

# 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.**

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**S**ex 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.<sup>1</sup>

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?<sup>2</sup> 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.

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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."<sup>3</sup>

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.

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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."<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.

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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.

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**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.**

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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.<sup>6</sup>

## 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

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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/](http://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](http://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).

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