

Chastity

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



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GENERAL EDITOR	Robert B. Kruschwitz
ART EDITOR	Heidi J. Hornik
REVIEW EDITOR	Norman Wirzba
PROCLAMATION EDITOR	William D. Shiell
PRODUCTION ASSISTANT	Elizabeth Sands Wise
DESIGNER	Eric Yarbrough
PUBLISHER	The Institute for Faith and Learning Baylor University One Bear Place #97270 Waco, TX 76798-7270
PHONE	(254) 710-4805
WEBSITE	www.ChristianEthics.ws
E-MAIL	Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

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HUMAN SEXUALITY AND RADICAL FAITHFULNESS

Christians have always acknowledged two routes for embodying faithfulness in the way we have sex or do not have sex, two routes for publicly declaring—and displaying—that God is faithful: celibate singleness and faithful marriage. In both conditions, we testify, with our bodies, to the power of God.

LIVING ‘THE LONG DEFEAT’ TOGETHER

Within a sexually-sodden culture, the life of chastity may seem like a lonely, long defeat, especially to gay and lesbian believers. How can congregations provide the good company which celibate, same-sex attracted believers need for their Christian pilgrimage?

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Chastity is not a teeth-gritting ability to avoid violating the sexual rules. Rather, chastity is a habit of reverence for oneself and others that enables us to use our sexual powers intelligently in the pursuit of human flourishing and happiness.

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TRAVELING WELL

CHASTITY

Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

At the heart of Christian sexual ethics is not a dour set of rules, but a fetching trait: the virtue of chastity. Our contributors examine how chastity is exemplified in married life and singleness, and why its beauty has become difficult for us to appreciate.

At the heart of traditional Christian sexual ethics has long stood not a dour set of rules, but a fetching character trait: the virtue of chastity. Admittedly, this would be hard to notice if you listen to many contemporary conversations about Christian faith and sex, both within the Church and outside it. For that reason, “We need to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the beauty of chastity,” Frederica Mathewes-Green concedes, “and we can begin by admitting that it is something we only dimly understand.” In this issue our contributors examine how the virtue of chastity is exemplified through married life and singleness, and why its beauty has become difficult for us to appreciate.

We should “think well—and Christianly—about sex,” Beth Felker Jones notes in *Radical Faithfulness* (p. 10), because it is important “what place bodies have in the life of discipleship and how it is that God intends for us to thrive as men and women.” She admits that some Christian ideas about sex have seemed strange—that is to say, out of step with the wider culture—from the beginning, because Christians see sex as not just about us, but about the nature of God. “Christians have always acknowledged two routes for embodying faithfulness in the way we have sex or do not have sex, two routes for publicly declaring—and displaying—that God is faithful: celibate singleness and faithful marriage,” Jones explains. “In both conditions, Christians testify, with their bodies, to the faithfulness and power of God.”

Regarding his life as a celibate gay believer, Wesley Hill has adopted the stance of living “a long defeat.” He borrows this poignant phrase from J. R. R.

Tolkien, who was assured of God's final victory, but prepared to endure his Christian pilgrimage with only small glimpses of it. The path of celibacy, which expresses one's faithfulness in echo of God's faithfulness, is "meant to be lived in good company, with other guests who are bound for the same Wedding Supper that is to come," Hill explains in *The Long Defeat* (p. 20). This leads him to explore "how congregations can provide the good company that their celibate, same-sex attracted believers will need for the long journey."

In *Chastity as a Virtue* (p. 32), Matt Fradd describes chastity as "a habit of reverence for oneself and others that enables us to use our sexual powers intelligently in the pursuit of human flourishing and happiness." Some contemporary mocking of the virtue of chastity, he suggests, is an expression of *ressentiment*, a disparaging of something good because we feel we cannot attain it. "When we think about it, this loving reverence for ourselves and others is what we deeply desire," he concludes. "It would be a shame to become confused about chastity, and despise it."

One reason chastity is so difficult for us to attain and appreciate is that we "are regularly exposed to many lies about dating, singleness, sex, and marriage," Mary Hulst observes in *Relationships with "More than Friends"* (p. 75). She hopes the college students she ministers to will seek friends—and, when led by God, "more than friends"—who draw them closer to Jesus and help them to become better for the kingdom of God.

The deceptions about sex that students face will differ widely between institutions with a hookup culture and those with a ring by spring culture. In the hookup culture "sexual intimacy is obliged, casual, and ambivalent, where sex and one's partners become a shrug, which is hugely problematic for sexual assault," Donna Freitas explains in *A Good Samaritan Response to Hookup Culture* (p. 38). She urges Christians to respond with more attention to and less judgment of the students who live within this culture. They most need "a listening and sympathetic ear," Freitas maintains. "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." Meanwhile, in *Beyond the "Ring by Spring" Culture* (p. 46), Stacy George details the distortions at the other extreme on Christian campuses where students, especially women, feel pressure "to put a ring on it" by becoming engaged or marrying before they graduate. She worries, "This may muddle their perceptions of marriage and the vocation of singleness, and deflect them from receiving more formative preparation for marriage."

Christian artists through the centuries have been inspired by scriptural and legendary stories about the sexual faithfulness of key biblical figures. Rembrandt's painting commonly known as *The Jewish Bride* contains an allusion to Rebekah's chastity when she and Isaac sojourned in Philistine territory, as Heidi Hornik explains in *A Couple's Intimacy* (p. 70). Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin* (on the cover), a grand depiction of a popular legend about Mary's marriage to Joseph, is Hornik's focus in *Mary's Worthy Suitor*

(p. 66). Other artists, like Botticelli in *Pallas and the Centaur*, drew freely from classical mythological sources to create allegories of chastity, as Hornik notes in *Love in Control* (p. 68).

The worship service (p. 58) by Amber Inscore Essick leads us to praise God for the created beauty of sex, and to repent when “as a church, we have been too shy about sex, failing to contribute to the growth of our cultural understandings about human bodies and their relationship to one another and to God.” The service incorporates a beautiful new hymn by Terry York and music by Kurt Kaiser, “Intense the Love God Molded” (p. 55). The hymn text asks “How shall the flesh Creator made / respond when love is breathed to life?” and responds “The Holy Spirit is that Breath / and guides the love to God.”

Adults and young people can find it very difficult to speak openly about their religious faith and sexuality. “It is awkward to bring up, taboo to talk about, and could elicit disappointment, shame, and punishment, especially in the religious world,” Lauren Taylor admits in *Sexuality and Spirituality in American Adolescents* (p. 84). Looking for ways to break the silence, she reviews Donna Freitas’s *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America’s College Campuses*, Christine J. Gardner’s *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns*, and Mark D. Regnerus’s *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*. From these resources, Taylor draws insight “to foster an environment where adolescents genuinely seek out a deeper understanding of faith in Christ and mature in their understanding of how to represent Christ’s faithfulness to a watching world in their lives and relationships.”

In *Christian Sexual Ethics in an Age of Individualism* (p. 89), Julie Morris reviews three books — Wesley Hill’s *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian*, Beth Felker Jones’s *Faithful: A Theology of Sex*, and Dale S. Kuehne’s *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship beyond an Age of Individualism* — that helpfully go beyond discussions of sexual behavior to “address healthy and holy relationships with self, others, and God.” Morris commends the authors for caring “about community and intimacy and about how to cultivate them in a culture that promotes disposable relationships.” Most importantly, they show us what it means “to take conversations about sex and the body as an integral part of our moral and spiritual formation in the Church.” The issues that Hill, Jones, and Kuehne raise — such as “What do our sexual bodies say about God, and vice versa” — are not new questions, Morris concludes, “but they are becoming more critical for us to ask as family structures and cultural ethics continue to shift and as cases of sexual assault proliferate within our society.” ❖

Radical Faithfulness

BY BETH FELKER JONES

Christians have always acknowledged two routes for embodying faithfulness in the way we have sex or do not have sex, two routes for publicly declaring—and displaying—that God is faithful: celibate singleness and faithful marriage. In both conditions, Christians testify, with their bodies, to the power of God.

Sex is an important topic. It matters because it is about our day-to-day lives, about our bodies, about what we want and how we arrange our lives and how we relate to other people. And because, as believers, we care about what place bodies have in the life of discipleship and how it is that God intends for us to thrive as men and women. So, it is important for us to think well—and Christianly—about sex.

Strange ideas about sex—odd ideas out of sync with those of the wider culture—have marked Christians out from the very beginning. Often these ideas derive from the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which speak frankly about sex and about how our bodies honor God.

There is no doubt, then, that sexual ethics has been and should be important to Christian faith. But what if much in the way Christians teach about sex has gone wrong? What if, in our efforts to keep young people from making mistakes, we have done a great deal of damage? What if sex is not about a list of rules, a set of dos and don'ts? What if sex is not, most of all, about us? What if sex is about God and who God is and about God's good intentions for creation?

These seemingly separate strands—the countercultural ideas Christians have about sex, Scripture's emphasis on our bodies honoring God, and the primacy of God's nature and purpose for creation—are united in the idea that sex should express radical faithfulness, that our faithful sex is meant to reflect God's faithfulness.

Eusebius, whose early history of the Church lets us glimpse the first centuries of Christianity, tells the story of Potamiaena. She was a slave who refused the sexual advances of her owner:

Endless the struggle that in defense of her chastity and virginity, which were beyond reproach, she maintained against lovers, for her beauty – of body as of mind – was in full flower. Endless her sufferings, till after tortures too horrible to describe...she faced her end with noble courage – slowly, drop by drop, boiling pitch was poured over different parts of her body, from her toes to the crown of her head. Such was the battle won by this splendid girl.¹

You read that right. Potamiaena died, one of countless early Christian martyrs who chose to be faithful unto death rather than renounce the faith. And her resistance to sexual assault – framed as desire for chastity – was what got her turned in to the government as a Christian.

Agatha's story is similar. She wanted to devote her whole life to God, and so she refused a senator's many offers of marriage. He had her tortured – including, at least according to legend, having her breasts cut off. She is still celebrated as a virgin martyr.

Lucy was the daughter of a wealthy family, and she too made a vow of perpetual virginity, a vow that would free her from marriage and allow her to give her fortune to the poor. The man she was betrothed to denounced her as a Christian, and she was sentenced to forced prostitution. When God protected her from this fate, she was burned and then died in prison of terrible wounds.

We only have the barest outlines of their stories, and even there the details are in question, but what survives of the stories of Potamiaena, Agatha, and Lucy certainly refers to a real historical phenomenon: Christians devoting their virginity to the Lord, even to the point of death.

Is it possible for us to imagine why any woman would make the choices Lucy, Agatha, or Potamiaena made? We live in a time in which sex is considered by many to be a necessity for anyone who wants to live a happy and healthy human life. And we are part of a church that tends to elevate marriage as the epitome of the happy Christian life. Can we take the imaginative leap into the world that shaped these early sisters in the faith?

Why would anyone die rather than marry? Were these early Christians insane? Were they prudes or heretical Gnostics who denied the goodness of the body and sex?² Can we imagine a more charitable take on their lives?

Women in the ancient world were not free to not marry. Potamiaena, Agatha, and Lucy embodied the possibility of a very different life from what the empire expected, especially for women. They wanted to live as though it were really possible for our whole lives – including our bodies – to be for the Lord.

And people noticed.

Eusebius tells us that Potamiaena's martyrdom was the catalyst for the conversion of Basilides, her executioner. Her complete devotion to the Lord—signified by her virginity—was a witness, one that God used to bring someone else to Christ. Her radical faithfulness spoke powerfully.

Then and now, it is through this sort of radical faithfulness by believers that the Christian theology of sex goes public.

Many Christians now act as though marriage—and with it sex—represents the fullest life possible. I frequently hear Christians equate maturity with marriage. Given that Jesus wasn't married, this is a theological disaster.

Christians have always acknowledged two routes for embodying faithfulness in a way that the world can see. We have always had these two routes for publicly declaring—and displaying—that God is faithful. The first route is celibate singleness; the second is faithful marriage. In both conditions, Christians testify, with their bodies, to the power of God.

Early Christians valued singleness and celibacy, at

least in part, because the single life was a sign of radical devotion. The virgin's body was a testament to the power of God, a testament to the fact that it is possible to be faithful to Christ alone. Singleness is a classic Christian way of life. In celibate singleness, countless Christians have chosen to devote their whole lives—body and soul—to God and to God alone.

In our time, it is hard for us to understand why believers in the early centuries of the Church elevated celibacy and virginity so much. Not only was the celibate body a sign of unprecedented devotion, it was also the case that to choose celibacy was countercultural.

Historian Peter Brown explains how deeply singleness went against the cultural grain. In celebrating singleness, the "church had become, in effect, an institution possessed of the ethereal secret of perpetual self-reproduction.... [Celibate singleness] announced to the Roman world of the late second century that the church was a new form of public body, confident that it possessed its own means of securing a perpetual existence."³

To remain single and chaste was to declare that God was your everything, so much so that you had no need of marriage and children to secure your place in society or your legacy after you died. God, and not the empire, was the meaning of life. Service in the kingdom of heaven, and not family or country, was the measure of a life well lived. Conversion through Jesus Christ, and not birthing babies, was the way to everlasting life. Holy virgins, then, were a powerful testament to what God could do.

This is strange to us. It is strange both to the culture at large and to vari-

ous Christian subcultures. That broader culture assumes that people need to have sex to be happy, to be fulfilled, and to live a full and flourishing human life. Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity, has reversed the early church's celebration of celibacy. Many Christians now act as though marriage – and with it sex – represents the fullest life possible. I frequently hear Christians equate maturity with marriage.

Given that Jesus wasn't married, this is a theological disaster.

Sex is good, but sex is not everything. Sex is good, but sex cannot be idolized. Sex is good, but sex is not God.

There is no doubt that our contemporary church does a bad job of valuing and supporting the single life. Single adults are subject to suspicion or are constantly asked about when they will marry or are segregated from the rest of the body of Christ in singles groups meant to get them unsingle. Maybe we have bought into the distorted cultural belief that there is something wrong with people who are not having sex. We are in desperate need of reclaiming a positive vision of singleness.

Todd Billings, a contemporary theologian, finds resources for a positive vision of singleness in the Christian tradition. Billings draws on the ancient theologian Gregory of Nyssa, who gives us a vision of "the virginal body" as "productive and fruitful" and of the chaste, single life as "one of fullness and presence rather than absence."⁴ Billings continues:

Our great attachment, our great identity-shaping love, should be for God.... Gregory calls attention to the "freedom of virginity." The virginal soul, its attachments rooted in God, has freedom from "greed, anger, hatred, the desire for empty fame and all such things." Since the virginal soul does not seek after these other loves, it is not a slave to them.... For Gregory, virginity is not a curse or an accident, but a "gift" with great "grandeur." It does not result from God's failing to provide someone to love, but from "grace." The virgin anticipates the time when there will be "no distance between himself and the presence of God." ... For the Christian, virginity is not about loneliness. Indeed, for the Christian, it is impossible to be a virgin alone.... In a culture where sex itself is often enthroned as the ultimate saving, healing experience of presence, Christian virgins embody a refusal to make sex the ultimate consummation. Precisely because they are sexual beings, Christian virgins demonstrate that even unfulfilled sexual desires point to another ultimate desire: the desire for God.⁵

How can we envision the single life as one of unfettered devotion to God? How can all Christians – single and married – support one another as one family united in the body of Christ? Billings, through Nyssa, wants to embody chaste singleness as a full life and a fruitful life and as a life lived in community. Nyssa and Billings – along with Agatha, Lucy, and Potamiaena –

are reflecting on and asking God for the grace to embody the truth of the Apostle Paul's teaching to the Corinthians.

Paul's famous advice is for "the unmarried and the widows" to stay unmarried, like him (1 Corinthians 7:8). Paul expects all of us who are in Christ to live with an urgency born of our faith that the kingdom is coming, that Christ will return, and that a desperate world is longing for the gospel. In this way, Paul expects us all to be in a kind of crisis mode, never allowing the Church to grow complacent or to settle for the way things are.

We are to have sex – and not have sex – as those who are standing at the very gates of the kingdom. This is the gospel urgency that informs the advice that, "in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife" (1 Corinthians 7:26-27). Paul speaks with eschatological determination. The kingdom is coming. The "time has grown short" (7:29).

Paul argues that the single condition frees people up for kingdom work. He is no Gnostic; he teaches that marriage is "not sin" (7:28), but he would like his sisters and brothers to weigh the kingdom advantages of the single life:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Like singleness, Christian marriage can also be understood as a public witness. Like chaste singleness, committed marriage is a sign of the divine possibility of faithfulness. As singleness testifies to the faithfulness of God, so does marriage.

The vast Christian theological tradition has always insisted that both marriage and singleness are good ways of life, good states of being, but there have been aberrations in that tradition. There have been instances where the Church has failed to affirm that both marriage and singleness are good. In the early centuries of the Church, there was a temptation to deny the goodness of marriage, and sometimes Christians elevated singleness and virginity to a status above that of marriage, but this was – and is – a mistake, and careful reading of Scripture and thinking theologically have always corrected the Church back to affirming that both marriage and singleness are good.

After the Protestant Reformation, the opposite temptation became real. The Protestant reformers objected to the requirement that Roman Catholic priests be celibate; and those Protestant reformers tried to elevate marriage as they reacted against a perceived tendency to treat single Christians — especially the celibate monks and nuns — as super Christians. Against this, those reformers taught the “priesthood of all believers,” a concept drawn especially from the New Testament book of 1 Peter. All Christians, those reformers insisted, are real Christians. All Christians, married and single, have status before God and may come before God.

Martin Luther, a former monk, shocked the world when he married Katie, a former nun. Their marriage seems to have been one full of love and affection and work for the kingdom of God, but it was also a symbol. The Luthers said to the world that married people — people who have sex — could be Christian teachers and leaders. There is a sense, though, in which Protestant elevation of marriage succeeded too well. The Church bought the idea that marriage is a good so thoroughly that we forgot the many goods of singleness.

A good theology of sex needs to reclaim and proclaim the good of both marriage and singleness. In both marriage and singleness, Christian bodies are testimony to the faithfulness of God.

This is why Christian faith teaches that sex is for marriage. Why, if two people love one another, shouldn't they go ahead and have sex, married or no? The answer is that only married sex can testify — publically and radically — to the way God is faithful to God's people. To have sex only in marriage is a radical sort of faithfulness, one that excludes premarital and extramarital sex along with adultery. The expectation that sex belongs within marriage and that marriage is an unbreakable union is the steady teaching of Scripture.

Christian faith teaches that sex is for marriage. Why, if two people love one another, shouldn't they go ahead and have sex, married or no? The answer is that only married sex can testify—publically and radically—to the way God is faithful to God's people.

The exclusivity and unbreakability of the marriage bond is promised in the public vows that make a marriage. Traditional wedding vows are vows of radical faithfulness. In these beautiful words, wife and husband promise to be faithful, come what may. Having already testified to their willingness to “forsake all others,” they promise to “have” and “hold” one another, “from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sick-

ness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.”

Genesis implies that God’s good, creative intention is for marriage to be like this – exclusive and unbreakable. This is what it means that the married “man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Exclusivity is seen in the “leaving” and unbreakability in the “clinging” and in the reality of the one-flesh union that married sex creates.

Exclusive unbreakability is also the teaching of Proverbs, when men are counseled to be faithful to the wives of their youth and so to keep sex within the confines of marriage.

Drink water from your own cistern,
 flowing water from your own well.
Should your springs be scattered abroad,
 streams of water in the streets?
Let them be for yourself alone,
 and not for sharing with strangers.
Let your fountain be blessed,
 and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
 a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
May her breasts satisfy you at all times;
 may you be intoxicated always by her love.

Proverbs 5:15-19

Here, in the poetic call for “springs” not to “be scattered abroad,” we might hear an echo of the ancient Christian’s desire that the celibate life be a way of resisting being scattered. Both faithful marriage and celibate singleness may, then, be ways of gathering up one’s life and pouring that life, in one steady stream, out for God. Here in Proverbs, the expectation of marital exclusivity and unbreakability is that this comes with joy, with satisfaction, with lifelong “intoxication” with love.

The married life of the prophet Hosea is a dramatic story of faithfulness, and it is explicitly a story in which marriage is a parable about God’s faithfulness to us. God gives Hosea a surprising command, telling him to “Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD” (Hosea 1:2).

Hosea obeys, marrying a prostitute named Gomer, and Hosea remains faithful to her, even in the face of her unfaithfulness. In faithful marriage – exclusive, committed marriage – we have a powerful witness to the God of Hosea who promises:

You will call me, “My husband,” and no longer will you call me, “My Baal.” For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and

the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.

Hosea 2:16–20

Here, we are the unfaithful ones and God is the faithful Lover. God promises to be faithful to us even though we fail again and again, even though we persist in sin and in idolatry. Faithful marriage is a sign of this faithful God and is possible by this God's power. Faithful marriage is a sign that God will bring us safely home, that God will destroy our worship of idols – those "Baals" whom we have been tempted to chase after – and that God will be faithful in loving-kindness and mercy.

In the New Testament, Jesus and Paul both teach that marriage is meant to be exclusive and unbreakable, and it follows that sex is for marriage alone. We see this in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus intensifies the law against adultery and teaches "that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). Here, Jesus reimagines faithfulness and takes it to new heights. Faithfulness involves both body and soul, both the inside and the outside of the human being, and marriage – and the physical and spiritual exclusivity that go with it – becomes an even more dramatic testimony to the God who is faithful.

As with Jesus, so with the teaching of the Apostle Paul: marriage should be the sort of faithful witness that cannot be broken apart. "To the married," says Paul, "I give this command – not I but the Lord – that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain

unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:10–11). Here, we see Paul advising the Corinthian church in a way that is coherent with the reality that the one-flesh union of marriage should be a faithful, unbreakable witness. Even those married to unbelievers "should not divorce" (7:12–13), if their unbelieving spouses are willing to stay.

In Hosea's prophecy, we are the unfaithful ones and God is the faithful Lover. God promises to be faithful to us even though we persist in sin and in idolatry. Faithful marriage is a sign of this faithful God and is possible by this God's power.

Faithful witness is the reason Christian ethics have always held open two paths for Christian sexual fidelity. The path of faithful marriage is a sign of God's faithfulness. The path of celibate singleness is a sign of God's faithfulness. When a single person does not have sex, his body is a testament to God's utter refusal to forsake us. When a married person remains faithful, her body is a testament to the same God.

In marriage, we bear witness to the world to the quality of the divine-human relationship. As in a faithful marriage, God is faithful to us. The husband and wife who are faithful to one another, while being different from another, are a sign of the ways that God is faithful to us, while being different from us. Singleness is a sign equal to marriage as singleness too points to God's faithfulness. In both marriage and singleness, we are embodying something about God's radical fidelity.

Early Christianity was bold enough to imagine that all of us have – in Christ – the freedom to bear witness to who God is. The Christian understanding of sex was dramatic in the ways that it ran against Roman sexual morality. Roman women were not free to not marry. Christian women could choose – even insist on – celibacy. For Christians, women are not property or baby makers. We are witnesses to the life of Jesus Christ in our bodies, including in the ways we choose to have and not have sex. For Christians, men are not lust machines or power mongers. They are witnesses to the life of Jesus Christ in their bodies, including in the ways they choose to have and not have sex.

In Rome, some people (potential wives, for instance) got protection and honor, and some (prostitutes and slaves, for example) did not. In the kingdom, everybody's body is honored. In Rome, bodies were for power or pleasure or the state or the market. In the kingdom, bodies are for the Lord. In Rome, sexual ethics were governed by different rules for men and women. In the kingdom, we are called to be chaste, all of our bodies are not for *porneia* (sex that denies who God is and tells lies about what it means to be human), but for the Lord. In Rome, if you were sexually shameful, there was no going back. In God's kingdom, there is forgiveness and healing and grace and freedom.

Here's the kicker: in Rome, you were either a slave or you were free. In the kingdom of God, we are all free. As a witness to this, we value singleness and marriage as two routes, two ways of life, in which the Christian may be truly sexual and truly free.⁶

NOTES

1 Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, translated by G. A. Williamson (New York: Penguin Books, 1989 [1965]), 184-185.

2 Gnostics were hierarchical dualists: they divided everything into spiritual and material, in opposition to each other, and believed the material things were nasty and degraded. For the Gnostic, flesh is bad and sex is impure. Simply to be a sexual person is

to be unredeemed. Peter Brown digs into the historical nitty-gritty of Gnosticism to show us an understanding of sexual desire “as an enduring feature of the unredeemed human person.... Sex was ‘the unclean rubbing that is from the fearful fire that came from the fleshly part’” (Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988], 116). Brown, at the end of my quotation, is quoting an ancient Gnostic source, Sophia of Jesus Christ.

3 Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, 120-121.

4 J. Todd Billings, “More than an Empty Bed: Meditations on Gregory of Nyssa’s ‘On Virginity,’” *Regeneration Quarterly* 8:2 (Winter 2002), jtoddbillings.com/2002/12/more-than-an-empty-bed/ (accessed September 21, 2016). I am grateful to Wesley Hill, at the blog Spiritual Friendship (www.spiritualfriendship.org), for pointing out the Billings essay. Hill’s work, along with the work of others at that blog, is an excellent resource for thinking about the healthy, happy, holy single life.

5 Ibid.

6 Material in this article is drawn from the introduction and fifth chapter of my book, *Faithfulness: A Theology of Sex*, Ordinary Theology Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).



BETH FELKER JONES

is Professor of Theology at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois.

The Long Defeat

BY WESLEY HILL

Within a sexually-sodden culture, the life of chastity may seem like a lonely, long defeat, especially to gay and lesbian believers. How can congregations provide the good company which celibate, same-sex attracted believers need for their Christian pilgrimage?

I have come to think about my life as a gay, celibate believer in terms of what J. R. R. Tolkien calls “the long defeat.” His regal character Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings*, surveying the long years of her immortality and all the seasons of mingled loss and triumph she has witnessed, says, “...through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.”¹ And Tolkien himself identifies with her: “I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect ‘history’ to be anything but a ‘long defeat’ – though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory.”²

Alan Jacobs has called this outlook

...the ideal one for anyone who has exceptionally difficult, frustrating, even agonizing, but nevertheless vitally important work to do. For such people, the expectation of victory can be a terrible thing – it can raise hopes in (relatively) good times only to shatter them when the inevitable downturn comes. Conversely, the one who fights the long defeat can be all the more thankful for victories, even small ones, precisely because (as St. Augustine said about ecstatic religious experiences) he or she does not expect them and is prepared to live without them.³

This perspective on history and on the individual Christian pilgrimage has meant a lot to me. As someone who has not received one iota of the promised “change” in my sexual orientation that some Christians have held

out to me, and as someone who also has not been able to embrace a more progressive understanding of same-sex marriage, I often feel like I am fighting a kind of long defeat. I am gay but not seeking a same-sex partner, and what that feels like is best described in the Apostle Paul's rather stark view of the Christian life: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:22-23).

I was helped to embrace this viewpoint in my early twenties when I read *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* by Richard Hays. Facing squarely the much-debated question of whether celibacy is "mandated" for all gay Christians in a way that is qualitatively different than the call to chastity for straight Christians, Hays writes:

While Paul regarded celibacy as a charisma, he did not therefore suppose that those lacking the charisma were free to indulge their sexual desires outside marriage. Heterosexually oriented persons are also called to abstinence from sex unless they marry (1 Corinthians 7:8-9). The only difference—admittedly a salient one—in the case of homosexually oriented persons is that they do not have the option of homosexual "marriage" [in traditional churches, we must now add]. So where does that leave them? It leaves them in precisely the same situation as the heterosexual who would like to marry but cannot find an appropriate partner (and there are many such): summoned to a difficult, costly obedience, while "groaning" for the "redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). *Anyone who does not recognize this as a description of authentic Christian existence has never struggled seriously with the imperatives of the gospel, which challenge and frustrate our "natural" impulses in countless ways* [italics added].⁴

This passage has become a lodestar for me. It goes a long way toward explaining how I and many of my fellow celibate gay friends view our discipleship: we are fighting a long defeat, not necessarily expecting to find a satisfying substitute in this life for the marital happiness we are choosing to live without and instead pinning our hopes for spousal union on the future marriage supper of the Lamb. We are groaning and waiting, often without much natural "fulfillment," and counting on a future weight of glory that will far surpass our present groans.

Much of what Dorothy Day (1897-1980) says in *The Long Loneliness*, a memoir of her conversion and activism for social justice through the Catholic Worker movement she founded with Peter Maurin, dovetails with what Tolkien calls "the long defeat." Day's conversion to Catholicism forced her to grapple with the Church's teaching about sex and marriage. (She is forthright about the Catholic Church's sexual ethics, demonstrating clearly that one can be "conservative" in this arena while not surrendering one ounce of

agitation for social justice—a combination that many people today find baffling.) Day was in a common law marriage to a man named Forster who wanted nothing to do with her newfound faith, and she recognized that choosing the Church over Forster might mean she would forfeit, for good, a great deal of earthly happiness. She writes:

God always gives us a chance to show our preference for Him. With Abraham it was to sacrifice his only son. With me it was to give up my married life with Forster. You do these things blindly, not because it is your natural inclination—you are going against nature when you do them—but because you wish to live in conformity with the will of God.⁵

I wonder how many of us share this vision of the Christian life. Are we—am I—prepared to countenance the fact that God might ask a us to say “no” to our most deeply felt “natural” (in the fallen sense) inclinations for sex and marriage in order to show our preference for God?

Day also describes having to “let go” of her natural love for her daughter and place her consciously in God’s care.

When I left Tamar that afternoon and went back to Montreal, I never was so unhappy, never felt so great a sense of loneliness. She was growing up, she was growing up to be married. It did not seem possible. I was always having to be parted from her. No matter how many times I gave up mother, father, husband, brother, daughter, for His sake, I had to do it over again.⁶

Day is alluding to Mark 10:29, in which Jesus observes that many of his disciples have given up their closest ties—to homes and siblings and parents and even children—in order to follow him. Can we imagine Christ calling us to such a deep level of surrender? Can we imagine placing—through one long, repeated act—our greatest loves before him?

I suspect that many of our debates about “mandatory gay celibacy” in the church today involve, at the end of the day, differing understandings of the character of God. Would God in Christ ask his children to embrace a lifelong loneliness, a long defeat? I do not want to be misunderstood here: I know many “progressive” Christians see same-sex marriage as a lifelong self-sacrifice, and there are many stories of gay partners standing by one another in sickness and in health alike to support their view. Nevertheless, can some of our disagreement about whether gay sex is morally appropriate for Christians be traced back to differing beliefs about whether God might ask us to do what feels well-nigh impossible: to give up the one thing that our “natural” selves most want? It’s a question I would like to explore more with my progressive friends, to see what common ground and what lack of agreement we might find.

Day improves on Tolkien’s vision of the “long defeat,” I think, when she

stresses that surrendering to God in this way – by giving up hope of “natural” fulfillment – paradoxically does not lead to a life without human love: “We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”⁷ No doubt she had read the rest of that passage in Mark:

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Mark 10:29-31

The long defeat and the long loneliness are meant to be lived in good company, with other guests who are bound for the same Wedding Supper that is to come. This has led me to think more about how congregations can provide the good company that their celibate, same-sex attracted believers will need for the long journey. What I have come up with is not a “ministry plan,” but some characteristics of the people, gestures, and conversations that have helped me find grace and hope when I needed it most over the years, but especially when I

was a deeply-closeted college student. I share these characteristics now in the hope that they may inspire faith communities to talk openly about chastity and sexuality in ways that welcome LGBT believers and encourage all members in their Christian pilgrimage.

The ministries that have helped me most *do not underestimate the power of small gestures*. I recall hearing a sermon by John Piper on the word “everyone” in Romans

1:16 (“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”), in which he says,

O, what an exhilarating word to those of us in this room who feel that there is something about us that rules us out! Wrong family, wrong background, wrong education, wrong language, wrong race, wrong culture, wrong sexual preference, wrong moral track record.

Can some of our disagreement about whether gay sex is morally appropriate for Christians be traced to differing beliefs about whether God might ask us to do what feels well-nigh impossible: to give up what our “natural” selves most want?

Then to hear the word, “Everyone who believes.” Everyone! One thing can rule you out: unbelief. Not trusting Jesus. But nothing else has to. The good news that Christ died for our sins, and that he rose from the dead to open eternal life, and that salvation is by grace through faith—all that is for everyone who believes.⁸

In that one mention of sexual preference, Piper reaches out to congregants who might be ashamed of their same-sex attraction and worry that it somehow disqualifies them from living a Christian life. This tiny, fleeting reference shows me Piper is aware of gay folks in his congregation. They are on his heart, and he wants them to hear the gospel as a word specifically for them. It is only a minuscule gesture in the big scheme of things, but it landed powerfully on me at the time.

My friend Brent Bailey characterizes “safe people” — people with whom gay and lesbian Christians can be honest without fear of judgment or disgust—as people who are not afraid to raise the issue:

Without a doubt, someone’s willingness to broach LGBT issues in any sort of positive or empathetic tone is the clearest and most visible indicator they might be prepared to listen to me talk about my sexuality. They may do something as noticeable as leading a Bible study about homosexuality or as simple as posting a link on Facebook to a story about sexual minorities; but in environments where nontraditional sexuality receives no attention, even the tiniest statement of knowledge or interest can communicate a loud-and-clear message (accurate or not) that this person is the safest person in the room.⁹

Those ministries that have helped me most *avoid making assumptions about the causes of same-sex attraction and my personal history*. I recall trying to make an initial appointment with a Christian counselor to talk about my homosexuality. As we were emailing and comparing calendars, he asked me to describe briefly what I hoped to discuss with him. When I said that I was gay and was experiencing a great deal of confusion in a particular friendship, he immediately wrote back and asked if I could bring my father along with me to our sessions since, he said, he had never met a gay man whose sexuality was not, at root, about a deficit of masculine, fatherly affirmation. I was dismayed. This counselor had never met me, had not heard me try to articulate what was drawing me to seek counseling, and already he was offering a diagnosis. I felt hemmed in and confined, as if the multi-shaded threads of my story were being bleached to a monochrome. No matter that I felt my relationship with my father was a far cry from this typical “father wound” story the counselor presumed.

Melinda Selmys writes very powerfully about how hurtful it can be when straight Christians offer a one-size-fits-all narrative of the origins of same-sex desire:

Where the animosity [from LGBT people] comes in, is when people try to aggressively project such narratives onto others. It's one thing to say "My mother really was smothering, my father really was absent, and that really did leave me in a headspace where I feel driven to have sex with men in order to reconnect with my damaged masculinity," [but] it's another thing to say, "That guy over there is just saying that he had a perfectly normal childhood because he's unwilling to confront the pain of the deep wounds which his parents left on his psyche." That guy over there has an absolute and inalienable right, for as long as he is alive, to wrestle with his own experience in his own way, to seek the Truth of it within himself, and to construct whatever narratives he requires to provide for his own spiritual and psychological needs.¹⁰

The helpful ministries have assumed my story is unique, my gayness is not the same as anyone else's, and this uniqueness is worthy of attention and respect and dignity.

Further, those helpful ministries *recognize that my sexual orientation affects everything about me, just like heterosexuality does for others*. They understand, in the words of my friend Misty Irons, "the experience [of being gay or lesbian] is nearly parallel to finding oneself heterosexual."¹¹ If you are heterosexual and want to know what it feels like to awaken, during or even before puberty, to being gay and to understand what it feels like to long for intimacy and companionship as a gay person, your best bet is to reflect deeply on what it feels like for you to be heterosexual. Just as your (straight) sexuality suffuses much more than your overt romantic encounters, attractions, or relationships, the same is true for a gay or lesbian person. Our sexuality is more like a facet of our personalities than a separable piece of our behavior; it is more like a trait than a habit, more like a sensibility than an action.

Eve Tushnet captures what it feels like to be gay and Christian when she explains:

My lesbianism is part of why I form the friendships I form. It's part of why I volunteer at a pregnancy center. Not because I'm attracted to the women I counsel, but because my connection to other women does have an adoring and erotic component, and I wanted to find a way to express that connection through works of mercy. My lesbianism is part of why I love the authors I love. It's inextricable from who I am and how I live in the world. Therefore I can't help but think it's inextricable from my vocation.¹²

Experiencing same-sex sexual desire is not just about whom you want to go to bed with; it shapes your entire way of being in the world.

Nevertheless, the helpful ministries *recognize that my sexual orientation does not define me*. Sexual orientation as we know it is culturally constructed.

In other words, same-sex attracted people throughout history have not always understood themselves as having fixed sexual “orientations” and cultural “identities,” nor will they go on doing so forever. Those understandings of what “being gay” amounts to are a reality of our particular cultural moment, and same-sex attracted people like me must figure out how to navigate them.

Realizing that my gayness is not some fixed script that I must conform

Realizing that my gayness is not some fixed script that I must conform to has given me freedom to explore historic Christian, chaste ways to express my love for men. What my culture defines as “gay” is not something I have to embrace.

to has given me freedom to explore historic Christian, chaste ways to express my love for men.¹³ What my culture defines as “gay” – the story my world offers me for who I am supposed to be and how I am supposed to live – is not something I have to embrace. There is freedom in choosing to express my love for men through friendship and service rather than through marriage or romantic partnership. Granted, opting out of the dominant way of understanding “gay”

often feels more like martyrdom than freedom. But if traditional Christianity is true, then self-denial – taking up one’s cross and following Jesus – is, in fact, regardless of how it feels to us, real freedom.

Fifth, the ministries that have helped me most *take the risk of speaking up about same-sex attraction*. For a congregation to even broach the topic of homosexuality is dangerous right now, because it’s almost guaranteed to offend dozens of people on every “side” and to cause a firestorm. But what if Christians stay silent? What if we never preach a sermon on this, or lead a Bible study on it, or mention it in a prayer group? Andrew Sullivan has written about the deadly consequences of silence:

In my adolescence and young adulthood, the teaching of the Church was merely a silence, an increasingly hollow denial even of the existence of homosexuals, let alone a credible ethical guide as to how they should live their lives. It is still true that in over thirty years of weekly churchgoing, I have never heard a homily that attempted to explain how a gay man should live, or how his sexuality should be expressed. I have heard nothing but a vast and endless and embarrassed silence, an awkward, unexpressed desire for the simple non-existence of such people, for their absence from the moral and

physical universe, for a word or a phrase, like “objective disorder,” that could simply abolish the problem they represented and the diverse humanity they symbolized.¹⁴

The ministries that have helped me venture to say something about how I might live my life, how I might go about giving and receiving love. The times when a Christian friend or priest has offered me some concrete, hopeful possibility of how I might shape my life – those have been lifelines for me. But they have required my friends to take the risk of speaking up and of committing themselves to learning along with me.

Another feature of the ministries that have helped me most is their *engaging Scripture and Christian theology in a deep, rigorous way*. We same-sex attracted folks do not have the luxury of remaining neutral on “the issue.” Since we must make concrete choices about how to “glorify God in our bodies” (1 Corinthians 6:20), many of us crave deep, searching engagement with Scripture and Christian theology. We are impatient with hasty arguments and shallow scriptural reasoning. We are frustrated when our fellow Christians want to slap a quick answer on our questions. We want to know whether the church’s historic opposition to gay sex is just about cultural prejudice or it is rooted in the Bible’s basic view of human nature and redemption.

This is illustrated in a letter to Rod Dreher from a Millennial who has left the church because of her congregation’s refusal or inability to offer a serious theological case for its ethical stance.

In all the years I was a member, my evangelical church made exactly one argument about SSM [same-sex marriage]. It’s the argument I like to call the Argument from Ickiness: being gay is icky, and the people who are gay are the worst kind of sinner you can be. Period, done, amen, pass the casserole. When you have membership with no theological or doctrinal depth that you have neglected to equip with the tools to wrestle with hard issues, the moment ickiness no longer rings true with young believers, their faith is destroyed. This is why other young ex-evangelicals I know point as their “turning point” on gay marriage to the moment they first really got to know someone who was gay. If your belief on SSM is based on a learned disgust at the thought of a gay person, the moment a gay person, any gay person, ceases to disgust you, you have nothing left. In short, the anti-SSM side, and really the Christian side of the culture war in general, is responsible for its own collapse. It failed to train up the young people on its own side, preferring instead to harness their energy while providing them no doctrinal depth by keeping them in a bubble of emotion dependent on their never engaging with the outside world on anything but warlike terms. Perhaps someday my fellow ex-evangelical Millennials and I will join other churches, but it will

be as essentially new Christians with no religious heritage from our childhoods to fall back on.¹⁵

Clearly, theology matters. Serious, sustained reading of Scripture is vital to those of us who are trying to figure out what to do with our baptized bodies. We need ministries that recognize this.

The helpful ministries *try to imagine the difficulty of being gay and the costliness of staying single*. Sometimes straight Christians have tried to comfort me in my loneliness by reminding me that marriage is no cakewalk either — and, in many cases, marriage can exacerbate loneliness. “I’m in a very happy marriage,” a friend said to me, “and I still battle loneliness.” I appreciate that perspective very much, and I need it, since I have an inveterate romantic streak that I am always trying to temper. But frankly, the more lasting consolations have come from people like my friend David Mills, who are willing to say things like this:

We ask our homosexual brethren, and our divorced brethren without annulments, to deny themselves something almost everyone else can have: a marriage, two people forming a haven in a heartless world, with someone they actively desire, with all the pleasures of romance that sexual desire brings. We ask them to live as celibates in a sexually-sodden culture where they may never find the alternative of deep, committed friendships. We ask them to risk loneliness we don’t risk.¹⁶

The way I am trying to live often seems very hard, and I appreciate it when my fellow Christians acknowledge that.

Those helpful ministries also *try to imagine and implement creative avenues to spiritual kinship and friendship*. They focus on the positive kind of life and relationships to which same-sex attracted believers are called. Eve Tushnet puts it well:

...initially, I conceived of my task, as a lgbt/ssa Catholic, as basically a) negative (don’t have gay sex) and b) intellectual (figure out why Church teaching is the way it is). I now think of it much more as the positive task of discerning vocation: discerning how God is calling me to pour out love to others.¹⁷

These ministries refuse to look down on celibacy as “second best.” Too often the possibility of chaste, committed friendship goes unexplored because we are determined to get as far away as possible from singleness. Many people on the left side of the spectrum want same-sex marriage rather than celibacy, while those on the right favor ex-gay approaches that hold out the promise of opposite-sex coupling rather than celibacy. But the ministries that have been most helpful to me, without dishonoring marriage in the least, have encouraged me to imagine a single life overflowing with familial

ties and hospitality and “thick” kinship commitments.

Furthermore, helpful ministries *recognize and nurture the spiritual gifts of gay and lesbian believers*. In their zeal to minister to LGBT Christians, they do not neglect to encourage the ministry of LGBT Christians. They do not view LGBT Christians as pitiable or “broken” or the perpetually needier, more fragile party in the relationship, but rather see them as complex, in-the-process-of-being-redeemed persons — “glorious ruins” (in Francis Schaeffer’s fine phrase) — whose experiences of temptation, repentance, grace, and growth have equipped them with unique perspectives and have forged a certain sensitivity that can be drawn out for the good of the church.

Honestly, my gay and lesbian Christian friends are some of the deepest, most thoughtful, most compassionate believers I know, and the ministry I have received from them has been some of the most caring. As Misty Irons has written:

So many times when I encounter a song, a performance, or a piece of art [or, I would add, an act of service or kindness in the Church] that strikes me as so true and subtle and poignant and uplifting..., I later learn the artist behind it is gay. It’s happened so often I now take it for granted. Maybe there’s something about being gay that enables an artist to see more clearly what it means to be human, to identify certain truths about us all. Maybe it is the ones who are forced to the margins who truly understand what it is we all have in common.¹⁸

C. S. Lewis once noted there are “certain kinds of sympathy and understanding [and] a certain social role” that only gay people can play in the church.¹⁹ Perhaps we are “called to otherness,” and the church’s ministry to us is in large measure about cultivating the ministry we can offer to the church.

Finally, the ministries that have helped me most *focus on the basics of the gospel and the “normal means of grace.”* The best “gay ministry” has only rarely mentioned anything “gay” at all. It has not been a gay support group or gay-themed Bible study or anything like that (as helpful as those may be for some people!). Rather, the most stabilizing and encouraging ministry has been garden-variety gospel preaching that holds the Cross and Resurrection constantly before me.

When I was in the throes of the coming out process and struggling with more loneliness than I had felt before or have felt since, I belonged to a church that emphasized how suffering and tears and struggle were normal parts of the Christian experience. In other words, it recognized that our discipleship will seem like (what I called above) “the long defeat.” By providing me with a sort of framework, or plausibility structure, if you like, that ministry made my personal frustration and struggles seem bearable and maybe even beautiful.

I have come to see that the kind of ministry I most crave — because it most helps — is the regular, bog-standard ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Sitting under preaching that points me to Jesus and receiving Communion (which is “Jesus placing himself in our hands so we know exactly where to find him,” as one of my Lutheran colleagues has put it) are the hallmarks of the ministry I need. Kneeling at the altar rail is where I receive the strength to keep going on this long journey.²⁰

NOTES

1 J. R. R. Tolkien, “The Mirror of Galadriel,” *The Lord of the Rings*, Book II, chapter 7 (London, UK: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004 [1954]), 353-366, here citing 357.

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6 *Ibid.*, 239.

7 *Ibid.*, 286.

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16 David Mills, “Yes, We Should Apologize to Homosexual People, and a Lot of Others,” *Aleteia* (June 29, 2016), aleteia.org/2016/06/29/yes-we-should-apologize-to-homosexual-people-and-a-lot-of-others/ (accessed September 19, 2016).

17 Eve Tushnet, “Yay Denver, Home of Happiness!” *Spiritual Friendship: Musings on God, Sexuality, Relationships* (May 23, 2012), spiritualfriendship.org/2012/05/15/yay-denver-home-of-happiness/ (accessed September 19, 2016).

18 Misty Irons, “Thoughts on Ian Charleson,” *More Musings on Christianity, Homosexuality & the Bible* (January 19, 2011), moremusingson.blogspot.ca/2011/01/thoughts-on-ian-charleson.html (accessed September 19, 2016). She reflects on Charleson’s portrayal of “the flying

Scotsman” and later missionary Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire* (1981).

19 The phrase comes from a letter C. S. Lewis wrote to Sheldon Vanauken in 1953, which appears in Vanauken’s spiritual autobiography, *A Severe Mercy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1977), 146-148. Ron Belgau reflects on the significance of this letter in “C. S. Lewis to Sheldon Vanauken on Homosexuality,” *Spiritual Friendship: Musings on God, Sexuality, Relationships* (August 25, 2013), spiritualfriendship.org/2013/08/25/c-s-lewis-to-sheldon-vanauken-on-homosexuality/ (accessed September 19, 2016).

20 Material in this article is drawn from my blog entries “The Long Defeat and the Long Loneliness” (August 23, 2016), “Ministry that Helps (Part 1)” (July 11, 2016), and “Ministry that Helps (Part 2)” (July 12, 2016) at *Spiritual Friendship: Musings on God, Sexuality, Relationships*.



WESLEY HILL

is Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies at Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania.

Chastity as a Virtue

BY MATT FRADD

Chastity is not a teeth-gritting ability to avoid violating the sexual rules but a habit of reverence for oneself and others that enables us to use our sexual powers intelligently in the pursuit of human flourishing and happiness.

It comes as a surprise that people can come to despise the very things they deeply desire, but it happens. In fact, I think for many us it is happening today with regard to morality generally and with the ideal of chastity specifically.

Through a simple example, let's examine how such a dramatic reversal of attitudes can occur. Perhaps when we were children our parents said things like "Do not drink Coca-Cola all the time," which we translated into "Thou shalt not drink Coca-Cola *just because we say so.*" Being children, we jumped to the conclusion that our parents were arbitrarily restraining us, were capriciously restricting what we could do at the moment. And if we disobeyed the "thou shalt not" and drank the Coca-Cola anyway, then when our parents found out, we reacted poorly: "But I *really wanted* it now, Mum!" Maybe our parents tried to explain that drinking soda all the time was unhealthy, but the immature versions of ourselves were not listening to them and sometimes threw a fit that involved knocking things over. At least, that was my experience. And it was probably induced by my insane sugar high!

Of course, the very idea of delaying gratification makes little sense to us when we are children. And what ten-year-old child really understands and cares about long-term health? Instead, we wonder why we should delay doing what our desires and feelings are telling us to do — namely, quenching a deep thirst for that delicious, child-obesity-inducing, fizzy liquid. As a kid hooked on sugary drinks, when my options were drinking water (rather than soda) or becoming dehydrated, I was tempted to choose the latter.

Now avid Coca-Cola fanatics — and here I speak from experience because I used to be one — have several options when people offer us water and

remind us that drinking it, rather than the soda we crave, is better for our bodies. We might assume these folks care for us, accept what they say to be wisdom, and thank them for sharing their water (and their insight) with us. But at the other extreme (and I admit there are other responses on the spectrum between these two), we might assume these folks are trying to manage us, reject their advice, and despise their water (and maybe even the water drinkers, for that matter) because we feel we do not have what it takes to drink water like we should. After all, we love Coca-Cola! We might even gulp down some soda as a protest against their advice.¹

The first response is gratitude. But the second is an emotion-stance that social psychologists, following the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, call *ressentiment*.² *Ressentiment* involves disparaging and rejecting what is good and strong because we feel unable to attain it. At some deep level we still know the thing is good and desire it; but feeling we cannot attain it, we self-deceptively tell ourselves it is bad and reject it.

When we develop *ressentiment*, the old ordering of life toward the good must come down. To continue with our example, after people tell us that drinking as much Coca-Cola as we want is unhealthy, but we have ignored their warnings and drunk it until our health wastes away, it is quite possible that we will not go back and thank them for trying to warn us, but will turn against the ideas they stood for. In a fit of *ressentiment*, we might reject their whole approach to denying strong soda-desires and subjugating them to reason. We might judge those advisors to be weaker people who were trying to impose their view of happiness on us. And here is the final twist: we might think we need some precepts in order to free ourselves from their constant attack. So, we replace “Thou shalt not drink Coca-Cola all the time” and its implied rationale “because Coca-Cola sets you on the path to Type II diabetes” with a new rule: “Thou shalt drink Coca-Cola whenever you feel like it.” Feels good, right?

But, of course, we still experience the negative physical consequences of indulging our desires for Coca-Cola and overthrowing the old order that managed our soda intake: disharmony starts in our bodies and our health suffers. Drinking wholesome amounts of water is the perfection of the human body, and when we abandon that regimen, we suffer the consequences. Our very thirstiness, because it is no longer oriented towards what is really good, slowly begins to consume us like a poison. Our soda-distorted instinct to drink slowly destroys us.

There is evidence that something like this process is causing many people today, even Christians, to experience *ressentiment* toward morality generally and toward specific moral ideals like chastity.

Consider that all of us value truly loving relationships that we can give ourselves to completely, body and soul. We want these relationships to accord with our human dignity and, if we are Christians, we want them to weave into the happiness that God intends for us in this life. “Chastity” is

the traditional name for this ideal that we so deeply value. Chastity is “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.”³ Within the context of marriage, the ideal of chastity is that the love between a man and a woman—body and soul, sexual and spiritual—will be permanent, exclusive, and faithful. In the context of singleness, it is that we, in our loving one another, will not misuse our sexuality, but will be celibate.

It is a common mistake to think that the ideal of chastity applies only within marriage, or that it especially esteems marriage. All persons will be single for at least part of their lives, and some people will be single throughout their lives—because they are called to the single life by God, or because they never find a partner amidst the sexual chaos and confusion of our culture. Yet all of us are called to chastity. Furthermore, we yearn for chastity, for “the integration of sexuality within [our] person.”

However, we live in a culture that makes it very difficult for us to live into the ideal of chastity. All around us we see marriages that are impermanent, personal loyalties that are problematically divided, and spouses and friends who are unfaithful. Sexuality is misused, within marriages and in singleness, in ways that are selfish, in ways that are abusive, and in ways that do not honor God. We do not see very many good examples of people living chastely and, so, we end up despising the ideal. We call chastity “oppressive”; we call it “naïve.” Lacking the strength in ourselves and having little community support to obtain the ideal we desire, we end up resenting it. Many aspects of popular culture—songs, television shows and movies, celebrities—reflect back to us and encourage our collective *ressentiment* of chastity.

Undoubtedly, some of the contemporary scorning of chastity is based on misconceptions people have about the ideal. But, I suspect those distorted ideas about chastity are motivated, in part, by *ressentiment*. (Recall that *ressentiment* is self-deceptive about the good, because it is easier to reject and despise something that appears foolish.)

One common misconception is that chastity is purely negative, that it revolves around not having sex. Admittedly, during singleness and at times in marriage it is appropriate to abstain from sex. But abstinence is not the heart of chastity. It couldn't be, because abstinence by itself does not express any virtue. Abstaining from sex might simply result from two people delaying the fulfillment of their desires to have sex until the opportunity arises. Furthermore, sexual abstinence only identifies what the people are not doing. What should they be doing?

People require positive actions to convey their love for one another. Chaste persons are in control of their sexual desires rather than those desires being in control of them. Chastity enables them to love one another in accord with their common dignity. Simply put, chastity is a sort of reverence: a chaste person reveres and respects the other person by making sure that before they have sex, both are united in a common aim—namely, a marriage

commitment whose mutual goal is the gift of self to the other. When people will the good for one another in this way, they do not act solely on passing desires and feelings, but rather on their commitment to help the other person attain the good and honor God.

Let me illustrate these points with an example from my own marriage. I remember a date with my wife in San Diego's Little Italy. On my iPhone I decided to play Dean Martin's "Sway," and we began dancing in the street as though no one was watching. We ignored the weird looks from passersby, which I deserved due to my lack of dancing talent. (People who see me dance often ask, "Dude, are you okay?") It was silly and inelegant, but we made each other sway as our friend Dean crooned through the cell phone speakers. And we came home from the date ready to make love.

Now, my wife and I use natural family planning, a method to help couples either achieve or postpone pregnancy by monitoring naturally occurring signs of fertility during the woman's menstrual cycle. There we were ready to make love, and my wife said, "Honey, I'm fertile." We had a decision to make—together. So, we discussed our situation, saying things like, "Are we ready for another child?" "I know we are hard on money right now. Is this the right decision?" "The kids right now are a handful. I'm worried I can't handle more at this moment." Our common bond of married love guided the discussion of the action we should take together.

That particular night we decided not to have sex. We watched our favorite show *The Office* instead. Not as much fun, but still fun. Was our sexual abstinence a purely negative action? No. Our decision to abstain was a positive choice of love. We chose a goal together as one, united by our marriage. This positive action which expressed and enriched our love was a fruit of chastity.

Now I do not want to be misunderstood. The decision to not have sex was not the essential feature of chastity that evening. Chastity does not say just "Do not have sex" or "Have sex." My wife and I could have said, "OK, let's go ahead with our sexual desires and be open to another child," and that equally would have been an expression of chastity. Chastity came to the fore in our reverence for one another, in our stopping to acknowledge and examine our sexual desires, and in orienting our lives toward the good, as we saw it together.

We see few examples of people living chastely and, so, we end up despising the ideal. We call chastity "oppressive" and "naïve." Lacking the strength in ourselves and having little community support to obtain the ideal we desire, we end up resenting it.

Chastity is not a momentary feeling, but a habit of the will that gives us the power to say “no” – to sex outside of the relationship of marriage, and to sex inside the relationship of marriage when it does not further the unity of the spouses. It also encourages us to say “yes” to sex that expresses and nurtures the unifying married love. In each context – single life and married life – chastity goes out to the other in a desire to love the person as the other.

Another common misconception about chastity is that it revolves around repressing sexual desire and not thinking about sex. This, I suspect, has it almost exactly backwards.

It does not prevent every disagreement or fill our lives with bunnies, sunshine, and rainbows like a Walt Disney movie. But it integrates our sexual longings with our commitment to love the other person through good and bad times, sick and healthy times, poor and rich times, and ultimately the goodbye of the loved one through

death. Chastity allows us to hold others up for the sake of their personal dignity, not abstaining from inappropriate sexual acts in a negative way, but channeling our desire through positive actions appropriate to our shared life.

Here’s another common misconception about chastity – that it revolves around repressing sexual desire and not thinking about sex. This, I suspect, has it almost exactly backwards. To see why, let’s be clear on the difference between sexual desire and lust. These terms are not synonymous; lust does not mean “strong sexual desire.” Sexual desire is a gift from God that must live up to the high demands of love, expressed in practical wisdom and chastity. Lust, on the other hand, does not propel us to love. Lust does not say, “This is my body given for you”; it says, “This is your body taken for me.” Since this is so, chastity has no interest in repressing sexual desire, but it would really like to eliminate lust.

We live in a sexualized culture. But that fact is increasingly difficult for us to recognize. We are becoming like the baby fish who said to its mother, “Where’s all this water everyone’s talking about?” A distorted sexuality is the water we swim in. I can remember when the word “sexy” was an adjective that meant “alluring,” but now people use it for donuts and ideas and plants, you name it. One day I pulled into work in my new car and a colleague said admiringly, “Man, that’s a sexy car.” I replied, “It’s a minivan!”

When I say our culture is “sexualized,” I mean we *talk* a lot about sex. We joke about it and write in bathroom stalls about it, but we rarely stop to *think* about sex. Frank Sheed (1897-1981), the Australian apologist, explains:

The typical modern man practically never thinks about sex. He dreams of it, of course, by day and by night; he craves for it; he

pictures it, is stimulated or depressed by it, slavers over it. But this frothing, steaming activity is not thinking. Slavering is not thinking, picturing is not thinking, craving is not thinking, dreaming is not thinking. Thinking means bringing the power of the mind to bear: thinking about sex means striving to see sex in its innermost reality and in the function it is meant to serve.⁴

Since this is our situation, chastity has no interest in our not thinking about sex; it would really like for us to think well about sex. The place to start is with the *telos* for which God created us, and why God made the other creatures and us sexual beings: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:22, 28). This tells us that sex, sexual desire, and orgasms are good. Chastity wants us to think about what good it is that they were created for. How do they fit within God’s plan for us to love one another and honor God?

The virtue of chastity calls us, as sexual beings, to revere ourselves as creatures made in the image of God and made to honor God through our actions – through how we do have sex and do not have sex. And it calls us to revere other persons for the sake of the other person’s good and ultimate happiness. When we think about it, this loving reverence for ourselves and others is what we deeply desire. It would be a shame to become confused about chastity and despise it.

NOTES

1 Many Coca-Cola drinkers are not fanatical in this way. They are fine people, as far as I know, and I apologize in advance for besmirching them with a playfully extended analogy.

2 In *On the Genealogy of Morality* I.10-12 (1887), Nietzsche famously deploys the concept of *ressentiment* in his account of how traditional morality arises: he says that because weaker people felt *ressentiment* toward the better and stronger people who dominated them, the weak ones self-deceptively denied the goodness of the strong people and gravitated to moral rules in order to control them. While some societal rules and structures may arise this way, I strongly deny that all morality has this ‘genealogy.’ Indeed, in this article I am flipping the tables on Nietzsche by suggesting that some opposition to divinely-given morality is an expression of *ressentiment*.

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), §2337. The catechism is available online at www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM (accessed September 24, 2016).

4 Frank Sheed, “The Nature of Sex and Marriage,” in *Society and Sanity: Understanding How to Live Well Together* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2013 [1953]), 99-109, here citing 99.



MATT FRADD

is founder and executive director of *The Porn Effect*, a ministry of Integrity Restored, and lives in Georgia.

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

Christians may be tempted to respond to hookup culture by proclaiming "Chastity!" and making judgments on sexual sin. If they are unwilling to budge from this response, they might as well just walk away from the young adults they are trying to help now.

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.



DONNA FREITAS

is a freelance author and speaker in Brooklyn, New York.

Beyond the “Ring by Spring” Culture

BY STACY KEOGH GEORGE

The “ring by spring” culture at Christian colleges and universities can pressure students to become engaged or to marry before they graduate. This may muddle their perceptions of marriage and vocation, and deflect them from receiving more formative preparation for marriage.

Christian colleges and universities are unique academic institutions. They not only provide rigorous academic courses, competitive athletic programs, and opportunities for student participation in a number of clubs and organizations on campuses, they simultaneously serve as religious communities committed to advancing the gospel through faith integration in the classroom and Christ-centered policies in the student life division. For this reason, they often appear to be institutions of higher education that serve much like Christian congregations by providing opportunities for educational, physical, emotional, and spiritual growth.

My exposure to Christian higher education began my freshman year as an undergraduate at a small, Christian liberal arts university in the northwestern United States. I was somewhat familiar with Christian college culture, having been well-prepared by my youth group at my home church, but I was nonetheless overwhelmed by the enormous pressure I felt to fit in the day I arrived on campus. Hearing the chattering of other young women on my floor about who they pegged as their future husband at the nearby all-male dorm, I was immediately aware that my success in college would be measured not only by achieving a college degree, but also by whether I had an engagement ring on my finger by the time I graduated. It was common knowledge among my friends and classmates that getting a “ring by spring” of one’s senior year was part of the hidden curriculum of the institution.

Though I failed to get my ring by spring, I succeeded academically and eventually returned to Christian higher education a decade later as a professor. In the first weeks of teaching, I was stunned to hear that the ring by spring culture still pervaded student life. Within the first two weeks of the fall semester I had three students, all single women, approach me with concerns about leaving college before finding a husband. They were already dreading graduation, rather than anticipating what lies ahead for them in the future. They were focusing only on their ‘failure’ at not being engaged at twenty-two, while overlooking their incredible academic accomplishments. After consoling and reassuring these students that God had better options for them at this time, I developed a research plan to more fully understand this not-so-hidden culture on Christian college and university campuses.

EXAMINING “RING BY SPRING”

My research examines the dynamics that lead students to feel compelled to become engaged before they graduate from college. My purpose is not to question the legitimacy of young engagements or marriages; nor do I presuppose that young marriages are an inherently positive or an inherently negative practice. Rather, I seek to understand the dynamics that lead these students to marry young, the peer pressure that may accompany their dating experience (or lack thereof) on campus, and the institutional infrastructure that may foster this culture. In doing so, perhaps I will gather information on how to address ring by spring with delicacy, and thereby provide Christian communities serving young adults with the necessary tools and procedures to promote healthy relationships.

Information from this study comes from a private Christian school located in a suburban setting in the United States, with a student population of approximately 2,500 undergraduates. In the fall of 2014, I asked students to complete an online survey, which would anonymously track their responses to questions about the ring by spring culture. The survey included fifty-five questions. Some of these questions asked students for basic demographic information such as their gender, age, major, and religious affiliation. Other questions sought information about their parents’ marital status, their own perceptions of marriage, and their views on the ring by spring culture more generally. In a series of open-ended questions, I asked students to discuss their perceptions of dating culture on campus and their level of sexual activity. The study concluded by seeking information on how, or in what ways, faculty and staff can help facilitate more productive conversations on campus around the topics of dating, sex, and marriage.

DEFINING “RING BY SPRING”

The tagline “ring by spring” signifies the tongue-in-cheek ambition of many traditional (eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old) Christian college and university students to be engaged by spring semester of their senior year. While students and faculty may joke about the marriage-obsessed ring by

spring culture, it dispenses a social psychological burden that follows students, particularly women, throughout their undergraduate experience.

Instead of encouraging men and women of faith to live out their individual vocations which may or may not include marriage, ring by spring culture pressures students to fulfill this sacrament as a cultural requisite for Christian college success. This is how Christian college students themselves, define “ring by spring”:

While students and faculty may joke about the marriage-obsessed ring by spring culture, it dispenses a social psychological burden that follows students, particularly women, throughout their undergraduate experience.

“The silly notion that, in Christian universities, the goal of couples (particularly women) is to attain a ring by spring. This puts pressure on people in relationships to commit to one another prematurely and also those not involved in relationships to couple up and rush into a committed relationship.”

“When a girl is supposed to get engaged by the spring of her senior year”

“A social pressure to be proposed to before you are done with school”

“Put a ring on her finger before spring”

“The desperate act of finding a husband before stepping out into the scary real world. I hear it most particularly described as a female goal. I also see it as the idea that finding a husband after school is highly improbable and extremely difficult, which in my opinion is ridiculous.”

“The goal of a woman to find a husband by the spring of her final year of college. In my experience, men are not pressured in the same way women are when it comes to this phrase.”

“The phenomenon (typically experienced at Christian universities and by heterosexual couples) where dating couples in their last year of college get engaged sometime during their final spring semester.”

“Gurrl, you betta find yourself a man by the time you graduate!”

These are just a few — roughly 5% — of the responses received from the survey questions related directly to the ring by spring phenomenon. Not surprisingly, the students report that they feel an incredible amount of pressure. In fact, 60 of the 139 responses to the question, “What is ring by spring?” use the word “pressure” to describe the sentiment behind the ring by spring

culture. When asked directly if students feel pressured to be married, at least 67% of students say they feel at least a little bit of pressure.

Where does this pressure come from? Of the social groups encouraging students to marry, their peer groups (33%), family (26%), churches (24%), and society in general (34%) are among those mentioned most frequently by respondents. Professors and student life staff on campuses, on the other hand, are among the groups least mentioned by them (only 3% of respondents, or 5 students). Yet, the culture continues to permeate Christian college and university campuses because of students' interactions with one another: 84% of student respondents report that they hear conversations about ring by spring at least occasionally, and 24% say the topic comes up often.

Women feel more pressure to be married than men (see figure 1). It is noteworthy that over 80% of the respondents in this study identify as female. This disproportionate gender response may indicate that women were more interested in communicating their perceptions of ring by spring than men.¹ Pressure to marry is generally higher for women than men due to traditional social expectations of domesticity; additional Christian pressures to refrain from premarital sexual activity (discussed below) may generate a heightened sense of anxiety for women to be in a committed relationship.

Do you feel pressured to be married?

	Definitely	A Little Bit	Not Really	Not at All	Already Married	Total
Male	0	6 (22%)	12 (44%)	9 (33%)	0	27
Female	16 (14%)	54 (48%)	20 (18%)	19 (17%)	3 (3%)	112
All	12%	43%	23%	20%	2%	139

Figure 1: Cross Tabulation of Gender and Pressure to Marry

The Christian university where I conducted the study does not keep accurate statistics on how many students become engaged during their undergraduate years. However, the students' perceptions of how many students actually become engaged are vastly exaggerated. I asked students whether they anticipated becoming engaged or being married before they graduated. Only 6.3% of students say that they are either engaged or plan to become engaged before graduation. Given the pressure felt by most students in the survey, there is an evident disconnect between this reality and the students' expectations.

From where do these expectations emerge? My findings suggest that there is a correlation between students who go to church frequently and amount of pressure they feel to marry. That is, the more involved students are in a church community, the more pressure they feel to be engaged or married before they graduate from college.

Many students at Christian colleges and universities have been brought up in religious households and participated in Christian youth groups throughout adolescence. Clearly, there are a variety of perspectives on marriage within these Christian communities, but traditional Christian theologies communicate that marriage is a portrait or metaphor of God's relationship with the Church. The Apostle Paul writes, "For this reason a

Given the social pressures to become sexually active, young Christians may think the only way to overcome temptation is to marry. But they need more tools to overcome sexual temptation than to simply "put a ring on it."

man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:31-32, NIV).² Thus, young unmarried Christians are taught to believe that just as God is fully committed to God's people, they should keep their intimate relationships sacred within marital structures that allow a couple to demonstrate complete and full commitment to one another. In this sense, it is the norm for Christian communities to promote sexual abstinence until marriage. As a result, single Christian students are expected to remain sexually "pure," which increases the pressure and anticipation to marry.

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AND MARRIAGE PREPARATION

Contemporary Christian communities may be falling short in properly preparing young adults for intimate relationships. In *Premarital Sex in America*, Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker explain:

Churchgoing and religiosity often provide social support and social control for those who remain virgins into adulthood. On the other hand, however, since organized religion is a key source of American's social interaction and a central place to meet people, it actually increases sexual opportunity. So virginity in the pews becomes quite rare, given enough time.³

Given the social pressures outside the church for them to become sexually active, Christian young people may think the only way to overcome temptation is to marry. They may see marriage as the only way to be sexually active and free from religious guilt. This is an honorable notion, no doubt, but young adults require more tools to overcome sexual temptation than to simply "put a ring on it." Young Christians admit to pushing the boundaries when it comes to sex.⁴

When marriage becomes the only solution to overcome temptation, then having sex becomes a primary reason a couple decides to marry. The danger in this, as most people recognize, is that marriage is the union between two people with different backgrounds, expectations, and family structures, which make for inevitable conflict after the honeymoon.

Given that an alarming number of evangelical Christian marriages will end in divorce,⁵ it seems reasonable that the ring by spring culture, with its attendant pressure to marry young with little to no marital preparation, may be an unhealthy practice on Christian college and university campuses. While divorce is generally considered the primary indicator of a failed marriage, there may be other consequences to marrying young that young adults do not consider before tying the knot. For instance, persons’ identities continue to develop through the mid-twenties, and some people change drastically between their college years and early adulthood.

Delaying marriage can have significant benefits for college-aged men and women. Information from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, and the RELATE Institute reveals that later marriage allows both men and women to pursue post-graduate education, establish themselves in their careers, and become financial stable. The economic benefits of waiting to get married more greatly impacts women. According to the study, women may make as much as \$18,000 more per year if they wait until their thirties to marry.⁶

Finally, the pressure to marry early often leads to the vocation of singleness being undervalued in Christian communities. The Apostle Paul writes, “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God; one having one kind and another a different kind. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am” (1 Corinthians 7:7-8), and then he goes on to extol some benefits of remaining single (7:25-35). He teaches that singleness is a *gift* that many are called to live out, and faithfully embracing it is righteous in the eyes of God. Yet rarely is singleness celebrated or encouraged in this way in Christian circles. Too often, being single is seen as deviant or abnormal. Healthy family-based gatherings and couples’ retreats are pervasive in Christian communities, but many single-focused groups are perceived as glorified “meet-markets,” places for nonmarried individuals to mingle with potential marriage partners. Singleness then becomes invisible, as though it is not an option for adult Christians. This only increases the pressure to find a partner as way to be seen as “successful” in those communities.

ADDRESSING RING BY SPRING

Marriage is also honorable in the eyes of God. Yet the pressure to marry young seems to be distracting some students from pursuing their callings. Undergraduate students’ engagements and marriages are very personal

matters, but I think many students (like the ones who approached me) would appreciate some faithful guidance. Their decision to attend a Christian college or university typically involves some embrace of the “mind and heart” education – both inside and outside of the classroom – that such schools provide.

Christian campuses should review to what extent the ring by spring culture is perpetuated by their institutional structures. They have a responsibility to guide students to pursue healthy relationships. This does not imply thwarting all engagements on campus or stifling students’ personal goals of finding a spouse. Rather, faculty and staff should use their disciplinary knowledge, theological convictions, professional training, and personal relationships to better educate students on the implications of their marital engagement for life “beyond the ring.”

A plethora of resources for marital preparation are available from both Christian and non-Christian perspectives, ranging from pre-marital counseling with pastors and marriage and family therapists, to books and quizzes to review with your mate, to online programs and articles to walk you through the engagement process. Even so, how many Christian college students seek out these materials? In a second wave of research in which only engaged or married students were polled, I asked students to describe their preparation for marriage. Only 43% were enrolled in pre-marital counseling and only 20% had purchased marital preparation books or materials. It is clear that more guidance is required to better equip students for a lifetime commitment to another person.

I asked students with whom, or in what context, they would like to discuss marriage and sex. They prefer to have intimate discussions privately with family members or church leaders rather than large-group, impersonal discussions about these issues, and are even less interested in private conversations with faculty and staff (see figure 2).

*Outside of romantic relationships,
where should there be more discussions about marriage and sex?*

	Marriage	Sex
Privately with Friends	55%	59%
Privately with Parents	51%	49%
Privately with Religious Leader	35%	36%
University-wide Forum	27%	38%
Residence Life Meetings	24%	42%
Privately with Faculty	10%	11%
Privately with Staff	8%	10%
No One	5%	3%

Figure 2: Preferences for Discussions about Marriage and Sex

There may be occasional faculty members who speak to students about marriage. However, students report that the majority of their conversations about marriage are with persons unaffiliated with the university (specifically, family and church members). Indeed, 90% of the respondents in my study indicate that their conversations around engagement and marriage are among peers or with their families, rather than among faculty, staff, or administrators on campus.

Christian colleges and universities have resources to support students who find themselves at a relationship crossroads: a faculty population of highly educated, successful Christian adults who deeply care about the students in their classes; a student life center that connects with our students on a personal level every day; a student health center with trained counselors and health educators to encourage healthy lifestyles and promote self-care; and an eager and curious student population directly affected by the ring by spring culture.

CONCLUSION

Many Christian college and university students feel pressure to become engaged or marry before they complete their senior year. Christian schools typically claim little responsibility for perpetuating the ring by spring culture, but once they recognize that it exists, its potential harm requires their attention. Offering traditional undergraduates the appropriate resources to plan their engagement and marriage decisions – such as workshops, seminars, pre-marital counseling sessions, or references to external sources – would benefit them during their college years and give their future marriages a better chance to succeed.

How Christian colleges and universities nurture young adults’ convictions regarding Christian dating is an essential discussion for all Christian communities. Mentoring resources must include supporting students as they discern whether to marry young, a choice that is arguably one of the most formative decisions of their lives. Specifically, they must handle the ring by spring culture with care, especially as it pressures some students to become engaged and to enter into marriage at a much earlier age than in the wider culture.⁸

Jonathan Grant argues that Christian thinking about marriage should be countercultural:

We must reframe marriage as an essential part of the community of the church. It is not simply enough to wave the happy couple off into the sunset; the goal of Christian marriage is not to see two lone rangers become one long ranger – it is that they become part of the wider faith community. By investing time in those entering into marriage, we can better help them to understand the nature of their commitment to reach the maturity required to sustain the covenant.⁹

A Christian toolkit to help undergraduates battle sexual temptation would include creating space for this sort of rich theological reflection about sexuality and marriage, exposing young people to nonmarried Christian lifestyles, and providing professional pre-marital programs. Such resources may prevent some students from marrying before they are properly prepared and may better prepare those who do marry for successful Christian marriages.

NOTES

1 The female population at the college is approximately sixty percent of the student population.

2 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

3 Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21.

4 *Ibid.*, 228.

5 Jonathan Grant notes that “although rates of divorce among American evangelicals have been consistently lower than the national average on most measures, evangelicals still track with the general cultural trend. The proportion of divorced or separated evangelicals almost doubled from the 1970s to the 2000s, from 25 percent to 46 percent—which is below the national average but hardly a victory for the distinctive witness of the church” [*Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), 39.] For a review of the statistics, see Ed Stetzer, “Marriage, Divorce, and the Church: What Do the Stats Say, and Can Marriage Be Happy?” *The Exchange* (February 14, 2014), www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/february/marriage-divorce-and-body-of-christ-what-do-stats-say-and-c.html (accessed August 25, 2016).

6 Kay Hymowitz, Jason S. Carroll, W. Bradford Wilcox, and Kelleen Kaye, “Knot Yet: The Benefits and Costs of Delayed Marriage in America” (2013), <http://twentysomethingmarriage.org/> (accessed August 25, 2016).

8 In the United States today, the estimated median age for marriage is 27 for women and 29 for men. See “Families and Living Arrangements,” *United States Census Bureau*, www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/marital.html (accessed August 25, 2016).

9 Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex*, 234.



STACY KEOGH GEORGE

is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington.

Intense the Love God Molded

BY TERRY W. YORK

Intense the love God molded
into the lump of clay;
the dust and mud God shaped and formed
on that first human day.
How shall the flesh Creator made
respond when love is breathed to life?
The Holy Spirit is that Breath
and guides the love to God.

The clay, God's breath inhaling,
exhales its love in praise;
in marriage, friendship, deepest prayer,
love breathed in many ways.
Now shall the flesh Creator made
respond in worship breathed to life.
The Holy Spirit is that Breath
and guides the love to God.

In Christ, we see God's loving,
both chaste and freely shared.
God's love is shaped by sacrifice
and with compassion paired
until the flesh Creator made
responds to death and breathes no life.
Then shall we in new bodies rise
to breathe not air, but Love.

Intense the Love God Molded

TERRY W. YORK

KURT KAISER



1. In - tense the love God mold - ed in - to the lump of clay;
2. The clay God's breath in - hal - ing, ex - hales its love in praise;
3. In Christ, we see God's lov - ing, both chaste and free - ly shared.

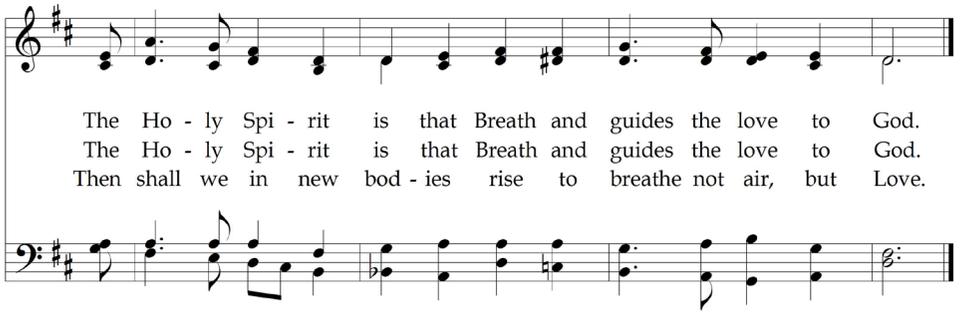


the dust and mud God shaped and formed on that first hu-man day.
in mar - riage, friend - ship, deep - est prayer, love breathed in ma - ny ways.
God's love is shaped by sac - ri - fice and with com - pas - sion paired



How shall the flesh Cre - a - tor made re - spond when love is breathed to life?
Now shall the flesh Cre - a - tor made re - spond in wor - ship breathed to life.
un - til the flesh Cre - a - tor made re - sponds to death and breathes no life.





The Ho - ly Spi - rit is that Breath and guides the love to God.
The Ho - ly Spi - rit is that Breath and guides the love to God.
Then shall we in new bod - ies rise to breathe not air, but Love.

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Tune: ANNIVERSARY

Worship Service

BY AMBER C. INSCORE ESSICK

Call to Worship

Creator God,

as we unite our voices in prayer and worship,

gather us to yourself.

As we contemplate the virtue of chastity,

gather us to one another.

As we learn how to live lives of commitment to you,

take us deeper into the life of Christ, our beloved.

As we speak about desire and commitment to one another,

take us deeper into the life of the world, your creation.

Chiming of the Hour

Silent Meditation

Sexual love is the heart of community life. Sexual love is the force that in our bodily life connects us most intimately to the Creation, to the fertility of the world, to farming and to the care of animals. It brings us into the dance that holds the community together and joins it to its place.

*Wendell Berry*¹

One of the main goals of chastity is to love as many people as possible as deeply as possible.

*James Martin, S. J.*²

Introit Hymn

“All Creatures of Our God and King”

All creatures of our God and King
lift up your voice and with us sing,
Alleluia, alleluia!

Thou burning sun with golden beam,
thou silver moon with softer gleam,
 O praise Him, O praise Him,
 Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Thou mother earth, who day by day
unfolds God's blessings on our way,
 O praise Him, alleluia!
The flowers and fruits that in thee grow,
let them His glory also show:
 O praise Him, O praise Him,
 Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

All you who are of tender heart,
forgiving others, take your part,
 O praise Him, alleluia!
All who long pain and sorrow bear,
praise God and on Him cast your care:
 O praise Him, O praise Him,
 Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Let all things their creator bless
and worship Him in humbleness,
 O praise Him, alleluia!
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
and praise the Spirit, Three in One!
 O praise Him, O praise Him,
 Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

St. Francis of Assisi (1225); paraphrased by William H. Draper (c. 1910), alt.
Tune: LASST UNS ERFREUEN

The First Reading: Genesis 2:18-25

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.”

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Litany of Thanksgiving

For the image of God borne into every human creature,
thanks be to God.

For the unity of God reflected in the desire of humans for one another,
thanks be to God.

For the cultivation of desire with selfless patience,
thanks be to God.

For the love of God communicated through human touch and union,
and the same love given in affectionate celibacy,
thanks be to God.

For friendship, for its intimacy, and for its safety in chastity,
thanks be to God.

For the gift of this mystery –
in expressing the fullness of commitment for one another,
couples may join God, their creator, in the creative act –
thanks be to God.

For the blessing of covenantal commitment,
which grants the freedom of full expression,
thanks be to God.

**For all those everywhere who nurture love
by honoring their commitments,
thanks be to God.**

The Second Reading: Song of Solomon 7:10-13 and Psalm 63:1-8

In praise of marital desire:

I am my beloved's
and his desire is for me.
Come, my beloved,
let us go forth into the fields,
and lodge in the villages;

let us go out early to the vineyards,
and see whether the vines have budded,
whether the grape blossoms have opened
and the pomegranates are in bloom.
There I will give you my love.
The mandrakes give forth fragrance,
and over our doors are all choice fruits,
new as well as old,
which I have laid up for you, O my beloved.

In praise of desire for God:

O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

Hymn of Response

“He Hideth My Soul”

A wonderful Savior is Jesus my Lord,
a wonderful Savior to me;
He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock,
where rivers of pleasure I see.

*He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock
that shadows a dry, thirsty land;
He hideth my life with the depths of His love,
and covers me there with His hand,
and covers me there with His hand.*

A wonderful Savior is Jesus my Lord,
He taketh my burden away;
He holdeth me up, and I shall not be moved,
He giveth me strength as my day.

Refrain

With numberless blessings each moment He crowns,
and filled with His fullness divine,
I sing in my rapture, oh, glory to God
for such a Redeemer as mine!

Refrain

When clothed in His brightness, transported I rise
to meet Him in clouds of the sky,
His perfect salvation, His wonderful love
I'll shout with the millions on high.

Refrain

Fanny J. Crosby (1890)

Tune: KIRKPATRICK

The Third Reading: Matthew 19:3-12

Some Pharisees came to Jesus, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" He answered, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." They said to him, "Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?" He said to them, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery."

His disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But he said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

Communal Confession

Living God,
by whom all things were created
and by whom all creatures on earth receive care,
we offer our confessions to you.

Too often our conversations about chastity have focused
on inactivity,
on some future commitment, or
on sterile restraint.

Lord, have mercy.

The weakness of our flesh,
rather than the strength of our love,
has determined our rules and our actions.

Lord, have mercy.

Our rhetoric about chastity has been theologically unimaginative,
helping neither single nor coupled persons
learn to love fully and deeply.

Lord, have mercy.

We have objectified humans, especially women,
in our analogies and lessons on purity and chastity.

Lord, have mercy.

We have asked others to bear the burden
of our own uncontrolled desires.

Lord, have mercy.

We have been sexually perverse,
seeking to gain rather than to give,
to be caught up in passion rather than to offer care for one another.

Lord, have mercy.

As a church, we have been too shy about sex,
failing to contribute to the growth of our cultural understandings
about human bodies and their relationship to one another and to you.

Lord, have mercy.

We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent.

Help us to turn to one another in love,
even as your Trinitarian life of giving, loving, and deep connection—
out of which all human life flows and is nourished—
teaches us about the blessedness of committed living. **Amen.**

Assurance of Pardon

Having confessed our sins and our need for our Creator's redemption,
we now accept and trust in God's free and full pardon.

Let us participate in fellowship
with one another and with God
at the Lord's table.

*Celebration of Holy Communion**Sermon**Silent Meditation*

When you have loved [Christ], you shall be chaste; when you have
touched [him], you shall become pure; when you have accepted [him],
you shall be a virgin.

Whose power is stronger,
whose generosity is more abundant,
whose appearance is more beautiful,
whose love more tender,
whose courtesy more gracious.

*Saint Clare of Assisi (1194-1253)*³

Hymn of Reflection and Commitment

"Intense the Love God Molded"

Intense the love God molded
into the lump of clay;
the dust and mud God shaped and formed
on that first human day.

How shall the flesh Creator made
respond when love is breathed to life?

The Holy Spirit is that Breath
and guides the love to God.

The clay, God's breath inhaling,
exhales its love in praise;
in marriage, friendship, deepest prayer,
love breathed in many ways.

Now shall the flesh Creator made
respond in worship breathed to life.

The Holy Spirit is that Breath
and guides the love to God.

In Christ, we see God's loving,
both chaste and freely shared.
God's love is shaped by sacrifice
and with compassion paired
until the flesh Creator made
responds to death and breathes no life.
Then shall we in new bodies rise
to breathe not air, but Love.

Terry W. York, ASCAP (2016)

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Benediction: 1 John 4:11-12

Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Amen. Go in peace.

NOTES

1 Wendell Berry, "Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community," in *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community: Eight Essays* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 117-173, here citing 133.

2 James Martin, S. J., *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 220.

3 Saint Clare of Assisi, "First Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague," *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, translated by Regis J. Armstrong, O. F. M. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 190-194, here citing 191.



AMBER C. INSCORE ESSICK

is Co-Pastor of Port Royal Baptist Church in Port Royal, Kentucky.

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**Raphael's image, based on a popular apocryphal story,
commends Mary's chastity as a model for young women
about to be betrothed and married.**

Mary's Worthy Suitor

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The chastity of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is frequently represented by a white lily or, in an Annunciation painting, a vase sitting on the table with light passing through it without breaking the vessel. An enclosed garden also represents her perpetual virginity in Catholic art.

The young Mary is most often featured in representations of the Lukan accounts of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38), Visitation (1:39-57), and Nativity (2:15-19). But she also appears in images like this one, Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin*, based on an apocryphal story about her betrothal to Joseph.

Raphael's painting was probably commissioned by the Albizzini family for the church dedicated to the Virgin's wedding ring in Città di Castello. The artist, only twenty-one years old at the time, had recently become an independent master and left the workshop of his teacher, Perugino (1446-1523). Raphael must have been quite proud of this work, which shows off his mastery of one-point linear perspective, because he signed and dated it.

The subject matter is a narrative found in the *Golden Legend*, an anthology of stories compiled by Jacobus da Voragine around 1260. This immensely popular book (remarkably, over one thousand copies of it have survived!) gave readers more "human" details about the lives of biblical characters and later Christian saints.

In this story, the Virgin Mary is at the temple awaiting her suitors. Each man selects a rod and presents it to the high priest. The suitor with the rod that miraculously blooms will be Mary's betrothed. In Raphael's composition, an older Joseph holds a flowering rod in one hand and with his other hand is about to place a ring on Mary's finger. Other temple virgins stand to the left of Mary, while unsuccessful suitors stand to Joseph's side. (One young suitor breaks his rod with his knee in frustration!)

The lines, or orthogonals, of the piazza converge on the doorway of the temple, which looks much like an Italian baptistery. The building's shape was often used by contemporary Renaissance architects, drawing their inspiration from Roman temples. It also recalls the Dome of the Rock, which had been built in Jerusalem in the seventh century on the site of the Temple of Solomon. This is an appropriate backdrop to the marriage of the Virgin.

Scenes like this served to commend Mary's chastity as a model for young women about to be betrothed and married.

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Botticelli draws freely from mythological figures to create a moral allegory of chaste and pure love controlling the sensual passions.

Love in Control

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

By the 1480s, Sandro Botticelli was one of the leading painters of the Renaissance and was working for the Medici family. Many works of this period, often considered his masterpieces, use mythological subjects to blend contemporary historical references and moral instruction.

Pallas and the Centaur, which is recorded in the 1498-1499 inventory as “Camilla and a Satyr,” originally was hung in the “old house” of the Medici family in a ground floor room alongside the chamber of Lorenzo, together with the *Primavera*.¹ The old palace on Via Larga was owned by Lorenzo and Pierfrancesco de’ Medici, cousins of Lorenzo the Magnificent.

The female figure with long blonde hair wears a wreath of olive branches with a diamond at the top. Her white, transparent gown is decorated with linked balls or circles, perhaps a symbol of the Medici family crest. She wears leather boots and bears defensive weapons—a diamond-crusted halberd (combined spear and battle axe) and a shield on her back.² The centaur submits to her, despite his having a bow and quiver of arrows.

There are no iconographic precedents for this scene. Botticelli has creatively blended a goddess figure (but without the helmet, aegis, and sword necessary to identify the woman as Pallas) and an archer centaur (who represented wild, sensual instincts and passions in contemporary Florence) to create an allegory of reason ruling over instinct in order to nurture virtue and control vice.³

The painting may be related to the marriage of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and Semiramide in 1482, which is a good date for the painting stylistically. It is suggested that Lorenzo de’ Medici gave the painting to his cousin and protégé on the occasion of his marriage to symbolize “the supremacy of the mind and reason over the senses and earthly temptations, factors that distract a young man from the path of the *studia humanitas*.” The painting then becomes an allegory of chaste and pure love controlling the sensual passions.⁴

NOTES

1 Mediateca di Palazzo Medici Riccardi, [www.palazzo-medici.it/mediateca/en/Scheda_Sandro_Botticelli,_Pallade_e_il_centauro_\(1482-1485_circa\)](http://www.palazzo-medici.it/mediateca/en/Scheda_Sandro_Botticelli,_Pallade_e_il_centauro_(1482-1485_circa)) (accessed October 17, 2016).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid. See also, Pierluigi de Vecchi and Daniel Arasse, *Botticelli: From Lorenzo the Magnificent to Savonarola*, exhibition catalog of Musée du Luxembourg, Paris and Palazzo Strozzi, Florence. (Milan, IT: Skira, 2003), 122-127.

4 *Botticelli: From Lorenzo the Magnificent to Savonarola*, 124.

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In this portrait of a couple's loving intimacy, Rembrandt alludes to the chastity of Rebekah during Isaac and Rebekah's sojourn among the Philistines.

A Couple's Intimacy

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

In this portrait of a couple's loving intimacy, commonly known as "The Jewish Bride," Dutch Baroque master Rembrandt van Rijn alludes to the chastity of Rebekah during Isaac and Rebekah's sojourn among the Philistines. Jonathan Bikker, in his notes for the exhibition *Rembrandt: The Late Works* at the National Gallery, London, in 2014, suggests that the quality of intimacy provides the key to unraveling the painting's iconography.¹

According to Genesis 26:1-11, God protected Isaac and Rebekah from a famine by sending them to the Philistine territory of Gerar ruled by King Abimelech. Isaac was afraid of being murdered by men who might desire his beautiful wife Rebekah and, to protect himself, he pretended to be her brother. This ruse worked until Abimelech, looking out a window, observed Isaac fondling his wife. When the king confronted him, Isaac confessed to his scheme. Then Abimelech, in his wisdom, reprimanded Isaac: he explained that Isaac's plan made it more likely that Rebekah's honor would be ruined (and, when her chastity was violated, that guilt would be brought upon them all) than if Isaac had been honest and protected her as her husband.

Rembrandt omits from the final painting the figure of Abimelech and his rebuke of Isaac's self-serving plan, although his drawings of the same subject include the leader. Instead, he redirects attention to the sincerity between the couple.

Later artists revered the tenderness conveyed in Rembrandt's portrayal of the couple's exchange of loving glances. For instance, Vincent van Gogh, when he first viewed the painting in 1885, commented that he would give up ten years of his life to be able to sit in front of it for a fortnight with a crust of bread. He continued in a letter to his brother Theo, "What an intimate, what an infinitely sympathetic painting."² The couple's physical and emotional intimacy is depicted by hand gestures: the man places his right hand lovingly on her bosom while she caresses it with her left hand. Many of Rembrandt's later works are characterized by the sort of intimacy that van Gogh and all of Rembrandt's audience through the centuries have recognized and appreciated in this image.

NOTES

1 Jonathan Bikker and Gregor J. M. Weber, *Rembrandt: The Late Works* (London, UK: National Gallery Company Limited, 2014), 193.

2 Ibid.

❖ Other Voices ❖

Let's get down to brass tacks. What is chastity? One way of putting it is that chastity is doing sex in the Body of Christ—doing sex in a way that befits the Body of Christ, and that keeps you grounded, and bounded, and in the community. As we've seen, that means sex only within marriage—which means, in turn, abstinence if you're not married, and fidelity if you are....

Chastity is something you do, it is something you practice. It is not only a state—the state of *being chaste*—but a disciplined, active undertaking that we *do* as part of the Body. It is not the mere absence of sex but an active conforming of one's body to the arc of the gospel.

LAUREN F. WINNER, *REALSEX: THE NAKED TRUTH ABOUT CHASTITY* (2005)

Virtue is not an absence of vices or the avoidance of moral dangers; virtue is a vivid and separate thing, like pain or a particular smell.... Chastity does not mean abstention from sexual wrong; it means something flaming, like Joan of Arc.

G. K. CHESTERTON, "A PIECE OF CHALK" (1905)

Those who are chaste are fully at peace with their bodies and their sexuality. Chastity is not best seen as the ability to keep oneself from violating the sexual "rules"; rather, it is "a dynamic principle enabling one to use one's sexual powers intelligently in the pursuit of human flourishing and happiness."

If chastity is a virtue, it is an aspect of character that a person can aspire to, achieve, stray from, regain. Notice that when the virtue at the top of this spectrum is chastity, there are three different ways of being unchaste—continence, incontinence and the vice of lustfulness.

CAROLINE J. SIMON, *BRINGING SEX INTO FOCUS: THE QUEST FOR SEXUAL INTEGRITY* (2012)

The virtue of chastity is so named because it is that which "chastises" the concupiscence that comes from venereal pleasure. As in the case of the other moral virtues, chastity does not eliminate one's appetites or passions, but moderates them, enabling them to be governed by practical reason informed by prudence and in this way ordered to the true good of the person.

JOHN S. GRABOWSKI, *SEX AND VIRTUE: AN INTRODUCTION TO SEXUAL ETHICS* (2012)

I can write with authority, because I've experienced nonmarital sex and I've experienced chastity, and I know what lies at the core of each.

Both experiences are centered on a kind of faith. One of them, sex before marriage, relies on faith that a man who has not shown faith in you – that is, not enough faith to commit himself to you for life – will come around through the persuasive force of your physical affection. It forces you to follow a set of Darwinian social rules – dressing and acting a certain way to outperform other women competing for mates. A man who's attracted to you will eventually learn who you really are – but by then, if all goes according to the rules, your hooks will be in too deep for him to escape.

The other experience, chastity, relies on faith that God, as you pursue a closer walk with Him, will lead you to a loving husband. Chastity opens up your world, enabling you to achieve your creative and spiritual potential without the pressure of having to play the dating game. Your husband will love you for yourself – your heart, mind, body, and soul.

When faced with a choice between two attitudes – both of which require looking beyond present reality – I choose the one that has a solid foundation.

DAWN EDEN, *THE THRILL OF THE CHASTE* (2006)

Chastity is one of the many Christian practices that are at odds with the dictates of our surrounding, secular culture. It challenges the movies we watch, the magazines we read, the songs we listen to. It runs counter to the way many of our non-Christian friends organize their lives. It strikes most secular folk as curious (at best), strange, backwards, repressed.

Chastity is also something that many of us Christians have to learn. I had to learn chastity because I became a Christian as an adult, after my sexual expectations and mores were already partly formed. But even many folks who grow up in good Christian homes, attending good Christian schools, and hanging out with good Christian friends – even these Christians-from-the-cradle often need to learn chastity, because unchaste assumptions govern so much of contemporary society.

LAUREN F. WINNER, *REALSEX: THE NAKED TRUTH ABOUT CHASTITY* (2005)

We need to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the beauty of chastity, and we can begin by admitting that it is something we only dimly understand. Rather than trying to think for ourselves, we should listen to the community of faith before us, around the world and through time. They knew something we didn't know.

We live in a reckless age that is amnesic and self-fascinated. Welding together fresh opinions in the basement will not solve this problem. We need to take the time to listen to the wisdom of our forebears in faith – and, harder still, to find the courage to put it into practice. If they are right, in practicing chastity we will begin to experience healing joy. Then, perhaps, we'll find the words for it.

FREDERICA MATHEWES-GREEN, "SEX AND SAINTS: A NEW VOCABULARY FOR AN OVERSEXUALIZED CULTURE," *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* (2000)

Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues. There is no getting away from it: the old Christian rule is, “Either marriage, with complete faithfulness to your partner, or else total abstinence.” Now this is so difficult and so contrary to our instincts, that obviously either Christianity is wrong or our sexual instinct, as it now is, has gone wrong. One or the other. Of course, being a Christian, I think it is the instinct which has gone wrong.

C. S. LEWIS, “SEXUAL MORALITY,” *MERE CHRISTIANITY* (1943)

People who understand the Bible’s vision for sex also understand that the physical union of a man and a woman is more a sign than it is a destination. It is not an end in itself. Sex is symbolic as much as it is real. It represents a holistic approach to nakedness, full and reciprocal transparency in which man and woman are fully exposed yet not rejected, fully known yet completely embraced.

SCOTT SAULS, *JESUS OUTSIDE THE LINES: A WAY FORWARD FOR THOSE WHO ARE TIRED OF TAKING SIDES* (2015)

Sex is not just about sex. The way we understand and express our sexuality points to our deepest-held convictions about who we are, who God is, the meaning of love, the ordering of society, and even the ordering of the universe.

CHRISTOPHER WEST, *THEOLOGY OF THE BODY FOR BEGINNERS: A BASIC INTRODUCTION TO POPE JOHN PAUL II’S SEXUAL REVOLUTION* (2004)

We are now in a context where there are likely to be significantly more single people than marrieds in the church. At the same time, social sexual mores are loosening such that the church increasingly stands alone in expecting people to limit genital sex to marital relationships. What does Jesus’ celibacy have to say to our obsessions with sexual expression?

DEBRA HIRSCH, *REDEEMING SEX: NAKED CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY* (2015)

Vibrant Christian communities where married couples and celibates live side by side in deep friendships could be a powerful countercultural sign, witnessing to the fact—almost unbelievable to many of our contemporaries—that clear limits set to the bodily expression of love do not keep one from finding happiness and fulfillment.

BROTHER JOHN OF TAIZÉ, *FRIENDS IN CHRIST: PATHS TO A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH* (2012)

Our sexual lives are ways of life we live into because our hearts and minds have been captivated by a picture of the so-called good life.... Our loves and longings and desires—including our sexual longings—are not just biological instincts; they are learned. But the pedagogies of desire that train us rarely look like lectures or sermons. We learn to love on the register of the imagination.

JAMES K. A. SMITH, “FORWARD,” IN JONATHAN GRANT, *DIVINE SEX: A COMPELLING VISION FOR CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIPS IN A HYPER-SEXUALIZED AGE* (2015)

Relationships with “More than Friends”

BY MARY S. HULST

Mary Hulst's college students, like all of us, are regularly exposed to many lies about dating, singleness, sex, and marriage. Walking with them through the basics of *why* to date, *how* to date, and *who* to date, she counters some of these lies with the truths of the gospel.

One of my great privileges as chaplain at Calvin College is to preach each Sunday night during the academic year at a campus worship service called “LOFT,” which stands for “Living Our Faith Together.” As the name implies, the focus is on living out discipleship in community. Each service is designed and led by college students for college students. Not surprisingly, I weave dating, chastity, sex, and relationships into many of my messages there.

In a series of four LOFT messages exploring our relationships with God, parents, friends, and (what I call) “more than friends,” I approached the topic of chastity in the last one. I added the quotation marks on purpose — as when someone asks about a couple, “Are they friends?” and the reply comes, “No, I think they are ‘more than friends.’” That’s what I was talking about: our relationship with the person we want to date, are dating, or want to break up with.

Every dating relationship requires a lot of ongoing discernment, even when everything goes properly — that is, when two people are civil and decent toward one another and do not maliciously abuse each other in any way. There are plenty of initial hurdles, personal disappointments, small hurts (intentional or not), and rejections to deal with. My comments to the students assumed this “normal” flow in their dating relationships. I would have more and different practical counsel if spiritual, emotional, or physical

abuse were involved.

I think of this fourth message as a “Christian speech” rather than a true sermon. By that I mean that I selected a topic and drew insights from the Bible to guide my thinking about it. Christian principles are presented throughout a Christian speech, but the scripture text is not the launching pad for the message. In a true sermon, a preacher starts with a scripture passage and opens it to deeper understanding by the congregation so that they live differently as a result of hearing it.¹

My college students, like all of us, are regularly exposed to many lies about dating, singleness, sex, and marriage. Walking with them in this message through the basics of *why* to date, *how* to date, and *who* to date allowed me to counter some of these lies with the truths of the gospel. What follows is a condensed version of my message to the students.²



Do you know about the app Tinder? Its enticing motto is “It’s like real life, but better.” Oh, really? Tinder allows you to upload a picture of yourself and then flip through the pictures uploaded by other people in your immediate geographical area. You can swipe one way if you do not like a person’s picture, and swipe another if you do. Now if you like someone’s picture and that person also sees your picture and likes it, then you get the option to communicate with each other.

In many places, but especially in big cities, people are using Tinder to arrange easy sex: “Let’s see, who is nearby that I find moderately attractive and is willing to meet? I can move into the relationship just as a body. I can get whatever sex I can get out of it, if that’s all I want.” Tinder allows people to have bodies without souls.

Way down at the other extreme on the Internet, there are people beginning online relationships with people who live far away, whom they have not seen, or do not know what they smell like, or know anything about them. Yet, they are pouring their hearts out to one another through emails, sent back and forth, that are filled with reflective, witty prose, and perhaps a poem. It’s as though they have souls but no bodies.

These extreme options – dating as bodies without souls and as souls without bodies – are available and increasingly popular today through the “miracle” of modern technology.

But our God comes into this and says, “Guys, I’ve got something so much better for you: fully incarnate relationships, where bodies and souls are together and you get to know each other well.”

When you were a child, did you snicker when a teacher read aloud in Sunday school or Bible class one of the Old Testament passages that talk about a husband and wife conceiving a child in these words: “The man *knew* his wife” (for example, Genesis 4:1)? He-he-he...they’re talking about sex.

You were eight years old, and that was funny. But the Hebrew word here, *yada* (“to know”), is much more holistic than “had sex with.” It conveys the idea of the husband delighting in knowing and loving and serving his wife, and one way this is exemplified is in the act of sexual intercourse.

God has this idea that he wants *yada*. And we, when we are honest with each other, most of all want *yada*. We really want to know and be known. We want this in our relationship with God, in our relationship with our parents, in our relationship with our friends, and we want this with anyone we date.

To know and be known—that’s what we are going for in a relationship. As we apply this to Christian dating, let’s look at *why* we should date, *how* we should date, and *whom* we should date.

WHY WE SHOULD DATE

What should be our purpose or goal in dating? First, it is important to dispel a cultural myth by saying clearly that *we do not date in order to get*. “Getting” a person is a common theme in romantic songs and movies: “I want *you*. I’ve got to have *you*. I need *you*.” We all know centripetal-force people who just suck others into their orbit and the relationship is all about *them*. That’s the central idea here: “I have a need, and I am going to take *you*.” But, as followers of Jesus Christ, this should not be our purpose in dating. We do not date to “get” someone.

Rather, *we date in order to grow closer to Jesus*. I know you are thinking, “O, Pastor Mary, we do *not* date to grow closer to Jesus,” but yes, yes we do—because hopefully what attracts us to someone initially is how well that person imitates Christ. Is that person kind and generous? Does that person live with integrity? Do we like the way this person is living and, if we hang out with them more, could this person help us become more like Jesus? That is *who* we want to date, and that is *why* we date. We want to grow closer to Jesus.

Furthermore, *we date in*

order to be better for the kingdom. I often say, “When all-you-all date, it affects all-you-all.” No one dates in isolation. There is another cultural myth that dating is private and one just goes off and figures it out on one’s own. No! Just ask the persons whose roommate or friend or sibling is dating how it affects their lives. So, when I say we date in order to be better for the king-

I often say to my students, “When all-you-all date, it affects all-you-all.” No one dates in isolation. If, by dating someone, we are not becoming better for the kingdom of God that is happening right around us, then we should not be dating that person.

dom, I am talking about the kingdom of God that is happening right around us, in our dorm room, our house, our family. Are we becoming better for the community because of the people we choose to hang out with? If we are not becoming better for our roommate, friends, and family by dating someone, then we should not be dating that person.

If we have some hutzpah, we will ask our friends and family how our dating that person has impacted our friendships and family relationships... because it has. And in the best situation, they will say, "You are so much better since you started dating that person. It is *awesome*. We want you with that person *forever*." That is where we want to get. We want to say, "The kingdom of God is going to be better if the two of us keep moving toward each other and toward Jesus." Eventually, if things are going really well, we will make the status permanent. We will say, "The kingdom is going to be best if we get married. That is just going to be great."

HOW WE SHOULD DATE

When we are dating to draw closer to Jesus and become better for the kingdom of God, then we will discover that *singleness is truly a beautiful and important state of being*. Some of us will be single our entire lives, because it is a calling or just how it happens. Most of us will be single for at least some part of our adult lives. We should treasure our singleness as an opportunity.

The Apostle Paul notes (in 1 Corinthians 7:32-35) that it is harder to be attentive to the kingdom of God when we are married. A married person wants to serve the kingdom and wants to pay attention to his or her spouse, and finds it hard to do both. If we are single, we can be devoted; if we are married, our loyalties are divided. I can testify, having been married for a couple years after being single for twelve years, that Paul is so right! I have limited mental real estate, and my husband and his children and his in-laws have all moved in on the real estate. My thoughts go to him and to them, and it is harder to be wholly attentive to the kingdom of God. I love being married, but it has helped me appreciate singleness as an important and beautiful state of being.

When we are single, then, we should value the opportunity to learn how to attend to God, how to talk to and listen to our Lord. In the process, we can find God really interesting and find ourselves really interesting. We will be rooted and contented in our singleness as we learn to root ourselves in Christ.

An episode of one of my favorite television shows, *Parks and Recreation*, illustrates what happens when we neglect to attend to God and to ourselves during singleness.³ The character Ann Perkins arrives at a community garage sale with three large boxes, each one labeled with the name of a previous boyfriend and containing the remains of their relationship. When Ann dated a man, she took on his personality. Rummaging through the first box, she explains to the camera, "I dated Chris and he was really into exercise," and

the box is full of now-unused exercise equipment. "Before him, I dated Andy and he was in a grunge band," and she pulls out the old flannel shirts. "Before that I dated Tom and this box" – filled with glitzy odds and ends – "is my needless shopping phase and also my credit card debt phase." We laugh in sad recognition of Ann's problem: she needed to figure out who she was. We need to figure out who we are in the Lord.

Parents ask me, "What are you most concerned about in your students?" I worry that in trying so hard to be liked by others, they will not learn what they really love. What do they love about God, what is God inviting them to do with their lives, what dreams do they have? Maybe one loves teaching music to children, and cannot imagine life without this. Maybe another loves the idea of healing people and watching them get better, and cannot imagine life without that. Maybe they love being outdoors in nature, and cannot imagine not doing that on a regular basis. Maybe they love children so much, that if God does not call them into marriage, they are sure God is calling them into parenthood and would think about adopting. As we learn to attend to God and figure out exactly who we are and what we love, we bring all of that into our relationships, including a romantic relationship if God calls us to it.

A second discovery we make as we are dating to draw closer to Jesus and be better for the kingdom, is that *we cannot save persons by dating them.*

We cannot keep them from their bad habits. It is a cultural myth that our strong love will stop them from drinking irresponsibly, cutting themselves, having an eating disorder, or viewing pornography. It is a myth that we will draw them into going to church, praying, studying harder, or managing their money responsibly. We may say, "I know that I can change this person's life. My love will save them." But who saves? Jesus saves, we don't. The truth is we cannot change or save anyone. Only God can do that!

Here's another discovery: *physical intimacy is not a right or a need.* It often feels like both because popular culture – every movie, television show, YouTube video, and popular song – is saying, "This is a right. This is a need. You should *get it.*" But that's not correct. How do we know? Well here is a clue: "We all experience sexual desires but they...can be controlled without

When we date to draw closer to Jesus and become better for the kingdom of God, we discover that singleness is a beautiful and important state of being. Most of us will be single for part of our adult lives. We should treasure our singleness as an opportunity.

damaging us," Molly Kelly notes. "I have never seen an obituary that gave chastity as the cause of death."⁴

We do not talk much about physical intimacy. Why not? We talk a lot about sex, but we do not we talk about the little things that lead up to it. Why don't we say, "I would like to be really clear: at the end of this night I would like to close by giving you a hug; other than that, I am not going to touch you, because I want to be fully attentive to you and I am not going to cross any barriers"? Wouldn't that be nice? Otherwise, the entire date is awkward, because all you are thinking about is how far this is going to go physically. What if you were asked before being touched? How delightful would it be if someone said to you, "May I hold your hand?" or "May I kiss you goodnight?" That is the difference between dating to get and dating to grow, to say "I'm not going to do anything that's going to make this person uncomfortable." Then you can be fully attentive to this other human being that God has put in your presence. Physical intimacy is not a right, it is not a need. It is a *gift*, so let's treat it like that.

When we date to draw closer to Jesus and become better for the kingdom of God, *we will treat each other with honesty and kindness*. That sounds trite and simple, but in the context of asking someone out, dating, and ending a relationship, it takes some courage to do.

Many of us can remember a painful conversation like this. "What did he say to you?" "He said he wanted to meet me after practice." "Well, what does that mean? Did he say you should shower and stuff? Was there a promise of food involved in this conversation?" "I don't know what it means!" We could not tell if the person really liked us or not.

So, here is some advice: let's be clear and honest when we ask someone out. Say something like this: "You're a really kind (or smart or funny or compassionate) person and I would like to get to know you better. On Thursdays I am done with classes at 2:30. Can I meet you at the campus coffeehouse and treat you to the hot beverage of your choice?" That's all you have to do. It is not hard, it just takes courage. Start by telling the person something good about the person. Then here is what I like about the plan: it keeps the date local, public, low stakes, and gives both of you an exit strategy. (Where did we get this idea in North America that teenagers should get in the car and go off by themselves where one has the keys and the other doesn't? If the date goes really poorly, one of you is toast because you have no way to get out of the situation.)

If someone says these words or something like them to you, just say "Yes." Worst case scenario: you are sitting there for twenty minutes drinking a free java. Best case scenario: you are thinking, "This is actually fun. I really enjoy this person. This is lovely."

So, let's say the first date goes well. Here is what to say: "I really enjoyed this and would like to do it again. Would you like to meet here again next Thursday?" Either person can say this; it is honest, clear, and

specific. If the date doesn't go well, tell the truth: "Thank you for spending time with me; I feel like I have a new friend. Have a great afternoon."

A big problem in our college community is that students get a crush on someone and create a Walter Mitty-like fantasy of what it would be like to date, marry, have babies, move to the burbs, and just go the whole way. But they don't even know yet if the person likes them, or if the person is dating anyone else! It is so much safer to stay in one's Mitty-like pretend world, than it is to ask someone out for coffee and hear this: "You have been so kind to me, but I'm not interested in a second date." But does our Lord invite us to live in secret fantasy worlds? Or does he invite us to date for the kingdom of truth and reality and kindness? It takes courage and a supporting community to ask for a date, or to say "no." It takes courage and a supporting community to deal with rejection, or to do the second date. Don't we want to be those kind of people? Isn't that what a life in Christ looks like? It looks courageous and truthful.

When you have been dating someone for a while and you need to break up, tell the truth. Because the stakes are higher and each of you has more invested, you may want to start the conversation by saying something like this: "This may come as a surprise to you, but I am losing confidence in this relationship. I know that I'm not ready to keep moving forward. I need to stop seeing you." Be clear and honest. Do not string the person along. Do not flirt without purpose. Do not say, "God told me to break up with you." It may be true, but if you tell this to a person, they've got a messed up relationship with you and a messed up relationship with God. Do not say, "Let's just be friends." If you have been invested in a relationship for a while and it is over, do not belittle the person by saying, "We can go back to the way we were." You can't.

If you want to break up, *break up*: that means no calling, no texting, no Facebook notes to check in. The person is looking for any sign of hope that this could keep going because your "no" was a mistake or you were having a bad day, and so on. And you need to understand what life looks like without this person in it. This is where the kingdom of God comes in, because your friends are going to be paying attention to how you do this. And if you think it is hard on the two of you involved, it is hard on the radius of people who know about this relationship.

We get a crush on someone and create a Walter Mitty-like fantasy of what it would be like to date, marry, have babies, and move to the burbs. But does our Lord invite us to live in secret fantasy worlds? Or does he invite us to date for the kingdom of truth?

Be kind when you see the person, and be kind when you speak about the person in conversation with others. This is an opportunity for us to model our discipleship. When things go awry in a relationship, do we respond with integrity and grace and kindness? Do we clothe ourselves with compassion? Do we forgive?

Here's a final discovery: *we can survive a break up*. Yes, studies show that breaking a relationship with someone produces the same physical trauma as a car accident: you ache, you cannot sleep or you sleep all the time, you cannot eat or you eat all the time. But God never wastes anything. God is teaching you, growing you, saying, "Let's move together from death to life, let's move together to find people who help you grow in relationship with me and build the kingdom. I'm not going to waste that time in your life. You learned a lot about yourself and about other people and what's important to you and what you love. I'm not going to waste that. Let's move into the future together."

This knowledge allows us to take a risk again. Before I met my husband, I had a bad break up that felt like I was in a car accident. But it taught me that I can survive this. So when my friend, Meg, said to me a few months later, "I have someone I want you to meet," I said, "I can survive this. Go ahead." Chocolate and prayer get you through a lot. So I could say, "yes." Meg was the one who officiated at our wedding.

WHOM SHOULD WE DATE?

Do you have a checklist? He's got to be tall, play the guitar, speak three languages, be really nice to his mother, and if he has brown eyes, that would be great. She should be cute, love to hike, be into basketball, sing in the choir, and wear her hair long. We all have a list. We have ideals. And usually the items on our lists are pretty superficial.

What would it look like if we used God's checklist? Psalm 15 begins with a question, "O LORD, who may abide in your tent?" (15:1), and goes on to describe a person of character, a person who loves righteousness. It is a pretty good checklist. "Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart" (15:2) — that is, they love holiness, are open to the Holy Spirit correcting them, and want to move from death to life. These persons "who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors" (15:3) — they speak kindly about their past relationships, even about the people who have hurt them. "In [their] eyes the wicked are despised, but [they] honor those who fear the LORD," and they "stand by their oath even to their hurt" (15:4) — in their corner of the kingdom, people like them and trust them. They have a clear idea of what is wrong, and keep working to move from wrong to right. And they keep their promises, even when it costs them. They "do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent" (15:5) — they are wise with money and 'stuff,' and generous with others.

Psalm 15 is the checklist for character and righteousness, which makes it a great checklist for the kind of people we want to date or have as friends. These people will help us grow closer to Jesus and become better for the kingdom. But here’s the final twist: when we are praying about whom to ask out, we must not only look to see if those people around us meet this checklist, but if we do. Are we Psalm 15 persons? Are we so grateful to God for the new life God has given us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ that we yearn to be Psalm 15 persons?

God’s purpose in all our relationships – with God, our parents, our friends, and whom we date – is to help us to flourish, to move us from death into life, from the tomb to resurrection. May we give thanks for everybody who celebrates resurrection with us, and with their help, may we order our loves well. We pray this through Jesus Christ, who loves us.

NOTES

1 I write more about the difference between a Christian speech and a sermon in Mary S. Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers: Ten Practical Ways to a Better Sermon by Sunday* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Praxis, 2016).

2 “Relationships with ‘More than Friends’” was originally given at LOFT on Sunday, March 2, 2014. If you want to listen to or view this message in its worship context – which is much more entertaining than reading about it, I assure you! – it is available at www.livestream.com/calvin-college/events/2725538 (accessed August 29, 2016). The message begins at minute thirty-six.

3 *Parks and Recreation*, “Halloween Surprise,” 73, directed by Dean Holland, written by Michael Schur, NBC Television, October 25, 2012. This funny scene is online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=LN8ooimoQ8I (accessed September 3, 2016).

4 Molly Kelly, as cited in Bruce Main, *If Jesus Were a Sophomore: Discipleship for College Students* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 89.



MARY S. HULST

is College Chaplain at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Sexuality and Spirituality in American Adolescents

BY LAUREN TAYLOR

Both adults and young people are hesitant to discuss the topic of faith and sexuality. Research in the three books reviewed here suggests ways to address this silent stand-off, bridge the generation gap, and start the conversation.

Understanding the ways religion impacts adolescents' attitudes and behaviors toward sex is difficult. It is subtle. It is complex. It is constantly evolving and usually locked in the mysterious and often impenetrable minds and worlds of young people. Those of us who shepherd youth through life, faith, and relationships know spirituality and sexuality are related, but how do we discern this connection if it is so shrouded in mystery? And how do we communicate that relation in a healthy way to our teenagers and twentysomethings? This is often where we get held up.

Adults, however, are not the only ones who get stuck. Young people also are hesitant to discuss the topic of faith and sexuality. It is awkward to bring up, taboo to talk about, and could elicit disappointment, shame, and punishment, especially in the religious world. Students are left wondering what is acceptable to talk about with adults. What will happen if they bring it up? And so, this is often where adolescents get held up.

But in the midst of this silent standoff, we must find a way to bridge the gap and start the conversation. The stakes are high, for the way adolescents understand the interconnectedness of sex and faith has serious long-term consequences on how religion and sexuality become integrated into their daily lives, affecting their relationships, marriages, and perspectives on God.

CONNECTING SEX LIFE WITH SOUL LIFE IN COLLEGE

Donna Freitas, in *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*, updated edition (New York:

Oxford University Press, 2015 [2008], 352 pp., \$19.95), seeks to articulate the connection (or lack thereof) between the sex lives and the spiritual lives of American college students.

Her project began in the classroom where, as a professor of religion, she stumbled into a post-spring break discussion among her students lamenting the hookup culture on campus. "The problem was that hookup culture promoted reckless, unthinking attitudes and expectations about sex, divorcing it from their larger value commitments – religious, spiritual, or otherwise," Freitas explains. "After a few years of living in this environment, they felt exhausted, spent, and emptied by the pressure to participate in encounters that left them unfulfilled" (xv). So, Freitas investigated this divide and its consequences further by conducting 2,500 surveys and interviews at seven categorically different colleges and universities. At each of these institutions (spanning from Catholic to evangelical to major non-religious universities), she sought to answer questions about students' experiences with sex and their spiritual lives, and how institutions responded.

Looking at religious life, Freitas pinpoints a growing problem with many of the non-religious private and public schools. In many of these schools, faith and religion have become an intensely private matter, both personally and on an institutional level. "Religion remains resolutely private – something students don't speak...or even debate about," she notes (33). These types of institutions often boast of their religious diversity, but by not fostering dialogue about faith this diversity is completely lost on students' real experiences. On the other hand, for many evangelical schools faith matters not just in theory, but is often woven into practice; it is valued both as private good and a public good, and thus conversations about faith are knit into the campus curriculum and culture (67). Admittedly, this sort of campus culture might be easier to attain at an evangelical school where the whole community signs onto the same statement of faith. But an environment where faith and religion is part of the conversation is essential for the healthy development of college students, no matter what type of institution they attend.

With regard to sexuality, Freitas highlights some disturbing trends in campus cultures of different sorts. Evangelical purity culture, for example, rigorously tries to instill in students the notion of saving sex for marriage. This can be helpful in some ways – namely, by encouraging students towards sexual faithfulness and reflecting God's faithfulness to the world. It can also be destructive in how its rhetoric so narrowly defines gender roles, places unrealistic expectations on sex in marriage (especially for those who never marry), and often inflicts damaging emotional and spiritual consequences for those who did not maintain the high standard of purity.

At secular institutions, on the other hand, sex is much more normalized both in institutional life and in student conversation. According to Freitas, being a virgin is often seen by students as a stigma "that kept them from

being 'normal' adults and having a 'normal' college experience" (134). Relationships are often avoided, as they take up too much time and effort for the fast-paced lifestyle of students, but hook-ups and one-night stands are the norm. As her interviews reveal, such an over-sexualized world imposes many unfortunate consequences. These college women learn to use sex and sexual allures as a tool to gain popularity without much thoughtfulness or regard to their own self-respect. College men, on the other hand, learn to use sex for self-gratification, divorced from any relationship or commitment.

Freitas sheds tremendous light on the topic of sex and the soul in the lives of adolescents by sharing large portions of her interviews and surveys. She presents the research in a helpful and compelling way. It is fascinating to jump inside the minds and hearts of young people and to hear them talk about their anxieties, curiosities, and confidences with regard to these often shadowy areas of their lives. It becomes clear to the reader that most college and university settings do not encourage any connection between sex and the soul, and while evangelical schools might offer a setting where this connection can be made, the evangelical culture is certainly not without its faults in this regard. Aside from a brief conclusion, Freitas leaves most of the concluding up to her intended readers – the parents, professors, pastors, and others who shepherd people through their complex adolescent years.

LINKING RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT TO TEEN SEX LIVES

In *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 304 pp., \$20.95) Mark D. Regnerus examines the "formation of sexual attitudes and motivations, and the initial and subsequent experiences of sexual intercourse and related sexual activities" of American teens (5). His research seeks to answer helpful questions about what sex means to teenagers, what expectations they have about it, and how they navigate the many voices speaking mixed messages about sex into their lives.

Regnerus confirms that religion generally influences the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents, but in regard to their sexuality, things become a bit more complex. For example, according to his findings, teens today receive most of their sex education from "uncensored and unchallenged sexual content on the internet" and other similar cultural voices, rather than more stable, thoughtful sources like school, family, or church (81). Their sexual decisions, like many other teenage decisions, are influenced most often by feelings and "emotional readiness," and less often by religious affiliation, especially for those with Jewish, mainline Christian, and Catholic backgrounds (117). As far as rhetoric goes, evangelical Protestant youth were most likely to talk about saving sex for marriage, but in terms of actual sexual experience, Regnerus uncovers that "evangelical Protestant youth don't always practice what they preach about premarital sexual behavior" (161). Despite the trends cited above, he discovers that teenage sexual decision

making is shaped more by high religiosity than certain religious affiliations. In short, it is commitment, not membership, which has the most influence.

Regnerus presents readers with a dense bit of research that covers the large diversity of American teenagers and sexuality. He asks big questions, and answers them with great breadth, which creates a wonderful jumping off point for those seeking an introduction to this topic. Regnerus definitively concludes that religion can positively influence young people's sexual attitudes and behaviors, and helpfully introduces the reader to the current dialogue on the subject.

EXAMINING THE EVANGELICAL PURITY CULTURE

Adopting a more focused line of research than Regnerus or Freitas, Christine J. Gardner analyzes the rhetoric and arguments that come from the evangelical purity culture in *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, 264 pp., \$29.95). "I am less concerned with mapping the terrain of sexual (or sexually abstinent) practices among teenagers than discovering how teens talk about their sexuality and abstinence," she writes to explain the uniqueness of her approach. "I take a narrow but detailed look at the specific rhetorical arguments and strategies persuading young people to say no to sex" (12). For students and instructors engaged in the evangelical culture and immersed in the academic world of rhetoric and communication, Gardner's research is gold.

Gardner focuses on three different abstinence campaigns in America:

True Love Waits, Silver Ring

Thing, and Pure Freedom

(6-10). She highlights rhet-

orical shifts in these cam-

paigns, like the move from

talking about *abstinence* to

talking about *purity* (Gard-

ner explains that thinking

about purity gives teens a

more active role in their sex-

ual decisions, compared to

abstinence, which remains

largely passive), and the

move to "use sex to sell

abstinence" to teens (41). Gardner points out that, for better or worse, these

campaigns have borrowed from popular culture by using sexy concerts,

comedy, and celebrities to send the message that abstinence provides great

sex in marriage (61). She goes on to trace the rhetoric of gender roles (espe-

cially noting the role of women), how teens talk about the practical applica-

tion of these purity ideals, and the dialogue surrounding those teens who

Mark Regnerus discovers that teenage sexual decision making is shaped more by high religiosity than certain religious affiliations. In short, it is commitment, not membership, which has the most influence.

did not wait for true love. She concludes with an insightful look into abstinence movements in Africa, especially as it relates to the AIDS crisis. Though living and teaching in an evangelical setting, Gardner does not shy away from maintaining a critical eye towards this rhetoric, and offers helpful reflection on both the positive outcomes and potential damaging consequence of these movements.

Gardner's highly sophisticated approach to this rhetorical research is interesting, especially for those who find themselves connected to evangelicalism. For those of us who find ourselves in the midst of the silent standoff between adults and young people, wondering how to bridge the gap and talk about the interconnectedness of sexuality and spirituality, this research sheds light on the ways the evangelical culture speaks into the lives of students and could, perhaps, inspire thoughtful reflection on the way we guide them.

ENCOURAGING FAITH AND FAITHFULNESS

Recognizing the diversity of perspectives that these authors present, I draw two basic convictions from this research about working with adolescents in the area of faith and sexuality. The first is that we must primarily be concerned with encouraging adolescents towards faith, and specifically towards faith in Christ. In other words, the good news of the gospel must precede conversations about sexual morality. The research shows that in the midst of a culture that sends so many unhelpful and unhealthy messages with regard to both spirituality and sexuality, it is faith commitment that lays the foundation for long-lasting attitude and behavior change over and above any simple religious affiliation or non-affiliation.

Second, it is after the gospel is known that encouraging young people towards faithfulness, and reflecting God's faithfulness, makes the most sense. In other words, one is able to see God's good intention for our physical bodies and our sexuality and how they work alongside of our spiritual identities, only after God is actually known. This leaves room for grace, which, through Christ, characterizes our whole relationship with God.

With these convictions guiding our conversations with young people, perhaps we can avoid some of the pitfalls of the past and foster an environment where adolescents genuinely seek out a deeper understanding of faith in Christ and mature in their understanding of how to represent Christ's faithfulness to a watching world in their lives and relationships.



LAUREN TAYLOR

is Chaplain of Discipleship at Hope College in Holland, Michigan.

Christian Sexual Ethics in an Age of Individualism

BY JULIE MORRIS

On the surface the three books reviewed here are about sexual behavior, but on a deeper level they address healthy and holy relationships with self, others, and God. The authors care deeply about community and intimacy and about how to cultivate them in a culture that promotes disposable relationships.

The victim of a highly publicized sexual assault at Stanford University wrote an open letter to her attacker, Brock Allen Turner, in which she described the psychological terror, fear, and isolation she had experienced since the attack.[†] She also expressed incredulity that at no point in the trial proceedings did her attacker express regret or even acknowledge that he had assaulted her, despite the unanimous decision to convict him on three counts of sexual assault. The judge had sentenced Turner to below the minimum requirement of the law, stating that he feared a longer sentence would have a “severe impact” on the attacker’s life.

Much could be said about what this case teaches us about rape culture, about whose bodies or futures matter, and about shame and victim-blame. This case, and thousands like it, indicate a vital need for more fulsome conversations about sex, bodies, and what constitutes sexually ethical behavior.

What would it look like for us to take conversations about sex and the body as an integral part of our moral and spiritual formation in the Church? What do our sexual bodies say about God, and vice versa? These are not new questions, of course, but they are becoming more critical for us to ask as family structures and cultural ethics continue to shift and as cases of sexual assault proliferate within our society.



In his book *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015, 160 pp., \$14.99), Wesley Hill addresses our questions about sexual ethics by focusing on singleness and platonic intimacy outside of marriage. He tells the story of developing and finding friendship within a culture that perpetuates short-term, disposable relationships. As someone who believes he is called to celibacy as a Christian homosexual, Hill vividly describes his struggle to find deeply fulfilling relationships within the Church and his subsequent journey to develop lifelong, committed friendships.

Hill observes that marriage has become the only place our culture imagines such deeply meaningful relationships can exist. Historically, however, marriage was not the only or even primary location for platonic intimacy. For instance, in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus reimagines friendship and familial relationships through relationship with him. Once when he was teaching a crowd, his mother and brothers arrived and called for him. Jesus replied with the rhetorical question, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” and said of the disciples sitting around him, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:31-35, cf. Matthew 12:46-50, Luke 8:19-21). Hill interprets this passage as a promise: “You *will* have close relationships if you follow me, Jesus seems to say. They will just look different from what you originally envisioned” (56).

That story is not the only place the Bible speaks about committed relationships. Hill provides a quick but thorough analysis of friendships within the Bible, and then he draws on these deep biblical resources to create space for committed friendship or, using his term, “spiritual friendship.” Beyond the Bible, the rich Christian tradition provides other examples of what this may practically look like; Hill finds the ceremony of “brother-making” vastly helpful when trying to think through how spiritual friendship functions.

Hill offers a much needed, beautifully written appeal for deep and meaningful friendships that are intentionally nonromantic. Though Hill writes from the specific theological position of a homosexual Christian who believes homosexuals should be celibate, his book will inspire other Christians who are struggling to navigate desire and find intimacy in a Christian culture that says little that is helpful about either. Hill is approachable and charitable, both toward himself and others. *Spiritual Friendship* is an incredibly important contribution to a gaping hole in the Church’s understanding of singleness as well as its limited vision of relational intimacy.



While Hill’s account is deeply personal, Dale S. Kuehne’s *Sex and the iWorld: Rethinking Relationship Beyond an Age of Individualism* (Grand Rapids,

MI: Baker Academic, 2009, 240 pp., \$20.00) approaches the above questions historically, using evidence from the past and present to build constructive suggestions for the future of sexual ethics. Kuehne addresses large questions about the meaning of sexual relationships and their role in helping humans thrive through an analysis of human history and philosophy, engaging such figures as Aristotle, Hume, and Nietzsche. In three sections of his book, Kuehne explores sexual ethics in the past (what he terms the “tWorld” or “traditional world”), the current approach to sexual ethics (in the “iWorld” or “individual world”), and where sexual ethics can and should go (the “rWorld” or “relational world”).

According to Kuehne’s reading of history, marriage and the extended family were the foundation of the traditional world. Marriage between one man and one woman was the location for desire, sexuality, and societal stability. Citing cultural references like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, Kuehne argues that the traditional world understood the value and importance of family as the cornerstone of society. Additionally, the traditional world offered stability and an incredible opportunity for relational fulfillment. With the rise of nihilism, the rejection of all moral principles, and the growing impact of philosophical liberalism (which “contends that reason can expand our freedom over the world of tradition and convention” [50]) in the 1960s, however, relationships took a sharp turn toward individualism.

Individualism, or the iWorld, removed people from the stability of both marriage and the family structure. As individuals could make choices about what was good or right for their own lives, marriage was no longer expected to last a lifetime. Consequently, the nuclear family also lost its stability, becoming more fluid as families separated and rejoined with other families. For Kuehne, the iWorld may have gained some individual freedoms, but it was at the cost of meaningful relationships. As a way forward, Kuehne suggests people move beyond the tWorld and iWorld toward the rWorld, or “relational world.”

Kuehne offers an interpretation of the biblical creation story as an example of what it might look like to build a relational world rather than an individual one. Asserting that God created human beings as relational creatures, Kuehne concludes that we need meaningful, lasting relationships in order to

Wesley Hill offers a beautifully written appeal for deep and meaningful friendships that are intentionally nonromantic. It will inspire Christians struggling to navigate desire and find intimacy in a Christian culture that says little that is helpful about either.

flourish. He then points to Adam and Eve as evidence that family is necessary for fulfillment.

Sex and the iWorld exhorts readers to rearrange their priorities by placing relationship and family over personal freedom. While Kuehne's message is important, it does fall a bit flat at times. For instance, it does not answer questions like how we understand human flourishing for people who have lost their families or for those who are victims of abuse by family members. How does someone like Wesley Hill, for whom the creation of a nuclear family is not possible, fit into this picture? Furthermore, Kuehne does not offer insight into how to evaluate situations in which individual freedom and relational stability come into conflict (as is the all-too-common case of women being praised for staying with abusive husbands).

Interestingly, Kuehn also cites the 1960s as the moment when individualism took hold, but does not offer the reader his interpretation of the Civil Rights movement or the great strides feminism made at that time. How do we interpret this overthrowing of oppression in light of Kuehne's interpretation of history? As Kuehne has made it clear that he hopes to open up conversations about sexual ethics, perhaps readers should not only keep these questions in mind as they engage his text, but also seek out companion texts or articles to read alongside Kuehne's work.



Though she responds to slightly different questions, Beth Felker Jones's *Faithful: A Theology of Sex* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015, 112 pp., \$11.99) is a challenging and thought-provoking companion to Kuehne.

Beth Felker Jones offers a rich yet conversational argument for why sex matters and how Christians should develop robust understandings of sex, intimacy, and the body. Though this is a slim volume in the "Ordinary Theology Series," Jones has contributed an important book on the theology of sex. She dives into surprisingly deep territory, covering topics like desire, radical faithfulness, and sex-gone-wrong.

Beginning with a strong argument for the goodness of sex and sexual desire, Jones develops a rich account of the reality and meaningfulness of sex in a culture that would rather dismiss it as recreation or personal life choices. At a time when most people seem to prefer keeping sex private, Jones argues that sex matters to God because bodies matter to God. As with the rest of creation, however, sex has been affected by the Fall. Thus, there is both sex that is ordered toward God and sex that is disordered. Though it may sound strange at first, Jones draws sex right into the believer's relationship with God. Believers are to demonstrate God's faithfulness to them in the way they have sex.

Jones demonstrates a vast knowledge of history and theology as she treats complex theological matters with a light tone and easy-to-follow

writing. *Faithful* is a meaningful read that will likely spark much-needed conversations among believers. Writing with grace and attention to questions surrounding sexism and gender, Jones is an author whose work deserves attention.



Each of the three books reviewed here offers an important contribution to Christian thought surrounding sexual ethics. While at the surface these authors write about sexual behavior, at a deeper level they deal with healthy and holy relationships with the self, with others, and with God. Hill, Kuehne, and Jones care deeply about community and intimacy and about how to cultivate them within a culture that promotes individualism and disposable relationships.

Reading a few books on sexual ethics will not eliminate rape or sexual assault within our culture, but it may affect how we respond to such tragic events. It may affect how seriously we take conversations about consent and appropriate manifestations of desire because we understand that what happens to bodies and what we do with them matters deeply to persons and to God. Ideally, attending to issues surrounding chastity will form people who realize that chastity is not just about being pure, it is about how we think about bodies.

NOTE

† After the victim read the letter as a courtroom statement, she supplied a copy of the letter to *BuzzFeeds News*. See Katie J. M. Baker, "Here Is the Powerful Letter the Stanford Victim Read Aloud to Her Attacker," *BuzzFeed News* (June 3, 2016), www.buzzfeed.com/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra?utm_term=.uv-LeDEWnW#.fuAp67VZV (accessed August 22, 2016).



JULIE MORRIS

is a Ph.D. candidate in theology at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina.

Editors



ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

General Editor

Bob Kruschwitz is Senior Scholar of the Institute for Faith and Learning and Professor of Philosophy at Baylor University. He convenes the editorial team to plan the themes for the issues of *Christian Reflection*, then he commissions the lead articles and supervises the formation of each issue. Bob holds the Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of

Texas at Austin and the B.A. from Georgetown College. You may contact him by e-mail at Robert_Kruschwitz@baylor.edu.



HEIDI J. HORNİK

Art Editor

Heidi Hornik is Professor of Art History at Baylor University. With the M.A. and Ph.D. in Art History from The Pennsylvania State University and the B.A. from Cornell University, her special interest is art of the Italian Renaissance. With Mikeal C. Parsons she coedited *Interpreting Christian Art* and coauthored the

three volume *Illuminating Luke*. Her most recent book is *Michele Tosini and the Ghirlandaio Workshop in Cinquecento Florence*. You may contact her by phone at 254-710-4548 or e-mail at Heidi_Hornik@baylor.edu.



NORMAN WIRZBA

Review Editor

Norman Wirzba is Professor of Theology and Ecology at Duke Divinity School. Norman holds the M.A. and Ph.D. in philosophy from Loyola University of Chicago, the M.A. in religion from Yale University, and the B.A. from the University of Lethbridge, Alberta. He is the author of *The Paradise of God*, *Living the Sabbath*, and *Food and Faith*

and editor of *The Essential Agrarian Reader*. You may contact him by phone at 919-660-3400 or e-mail at nwirzba@div.duke.edu.



WILLIAM D. SHIELL

Proclamation Editor

William D. Shiell is President, and Professor of Pastoral Theology and Preaching, at Northern Seminary in Lombard, Illinois. He has pastored churches for seventeen years in Texas, Tennessee, and Florida. After receiving the B.A. in religion from Samford University, he earned the M.Div. in theology from George W. Truett Theological Seminary and Ph.D. in religion from Baylor University. He is the author of *Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience* and *Sessions with Matthew*. You may contact him by phone at 630-620-2101 or e-mail at president@seminary.edu.

Contributors

MATT FRADD

Founder and executive director of The Porn Effect, a ministry of Integrity Restored

DONNA FREITAS

Author and speaker, Brooklyn, NY

STACY KEOGH GEORGE

Assistant Professor of Sociology, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA

WESLEY HILL

Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies, Trinity School for Ministry, Ambridge, PA

HEIDI J. HORNIK

Professor of Art History, Baylor University

MARY S. HULST

College Chaplain, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI

AMBER C. INSCORE ESSICK

Co-Pastor, Port Royal Baptist Church, Port Royal, KY

BETH FELKER JONES

Professor of Theology, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL

KURT KAISER

Songwriter, Waco, TX

ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Senior Scholar of the Institute for Faith and Learning, and Professor of Philosophy, Baylor University

JULIE MORRIS

Ph.D. candidate in theology, Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC

LAUREN TAYLOR

Chaplain of Discipleship, Hope College, Holland, MI

TERRY YORK

Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Professor of Christian Ministry and Church Music, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University