

Gospel Hope in Hookup Culture

Owen Strachan / January 23, 2017

If you've followed major trends in American life, you've heard of "hookup culture." A brand-new book, *American Hookup*, by sociologist Lisa Wade shows that boundaries-free sexuality is now the dominant force in shaping campus sexual culture. Wade's text, driven by reports from students themselves, shows that many are bewildered and broken by modern sexual codes. Wade believes the solution to this reality is to dive further into hookup culture. "We need to say yes to the opportunity for casual sexual encounters," she argues, and to "a way of being sexual that is forward-thinking and feels good" (25, 246).

I've interacted with Wade's work for the [Center for Public Theology](#), and believe there's a better approach. Here are four ways we may respond to hookup culture with the [biblical sexual ethic](#).

1. Promote an ethic that focuses on the whole person, not 'hotness.'

The "ultimate goal in hookup culture," according to Wade, "isn't just to hook up, it's to hook up with . . . a *hot* person" (34).

Christians aren't squeamish about beauty and sexual attraction. God clearly wants married couples to enjoy the gift of sex ([Gen. 2:24–25](#); Song of Songs). Sex comes from the pure mind of the Lord, not the foul schemes of a pornographer. But while attractiveness is a component of [covenantal love](#), it's merely a part of our love for our spouse. We're all image-bearers, given tremendous dignity and worth by God ([Gen. 1:26–27](#)). Love doesn't reduce to a "Hot or Not" screen-swipe. Love is complex, multifaceted, and oriented to the whole person.

Students are being trained by a secularizing culture to use one another in casual encounters. The church must promote a better vision, one grounded in mutual love and biblical fidelity.

2. Promote God-honoring romance, not sexual utilitarianism.

Just about the worst thing you can do in the process of a "hookup" is to "catch feelings," according to Wade's students. Students simply "aim to hook up with someone that they don't particularly like" and then break off (46). Sexual encounters are merely transactional.

We scarcely have words to capture the sadness of this setup. Marriage takes hard work, but God intends for one man and one woman to enjoy “one flesh” union ([Gen. 2:24](#)). Sex isn’t a utilitarian good; it’s a gift to be enjoyed by a married couple that images nothing less than the relationship between Christ and his church ([Eph. 5:22–33](#)). To put it more practically, God intends for couples who desire sex to absolutely “catch feelings” for one another—he wants them to love one another in the deepest possible way.

Hookup culture guts sex of meaning; biblical teaching makes sense of the passion and connection sex yields.

3. Train men to care for women, not prey on them.

There is [schizophrenia surrounding sexuality](#) in our modern culture. On the one hand, we hear that the demolition of a traditional sexual ethic is a great gain. On the other, as Wade reports, students today are suffering from “rape culture,” sexual assault, the loss of intimacy, the lack of committed relationships, and much more (see 148–51 and 214–15).

It’s clear to both Wade and me—and many others—that men are behaving badly in our sexualized age. But the solution to this problem is not to do away with the Judeo-Christian ethic; it’s to [recover it](#). Men need to be trained to care for women. They need to protect women. They need to see women not as objects, but as human beings made in God’s image. Men are languishing today, retreating to their basest nature. They need a greater call, a higher standard, and a worthy Savior.

4. Help students see they are not defined by their sexuality.

Hookup culture is equally corrosive for women. According to Wade, “Sexy costume themes” at campus parties “reward women for revealing and provocative clothes, stratify them and put them into competition, all while reminding them that it’s their job to make parties sexy” (195). By Wade’s own testimony, the postmodern approach to sex robs women of their dignity, puts them into competition, and plunges them into unhappiness by rendering them as mere objects.

How different the Christian ethic is. It frees women to find their worth in Christ. It looses the chains of cultural expectations. It ends the competitive contests that endlessly play out in one alcohol-fueled room after the next. If a woman is called to marriage, she’s given the gift of covenantal love, which God intends to free her from the need to

constantly prove herself and draw attention. She's free, gloriously free from her sin and its effects, in God.

Beyond those called to marriage, men and women alike need to know that sex isn't what defines them. Singles sometimes feel left out of the conversation over sex, but godly singles have a profound and valuable opportunity today. They can show a culture organized around sexual identity that God alone is their all.

Recalibrate and Reload

Hookup culture is leaving the rising generation with tremendous baggage and unending shame. For a joy-destroyer like this, there is only one true hope: the gospel, and the purity and renewal it creates. [Local churches](#), working with valuable ministry partners like Cru, InterVarsity, RUF, Campus Outreach, The Navigators, BCM, and more, need to recalibrate and reload for maximal impact.

How we need a fresh movement in our day of university church planters and revitalizers, and many partners who will help reach the campus. How we need the bold preaching of the gospel, the open declaration of the whole and glorious counsel of God, the means by which God will open the eyes of a sexualized generation broken by hookup culture. How we long for our neighbors to see the beauty of covenantal love and, towering above everything else, the surpassing worth of Jesus.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/gospel-hope-in-hookup-culture>

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