Sexuality and the Christian Family

Part 1 of 2: Raising Children in a Sex-Saturated Society
with C. Gary Barnes, Charles W. Dickens, Darrell L. Bock, and Debby Wade
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Welcome to the Table, where we discuss issues of the connection between God and culture. And, today, we're going to discuss the issue of sexuality in general, and talk about particularly issues of sexuality as they relate to the family. And I have three experts with me – two colleagues and someone who I've literally just met, so this is great. I have Debby Wade, and Chip Dickens, and Gary Barnes.

And Gary and I actually go way back. Gary and I attended the same church for years together, served as fellow elders at Trinity Fellowship Church in Richardson for many, many years, and our kids grew up together. So this is kind of a treat to talk about family issues with Gary in a context in which we're talking about families in the church and how to think about issues of sexuality.

And I think to begin, I'll just let each of you kind of introduce yourself by telling us what you do professionally in terms of counseling, so we can get oriented to the expertise that you're bringing to us today. And, Gary, I'll start with you and we'll just roll around the table.

All righty. Thanks, Darrell. So I am on faculty here at Dallas Seminary. This next month will be my 16th year of being here.

Very good.

And do love having that full-time opportunity of being here. Part-time, I have a private practice as a licensed psychologist working with marriage and families. And so that's also a day-to-day part-time experience.

Now you did your training where, at Columbia in New York?

I came here to DTS and received my ThM degree. Was in the ministry as an assistant pastor at Trinity Fellowship for seven years, and then realized after doing that, all that was happening and working with marriages and families, that it'd probably be a good idea to get some more training. So then I went back, where I'm from, and got my doctorate in psychology at Columbia.

Very good. And, Chip?
Chip Dickens: Well, I'm in my 10th year, and I think I'm one of the few guys on faculty that actually didn't go to DTS, but I'm glad I get to serve here now. So that's my full-time job as well. And I get to serve as the Department Chairman, so I get to work with great students and faculty like Gary, and get to teach courses. And I teach kind of a wide variety of stuff, but have a particular interest in marriage and family. And so when I'm not here on campus, I don't have a private practice, but consult and do a lot of training and equipping in the area of marriage and family with churches.

Darrell Bock: Great. And your degree is?

Chip Dickens: Yeah, I also have a degree in psychology, and I went to SMU here locally and did my Masters and PhD there.

Darrell Bock: Very good. And you're a big guy. You must have played sports.

Chip Dickens: I did. I was a horse jockey. No, I'm just kidding. I played basketball.

Darrell Bock: You won the Kentucky Derby for really big horses.

Chip Dickens: I played basketball, so, yeah, yeah.

Darrell Bock: Good, I was a guard. I could use someone like you in the post.

Chip Dickens: We could have had a good pick and roll.

Darrell Bock: That's exactly right. Very good. Debby?

Debby Wade: I founded ACT Solutions in 1999, which stands for Authentic Christian Therapeutic Solutions, and so I'm in private practice there. I'm a licensed marriage and family therapist, a licensed professional counselor, and a certified sex therapist. And so I predominantly work with couples, restoring marriages or enhancing intimacy. Do quite a bit of recovery of addiction work – sexual addiction – and then get to work with individuals too, just wanting to have healthy sexual wholeness in their life.
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I was raised in a Southern Baptist preacher's family, and probably one of my greatest thrills was sitting with my father through a class here at DTS. That was a human sexuality class, and for us to do that together as father and daughter was pretty amazing and brought silence to the room every once in a while. So it was kind of fun.

And my master’s is from Hardin-Simmons, and then my bachelor’s was from Wayland Baptist University. So I have a lot of Baptist in me.

Darrell Bock:  Very good, all right. Well, that's great. Well, thank you all again for being here, and let me just dive in. Chip, I'll start with you. Let's talk about the biblical view of sexuality and how we should think about sexuality, and maybe even your take on how the church has either handled or mishandled sexuality.

Chip Dickens:  Yeah, probably even an easier place to start is what not to think about all this. And I can just say, even from my own experience, this was just one of those topics that in Christian circles, it was just taboo. You just did not talk about it.

Darrell Bock:  Shhh, don't talk.

Chip Dickens:  I know. Everybody, don't make any sudden movements. And it really was that way. And for me especially, not having grown up in the church and coming to Christ later as a young adult, it was kind of strange to me, because my assumption was that God and Scripture had all kinds of relevance to what was going on in my life, and I couldn't wait to figure out, "What does the church think about this?" And I heard nothing. I mean I literally just would hear nothing. I'd go to Sunday School classes, I'd listen to sermons. I'd ask people in the hallway, "What do we think about this?" And everybody would just kind of say, "Well, look, I'm kind of late for a thing."

So the message was really clear that either (a) we don't have a biblical view on this, which concerned me, or it's just too uncomfortable for us to talk about. So that was kind of my takeaway early on. And then even professionally, I can tell you, studying in a secular environment, learning how to deal with issues that families come up with, even in that environment. So a totally non-Christian environment.
It was difficult, even in normal classes to say, "Okay, what do families – what are they really wrestling with about this issue of sexuality?" And so that made me feel a little bit better that it wasn't just a church that didn't have a view on it, and felt awkward and uncomfortable talking about it. But even in a total secular environment, there wasn't a healthy conversation going on there either.

So I think that's probably one of the things that – I mean even if we don't have a real clear definition or real clarity about it, but just engaging in that conversation and getting it going I think in the Christian communities are a really, really powerful force for good. I mean I hope that'll be the case for my kids or our students, that they don't have those kind of awkward silent places.

**Darrell Bock:** So we don't talk about it. So now that we're going to talk about it, what would you say? Where would you lead off?

**Chip Dickens:** Yeah. I'd start off with, "Sex is good. Sex is a good thing." Jump in now.

**Debby Wade:** That's just absolutely – it's good.

**Chip Dickens:** I heard an amen over in the corner.

**Darrell Bock:** That's right, that's right.

**Chip Dickens:** Not only experientially is it good, but it's a good topic. I mean it's a good idea. I mean it's God's design, it's his idea, he authored it, so it's a positive thing. And so even to get that conversation going in a Christian community I think it'd be great for our first step to be that this is a positive, really rich experience between two people that really is an expression of God's heart.

There's that sense of intimacy and closeness that we get to experience within the context of a husband and wife that really reflects some great traits and great features about what God's love for us is like, what his nature is like. And so sex is a good thing, it's a positive thing, and it's an illustrative thing that it tells us a lot about who Jesus is, and his relationship with the Father and the Spirit.

**Darrell Bock:** Gary?
You know, Darrell, one of the things I'm really glad to report is now Dallas Theological Seminary has four separate courses on sexuality, and there's a lot of theology that fuels each of these four courses.

And so we really need to kind of go back and say, "Okay, let's not just think of, 'What do we need to know that's okay practice-wise, or not okay practice-wise behind sexuality?' But, 'What's really the driving theology behind it all? I mean what's the big idea here? What's going on?'"

So rather than take this, like we often do, this kind of protective approach, we want to take an elevating approach, you know. Let's not only, you know, minimize it, but let's elevate it. Now we don't want to elevate it to the point that we're worshipping it, because that's not the point either. But we tend to either go in the demonizing or the deifying direction here. But we really have unbelievable theology to elevate it.

And, you know, if I was going to say, "What's my one favorite quote I've ever read on a good theology about sexuality?" comes from Dan Allender. And he said, "You know, sex is really a window into the heart of God."

And so another way of saying it is, this is reflective. It is our tangible way of learning something really great about God.

I'm going to come back to something that both of you are saying that I want to zero in on, and that has to do with how, in one sense, precious sexuality is. And I actually think that that's something that we're losing in the larger culture today, and it's a very important point that's coming from what you're saying. It's good, it's something that needs to be elevated, it's a window into who God is. And that elevation is part of what makes sexuality precious, which means that we need to treat it with a kind of respect, if I can say, a certain way that is important.

Debby, what would you add to what these two gentlemen have said? I brought you in because I wanted to be sure we were gender-balanced -- gender-balanced three-on-one, okay.

That's what it takes to be balanced.

Yeah, one lady is worth three guys, okay.

She may still have the advantage.
Darrell Bock: That's exactly right.

Debby Wade: You know what? I just think that the church has made some changes, and finally the church is starting to talk about sex, and I think that is a good thing. And, you know, I just think from the standpoint of us looking at God’s design of our bodies, and men and women, and that the message to be that when he said after he looked at creation and said, "It's not only good, but it's absolutely good," which was my – you know.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, and he's not good enough.

Debby Wade: He just says it's absolutely good. And so this permissive thing to us to enjoy our bodies and to embrace sexuality is a healthy – and I loved your word – precious thing, because we hear about sex so much and all the distorted things about sex, and how our culture has just so sorted it. But to see sex back as a precious gift that God gave man and woman – not just for men to enjoy, but that he designed us as women to also enjoy sex. And it's not just a need for men and desire for men, but a need and desire for women as well. And in the context of how he designed it to be within marriage.

And, you know, I think of the metaphor that I've been taught about that God's love for us and his desire for intimacy with us, that the greatest metaphor really is the sexual relationship between a husband and wife, that God wants to be penetrating in our lives. He wants to come into us and to know us, and to be known by us, and he designed us to be receptive and responsive to him. And I just think that's a beautiful metaphor of what is in the design of the intimacy in sex.

Darrell Bock: So you're alluding to here, of course, the idea that just as marriage is declared to be a one flesh relationship, the picture between Christ and the Church is also compared to marriage and the intimacy and the preciousness of that relationship.

Debby Wade: Yes, yes. And sacred at that.

Darrell Bock: Exactly. Well, that's a good start. I guess the way I'm going to start is just think about in the context of family. What advice would you have – and, Debby, I'm going to start with you on this. What advice would you have for parents who are raising children? And, really, there are two issues I want you kind of to discuss in relationship to each other.
On the one hand, there's just – how do you talk about sexuality and introduce it? When is the appropriate time, you know? When you get the question, "How do you do it?"

I remember there's a scene in Everybody Loves Raymond in which Raymond is asked the question by his nine-year-old daughter, "How do we get here and why are we here?" And he thinks it's the sex talk, and, actually, she really wants to know why we're here. It's a life-meaning question and it's a funny scene, because he comes in all loaded with books and ready to get into the details, and that's not where she's trying to go at all. And it illustrates the fact that sometimes parents think there's more to a child's question than there really is.

And so I'd like to deal with that on the one hand, and on the other hand, deal with the question of, how do you, in the midst of communicating the preciousness and the value, the elevation, and the goodness of what sex is to a child? How do you help them cope with the world that they're living in, which in many contexts is – if I can say it this way – sexually saturated? And so how do we balance those two things?

**Debby Wade:** Let me start by giving just a bit of my personal experience. My parents, probably one of things I'm most grateful for with them, besides teaching me who Christ is and giving me life-learning lessons all my life of a relationship with Christ – they started with my older sister and me at an early age. We were six and eight when they began talking to us very directly about sex and brought the book out.

**Darrell Bock:** So they took the initiative?

**Debby Wade:** They took the initiative when we were six and eight. They both knew they wanted it different for their children than what is was for them, because they came into marriage so naively about sex, and believed it was such a beautiful thing. So they started with a book when we were young, and then just – it wasn't like a one-time talk. They allowed that then to be the doorway of all other questions, that we could come to them and ask them. And so those conversations, I do believe, need to start early.

And I think they can even start earlier than six and eight, just about the messages to a child when you're changing diapers that God made your body and he designed it good, and he designed you as a little boy and he designed you as a little girl, in ways to be able to say, "And he designed you with a special purpose." So I think those conversations need to start early.
And then I think a crucial thing is what we are teaching as parents to our kids also needs to be demonstrated, that a husband and wife believes that sex is really good between them. I knew that the relationship that my parents had I wanted. And so watching them and engaging – and, of course, it was appropriate affection and attention – but I knew the fun that they had, that when it came to fighting pressures in my teen years and what I saw friends being pressured to do, I knew I wanted what my parents had, and everything else seemed less than.

And so I think parents knowing that they are the most significant sexual educator in their children's lives, and so being able to take advantage of that and start those conversations early. And I think so many parents are afraid to start the conversations, fearing that if we give our child information, then they'll be so curious and want to go explore, when research shows just the opposite – that the ones that seem to be the most curious and take risky behaviors are kids who haven't been told or haven't been taught.

*Darrell Bock:* So when a parent abdicates, if I can say it this way, the responsibility to communicate these ideas to their children, they really are leaving a vacuum that everything in rushes in and fills. Is that right?

*Debby Wade:* Yes, yes. And it leaves this huge vacuum and this void for all the distorted messages to come in. And so I think it's so important for parents to just take that privilege with honor that they get to be the sex educators to their kids, and to be confident in what they're getting to share. So they've got to believe that it's a good thing in order to teach that it's a good thing.

*Darrell Bock:* Now I got rush of questions coming at me, but I want to make sure we get around the table. So I'm going to put this one out on the table and save it, and say I'm going to come back to it, and it's this. What about in single parent homes where the dynamics of a model either don't exist, or the dynamics have been impacted to some degree negatively?

I want to come back to that one, because we have more single parent families that we deal with on a regular basis. So push the save button, we're coming back to that question. But, Chip, what would you say in terms of advising families?
**Chip Dickens:** Well, what I love of what Deb shared there was that it's not the sex talk, it's a sex conversation that's going to happen over the years. And that just feels so much more healthy, because it's a conversation that happens within the context of a relationship where you get to see things and there's interactions. It's not a drive-by data dump, you know, and, hey, hopefully.

**Darrell Bock:** A gorilla attack.

**Chip Dickens:** Here's the pieces to the puzzle, good luck.

**Debby Wade:** Yeah, figure this out.

**Chip Dickens:** I'm glad that's over with, you know. And it's just like we would talk with our kids about anything else. You know, it's like how we would talk with them about money. I don't sit down with my kids and explain to them how much we owe on the mortgage or what we're doing on our financials, but I am talking to them early on about, "How do you save, and what do we spend money on, and what's God's view about money?" and it's an ongoing conversation. It just makes sense that this is a really, really critical part of what it means to be a Christ follower and what it means to be human that we'd have this ongoing conversation with our kids. You know, kind of time-released at appropriate moments as they can handle different information. And it just seems to me that that's the context where wisdom really develops.

And I love, Deb too, kind of the – it's not just informing them, it's equipping them to be able to interact with all of those other competing messages, because you're right Darrell. There's so many – it is saturated. And to be able to discern, "Okay, what's on mark, what's not on mark?" Or, how do I deal with all that stuff?

You can just get bombarded and overwhelmed with it, where you just fall really kind of paralyzed to decide exactly, "How am I going to engage with this stuff as a teenager, or as a young adult?" because the messages are just overwhelming.

**Darrell Bock:** Gary?

**Gary Barnes:** You know, I'd like to give an example. It stresses the significance of not just approaching it from "the talk", because it makes me flash back to when I was 12 years old.
This time of the year, we're driving from Dallas to my Aunt Betty's house at night, just me and dad. And in the dark, in the car, the talk happened from Dallas to Memphis. And then that was it, I was set for life after that. And I didn't need it before then either, you know. That was the moment in time, see.

So, yeah, Debby's model with her parents and what she's describing is Chip's word, the "conversation" rather than the talk. Boy, if we can just sell that concept right there. And then I would add to it that parents would also not see it as this dreaded thing, but this awesome thing that they get to participate in as parents.

**Darrell Bock:** It's part of the elevation.

**Gary Barnes:** And I think the thing that makes us feel, you know, dread about it is we're so fearful, for good reasons, how this can get derailed for our kids; because it can easily, you know. This is a very vulnerable thing, even though it's precious. And so I think we kind of default to this too narrow of an approach, and it's a protective approach, and it's a negative approach.

And what our kids tend to hear from us is, "Don't do it," and that's the takeaway, and it's kind of a narrow negative protective approach. Whereas, if we could say, "Wow, I have this unbelievable opportunity to help prepare for an unbelievable earthly experience that's going to be an unbelievable heavenly lesson for you." And we're going to just have this in graduated conversations all through your life.

**Darrell Bock:** So it's a complete reframing of the way in which the conversation is taking place. We're moving from a talk to a conversation. We're moving from a negative message that sends the message, "This is bad or unhealthy or destructive," which, of course, in certain cases, it can be, to now if you think about this in its proper context, this is a really significant and positive and beautiful thing that we're dealing with.

**Debby Wade:** Instead of approaching it with anxiety, to have this exciting anticipation about these opportunities to come, you know, much like what it says in Deuteronomy, where it's speaking of, you know, "Talk of these things when you're walking on the road, and when you're sitting, and when you're laying down," of looking for these neat opportunities with your kids and being excited with it, you know, anticipating the questions and anticipating the conversations, instead of being anxious about them.
Darrell Bock: So we're talking about, you know – that passage, of course, is dealing with all the issues of life and how God is wrapped in all of it. The other picture is, "So God's wrapped up in all of this, but this over here is – "

Chip Dickens: Right.

Darrell Bock: Great, okay. Well, that's the first scenario I wanted to go through. Here’s the second scenario I want to go through. Let's go back and say, "Now, what do we do when we're in a situation where we're dealing with a single parent family, and perhaps, some disfunction in the background that's impacting what it is that the children see. And who wants to take that? That ball's on the ground.

Darrell Bock: One dimension of that, that I want to start off with is, just the fact that you would be working with a one-parent situation makes it very possible that there's personal unresolved things for that one parent. And there's a likelihood for shame and guilt that's still carried over. And the big message that would be great for kids is to see from your own life how God can redeem any bad situation. There's not any situation outside of God's reach that he can't come in, touch it, and redeem it. And so for the single parent to really feel God's grace in their life or the redemptive work of God in their life, that's going to model a new kind of a freedom for them, that they're going to be able to pass on this concept of God's grace in our lives, in your life as a growing child. And so that would be what I would say is a first key step in the process, that as a single parent, you would experience God's freedom from his redemptive work in your life, no matter what the situation.

Darrell Bock: And I would suspect that it's important for the parent to have the view of, there may be issues in my own life, but helping to frame how my child is going to experience this, and hopefully in a positive way – we've used the word opportunity – is an opportunity to prevent, in effect, a repeat of going through the same kind of experience.

Chip Dickens: You know, I'm thinking for so many single parents out there, where they are – I mean it's hard enough with two parents to manage everything – just struggling all the time with this feeling like, "I am in way over my head," and feeling under-resourced or just incompetent.
And it just takes so much courage, I think, for any parent, but particularly for single parents to say, "I'm going to jump in and initiate this conversation even though I know that probably the moment out of the gate, I'm not going to be able to control where it goes, or I'm not going to be able to kind of have all the answers."

It just takes an amazing amount of courage, I think, and faith for any parent to really lead this conversation, even when you're not the expert, you know. It's not like you can call Deb and have her come over and have the conversation. But it's God's appointed you to do it, and it's just an amazing thing.

So one of the things that I would encourage single parents to do is to not wait until they feel like they have mastered all the content of everything, because that's never going to happen. There's not enough bandwidth for you to master everything, then we'll have that conversation. So it's that idea of kind of jumping in the river, even though the boat's quite not built all the way yet.

And you do have to have that grace kind of environment towards yourself, even as you have that conversation with your kids. But it just takes a lot of courage. It takes a lot of courage to jump out and start doing that before you have it all mapped out and figured out for your kids for sure.

**Darrell Bock:** Debby?

**Debby Wade:** And, Darrell, I think so much what keeps us, or keeps someone from sharing is the sexual shame maybe that they still carry. And how important that is to work through that for yourself before introducing the topic to your kids, so you're not bringing the shame into it. But also knowing that I think kids love honesty and authenticity.

And so when a parent is able to say, "I've not done it perfect, or things haven't been always great for me or good for me, but I trust in the redemptive power of God. And here's where he has restored and what he's redeemed, and what he's still doing in my life," and so that they know that they can be honest with their children that they may have made mistakes; but also being able to say, "I want to equip you to do it differently."

And I think there's three words that are real important for parents to think about when they are teaching kids, and for single parents to go, "I want to be able to educate my children. I don't want them to be ignorant. And I'm going to equip them with some things so that they feel empowered to stand up against some things."
And as a single parent, recognizing that I need to be educated, and so choosing to have the resources, seeking those out. And I need to be equipped in my singleness. There's going to be some things I'm going to be challenged with sexually, and I want to feel empowered. And so I think if a single parent can feel educated, equipped, and empowered, then they feel they can educate, equip, and empower their child.

**Darrell Bock:** Now when we're thinking about this – and, obviously, another question that comes alongside of it is, I've got one parent. Obviously, I have either a mother or a dad, and – well, in some cases and some families it may be a relative – and so should the parent seek out someone of another gender to help their child with this area? I mean how do you fill the gap is actually what I'm asking. What advice do you have in that regard for single parents?

**Debby Wade:** Well first I would say, if it's a mother and a son, still she starts the foundational conversations, because what we want to say to kids is, "This is not a topic that's so shameful we can't talk about, or that I'm too embarrassed to talk about it. I want to have this conversation with you."

Back to what Gary was saying earlier, I have this great precious gift that I want to teach you about that God gave us. So I think to start the foundational conversations, that mothers have those with sons, fathers have those with daughters, and then being able to say, "I realize because you're a boy and I'm not, you know, that you may want to talk to a man about this."

And that is where I think it's important, whether it's a close uncle, or a healthy grandfather, or a youth pastor, or a preacher, or a DTS professor that you trust that your son knows. Or sometimes it is a counselor. To say, "I want you to be equipped, and I'm going to provide that for you if you don't feel comfortable talking to me."

But I think, again, if those conversations are started early, the more comfortable the child will feel, regardless if it's a son and mother, or a daughter and a father.

**Darrell Bock:** Any others?
Gary Barnes: You know, I think in addition to what Debby's pointing out is, there's an amazing way that the body of Christ can supplement just by, let's say the single mom and a son, just by having male role models. It's not necessarily "the talk" or the conversation, but it would just be involving kids with older guys who are doing guy things.

Darrell Bock: And the same thing for girls.

Gary Barnes: Yeah, right. And so it's a way of us just being a body, a community with one another.

Chip Dickens: It's really powerful how the body of Christ, not just as an idea, but real tangibly that God can position and utilize them in people's lives where there are those gaps, and to be open to that, to be receptive to it, even as a single parent, to expect that and hope that, and anticipate that happening as you're in community where folks can fill in those gaps.

Darrell Bock: Okay, well that gets us started on kind of dealing with the child. I guess we're going to move with the child through life. The child hits teenage years, okay. Obviously, everything changes. Everything. So now, you're not speaking so theoretically about things anymore. Now we're in the middle of choices and pressures, and hormones, you know, and identity. I mean there's so much swimming around. What advice do you have to parents with teenagers?

Hopefully, they've gotten the process started. Or maybe they haven't. Maybe they realize, "Oh, I'm in trouble, we're on the edge here." What advice do you give to parents with teenagers?

Gary Barnes: I have a word from Kathy, my wife. We were having this conversation this morning earlier, and she really highlighted a couple of key things that I think would be good right from the start for parents to think about as they're working with the teenage stage, and that is, "Don't think of what you do as a formula. And if I just get the formula perfect, then I'll get the perfect outcome with my kids."
Now it's kind of the distinction between you do want to be a good steward with that stage of life, but don't think of it as the goal of success. And so what we want is, you know, I'm going to go ahead and do my part, but not with the expectation or the pressure of, "If I don't do this right, it's not going to end up right. Or, if I do it right, it will end up right."

**Darrell Bock:** And so by a formula, you mean having a program that you think you have to put together, or a checklist that you go through to make sure –

**Gary Barnes:** Whatever your formula is. I mean it could look like a lot of different things see. But we have to realize that, you know, our teenage sons and daughters are individuals, and they will have their spiritual journey, and you could have the perfect formula and their spiritual journey’s not going to go where you had in mind for it to go.