

A Good Samaritan Response to Hookup Culture

BY DONNA FREITAS

What college students living within hookup culture need most is a listening and sympathetic ear. They need someone who sees them for who and where they really are, and who sympathizes with their uncertainties, their confusion, and, sometimes, their regret and loss.

For the last decade I have been researching hookup culture on campus and visiting universities of all types and affiliations to lecture about my findings. This has given me the chance to engage with young adults all over the United States about this subject, in settings both formal and informal, light-hearted and serious, religiously affiliated and otherwise, listening to their questions, thoughts, ideas, defenses, wishes, angers, joys, disappointments, and hopes with regard to sex, dating, hooking up, romance, and everything between.¹

People beyond the campus – including parents, members of the media, ministers, and others concerned with the lives of young people – make all sorts of assumptions regarding what happens on hookups, what the culture surrounding them is about, and the possible effects of living this way. Many of these assumptions are wrong.

To begin to contemplate how Christians might respond to hookup culture, it is important to understand a few details about it, most notably what young adults mean when they use the term. What it is and what it isn't. When college students speak about what defines hookups, they generally offer three criteria.

First, *hookups include some form of sexual intimacy*, but the range of what counts is very broad: anything from kissing and making out to “having sex.” Some students will define what counts as sex depending on a person's

sexual orientation and offer three separate definitions. One of the most common misunderstandings about hookups is that they always involve “sex.” But the wide range of intimacy that college students count as a hookup is intentional on their part, and has to do with the desire *to be able to count* just about anything, including a few minutes of kissing at a party, as a hookup. There is pressure on campus for students to act like they approve of hookup culture, that they are a part of it, they participate, and have stories of hookups to share with their peers as proof that they have participated. By counting anything from kissing to sex as a hookup, it is far easier to say you did, you do, and you are going to do it again. There is also a gender issue at work in the wide range of intimacy that counts as a hookup. By leaving the content of a hookup vague, women can protect their reputations by implying they did “less” even if they did “more,” and men can imply the exact opposite. Young men or women can tell one of their peers, “I hooked up last night,” and unless they elaborate with specifics, this could mean just about anything, kissing in a corner at a party or an entire night spent together where the person and their partner “had sex,” whatever that means to them. The listener is left to make her or his own assumptions about what, exactly, occurred.

Second, *hookups are brief*. They can last as short as five minutes of kissing or as long as an entire night of “sex.” Hookups are also brief in the sense that they supposedly happen only once, though there are plenty of supposed one-time hookups that turn into “serial hookups” or friends with benefits. The assumption that the hookup is the same thing as a “one night stand” is mistaken.

Third, *during a hookup, you are not supposed to get attached*. A degree of ambivalence about both the experience and one’s partner is expected. And this last criterion is the one that truly defines the hookup, which makes a hookup a hookup and not something more. It is the element of the hookup that I have come to think of as the “social contract” of the activity: both parties agree to engage in a certain degree of sexual intimacy, and then walk away from each other with a shrug of their shoulders and the promise of no further expectations. This is the transactional dimension of the hookup, and, while it is the dimension that truly defines the hookup, it is also the part that most students – both men and women – struggle with and typically fail at upholding. People fail at this social contract regularly: men and women find themselves caring about each other and wanting something more, even though in theory they promised not to do this very thing.

The fourth unofficial criterion of the hookup is alcohol. I have heard so many college students say something like the following: “Without alcohol, nobody would ever make out!” or, “Without alcohol, nobody would ever get together!” Alcohol is, of course, part and parcel of the party scene at most colleges and universities, but the role of alcohol in hookups is complex. Students use alcohol as an excuse for denying their own agency in a

hookup—being drunk on alcohol allows students to blame their hookups on something other than themselves. The alcohol becomes responsible for what happened, not the hookup partners. This is hugely problematic, of course, when it comes to the subject of consent and sexual assault.

Nevertheless, students turn to alcohol in order to gear up to do something—hooking up—that they often are not happy about, that they do not

really want to do but feel peer pressure to do. The alcohol has a numbing effect. Students use it to dull their emotions in order to get this thing done.

We should distinguish individual hookups from a *culture* of hooking up. The latter is a culture where sexual intimacy is obliged, casual, and ambivalent, where sex and one's partners become a shrug, which is hugely problematic for sexual assault.

This last piece is also essential to understanding hookup culture, and why it is extremely important to distinguish between individual hookups and a culture of hooking up. People often have an idealized notion of the hookup as a fun, one-time, unfettered, and

exciting experience of sexual intimacy. I have come to think of this as the “hookup in theory.” But this kind of hookup is difficult to find within a *culture* of hooking up. Most often, there is the “hookup in reality” or the “hookup of obligation.” It took me ages to figure out that sexual desire—if it is on the list of reasons why two students hookup with each other—is often far down on that list of reasons. Highest on that list is usually proving to others that one can and one does hookup, which is akin to proving that one is normal, and to be normal on campus is to be casual about sex and hooking up. Hookups are just what people do in college, so you do them, too. Sexual intimacy is turned into something you shrug at, and you must prove you can do that shrugging along with everyone else around you. A *culture* of hooking up, then, is a culture where sexual intimacy is obliged, casual, and ambivalent. Sex and one's partners become a shrug, which again, is hugely problematic for sexual assault.

A culture of hooking up is a true culture of casual sex, in that it sells its citizens the notion that the “normal” attitude to have about sex is an ambivalent one—ambivalence about both one's partner and sexual intimacy (the third criterion of the hookup mentioned above). Yet students are not naturally ambivalent. Ambivalence is something they have to work at, and within hookup culture, they do work at it, so as to fulfill this norm. But this learned ambivalence does not tend to make them happy or fulfilled, and after years of talking with students who are working hard at shrugging off sex and

their partners and many of their real feelings, desires, and hopes for relationship, I have come to see this learned ambivalence as a kind of suffering in and of itself.

Before moving on, I want to draw an important distinction between school types that have hookup culture and school types that do not. At Catholic, mainstream Protestant, private-secular, and public universities, hookup culture is nearly universally present. On the other hand, CCCU schools (those affiliated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities) as a rule do not have hookup culture, even though university administration at CCCU campuses are often worried their students are hooking up, or even insist that hookup culture is a problem on their campuses. CCCU schools ban alcohol on campus and this changes everything. Alcohol is the fuel of hookup culture, and without it, hookup culture has a difficult time getting off the ground.

CCCU schools have purity culture instead, which is a wide-reaching, student-supported commitment to chastity that affects nearly all students' attitudes about sex and their sexual decision-making on campus. This does not mean that students are not having sex or that they do not engage in any sexual intimacy outside of commitment. However, at a college with purity culture the numbers of students having sex are vastly lower compared to colleges with hookup culture, and students who do have sex are nearly always doing so within committed, long-term relationships that they believe will lead to marriage. In fact, the number of students who even kiss each other outside of a committed relationship is vastly lower to nearly nonexistent on such campuses. The main thing that distinguishes CCCU schools from all other schools with hookup culture is the type of peer pressure students are under with respect to any form of sexual intimacy, including kissing: at CCCU schools, students feel pressure from each other to abstain from sex (to remain chaste according to the standards of Christianity) and to abstain from most forms of sexual intimacy (sometimes this even includes kissing) outside of a committed, long-term relationship that will lead to marriage.

Some Christians might be tempted to label those CCCU students kissing each other one night just for fun and not because they are in a relationship a "hookup," and the students themselves might want to call it that, but it is vastly different from the kind of thing that happens at all other institutions where hookup culture dominates. When two students kiss outside of a relationship at a school where purity culture dominates, their kissing or making out is a countercultural act on campus and they know this. However, at a school where a culture of hooking up dominates, any engagement of sexual intimacy outside of a committed relationship is simply reinforcing the status quo when it comes to sex on campus; it is not transgressive or countercultural, but is rather a perpetuation of the norms of the dominant culture of the campus.

SETTING ASIDE OUR AGENDA, BUT BEING GOOD SAMARITANS

Many Christians are tempted to respond to hookup culture by proclaiming “Chastity, chastity, chastity!” and making judgments on sexual sin. Everyone wants to be helpful and relevant to young adults living within hookup culture, but if this is your response, as a Christian, and you are unwilling to budge from it, then you might as well just walk away from the students now.

Such condemnations will not get anyone anywhere, or at least not with ninety-eight percent of the young adult population living within hookup culture. Worse still, such criticisms will alienate the very young women and men we want to reach, making them believe Christians care nothing for the reality of their situation and have not taken the time to truly understand the world in which they are living. They will tune us out, turn a deaf ear, and go away from us feeling abandoned, lost, and angry.

To be effective in reaching out to young adults living within a culture of hooking up, Christians must quit hiding behind an agenda that enforces chastity and showers judgment on sexual sin. This agenda must be replaced with what I have come to think of as the “Good Samaritan” response. Let me explain.

Perhaps if one were talking to young adults at a CCCU school where purity culture reigns, it would make sense to jump straight to Christian teachings about chastity, because the peer-supported purity culture already strains against premarital sex in accord with the Christian tradition. The students, even the ones who have had sex or are still having sex, usually wish to uphold those teachings and may want help in getting back to a place of practicing chastity. Christian teachings against premarital sex will generally not fall on deaf ears since these teachings are already part and parcel of the daily concerns of most of the students.

But the situation is quite different at the vast majority of colleges and universities where hookup culture dominates. Offering preachments on chastity, warnings against premarital sex, and talk of sexual sin – however nicely these are put – is akin to talking loudly over the pleas of those young people who come to us for help, and offering advice to them as though we cannot even see their lives.

Plenty of students, both men and women, loathe hookup culture or, at the very least, live within it reluctantly. They participate because they feel it is the only option they have, at least if they want to maintain any semblance of a normal social life during college. They would like other options; they would like ideas on how not to sacrifice their own needs and desires in the face of peer pressure. They would like a place and some time to puzzle through how they really feel about sex and their sexuality. But to present these students with chastity as if it is an “alternate choice” is the same as reaffirming that they have no choice but to remain caught within a culture that is often unsatisfying at best and coercive at worst. It is like offering someone who lives in the tropics a trip to Antarctica and total social isola-

tion as a balm for the heat. Even though many students are unhappy within hookup culture, this does not mean they want to stop having sex or to swear it off until marriage. For most young adults, such a choice would be untenable. It is extreme and unrealistic, given their cultural realities. But a lot of those students would like to take a step back, maybe even press pause on their participation in hookup culture, and this is where the Church might have a useful place to step in.

Can Christians live with these young adults' reality, or at least, work within their reality? Can you, if you are a Christian, set aside an agenda against premarital sex in order to attend first and foremost to the questions, needs, struggles, and yes, even the suffering of these college students? You may worry that if you do not jump straight to proclaiming judgments about premarital sex, if you do not at least point out the traditional Christian teaching in this regard and make sure that it gets said, that somehow you have failed as a Christian, failed the tradition, and even failed God. But Christianity is far bigger than its teachings around premarital sex. And this sort of worry is really a *self*-centered fear. What college students who are living within hookup culture need from us, more than anything else, is an *other*-centered response, which is modeled by the Samaritan in Jesus' parable (Luke 10:25-37).

Simone Weil (1909-1943), one of my favorite theologians, put me onto the centrality of the Good Samaritan's approach to the healing of suffering. What is needed most in the face of pain, whether emotional or physical, she says, is "Creative attention [which] means really giving our attention to what does not exist [for us]."² This is because it is so difficult for us to see suffering, and therefore to attend to it. In fact, we do not *like* to see those who suffer, so we *refuse* to see them and, likewise, the suffering itself. In this sense, they do not exist for us.

"The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle," Weil admits. "Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it. Warmth of heart, impulsiveness, pity are not enough."³ She continues:

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: "What are you going through?" It is a recognition that

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the sufferer exists.... For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way.

This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.

Only he who is capable of attention can do this.⁴

This last part is particularly relevant for us here: "The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth." We must set aside our self-interests, prescribed agendas, and self-centered needs to impose, to change, to have a particular effect on the other person, so that we may receive into ourselves the persons we are looking at, just as they are, in all their truth—even if that truth unsettles us and makes us nervous, conflicts with our agenda, or we just don't like it. The exemplar of creative attention, for Weil, is the Good Samaritan, who sets aside politics and every other potential obstacle in order to pay attention to the urgent need in front of him. Creative attention has the power to restore a person's existence, making them visible again when they feel ignored, alienated, invisible, like their needs never really mattered to anyone before. It is *creative* in just this way: it can make the unseen seen. And, for Weil, it is creative in that it is also an act of grace.

Among the students at schools where hookup culture dominates, I often see a kind of helplessness in the face of that culture: they are resigned to it, because hooking up is "just what everybody does in college." Some of them have tamped deep down inside what they really believe about sex, romance, and relationships, and their hopes for these during college. Others have never gotten the chance to ask themselves what they want from a romantic relationship, and what sex means to them and how they would like it to happen (if they even want it to happen). Likewise, many of these same students have felt abandoned and invisible to a Church that refuses to see them and their reality, a Church which only deigns to judge and condemn them, further abandoning them in the process.

What these students need most is a listening and sympathetic ear, someone to talk through how they really feel about the culture they live within. They need someone who sees them for who and where they really are, and who sympathizes with their uncertainties, their confusion, their questions and desires, and, sometimes, their regret and loss. They need resources, too, but within reason: if one hands copies of *Every Young Man's Battle: Strategies for Victory in the Real World of Sexual Temptation* to students living within hookup culture, one might as well leave them with nothing.

So, the Church must decide if it is willing to take a different approach with young adults living within hookup culture. Does the Church need to control the lives and bodies of these young adults, to point out their wrong actions to them, and to legislate over their sexual activity? Or are Christians

willing, with justice and compassion, to see the suffering and sadness and loss that are really at the heart of things, and to sit alongside the students?

In my opinion, very few Christians are paying such creative, restorative attention to young adults struggling within hookup culture. But I am hopeful that this will change. I have faith that it can. For only through such self-emptying attention which allows us to truly see these young adults for who and what they are, can their deep spiritual needs be met. Then they might begin to dig out of this place where they find themselves, because they have found in us a listening ear, a companion who will not abandon them along the road.

NOTES

1 I reflect more on these conversations in *The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture Is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused About Intimacy* (New York: Basic Books, 2013) and *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015 [2008]).

2 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001 [1951]), 92.

3 *Ibid.*, 64.

4 *Ibid.*, 64-65.



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