

Q. It seems fairly obvious that these relationships for discussing sex are not developing. How can a person initiate that relationship?

REV. PALMER: Sex is a very important part of the marvel of God's creation. All of our created individuality and uniqueness comes from the decision God made to love us and make us good, according to His plan. And our sexuality, male and female, is a part of that good plan. The typical view of the body and human personality is as one integrated whole. When we reflect on other cultures' views that influenced Western civilization—such as the Greek view of the body, which downgraded the importance of sexuality and upgraded the importance of spirituality—it was the spirit that mattered and the body had no significance. But the Old and New Testaments reject that completely. The body is a

part of the total of the personality. And, therefore, sexuality is a part of the whole person. What happens to us sexually is significant because it has an effect on our whole self. Just as being physically sick affects our whole self. And, of course, what happens to us spiritually is also important because it, too, affects the whole self.

Q. I get the feeling that a lot of Christians downgrade the physical aspects of sex and put undue emphasis on the emotional. Do you think they should be treated equally?

REV. PALMER: The physical and the emotional are the same thing.

Q. I'm talking about the mechanics of sex.

REV. PALMER: A sexual relationship is a relationship of two personalities that has physical and emotional components. And the Bible never downgrades the physical component. The whole word for sexual union—sexual intercourse—is that “they will become one flesh” or “Adam knew Eve.” Notice that to “know Eve” applies to both spiritual and emotional; but to “become one flesh” is extremely physical. Another phrase used in the Old Testament for sexual intercourse is “he went into her.” Again, very physical, but also with profound emotional significance. The main thing about sexual intercourse and sexual relationship in the Bible is that it is an experience of massive communication between two people.

Q. What about the United States?

REV. PALMER: The Bible encourages us to have appropriate symbols in our relationships and the symbol of sexual intercourse is the sign of marriage. The sign of public commitment where we have publicly committed ourselves to one another is also marriage. But to express the sexual sign without public commitment is both spiritually and psychologically hazardous. They can easily back out because there has been no public commitment. But they are still physically involved. Therefore, it is a hazardous thing to do.

And of course, in the Bible it is sin. It is a garden sin, just like every other sin; it can be forgiven, it can be healed, but it still does damage. Even sexual intercourse in marriage, when it doesn't mean love, is hazardous. A sexual relation-

ship is a sign of commitment. Adam knew Eve. It is a sign of this massive communication between two people who love each other. It is a sign of marriage.

That is why I am not in favor of premarital sexual intercourse. But I also have to go on to say that sexual intercourse within marriage where it is not a sign of affection is wrong. There are married men who, in effect, rape their wives; they use their wives just to satisfy their own needs. And perhaps there are women who use their husbands. It is not fulfilling what the biblical signs meant to say.

Q. There is so much pressure on single Christians.

today to experience premarital sex. In school the pressure is tremendous. What's the answer?

REV. PALMER: When a young person is in high school or college discovering his or her own individuality and personality and the personalities of others, it is difficult. That is the time he should use up all his vocabulary, use all the signs he has in those encounters with other people. Premarital sex is hazardous. Like any other sin, God can forgive and heal, but it does do harm. And that is why young people who are thrust into overwhelming intimate experiences before they are prepared, and before they understand what it means to be fully intimate with another person, have cheapened the intimate experience.

I counsel young people to establish guidelines in their relationships. When they are dating a man or woman they care about, they need to converse and communicate about the guidelines they want in that relationship. Once they set those guidelines, they are not in a battle with each other or up against the kind of barrier that is always fragile. They have agreed upon guidelines. I find those young couples end up with the best pre-romantic relationships.

You asked for an alternative. The alternative is to have wide and healthy pre-romantic relationships with many men and women. Then we can be in the position to choose where we get into the more intimate, totally massive communicative experiences—which is what romance is.

The best preparation for marriage is not all kinds of intense intimate experiences that are all a little fraudulent because they are not real. They are only papier-mâché, only make-believe. The best preparation for an intimate relationship is a lot of normal, healthy relationships with the oppo-

site sex in which we discover who we are and who our partner is. But we have guidelines, and operate within those guidelines.

When a romantic relationship begins to emerge between a male and female and they are getting ready for a genuine romantic relationship, there is naturally going to be a greater and greater desire for each other physically, emotionally and spiritually. This is good. This is the way God made a person. That is why Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:9 says to a young couple if their passions are strong then they should get married. He means we shouldn't get married unless our passions are strong. That passion and desire building is what it takes to make a good marriage. There has to be that chemistry; there has to be that sense of desire for each other. In fact, Paul even throws into that sentence, "If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to . . . They should get married" (v. 36), so that he is not tempted beyond the point he can bear.

That is why I don't believe in long engagements. When couples are in the romantic period there will be a gradual crescendo building, an intensification of communication, and it will increase in its sexual connotations. It is wise, of course, for a couple who are in love to wait for marriage for sexual union so it becomes the symbol of their marriage. There should be a natural growth toward marriage.

Now when the ideal fails and the couple get carried away, then they have to ask God's forgiveness, talk to each other and establish guidelines so that no great harm is done. All sins can be forgiven and healed. That is the joy of the good news of the gospel. I have three children. They establish guidelines and I think they feel a lot happier and healthier with their teenage friends who use similar guidelines.

Q. Again, the solution is communication?

REV. PALMER: It's very important.

Q. Some Christians call masturbation an acceptable alternative to sexual acts.

REV. PALMER: Masturbation isn't even mentioned in the Bible. But like anything else, it can be a sin because it can become a lonely form of narcissism and self-preoccupation. The Bible warns us about self-preoccupation and selfishness. Where masturbation becomes intense, combined with a certain amount of fantasizing, a person may become

incapable, or make it more difficult, to relate interpersonally because of all this self-gratification, touching and concentrating on his or her own body. Then it becomes psychologically hazardous. But the greater harm may come from unfounded fears and guilt resulting from masturbation.

In my own counseling experiences, the greater harm in masturbation comes from the fear a young man or woman feels because some grandmother, mother, father, friend or Christian leader once said it was a terrible sin. And that inordinate and artificial fear has no biblical basis. I have had young people come in for counseling who felt they were horrible sinners because of this particular habit which, of all the people I had talked to, was really within the range of normal. And yet these people now were losing sleep over it.

What makes it sin is when it becomes a substitute for what God intends. If an adolescent masturbates because of sexual tension, it is legitimate. But if a married man has a wife who desires him sexually, and he masturbates to relieve tension, he does so at the expense of the relationship with his wife. I see that as a sin.

Q. But is sexual fantasy sin?

REV. PALMER: Not necessarily. There are certain guidelines Christians want to follow. When something goes bizarre or towards a destructive end, then we have to protect ourselves from temptation. Garbage in is garbage out. A rule of thumb in the computer industry is also a rule of thumb of human emotions. If a person detects that his fantasizing is

becoming perverted, then he has to face it for what it is. It is dangerous and hazardous. For instance, a person who begins to fantasize about homosexuality or sadomasochism, or other bizarre fascinations, must recognize it as temptation from the evil one and know it will do harm to himself.

On the other hand, there is a full range of what I call normal mild innocence, part of the range of perfectly normal fantasizing, which should not be given the heavy title of lust in the heart. The lust in the heart our Lord is talking about is adultery. When a young person is in the beginning of a pre-romantic period of life and dreaming of what it would be like to be married, I don't call that lusting. That's natural and normal preparation for marriage. But when a married man or woman starts to dream about other partners, that's lust in the heart, and Jesus says that person has committed adultery. That is the sin to be most worried about because then a relationship and commitment is being thrown out the window for some bizarre fantasizing. That is danger in the worst sort.

Q. It seems we can't control our dreams, but some say dreams can be a sign that we are doing something wrong during our waking hours. How would you react to that?

REV. PALMER: That is a very heavy and careless interpretation. But there is an element of truth in it. Sexual dreams are the working out of deep yearnings and anxieties. But they are being worked out and they should never be over-interpreted. I do not favor any kind of heavy-handed interpretation. That would be totally uncalled for and would have

no spiritual value. It only makes people preoccupied with themselves. And then we do too much analyzing of our dreams. The best thing we can do with a dream is to have it—we can't control it anyway—and then thank God it did not happen.

REV. PALMER: No, we are not responsible for our dreams. And I don't think all fantasizing is harmful either. A lot of fantasizing is normal and very good as part of the imaginative gift God gave us. When we are getting ready for romance we had better do some fantasizing about the person. We had better do a lot of thinking about the person we are going to marry. That is how God prepares us for wanting to commit

the rest of our life to another person.

Q. Is there just too much sexual temptation in a relationship with a non-Christian?

REV. PALMER: I have lived long enough to be very cautious about generalization. I know countless people in our church who have become Christians because they dated a Christian. In fact, that is precisely what the non-Christian liked in the Christian. That was one of the things he or she was drawn to, the fact that the person was a Christian.

I don't have hard and fast rules in this area, but I believe the important principle in the best marriage is the marriage in which the people are most equally yoked. I have told my own children to choose life partners who share their same value system. That includes spiritual, moral and economic values. If we cannot pray with the person we are going to marry, and instead have to hide our faith or diminish what we believe in deeply in order to be married, then we are off to a very shaky start. The name of the game in marriage is communication. And we cannot communicate properly if we do not share the same value system. We have to keep that in mind when we are in the pre-romantic period. If a Christian is dating a non-Christian who doesn't share fundamental values with him or her, then maybe the Christian is playing with fire.

On the other hand, in what direction is the non-Christian person going? Is he or she on the way into the faith? So you see I can't make generalizations. But I do emphasize gen-

eral principle. The best marriages, a marriage in God's will, is a marriage in which couples are equally yoked in terms of deep values. We have to keep that in mind when we are dating so that we don't end up becoming infatuated with a person we don't share any fundamental values with.

A Christian dating a non-Christian is not a sin. The real issue is the intent of the person. He might be able to share his experiences with the person, share the gospel, but he can do that on a one-time visit.

Of course, we have an obligation to love the people in the world. Now how do we love them? By developing a relationship that gets increasingly close and then tell the other at the last moment, "I am a Christian, I can't marry you?" Is that love? It is better, right off, to tell a person we have strong beliefs and what is going to happen because of our beliefs. This action avoids misunderstanding and hurt feelings. The world has a worldly viewpoint; Christians have a divine viewpoint. There is going to be a clash. And, eventually, the world is going to pull us down. If we go into the world and stay there, we are going to be pulled down.

Q. Let's talk about engagement. How long should an engagement be and what are couples trying to establish during an engagement period?

REV. PALMER: When I counsel couples I tell them that an engagement is the time when they set a date in the foreseeable future for their wedding. I believe that should be within a year. Beyond a year may be too long.

Q. What about a situation where a person feels he or she has to have a college degree first or get established in his or her field before marriage? Should the engagement or relationship be postponed until this is accomplished?

REV. PALMER: One thing I am always cautious about, and always counsel couples carefully on, is the case where one person is getting an education and the other partner, most often the wife, is supporting that person. That is all very beautiful, provided the wife is growing intellectually along with her husband. In marriage, there is an old saying, "Educate a man and you educate an individual. Educate a woman and you educate a family." It is important that a woman be just as educated as her husband. It is part of their communication system, part of their sharing.

I am not in favor of a wife working and struggling to put her husband through doctorate programs while she is not growing intellectually, culturally and spiritually with her husband. If the husband wants to get his doctorate, then they both have to sacrifice equally. The wife has to grow also. These are things a young couple must really think through. A husband has to be as concerned about his wife growing intellectually and spiritually as he is about himself. When he

is not, then he is not mature enough to get married.

Q. Can couples sense sexual compatibility before marriage?

REV. PALMER: There is never a way to know for certain if two people are going to be sexually compatible. Just as you are never sure you are going to be compatible in the whole range of communication threads that are a part of the marriage rope. I have done so much counseling in my ministry—15 years at Berkeley and eight years in Seattle and six years in Manila—with all kinds of young, university students who have had all kinds of experiences in pre-romantic relationships. And I am not convinced that wide sexual experience and permissiveness in sexual expression makes for happier marriages. My experience is that it goes the other way.

The person who is sexually very active tends to have the beauty and wonder and mystery of sex and the sexual relationship diminished, often to the point where a kind of cynicism sets in. And that is very damaging. As a matter of fact, the worst that can happen to romance is stagnation. It is stagnation that causes the most harm in a personal relationship. And I think there is no way to become stagnant quite like sexually active singles can.

Q. What should be the ideal Christian attitude toward a homosexual?

REV. PALMER: A homosexual is a human being and should be treated with friendship and Christian love like any other human being. I don't think a homosexual should be shunned or isolated. But just as we do any person in our church who is involved in disobedience to the gospel, we have to relate to that person with Christian love and understanding, which sometimes involves confrontation.

I will say one thing I have learned about confrontation.

We cannot confront or challenge anyone unless we are prepared to hang in there with them. Otherwise we are just scolding people, and scolding does not do anybody one bit of good.

Q. But doesn't an unmarried Christian miss out on the fulfillment of a family?

REV. PALMER: A single Christian is fulfilled by the extended family. And the Christian Church becomes the extended family in his or her work relationship. The Christian single needs to find surrogate families in which to get fulfillment. We are not meant to be alone. Many times a single person has more relationships than a married person. Our church is filled with single, highly fulfilled people. They have been called to single life, but they are not single; they are in beautiful relationships. They have extended families, surrogate families; they play the role of uncles and aunts. God blesses their lives in a different way, with a different kind of fulfillment.

Q. But Is there complete sexual freedom after marriage?

REV. PALMER: A wife or husband can be deeply offended sexually by a life partner. And then, of course, that is not sexual union as the Bible intended. As I said earlier, it is

possible that a man could rape his wife, and in that case I think that he should be sentenced to jail.

Q. What biblical passage has helped most in your sex life and marriage?

REV. PALMER: Well, I think that Paul's great advice in Ephesians 5:22-33 is one of the most beautifully romantic and marvelous passages on the mysteries of marriage. A person in married life has to understand that there is a great mystery being acted out every day. Between a man and his wife and family, there is a picture of Christ and the Church.

Q. Did God give us the authority to control the size of our families?

REV. PALMER: Yes. That is a part of the doctrine of stewardship. I do not agree with the Roman Catholic interpretation that to practice that kind of stewardship is aborting God's perfect will. Contraception is a very important part of the stewardship He gives a couple in planning a family.

However, I agree with C.S. Lewis who wrote that when contraception is used to avoid the responsibility of having children a marriage tends to become narcissistic and lonely. I believe it becomes the shining barrier kind of relationship.

There may be marriages where couples are called to be childless as part of God's will for their lives. But then they should consider adoption. We need children in a marriage to give it fulfillment. I believe in contraception in order to have a thoughtful family, not to avoid having a family at all.

Q. Where would you draw the line on responsibility? One, two, three children?

REV. PALMER: That is for each family to decide.