

THE BELIEVER'S LIFESTYLE: SEX RESPECT

By Andrew Wilson
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Song of Songs 2:1-7
1 Corinthians 6:12-20

It has always been hard for Christians to accept and to live by the Bible's teachings regarding sex.

We learn from Paul's letters that many of the earliest Christians struggled with their sexuality. In the church at Corinth, many of the people misconstrued the teaching that Christ had liberated them from the old Jewish laws and customs. Some were saying:

"Physical acts like eating and drinking don't affect our inner spiritual life. Therefore, physical acts like having sex don't affect our inner spiritual life. So let's celebrate our freedom! Let's party!"

Many of the Corinthian Christians were hooking up with each other and thinking nothing of it. Some of them were even engaging in recreational sex with local prostitutes.

C. S. Lewis once observed that "chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues" (*Mere Christianity*). Lewis wrote those words in the 1940s, at a time when, from his perspective, the whole world was crazy for sex. But if chastity seemed unpopular in Lewis' day, it seems like a ridiculous, almost quaint anachronism in today's world.

Peter Gomes, the chaplain at Harvard University, tells a story that illustrates the point. In 1982 Harvard decided to give sainted Mother Teresa an honorary degree and they invited her to speak at the university's commencement ceremony. She opened her simple address with these words:

"Young people, there is nothing more important than for you to be chaste."

The graduates, sat for a moment in befuddled silence. Many of them had begun their day of celebration with a few drinks, and it took a while for the words to sink in. Mother Teresa was actually urging the best and the brightest students in America to abstain from premarital sex.

"You must be chaste," she continued. "Your body is a temple."

Some of the students chuckled and said to each other: "Yeah, I want to be chased! – you can chase me all you want!" The rest of Mother Teresa's speech was accompanied by hoots and shouts of praise.

I'm part of what to some people is proudly known as the "Dazed and Confused" generation. If you've seen the movie "Fast Times at Ridgmont High," that was my high school. For a long time after college I looked the sexual antics of kids in high school and college and thought:

"Nothing's changed; I've seen it all before."

But I don't think that any more. Sexual mores and practices *have* changed. Over the past decade they've become even more unhinged from Christian tradition.

Both the anecdotal evidence and scientific studies bear that out.

According to the 2000 census, the number of unmarried couples living together increased tenfold between 1960 and 2000.

In a 2002 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Seventeen Magazine, over a quarter of fifteen-to seventeen-year-old girls indicated that sexual intercourse is “almost always” or “most of the time” part of a “casual relationship.” About 65 percent of teenagers have sex by the time they finish high school and 75 percent of women have sex before they get married.

Christian culture has been deeply affected by these trends, so much so that the sexual behavior exhibited in many congregations is indistinguishable from the behavior exhibited in the wider community.

Three independent surveys conducted in the 1990s concluded that only one-third of single Christians had never had sex.

In that same decade the magazine *Christianity Today* polled more than one thousand of its readers and found that forty percent of those who were single had had premarital sex, and fourteen percent of those who were married had had an affair. What makes that survey so remarkable is that most of the readers of *Christianity Today* are Evangelicals who are very active in their churches.

A national survey conducted by George Barna in 2001 found that the divorce rate was about the same for self-described born-again Christians as it was for the population as a whole.

Some of you remember the “True Love Waits” program that was launched in many conservative churches in the early 1990s. The program invited teenagers to make a public commitment to abstain from sex until they married. In 2001 researches at Columbia and Yale polled 6,800 students who had taken the “True Love Waits” pledge. They found that the virgins who had taken the pledge were likely to abstain from sex only 18 months longer than those who didn’t take the pledge. This was hardly a decisive victory for the abstinence campaign.

The study also found that those who took the pledge were less likely than those who didn’t take the pledge to use birth control during sex. Presumably, this is because, according to the prevailing ethic among Christians singles it’s not as sinful to have planned sex as it is to have sex because you just couldn’t control yourself.

Here’s the result from the “True Love Waits” study that I found most alarming. And I’m sorry, but this is fairly graphic. Of the 39 percent of youth who said that they had kept their pledges to abstain from intercourse, 55 percent admitted that they’d had oral sex, but indicated that they didn’t consider oral sex to be real sex.

I served as a youth pastor throughout most of the eighties and nineties. The students in my youth groups struggled constantly with the question of whether premarital sex was permissible for Christians. Of course many of them chose to have sex, but most of the sexually active kids weren’t entirely comfortable with their decisions. And they didn’t discuss them openly with other Christians.

When I left youth ministry in the late nineties I went to serve a church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in the heart of the Bible belt. I learned in that church that the issues Christian kids were facing, as well as their beliefs about sex, were changing.

Some of the students in our youth group were having sex regularly and were perfectly comfortable talking to other Christian kids about their experiences. Moreover, when they were told by their youth pastor that their behavior was inconsistent with the teachings of the Bible, they looked at him as though he had just fallen to earth from another planet.

In their minds, it was only natural that two people who were in love would solidify their relationship by having intercourse. At school they were mixing with kids for whom sex was just another form of recreation like playing with their X Box or going to a movie. The starting point for conversation with those kids wasn't: "Is it okay for Christians to have sex?" Rather, it was: "Is it dangerous for heterosexuals to experiment with homosexuality?"

In case you hadn't guessed, I'm completely out of sync with our culture in my views about sex. In my mind, the statistics I've cited for you powerfully reinforce the Christian understanding of our sexual instinct, which is that it has gone terribly wrong and has become, for many, the source of untold misery.

I take my stand squarely with those who take the Bible seriously and who accept Paul's teaching that the only "good sex" in terms of intercourse is sex between husbands and wives.

Having said that, I think we misunderstand Christianity if we think its basic message about sex is simply: "Not unless you're married!" Christianity does lay down a few dos and don'ts, and it's important to keep those signposts in front of us, especially when we're seventeen years old and we're sitting in a parked car on a deserted road at midnight with that cute girl from our Spanish class. But if we just focus on the signposts we miss most of the excitement and adventure of sex as God intends it to be.

There's no question about it: Christians are called to be chaste. But when Paul and Mother Teresa speak of chastity, they're not just advising us not to sleep around. Chastity is a virtue that's directly tied to our relationship with God. It's a particular way of relating to God and to other people with our bodies that's modeled by Christ and lived out in Christian community.

The ideal of chastity only makes sense when it's understood in the wider context of creation. In the creation story in Genesis, chapter 1, man and woman are created together, at once. Though they're distinct beings, a male and a female, they both reflect God's likeness. They both are created in his image. Reading at verse twenty-seven:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them.

- Genesis 1:27

What does it mean to be created in God's image? That isn't a question that's easily answered. Even after we've read through the entire Bible, we have the sense that we've only been given a glimpse of the truth of what it means to reflect God's image. But here's what we know for sure from Genesis: God's image is reflected in maleness, and it's reflected in femaleness. Each is somehow completed, or fulfilled, in relationship with the other.

This idea becomes clearer as we read on. In chapter 2 God creates the man, but he knows right away that something is missing. So he sets out to create for the man a partner and a helpmate.

Some have suggested, alternatively, that God looked at the man and concluded he could do a better job. So he created woman. But that's not exactly what the text says. God creates animals of

the field, and birds of the air. The man names them, but among them he doesn't find his companion. So God puts the man to sleep, takes a rib from his side, and makes it into a woman. The man is delighted with her. She's gorgeous. He calls her "Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh." And then comes verse 24 – listen to this:

Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

- Genesis 2:24

How does this happen? How do two distinct bodies, one male, and one female, become one flesh, and yet still remain two bodies? We can't answer that question using only the language of the physical. Though Genesis is talking pretty frankly about flesh – about living organisms that have glands and sex organs – the truth that's being revealed is a spiritual one. It can't be understood only with reference to the things of the earth. It has its foundation in God and in his kingdom.

Genesis is speaking the language of Holy Communion. Adam and Eve are given to one another by God. Each fulfills the other because each is created as a life-long companion and helpmate for the other. And when they join their bodies together in that joyful, passionate exchange, something beautiful happens. They become joined to one another in a way that mirrors God's relationship with them in Eden as well as Christ's relationship to the church in our fallen world.

Remember Paul's rebuke to the Corinthians who were having sex with hookers? You might expect him to say: "Don't be so vulgar! Don't degrade yourself like that!" Instead he says:

Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said – and now he's quoting from Genesis – "The two will become one flesh."

- 1 Corinthians 6:16

What Paul is saying is that sex is a spiritual exchange, one that has the potential to strengthen the covenant between the husband and wife. He's affirming that sex is part of God's grand design for us. When we have sex outside of marriage, even if it's just for recreational purposes, Paul insists, we move against that grand design. We give away what isn't ours to give, and we take for ourselves what isn't ours to take. One person says with his or her body, "Take me, I'm yours." But that person doesn't belong to the other. He or she belongs to God.

So the Bible says it plainly and simply: "Wait until God gives you to another person in marriage."

Many of us, from time to time, find ourselves speaking of the body as though it were something shameful and inferior. We speak of the soul as though it were a higher being imprisoned in flesh. But that kind of talk isn't supported in either the Old or the New Testament.

In the Bible body and soul are bound together. Adam and Eve are created from the dust of the ground, yet God's breath is breathed into them. Jesus takes on human flesh yet he's wholly divine. Jesus gives up his spirit on the cross, yet he's raised in a resurrected body.

What this tells us is that the spiritual is all tangled up in the physical. God created the world, including our bodies, good. Our bodies are temples of his Holy Spirit. Living under his covenant of grace, everything we do with our bodies brings him honor and glory. And that includes the wonderful things we do between the sheets with our spouses.

If you don't believe that, then sit down sometime and read the Song of Solomon. There Solomon and his wife sing playfully to each other in a great celebration of sex. Most Bible scholars, both Jewish and Christian, have concluded that the song is also a celebration of the love between God and his people:

As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
So is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
And his fruit was sweet to my taste.
- Song of Songs 2:3

If, as Paul says, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, then sex truly is one of the mysteries of his grace. It's something powerful that we probably won't fully understand until we stand in God's presence in his kingdom. Until that time, God calls us to express our sexuality in ways that honor him, and that help us to mature and grow as his beloved children.

Over the years I've heard many people, mostly teenagers, argue that God has set the bar too high, and that chastity is an unrealistic goal. Like most men I know, I've spent many years struggling with sexual sin, so I'm especially sympathetic with this line of reasoning. I used to try to counter that argument by appealing to our sense of shame. I would say something like this:

"Single people who are sexually active know deep down that they're living outside of God's will. And that knowledge makes them depressed and miserable. So listen to your heart. Let your conscience be your guide."

I now understand that that kind of advice often isn't helpful. The confusion about sex runs deep in our society, and there are a great many people who really have no sense that they're doing anything wrong when they give themselves to someone who isn't their spouse. Most of us are only able to see the truth about sex, and the truth about our sexual sin, when we're part of a healthy, spiritually alive community of believers. It's only in that context that chastity will be attractive to us. And it's only when chastity seems attractive that it becomes attainable as a goal.

I like the way William Willimon makes the point. Willimon is a bishop in the United Methodist Church:

We... Christians have capitulated and fallen face down into the morass of contemporary sexual confusion not simply because we want to be in step with the culture but because our church does not enable us to look at someone like Britney Spears and know why we are meant not to emulate her.

- *Christianity Today*, 6-14-05, page 31

What all of this means is that sex isn't a just a private matter that happens behind closed doors. Sex is the business of the whole community. If our teenagers are getting into trouble sexually, it's because we haven't created for them the kind of community where chastity makes sense. We need, as a church, to recover the virtue of modesty, and a deeper sense of the sanctity of our bodies. We need to become a fellowship where single people express their sexuality in ways that honor God, and married couples model Christ's relationship with his church.

Those are the things we must do if we ever hope to inspire our youth with a biblical perspective on sex.

The ideal of chaste singleness is one that has inspired the church for 2000 years. Jesus himself reveals to us the integrity and beauty of that ideal. So do the Apostle Paul and Mother Teresa. And so do countless other saints of the church who followed in the Lord's footsteps.

What they all teach us is that chastity is difficult to attain, but worth pursuing with all the passion and energy we can muster. I certainly fall far short of the goal. But what I learn, each time I fail, is that God's grace is always there for me. Chastity is hard, but God's power is great, and he always grants us victory when we yield our weaknesses and our temptations to him.

I want to close today by asking you this question: Are you honoring God with your body?

Maybe you've become aware today of a habit that you need to break.

Maybe you've become aware of a relationship that you need to repair, whether it's by saying "I love you" or "I'm sorry," or by holding someone close.

Maybe you've become aware of a relationship that you need to end.

Or maybe you find yourself thinking about a friend or family member who's making lots of mistakes, sexually, and who need a gentle word of advice.

Whatever your situation, I hope you'll make a decision, right now, to deal with it. Do it in a way that brings honor to God. And trust him to give you the strength you'll need to walk in his light.

Gracious Lord, thank you for creating us male and female, in bodies that reflect your goodness. We confess that we don't always express our sexuality in ways that bring you glory. We harbor lustful thoughts. We treat others as objects. We pursue relationships that are destructive.

Teach us to honor you with our bodies. Help us to model healthy sexuality to our children and youth. Make our bodies into temples for your Holy Spirit. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.