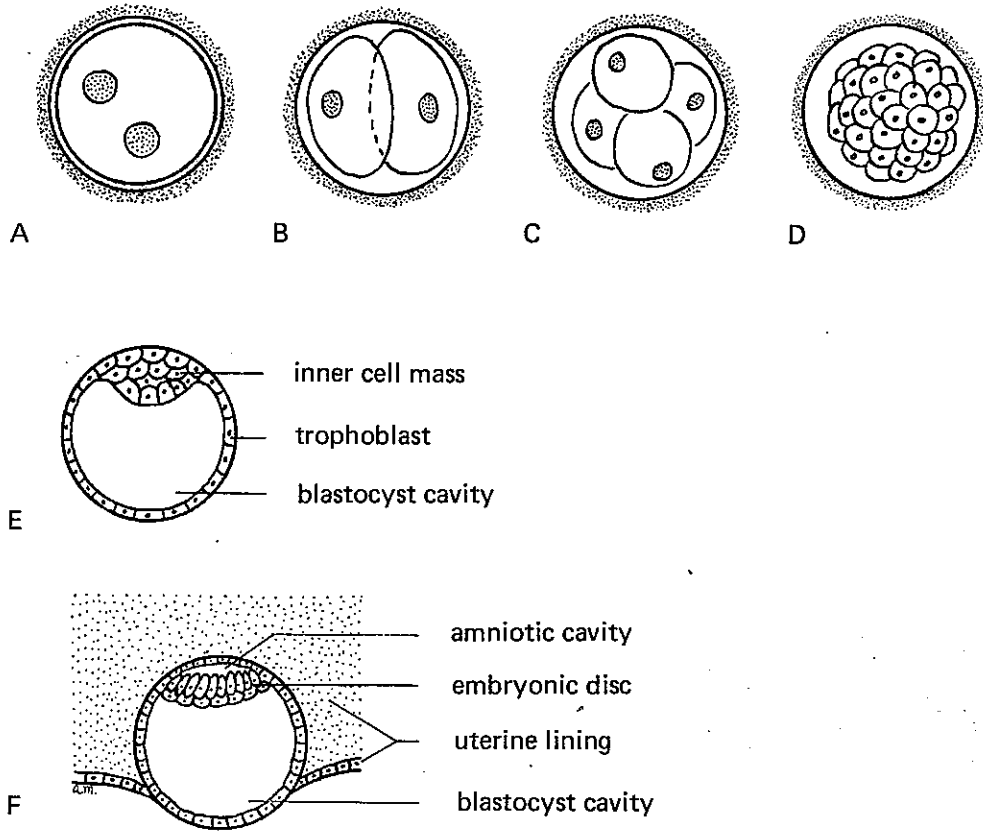


Fig. 2. Early development of a human ovum, up to implantation. A, fertilized egg with male and female pronuclei; B, ovum after first division; C, ovum after second division; D, morula, a solid ball of small cells; E, blastocyst with inner cell mass; F, blastocyst implanted in uterine lining, with embryonic disc distinct.

taken place, and development of the new individual has progressed for more than a week by the time implantation starts. The use of the IUD interferes with the further development of this new life, because the uterine lining is unable to accept the blastocyst. But this places it in the same category as abortion! While we are not completely sure that this is how the IUD works, this explanation seems to be the most likely to be correct. And if so, this means that we are, though possibly unwittingly, snuffing out a very young human life. For those who hold life sacred and

cannot justify abortion, there seems to be only one clear conclusion from the above information, namely, that the use of the intra-uterine device cannot be justified.

It has come to my attention increasingly during the last year or so that the people of the Christian community are not aware of these facts and implications of the use of the intra-uterine device. We would do well, therefore, to discuss these matters together in our homes, and to take a responsible stand in the light of a biblical world view, so that our people may not sin, though unawares, in this respect.