

AIDS lecture 3/23/87  
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Address

By

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It was five days since I had last spoken publicly to an audience about the epidemic of AIDS.

When I was interviewing the 26 different organizations in preparation for writing the report requested by President Reagan on Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome, the representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention were not only the most surprised about the intricacies of the transmission of the AIDS Virus, but also the most eager to do something about it and then specifically to find a way to utilize a sex education curriculum in line with the necessities of the day, keeping in mind their own moral convictions.

I began by thanking the audience for the several times that they had already assisted me in getting my job done by mentioning issues such as Baby Doe and pornography. I then went through my usual litany about AIDS being a mysterious contagious disease with a virtually 100 per cent mortality, one that is spreading with the number of victims doubling every thirteen or fourteen months. I gave statistics as of the time of the lecture and estimated that next year by that same date; we would have added over 23,000 new cases of AIDS in the United States.

This was followed by a recitation of how the report to the American people requested by President Reagan was put together, including the cooperation of their own commission. In so doing, I defended the statement made in my report that "Education about AIDS should start in early elementary school and at home so that children could grow up knowing the behavior to avoid to protect themselves from exposure to the AIDS virus".

Knowing the concerns of this commission about the inappropriateness of some types of sex education available for school children, I went into some detail and mentioned that "sex education can and should be non-threatening...it can teach good values...it can help develop a child's own sense of personal responsibility...and can strengthen the concept of the family". This kind of sex education should unfold according to the developmental age of children and in response to their different levels of awareness and curiosity. I said I didn't see any reason to cling to a rigid schedule based on chronological age with a well-planned curriculum, thoughtfully carried out, it is possible to bring to the attention of the children the facts about

sexually transmitted disease – and AIDS in particular – along about the junior high school years...the years of early adolescence.

If this makes us uncomfortable – if it is awkward to do – if it conflict with other information we might have – those are problems that we, as adults, have to resolve in a way that enables us to nevertheless tell our children what they need to know and have a right to know. I then went into a description of what I thought were appropriate behaviors in reference to sexual contact for various ages including adults. I reiterated my oft-quoted statement that when one has sex with someone, they are also having sex with everyone else with whom that person has ever had sex.

I took all this trouble because in previous discussions with the Christian Life Commission, I challenged them about sex education. Knowing their squeamishness about just buying a curriculum that might not suit their moral requirements, I said that with a denomination as large of the Southern Baptist Convention, and the amount of expertise that must exist among those people, they probably were in as good a position as any group I knew to construct their own curriculum and have it exactly the way they wanted it. Surprisingly enough they did that and they did it within six to seven months and I was very happy to be able to congratulate them for a job well done.

My comments on sex education to this group would not have been complete without observations from my own experience in pediatrics that parents felt that the sex education of their children was not only their obligation, but also their privilege and yet, how few ever rose to the occasion to do the job adequately. I then added some other statistics about the work at Michigan State University on the kinds of sexual experiences children are exposed to through movies and television. This naturally led to a few comments that I thought were needed here on pornography. After giving the audience the four points I usually make about sexual relationships starting with young people, I spoke to them as Christians reminding them that they would continue to be tested by issues arising from the turmoil of current events. These issues make all of us examine and re-examine who we are and what we stand for. It is not an age for the faint of heart...or of soul.

As with any Christian audience, I always reminded them that if they regarded homosexual behavior as sin, that one of the fundamental teachings of Christianity has been to separate the sin from the sinner and therefore, not discriminate, in this case, against the sinner now in the throes of a fatal and unrelenting disease. I especially called attention to the innocent victims of AIDS: the wives of bisexual men, the spouses of IV drug abusers, and wives and husbands of promiscuous spouses. I didn't leave out the newborns delivered by IV drug abusers or the infected wives of IV drug abusers.

Once again, I thanked them for their support in days ahead as well as days gone by.