

Russell Moore Helps Church Grapple With Sexual Ethics

The issues sound like they belong on the therapist's couch:

The couple that hasn't had sex eight months into their marriage.

The parents who can't deal with their son's homosexuality.

The male teen who wants to be called by a girl's name.

But they're also the kinds of topics that frequently crowd the inbox of Russell Moore, who recently marked his first anniversary as the Southern Baptist Convention's top public-policy expert.

Though he often grapples with contentious political issues—the Hobby Lobby case, religious persecution and most recently, the immigrant border crisis—Moore has spent much of his first year at the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission writing blog posts on Christian sexual ethics.

“Probably day to day I'm dealing with more church issues of how do we deal with these tough ethical issues,” he said recently.

Moore, 42, cited a query from a minister on how to deal with a transgender congregant as a reason for his commission's upcoming conference on “The Gospel, Homosexuality and the Future of Marriage.” He hopes to help church leaders tackle modern-day questions as they hold onto age-old Scriptures. More than 1,000 are expected for the fall national leadership summit.

“That pastor is asking a question that nobody at the 1970 Southern Baptist Convention was asking,” he said of the minister who hesitated to address a 15-year-old boy in his

congregation as a girl.

But these quandaries aren't new for Moore.

As a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary years ago, he asked students on a final exam how they would guide a "Joan" who was born "John" but is seeking a pastor's direction to do what's right.

"Most of the students in the room thought that I was throwing them an ethical curveball but every congregation is having to address that issue," Moore said in an interview. "I think we have to equip people to be able to deal with that."

In the real-life example from the pastor, Moore said there are no easy answers.

"He has to see this person as a person, not as just a set of issues," he said.

In June, delegates to the SBC annual meeting passed a resolution affirming that God created "two distinct and complementary sexes" and opposing "efforts to alter one's bodily identity," a statement criticized by the LGBT advocacy organization GLAAD.

More traditional issues keep him busy, too.

Amid recent tweets on the current border crisis and the nominee for U.S. ambassador-at-large for religious freedom, he linked to his most recent column on marital life: "Does he need to confess adultery to his wife?"

In a word, yes.

"I do think that you need to tell her and for several reasons: One of those reasons being, you have sinned against her," Moore wrote in his latest "Questions and Ethics" commentary on The Gospel Coalition's website.

He also advised the questioner: "Do not give even the appearance that you are blaming her."

Amy DeRogatis, author of the forthcoming book "Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism," said Moore represents the mainstream view of U.S. evangelicals.

"They're not anti-sex but they are very clear about the parameters of sanctioned sex," she said.

Moore's colleagues say he's giving public expression to topics fellow evangelical leaders might think should be private but need to be brought out in the open.

"He brings to the surface a lot of questions that people have and don't know how to address but need to address," said Alabama megachurch pastor and author David Platt.

In March, Moore took on the topic of a sexless marriage, raised by a pastor of a small congregation, approached by a woman whose new husband had refused sex in the eight months since they wed.

"It seems that I am finding more and more young couples having sexual difficulties," Moore said at the time.

In his response, Moore was direct. "This is a marriage in crisis," he wrote.

Among his suggestions: Seek professional counseling to learn whether there was some unresolved trauma in the man's life.

Moore has also advised parents not to reject their gay children: "Be clear about your convictions, and at the same time don't exile your child from your life."

Trillia Newbell, consultant for women's initiatives at the ERLC, said Moore has managed to move beyond words on paper to addressing people's sexuality concerns more directly with "a pastoral heart."

“He’s not just looking at them as an issue—black or white,” she said. “These are real people who are dealing with this. It’s not just something that we can make a statement on and move on.”

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