



'Safe-Sex' Promotion and a Biblical Alternative

The promotion of 'safe(r) sex' through use of the condom has been the central theme of the UK government's sex education policy over the last twenty years. It is one example of so-called 'harm-reduction' policies, which aim to prevent the damaging and unwanted consequences of sinful behaviour.

The funding and support of such harm-reduction policies is increasing, especially in the area of sexual health and drug abuse. Their history goes back at least as far as the Victorian era with its laws aimed at detaining and decontaminating prostitutes. The 1967 Abortion Act in the UK was originally justified by the expectation that it would prevent many deaths from infected back-street abortions. Other harm reduction policies include the proposed introduction of immunization against Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), aiming to prevent cervical cancer caused by this chronic infection, and needle exchanges, which allow drug addicts to swap used for new needles in an attempt to prevent the spread of blood-borne infections through intravenous drug abuse.

Contemporary Justification for Safe(r)-Sex Promotion

At first sight the rationale for such harm reduction policies has some appeal. The old medical adage that 'prevention is better than cure' seems attractive. Yet Christians need to be on their guard against them, for these policies directly oppose a God-honouring response to sin and its consequences.

In another article (*Banner of Truth*, 530, November 2.007, p. 14), we looked at some of the penalties that God imposes on women and men who indulge in sexual immorality as part of his judgment for breaking his moral laws. These include sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies, infertility, emotional damage, deformation of character, and damage to future marriages. Just as God allows man to experience the blessings of obedience, so also he intends there to be curses from disobedience (Deut. 30:15-19). He uses these curses to remind people that he is a holy God who demands respect for his holy commands regarding sexual intimacy. Such curses can warn people of the presence and seriousness of sin, convict them of their own sinful nature and direct them to lead lives of righteousness.

Our society denies the moral origin of these curses, yet is unable to deny their existence, in part because of the imposing medical and social implications of STIs and of teenage pregnancies. Instead of curbing sinful behaviour, society has sought to rid itself of sin's judgments. It has identified the condom as its chief means of protection from STIs and unwanted pregnancy – with abortion as a back-up when the condom fails to prevent pregnancy. To give respectability to its attempt at damage limitation the medical profession, and more recently teachers have been enrolled to promote condom use and availability.

Has 'Safe(r)-Sex' Promotion Been Effective?

Before addressing the ethics of this approach it is worth noting its failure. Its promotion for the past twenty years has been accompanied by worsening yearly indices. There are a number of reasons for this. The (false) prospect of avoiding the unwanted consequences of sexual immorality has led to an increase in such behaviour which in turn has increased the number of unwanted pregnancies, abortions and STIs.¹

STIs and pregnancies have also increased because the condom is just not as effective as is claimed. Many reliable studies² show that, even when used consistently, condoms are not very effective in limiting STI spread. They sometimes break (3% per intercourse) and some viruses like warts and herpes are found outside the covered area. In addition people, especially teenagers, do not use condoms consistently. UK 'last intercourse usage rates' are rarely above 40%. We should not be surprised at this because intercourse outside marriage is often unplanned, coercive or takes place while participants are under the influence of alcohol – all circumstances when condoms are unlikely to be used.

The Ethics of 'Safe(r)-Sex' Teaching

The spiritual situation could be summarized in this way. People are sinning, and without scruple are planning to sin further. (We need to distinguish this ethically from circumstances where an individual has sinned, is suffering the consequences, and subsequently seeks healing in his suffering.) In asking for condoms they are asking those in authority to share in anticipating their sinful plans and to help them do so without consequences (actually a vain hope).

Sadly, many Christians have been taken in by the professionalization of the approach and its claimed benefits without realizing the ethical issues at stake. Few of them, at least in their professional capacities as doctor, nurse or teacher, have opposed the handing out of condoms to teenagers.

So how should a Christian respond in righteousness to this approach? The Lord has clear directions for his people who are surrounded by and tempted to mix with pagan practices, yet want to be assured of his continued presence and blessing. *'Come out from among them, and be separate'*, says the Lord, *'do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you'* (2 Cor. 6:17). Paul charges Timothy not 'to share in other people's sins', but rather to *'keep yourself pure'* (1 Tim. 5:22b). Surely providing a condom to someone intending to fornicate is sharing in his sins by aiding and abetting him in his sinful acts?

Reaping the Consequences of this Folly

The government responds each year to worsening STI and teenage pregnancy figures by promising more and more money for 'safe(r)-sex' promotion. Psalm 2 provides an accurate analysis of the situation. *'The kings of the earth set themselves ... against the Lord and against his anointed'* (verse 2). They think that they can be wiser than God in deciding how to live. They think they can ignore the goodness of his design to keep sexual intimacy for marriage. *'Let us break their bonds in pieces'* (verse 3). They think that they can effectively release themselves from all moral constraint without consequences. Yet we know that *'He who sits in the heavens shall laugh'* (verse 4). The Lord knows the folly of their plans as he *'holds them in derision'*. They cannot thwart his decrees with a piece of latex rubber. They are blinded to the absurdity and futility of such an idea. One may as well try to put out a fire with petrol.

Are we not now seeing *'his wrath kindled but a little'* (verse 2) as our young people reap the consequences of squandering good things in the name of self-fulfilment? They are suffering God's anger for their parents' and teachers' rejection of his commands. *'Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also forget your children'* (Hos. 4:6). They lurch from one painful but unheeded disaster to another for want of moral direction. And we all suffer the consequences, because marriage is the building block of society. Such foolish decisions lead to the erosion of family life with fatherlessness or unstable marriages damaging subsequent generations. The effects of immorality overflow from the home to our increasingly unruly neighbourhoods and schools. We are surely seeing one aspect of the rapid decline of our civilization. Not all the blame can be placed on safe-sex teaching, but it is one issue that attacks our malleable and vulnerable young people and is one important means of promoting moral anarchy.

We now address the important issue of how Christians should respond to this contemporary threat, both at home and at school.

The Responsibility of Christian Parents at Home

The Lord desires that a child's education be directed by the father (Eph. 6:4) and carried out by both parents (Prov. 1:8). Matters of right and wrong (for example, Prov. 1-2) and of intimacy (for example, Prov. 5) should be primarily addressed in the close family setting. Such teaching needs to be given to a child whose heart is already disciplined to accept the laws of God in faith.

The questions of what intimate issues should be addressed and when to address them require wisdom and sensitivity. Later we will mention a few important subjects in more detail. The mechanical facts are perhaps one of the least important aspects of any 'syllabus'. Some may question whether they should be shared at all.

Certainly many parents find their explanation very embarrassing. We keenly sense the shame and vulnerability of our fallen ancestors (Gen. 3:7), as we ourselves yearn for a 'fig-leaf covering' during such conversations. We need to be grateful for this God-given shame, not least because it helps prevent sexual provocation of a forbidden nature within the family circle.

In a more protected or moral society perhaps parents could avoid teaching 'the facts of life'. It is not necessary to know the mechanics of adultery in order to obey the Seventh Commandment, any more than a knowledge of how to construct idols is needed to obey the Second. The physical facts could be lovingly discovered at first intimacy following marriage. But in our society there is no doubt that someone will tell our children these facts, even if we do not, and this will usually be in a way that dishonours God and his design. It is surely better, then, that parents do this, thereby explaining the moral context of sexual intimacy in a home environment which honours this command.

It is encouraging to remember that, though example does not replace explanation, experiencing the workings of a secure marriage will indeed speak powerfully to the growing child.

Because Christian parents at home are the right source and context for intimate education, they need to be active in monitoring what their children are being taught at school. Any intimate and moral matters must only be taught with the parents' full knowledge and by someone whom they trust. Some Christian parents are culpably ignorant of the damaging moral lies – often including 'safe sex' and the promotion of homosexuality – being taught to their children in the classroom.

A Christian Response – Establishing in Schools a Curriculum that Honours God

What should we advocate for pupils attending our secular schools especially if they lack such teaching and example at home? We note how active the world has been in influencing young people through sex education. Should not the church be stirred to oppose and replace this unrighteous teaching? Should we not be keener than the world to influence the next generation for good rather than bad?

The author is actively involved in a UK charity called 'Lovewise' which now works throughout the country to give pupils such teaching in both schools and Christian youth groups.³ Our material is based on the twin biblical pillars of God's design of marriage and God's law expressed in the Seventh Commandment, which is given that marriage may be protected and honoured. The themes are similar for a secular school class as for a more overtly Christian audience, though some biblical direction, such as the possibility of a calling to the single life for the sake of the gospel, applies only to believing young people. We recognize that there is a common-grace element to our teaching which helps both unbelieving and believing young people.

Here are some of the themes and responses:

1. Encouraging pupils to aspire to marriage and parenthood

Interestingly, despite the poor press that marriage receives, over 70% of the pupils hope to marry. But they know little about what marriage is. We use a clip of a wedding ceremony to

explain the nature of marriage. We are mindful of the disrupted home background of many pupils but do not want the mistakes of a previous generation to be foisted on the next.

We explain the superior nature of marriage compared to living together in terms of duration, fidelity and benefit for children. In contrast to the safe(r)-sex perspective of pregnancy avoidance, we talk of the great privilege of raising new life and the shared joy of parenthood in marriage. Many young men in our society are disillusioned and aimless, having been declared an unnecessary accessory to family life by both single motherhood and self-sufficient career-minded women. They seem to respond to the challenging prospect of responsibility to lead and provide for a wife and family.

2. Upholding God-given boundaries for sex

Few pupils have ever been encouraged to consider the possibility of keeping sex for marriage. It runs hard against the tide of all their magazines, TV programmes and often even what they learn at home. We remind them what their consciences already know – that God commands them to keep sex for marriage. We help them to realize that there are some very sensible reasons for sticking to their Maker's instructions! Without the test of the marriage commitment, girls are especially vulnerable to the impulsive and lustful advances of boys. We remind them that an extra-marital teenage sexual relationship only lasts an average of three weeks. Some seem relieved to hear that they are not being 'cold' or awkward if they long for and insist upon life-long commitment before giving themselves physically.

3. Considering the consequences of sex outside marriage

We show students a photo of a pregnant woman and a man with AIDS to remind them of the life-and-death consequences of sexual intimacy. The condom will not protect them from many of these. We warn them of the condom's limitations in preventing pregnancy and STIs, and remind them that it most definitely will not protect their hearts from being broken. They are shown a picture of the early foetus and are also told the plain truth that sexual activity outside marriage has led to an ever-increasing demand for abortion.

4. Holding out God's offer of forgiveness and a fresh start

How hopeless it would be if we simply held up God's commands but not his gracious response to our disobedience. Though we only rarely receive an obvious response to our simple explanation of the cross, we know that many need to hear of God's grace as they wrestle with guilt and pain from their past sins.

5. Offering advice on how to 'go out' in a God-honouring way

Our programme offers help on how to avoid sexual intimacy whilst going out. They need to think ahead, decide upon rules and then be self-controlled in sticking to them. We talk about the differing provocations to temptation for girls and boys.

Girls often, and in vain, hope to 'catch their men' by physical inducements – are willing to trade intimacy for anticipated security. They are tempted to allure with their looks and dress, and then become disappointed when they attract men with the shallowest interest in them as a person. We talk about their need for modesty.

Boys are often already uninhibited because of what they are hearing of no-consequences, recreational sex. We exhort them to self-control in the face of these tempting messages and of their need to refuse to look at pornography, though it can be piped into their bedrooms without their parents' knowledge.

The battle for the hearts and minds of our young people is fierce. It is a spiritual battle that Christians are just beginning to fight through prayer and action. We cannot expect the world to embrace God-centred messages with open arms. Our programme has experienced opposition but we have nevertheless received invitations from an increasing number of schools around the UK.

At these schools our message has been given serious and concerned attention by many pupils. We have the encouragement of knowing that we are speaking of God's design to God-given consciences that are often able to recognize the truth of what we say. Many have already experienced the pain and guilt of ignoring his commands. Christians urgently need to replace the sin-promoting message of 'safe(r)-sex' teaching with the powerful biblical message of moral order, hope and forgiveness that these young people so badly need to hear.

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Endnotes:

¹ Paton D Random, Behaviour or Rational Choice? Family Planning, Teenage Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Infections, *Sex Education*, 2006, 6, pp. 281-308.

² *Workshop Summary: Scientific Evidence on Condom Effectiveness for STD Prevention*, July 20, 2001. Available at <http://www.niaid.nih.gov/dmid/stds/condomreport.pdf>.

³ Examples of our presentation material can be viewed on www.lovewise.org.uk