

Hey, Intimacy, Where Are You?

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It is interesting that if you enter into a conversation with almost anyone (except for very young children) they can quickly identify that change is inevitable for everyone. If this conversation was pushed for further explanation most of the information would focus on visible, physical change. People will not find it surprising that men begin to lose their hair and see streaks of grey beginning to appear. It will also not be shocking that women begin to discover wrinkles and that idea that general physical abilities slow down for both men and women. However, there are many other aspects of humanity that grow, diminish or transform throughout life that are not as apparent as the outward changes. This is why you will hear women who appear on the Dr. Phil show say with dismay, "This is not the man I married"! Well, of course he's not and he should not be the same, in fact he cannot be the same, because he will always be developing (changing). It has been stated that "the only thing constant in life is change". For some this may seem a little unsettling to contemplate what seems to be instability. But change doesn't necessarily equal instability. The truth is it is what brings excitement and richness and growth to life and relationships.

One change that typically will not come up in conversation is how does a person's thinking and behaving change in response to their social interactions. Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development attempts to offer answers to that question. Erikson looked at 8 different stages of life and the crisis that must be resolved at each stage in order to move to the next one in a healthy way. If you have studied Erikson's concepts before please do not stop reading here because I am going to take exception with his theory because of changes in today's culture. Erikson wrote that during adolescence the crisis is an identity crisis. The issue that must be confronted is, will they emerge from adolescence with a clear response to the questions; Who am I? How do I fit in? Where am I going in life? If the person enters young adulthood without understanding who they are then they will have to deal with the next stage while experiencing identity confusion.

This next stage, which would be the crisis of young adulthood, would be intimacy versus isolation. The main issue during this time is finding someone with whom to enter into an intimate relationship and possibly spend the rest of their life. So in chronological order it is identity and then intimacy.

I was walking briskly toward my class at Indiana University where I was about to present to elementary education students the concepts of Erik Erikson's. I had studied his theory over and over throughout my graduate program and felt very confident about what I would be teaching. But as I was running through the details in my mind I all of a sudden had an "aha" moment. It suddenly occurred to me that these two stages of Erikson's theory that had been created in the 1950's may not be accurate anymore in our culture. The adolescent stage of attempting to establish an identity and the young adult stage of seeking intimacy seemed to have been reversed. In other words, people were seeking

intimacy before ever having much of an idea of who they might be.

One main issue that may have influenced this reversal is the change in the term intimacy. This generation has confused sex with intimacy, and with the loosening of sexual moral values throughout the sixties and seventies young people since have been seeking intimacy through sex at younger and younger ages. Sex and intimacy are two different concepts. Someone can have sex and not experience intimacy and one can experience intimacy without having sex. This is not to imply that sex cannot be a part of intimacy it usually is when it is used in reference to married relationships, but to clarify they are not the same thing. Based upon this confused understanding of intimacy, many young people who are engaging in sexual behavior at an early age are finding that the outcomes are not even pleasurable due to their lack of covenant, bondedness, maturity and spiritual connectedness with their partner. What they have been promised through almost every message from our culture is not coming true and they cannot figure out why? If only the true message of intimacy was being spoken loudly so that young people could listen and respond. Most really want true intimacy. Many are desperately searching for intimacy. So what is it? How can I find it?

Intimacy can be experienced between friends. For example, there is intimacy among military units, sports team members and so on. This type of intimacy is defined by the dictionary as a close, familiar, and usually affectionate or loving personal relationship with another person or group. This is usually developed through common interests or common struggles. As Christians we also believe that we can experience intimacy with God. However, since we are speaking in this article mainly about intimacy as described by Erikson we will focus on romantic relationships and I will attempt to describe it within that framework. The feelings of love, trust, security, understanding, vulnerability and spiritual connectedness provide the avenue to ultimate sexual experience which when expressed together within a covenant bond of marriage allows for the union of two people to become one in the image of God, under His blessing, which establishes the definitive gift of God in human relationship which is the fullness of intimacy. Intimacy is only discovered when the view of loving another is one of giving and serving, but it takes two for intimacy to exist. It cannot be one partner giving and serving and the other taking it will quickly shatter any hope of intimacy. It is when each person looks out for the well being and interests of the other person so that both individuals are understood and have their deepest needs met without ever needing to beg, raise their voice to be heard or grab for power. It is in the fullness of sacrificial loving and being loved sacrificially that intimacy is birthed. And when this is offered to just one person and received from one person and it is sanctified and set aside for holy use that intimacy shines. It is vulnerable yet exciting. It is ever changing and yet stable. It is the gift of God for those who are willing to wait for His timing and living in His perfect design.

But our culture has made this very difficult for young people to understand. Our culture seems to scream the counter messages; "Look out for yourself". "Take from others what you need". "Submission to anyone is weakness". "Sex is the ultimate in relationships". "Waiting is missing out on the pleasures of life now". "Variety is the spice of life"...and these damning messages echo in the minds of adolescents and young adults from their

constant exposure to the media. But the horrible truth of living by this standard is when one seeks intimacy through the lust of another or out of blind response to the norms of our culture the results are the feelings of guilt, shame, fear, and betrayal. For these individuals these thoughts and feelings then become the framework for what the fullness of intimacy in marriage is supposed to be which will only lead to disappointment and unfulfilled lives.

Another danger in this reversal of Erikson's stages that should be considered is that when young people engage in sexual activity before establishing their identity, for some their identity becomes grounded in their sexuality. In other words, they find the answer to the questions; "Who are you" and "Where are you going" in relationship to other people and their ability to illicit sexual responses from them. If this is the case then it would seem to make sense why so many people feel comfortable with all of the sexual content in the media that they watch. You would think that hearing and seeing all of the sexual conversations and images on television and in movies would make people either uncomfortable or bothered, but for many it is so much a part of who they are and who they perceive themselves to be that not only does it not upset them but they can very much relate to it. Since this is contrary to Christian values the only way individuals can continue like this and continue to believe that it is ok is to compartmentalize their view of Christianity and themselves. In other words who I am at church is not who I am with my boyfriend or girlfriend but that is perfectly alright. I will be sexual with those I date but believe I am a Christian because on Sundays I am in church and I read my Bible and pray every once in awhile. I hope you can see how confusing this can be for young people if this is not confronted and dealt with by both parents and the church.

The results of both of these outcomes, not understanding intimacy and grounding their identity in their sexuality raises the probability of divorce if they eventually decide to marry. For not only will they be dissatisfied with their own sexual experiences with their spouse, but they will also feel the need to continue to relate to others of the opposite sex in physical ways because that is how they have viewed others and themselves since they were adolescents. In addition, if the goal of relationships has been to find value in themselves through their ability to illicit sexual responses from others then this is considered an "instrumental view" of people and relationships. This type of view looks for the "sexual high" or the "sexual buzz" which with the giving nature of married sex is not what they will find in their marital bed. The process of experiencing the "sexual buzz" is typically through seduction and manipulation. The natural response to this is to then explore outside of the marital relationship to try and find that "sexual buzz" again, thereby greatly increasing the probability of unfaithfulness and eventually divorce. The destruction that divorce creates in every area of life is then felt by many as its waves move throughout all of those involved.

It is time for the church to begin to aggressively confront this confusion and misguided thinking and behaving. Parents and those who have influence with children, teenagers and young adults need to find ways to help them find their identity in Christ. This of course is going to be counter to the popular culture and the time to start this education is in the nursery. Too often we wait until adolescence to begin this process of identity

development, but by then it may be too late. Just because adolescence is the time that identity should be clarified and solidified does not imply that all of the training and experience before that is not important. On the contrary it should not be taken very seriously because it is the foundation upon which identity will emerge.

Young adults who have not found their identity in Christ are going to have to come back to a unified understanding of life and Christianity. They are going to have to be confronted with the truths of God's Word. They are going to have to rethink the outcomes of their behaviors and ask God to forgive them if they have been living in sin and allow the Holy Spirit to direct them. They are going to have to develop a deeper and more correct understanding of intimacy in the way that God intended for them to experience it. And they are going to have to be patient and know that by waiting to be united with one person in the purity and righteousness of marriage that it is then that they will find what their soul has been longing