Rape and Sexual Assault on College Campuses: Discussing Sexual Violence in the Church

Introduction:

The issue of rape and sexual assault on college campuses has ignited conversation in the media and at the national level. The voices of youth and young adult survivors have started a movement to address these often-silenced forms of violence. Campus administrations have responded to this reality in myriad ways, from requiring attendance at sexual assault seminars to emphasizing the idea of “enthusiastic consent.” And still, news outlets report a trend toward blaming the victim—sometimes at schools that profess a particular Christian witness. Silence in the face of such violence is not an option. Because human beings are created in the image of God, it is clear that the church must speak out against rape and sexual assault—in all its forms. How might the voice of the church bring a constructive and integrated response to the prominence of sexual violence against youth and young adults? When and how should the church start talking with young people about sexual violence? Might these issues cause us to re-examine if, when, and how we address sexual ethics with young people?

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When it comes to discussing sexual violence, let's talk about more than just rape. The term rape is so narrowly defined that an individual could be sexually harassed, groped, assaulted, or threatened quite a bit before she or he would have language to call it rape. Rape is also a term heavy with rhetoric. The ideal rape victim is often described as an innocent victim who fought back or was physically overwhelmed. She is morally pure, courted no danger, and did not attract sexual attention. The ideal rape victim is the one who clearly did not deserve sexual assault, which leaves a wide range of sexual encounters that feel violating and yet remain shameful secrets, bereft of speech.

Is there a place in our congregations for the not-perfect survivor of sexual assault? A place to say “I was attracted to that person,” or “I have had sex before, but this time I was forced,” or “I was flirting but then my limits were pushed,” or “I put up with harassment because they are leaders in the church.” Sexual violence is confusing because so often it is committed by someone we know, and potentially by someone to whom we were attracted. The same acts that are a blessing in consensual intimacy become abusive when forced or unwelcome. Christian talk about sexual purity can also get confused with experiences of forced sex, leading to a sense of spiritual shame.

So I think that we should speak about sexual violence anytime we speak about sex. Because if we are not careful, whatever we teach about sex will be the language through which unwanted sexual encounters are interpreted. And it is a statistical probability that there are always survivors of sexual violence in our midst whenever we speak. If your church actively discusses Christian values regarding sex, then sexual violence must be a regular part of that conversation. Any time we speak about sex, some explanation must be put in place about how sexual choices (waiting until marriage, restraining sexual contact) are not the same in situations of manipulation, coercion, or victimization. Sins of volition against us must be clearly differentiated from the value-driven sexual choices we make in mutual relationships.

Some congregations are uncomfortable about sex education in church. But consider, if sex is a taboo conversation in your church, then experiences of sexual violence will also be silenced and shameful. Without conversation, youth will be ill prepared to identify and respond to unwanted sexual contact against themselves or others.

Furthermore, blanket prohibitions against genital sex are too general an ideal. Youth need to be able to talk out the difference between respectful, consensual sexual encounters and those that are manipulative, coercive, or forced.

Again, we need to make a place for not-perfect youth along with not-perfect survivors. Youth get into ambiguous or coercive situations where they have never before used their voice or thought about the complications of sexual encounters. If youth feel safe enough to verbalize confusing feelings or questions about uncomfortable situations at school, it will help them later to identify signs of coercive encounters and to claim their voice to defend others. We can better train them to
notice and respond to the signs of impending sexual violence, such as boundary testing, isolating a victim, offering drugs or alcohol, verbal manipulations, or lack of empathy for the other.

Finally, I want to suggest one more caution when using purity language in the church. Sexual purity is not an ontology—in other words, not a unique and privileged state of being. There is no Christian karma, where our youthful sins ruin the prospect for future faithful marriage. We choose to seek a sanctified life as a thankful response to our salvation, but we do not earn a pure state of being before God. It is grace, not works. The idea of purity as something one can lose increases the spiritual trauma of sexual violence. It plays into feelings of shame and “otherness” in violation. We already have youth who have experienced incest, rape, or unwanted sexual contact. They are not an aberration from God’s ideal child. Instead of exclusively focusing on purity language, what if we focused an equal amount on our call to be prophetic witnesses in a sexually objectifying and violent culture?

In sum, if we can accept the not-perfect about sex and assault survival, we can help our youth to identify and express experiences of unwanted or forced sexual encounters. Helping youth critically explore sex, sexual violence, and a violent culture will help youth gain an informed and prophetic voice. It will help the church be a source that heals violence but also trains youth to prevent it.

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Response: Dennis Olson

Biblical stories of rape, sexual violence, and the abuse of power and sexuality in the Old Testament testify to God’s concern about such matters. Hagar, the Egyptian slave to Abraham and Sarah, is forced to have a child with Abraham (Genesis 16 and 21). All the men of Sodom threaten to gang rape male strangers visiting the city (who turn out to be angels of God—Genesis 19). Jacob’s daughter, Dinah, is forcibly raped by a Canaanite named Shechem who then negotiates with Jacob to marry her (Genesis 34). Potiphar’s wife makes sexual advances on Joseph; although he flees, Joseph is falsely imprisoned for attempted rape (Genesis 38). The horrendous gang rape of the Levite’s concubine in Gibeah (Judges 19) is followed by Israelite warriors who capture and force Israelite women to marry Israelite men of another tribe (Judges 21). King David abuses his power by having sex with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his loyal soldiers, Uriah. David then has Uriah murdered on the battlefield (2 Samuel 11). David’s deed reverberates into the next generation when one of his sons Amnon rapes his half-sister Tamar; Amnon in turn is killed in revenge by Tamar’s brother, Absalom (2 Samuel 13). Each of these stories swirls around the complex interplay of gender, power, class and race.

Sexual violence, date rape, and the role of power and consent may sometimes be difficult topics to approach head on with young people. A Bible study series on biblical rape narratives may provide an indirect way for young people to enter into a discussion about sexual violence, power, and consent. Starting in Scripture with these challenging stories about our biblical ancestors may help open the door into more honest reflection (whether spoken or unspoken) on a young person’s experience as victim, perpetrator, bystander, caretaker, or consumer in regard to sexual violence in our schools, campuses, and more broadly in our culture.

The following is an example of a Bible study on Genesis 34 and Shechem’s rape of Dinah that you might use or adapt for the young people that you lead. In some contexts, it may be wise to meet with parents ahead of time to alert them of your plans to engage this challenging issue, allow them to ask questions, and leave room to opt out or talk with you privately before or after the Bible study. You will also want to do something similar directly with the young people themselves. Laying groundwork and guidelines before launching into a potentially painful biblical text and conversation that may expose deep and secret wounds is important.

1) Make sure everyone has a copy of the story of Genesis 34. Have someone in the group read the story out loud. Sit with the story in silence for a minute.

2) Hand out a piece of paper with a list of the primary characters and groups in the story. Ask people to rank people by their place in the hierarchy of power relationships within the story: Hamor the father and ruler of the city, Shechem, son of Hamor, “prince of the region,” the male Canaanite inhabitants of the city of Shechem, the Canaanite women and children of the city of Shechem, Jacob, the sons of Jacob, Dinah. Remind the group that the Israelites in Genesis are a minority group within a dominant Canaanite culture. Note who has a voice in the dialogues in the chapter and who is silent.

3) Verse 3—What do participants make of Shechem? He has just forced himself on Dinah, and then afterward he says he loves her and wants to marry her. Does Shechem’s desire to
marry Dinah only intensify the wrong already done to her? Or does it in some way mitigate or lessen the effect of the rape? Why or why not?
Read 2 Samuel 13:11-17, a story of Amnon’s rape of his half-sister Tamar. Do Tamar’s words in v. 15 influence our assessment of Shechem’s offer to marry Tamar? Why or why not?

4) A central dispute in Genesis 34 occurs between Jacob, the father of Dinah, and the sons of Jacob, her brothers (especially Simeon and Levi). What is the issue in this dispute? In the world of ancient Israel, guardianship over a woman’s sexuality was typically not controlled by the woman herself but, if married, by her husband, and if not married, by her father or other male relatives.
How does this ancient understanding fit with contemporary understandings of who rightfully makes decisions about sexual relations with others? What difference does that make in how we interpret the implications of this story for our own lives and context?

5) Genesis 34 portrays the sons of Jacob taking violent revenge against the males of Shechem and then stealing their wives and children for themselves. Why is the father Jacob angry about what his sons have done? What do you imagine Jacob would have preferred to happen? With whom do you most agree in terms of their desired response to Shechem’s rape of Dinah—the more pragmatic and non-violent Jacob or the vengeful sons of Jacob?

6) Give voice to the voiceless: If you were to give Dinah the voice in this story that she did not have, what would you imagine she might say to Shechem? To her father Jacob? To her brothers, the sons of Jacob? To God? To us?

Giving voice to Dinah’s pain and confusion provides a model for our young people today. Those who may have been victimized by sexual violence need to know that their voice can find a place in the biblical story, in the church, and in the heart of a loving God who hears their cry.

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Response: Erica Liu

The topic for our annual Fall Retreat this year was “Sexuality and Faith” which meant that I had to do a lot of explaining to convince people to come. Their initial reactions went something like, “Church? Sex? Weekend retreat? Why would I want to do something like that?!?” It wasn’t surprising, but it illuminates a lot – when it comes to sexuality, young people rarely look to the church or expect it to have anything useful for their lives.

When we do not talk about what a healthy sexuality looks like, it contributes to the perversion of sexuality that is so prevalent in our society. It should not surprise us that there is confusion about consent amongst young people given the images and narratives that dominate our culture—whether it is 50 Shades of Gray or the latest Bloomingdale’s ad that reads, “Spike your best friend’s eggnog when they’re not looking.” Our silence leaves a giant vacuum that advertisers eagerly fill up and the statistics show their marketing is effective.

The church’s silence is problematic because it is quite likely that young adults will encounter sexual assault, whether in a personal experience or through someone they know. Often the voices college students hear from are through official university channels: i.e., mandatory online tutorials they are required to take as entering students, text messages alerting them that yet another sexual assault occurred on campus, e-mail messages from the administration about how they are addressing the issue. The vast majority of faith communities, however, find it difficult to go beyond making general statements that it should not happen. If we do not find ways to specifically engage this issue with our young people, the church misses an opportunity to be a space of healing redemption and restorative justice—not to mention relevant, as sexuality takes front and center stage in this age range.

While I think that a faith community should regularly talk about sexuality in a holistic manner, what follows is a specific example of what we did to respond to a sexual assault survey released by the University of Wisconsin, Madison this past fall. We planned a worship service, a bystander workshop, and a small group to give multiple entry points for people in our community to connect to the issue. Here are some of the things we did to facilitate discussion around this sensitive topic:

- Worship Service
  - Trigger warnings – We started telling people through announcements, e-mails, social media, and conversations a couple of weeks before our planned service and continuing up to the very beginning of worship. We knew there were people in our community for whom this was a very personal issue and took precautions so it would not be a surprise.
  - We asked a victim advocate from the University Health Services: End Violence on Campus department to be present during and after the service in case anyone wanted to talk to someone and seek support; our staff also made themselves available to students.
  - We created a resource sheet that we made available at worship and online.
  - We used the following scripture passages: Genesis 1:27 and 31; Matthew 22:36-39; 1 Corinthians 13:4-6. We intentionally chose to have our male co-pastor preach the
first part of the message because the majority of sexual assault on our campus involves a male perpetrator and a female victim. We felt it was important for a man to be seen and heard speaking out on this topic.

- I shared a very personal experience of sexual assault; this is not something everyone can nor should do. Careful thought needs to be given to if and how a person may disclose, and what the impact may be on the one disclosing and those who hear the disclosure. I chose to do so because I felt my story would bring the issue home in a way that made it more than a statistic, and also to break the silence and shame that frequently surrounds it.

- Our aim was to begin modeling a way for our community to engage this issue in a safe, respectful, and authentic way. While it was a very heavy and serious issue, we also wanted to make sure that the overall theme pointed towards hope and redemption. After naming the very real pain, we reminded people of God’s promises for healing, reconciliation, and restoration. This was embodied as we celebrated the Lord’s Supper.

- **Bystander Workshop**
  - Two days later, we hosted a bystander intervention workshop that was led by a University Health Services staff person. We felt it was important to have a follow-up event that gave people a concrete way to respond to the issue.

- **Small Group**
  - We created a small group for women that met weekly to talk about this issue along with other issues that are particularly relevant to being a woman of faith.

- **Support**
  - This was a challenging and exhausting issue for our staff to plan for, from the Music Director who chose songs to the Office Manager who posts sermons on the website. We worked hard to ask good questions, anticipate responses, reach out to other partners on campus, and support one another throughout the process because dwelling on this issue impacted all of us. It was critical for this to be a team effort so we could all stay healthy and well too.

A number of students approached staff members after the Worship service focusing on sexual assault, immediately and in the following days, weeks, and months. They had their own stories to share and it was clear their burdens were eased knowing they were not alone in their experiences. More importantly, they witnessed a faith community walking in the dark places together, grounded in the promises of God’s transformative grace to heal them all.

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Since 2004, **Rev. Erica Liu** has served as Campus Co-Pastor at Pres House, a PCUSA ministry at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She is a graduate from University of California, Berkeley and Princeton Theological Seminary.
Response: Chelsea Cornelius

College and university settings are uniquely formative environments for young adults. For many first-year college students, beginning college marks the first time they will independently navigate and negotiate their own priorities, schedules, networks, and values.

College is also a space where many students will be confronted with the reality of sexual violence. This confrontation happens in myriad ways: overhearing a sexist, homophobic, racist, or otherwise harmful comment that perpetuates norms of sexual harassment; noticing the rising aggression of a friend after their sexual advances towards another student are repeatedly denied; a roommate disclosing their recent experience of sexual assault; being assaulted by an acquaintance or friend.

In the recently published Association of American Universities all-campus survey on sexual assault and sexual misconduct, survey results showed that nearly 1 in 4 female-identified undergraduates have experienced some form of sexual violence during their time in college.

In the fall of 2015 as a follow up to a sermon and training on sexual assault awareness and intervention, I led a 6-week discussion group on the intersection of faith and feminism for a group of UW-Madison students and women in the Pres House worshipping community. The discussion centered on issues pertaining to being women of faith at a public university, including the culture of sexual assault on campus.

At the first meeting, when asked about conversations, sermons, or any other mention of sexual violence in church growing up, none of the women in the Faith and Feminism small group had ever heard their pastors engage the topic. One student remarked, “It was so weird because I knew [sexual assault] was an issue, but it fell into the category of ‘those things not to be discussed at church.’” She continued:

"But then [sexual assault] happened to me in college, and it couldn’t be one of those things not to talk about anymore. My campus church simply talking about it and making a safe space, where I can even be silent, but comforted, really helped with the healing process. I wish my youth group growing up could’ve created that space too. It would have been helpful to just recognize the issue and talk about supporting each other.”

Sexual violence arose in the Faith and Feminism discussion in some form each week—ranging from Bible interpretation to romantic relationships; from the use of male pronouns for God to self-care, illness, and health; from the people who’ve most influenced their lives, to the role of activism and advocacy on campus. The reality of sexual assault pervades a multitude of spaces and experiences for young women on college campuses, and they need spaces to talk about it.

Breaking the silence and fostering space for dialogue allowed these young women to articulate how their faith informs their convictions about injustice, violence, and the social norms that perpetuate sexual assault.

Responsible engagement from students begins with responsible engagement from leaders.

Two questions I often asked myself can help guide responsible leadership on sexual assault:
ENGAGE: Youth Ministry & Contemporary Issues

1) **What is the goal?** Is your goal to raise awareness of the statistics? To help young men understand how notions of masculinity inform unhealthy conceptions of sexuality? Is it to create space for women to build faith-based networks of support? To discuss the particular challenges of sexual violence in the LGBTQ+ community? Be specific. One sermon, training, or one discussion group cannot engage every issue, and will not meet the needs of everyone. Establish multiple avenues for engagement instead of attempting to fit a variety of topics and needs into one “flash in the pan” sermon or event.

2) **What informs my perspective, and what do I still have to learn?** Recognizing our own biases, convictions, and “blind spots” allows us as leaders to more responsibly engage in sensitive discussions.

As religious leaders we have an opportunity and a responsibility to not only work to understand the contexts in which our students will exist, but also model breaking the silence on the pervasive culture of sexual violence, so our students feel empowered to do so as well.

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Response: Philip Helsel

Bloomingdales recently ran an ad in which a man leers at a laughing woman who is looking away. The caption reads, “Spike your best friend’s eggnog when they’re not looking.” The fact that this ad survived the editorial process shows that we are far from where we should be in terms of addressing sexual assault and violence in popular culture, let alone on college campuses. Though some states have moved to expand the definition of consent away from simply saying “no” to saying “yes” at each part of the sexual encounter, young women on college campuses are subject to sexual assault at alarming rates and often have nowhere to go for help. How does the Christian doctrine of the imago Dei inform our understanding of the distinctive experience of trauma in sexual assault?

Statistics from the Bureau of Justice (1995-2013) indicate that women are five times more likely than men to be victims of sexual assault. For this reason, the language in this reflection focuses on violence against women, although violence against men is no less real or important. These statistics show that only twenty percent of victims report their crime to authorities, perhaps because only sixteen percent receive help from a victim services agency when they do. About fifty percent of victims were assaulted by someone they knew, which adds a layer of betrayal to the trauma—see Kristin Leslie’s helpful book When Violence is no Stranger. The perpetrators were disproportionately white.

Kate Wiebe, founder of Institute for Congregational Trauma and Growth, maintains that healing transformation appears to begin at the moment when a person perceives her intimate experience of trauma as truthfully witnessed by a caring person. Campus ministers frequently hear disclosures about sexual assault, and when they do it is important that they work with counseling services to get the appropriate treatment, evidence collection, and legal support. Nevertheless, as ministers they have another distinctive contribution. They can hear the cry of survivors as a lament to a God of justice.

Caregivers need to communicate in a straightforward manner that they support the person who has reported, stating they are sorry for what happened and that they believe the person. This includes a needs assessment that can be performed in cooperation with a therapist. Caregivers also need a longer-term orientation to hear feelings of betrayal and questions about whether God is just. Many survivors want to talk about the assault for longer than anyone seems to want to listen. Beginning survivor groups can be a helpful way to keep faith with the memory of traumatization.

People who have been assaulted sometimes have terrifying dreams or startle easily. When we walk with people who have been hurt, we listen not just to their words but also to their bodies. Although these symptoms can feel like falling apart, they can also be a gift that slows time down, not allowing the sufferer to re-experience too much pain at once. We also need to add advocacy to this accompaniment, fostering legal counsel and self-defense classes for women. When we hear disclosures of assault we need to understand that persons are not to blame for their victimization. Listening for the Image of God in the person means keeping faith with the memory of their traumatization as a violation of God’s justice.
Dr. Philip Browning Helsel, assistant professor of pastoral care and counseling at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, is author of Pastoral Power (Palgrave, 2015), a book about pastoral care for mental illness in a time of widespread economic stress. A frequent contributor in scholarly forums, he has written numerous articles on grief, trauma, and empowering approaches to pastoral care. The Women’s Center at B.C. has chosen him as a ‘featured feminist,’ indicating some level of awareness of gender issues.
Discussion Questions

1) What sorts of messages does your congregation give about sexuality? How does your congregation communicate those messages? What does how you speak (or refuse to speak) about sexuality communicate?

2) In what ways does seeing the image of God in survivors of sexual violence help a congregation extend care?

3) What resources might a congregation offer to a survivor of sexual violence? How might a congregation support a survivor?

4) On a scale from 1 (very little) to 10 (very much), how important to a congregation should caring for survivors of sexual violence be? What might that look like?

5) On a scale from 1 (very little) to 10 (very much), how important to a congregation should caring for perpetrators of sexual violence be? What might that look like?

6) How can stories of sexual violence—both in Scripture and in our communities—help shape our theology of sexuality? Can they act as more than just “cautionary tales?”

7) What does the gospel message look like for a survivor of sexual violence? How might it extend hope? How might it be challenging?
Additional Resources


Have We Learned Anything from the Columbia Rape Case? – A New York Times Magazine article about the rape case which led a woman to carry her mattress around with her for over two years – http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/29/magazine/have-we-learned-anything-from-the-columbia-rape-case.html?_r=1


Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible (Susanne Scholz, Fortress 2010) – Treats all of the texts having to do with sexual violence in the Old Testament

The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34: Interpreting Dinah’s Silence (Caroline Blyth, Oxford University Press 2010) – Written by a biblical scholar who is also a trained psychologist; she traces the interconnections of ancient and current attitudes toward sexual violence, using the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34 to explore the cultural myths and misrepresentations associated with sexual assault