**THE GOSPEL AND SEX**

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Christian community is to be an alternate society in which sex, money, and power are used in life-giving ways that differ sharply from the practices of the broader culture. This article addresses sex in the context of the gospel and Christian community.



# PART I: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SEX

Three different personal and cultural attitudes toward sex have been predominant through the centuries.

**Sexual Realism: Sex as natural appetite.**

Many of the ancient Greeks and Romans viewed sex as similar to any other bodily activity, such as eating or sleeping. When you felt like doing it, you should do it—just be careful not to overdo it, as with all appetites. This modern view of sex has been called “realism.” Realists claim to be neutral about sex; they see it as just one human activity among many, but one that must be demystified. Their message, prominent in today’s public school sex education, is that we should understand the natural biological drive of sex, realize that if we are not careful sexual activity can have negative consequences, master it like any other skill, and be responsible.

**Sexual Platonism: Sex as animal passion.**

One of the most influential branches of Hellenistic philosophy viewed the spirit as the highest good and the body as “lesser.” That is, the lower, physical, “animal” nature was seen as chaotic and dark, and the higher, more rational, “spiritual” nature was seen as civilized and noble. This led to viewing sex as a degrading, dirty thing, a necessary evil for the propagation of the human race. Premarital sex was forbidden because sex in general was dirty and was allowable only for the higher good of having children and building up the family name. Unfortunately, this view took root in many places in the Christian church. Truly spiritual people should refrain from sex, sex is allowable only if you are trying to have children, sexual pleasure is not appropriate for high-minded people—these notions grew out of a kind of sexual platonism.

**Sexual Romanticism: Sex as repressed creativity.**

While Hellenism located the source of evil in the physical, the Romanticists located it in the cultural. They thought that human beings in their unspoiled original state were brimming with natural goodness and creativity; it was society that stifled it. Goodness would be achieved by liberating the basic, primal instincts, which were in themselves pure. Opposed to Romanticism was Victorianism, the assumption that goodness could be achieved only by suppressing the primal instincts, which in themselves were evil.

While the first perspective sees sex as an inevitable biological drive and the second view sees it as a necessary evil, the last view sees sex as a critical way of self-expression, a way to “be yourself” or “find yourself.” For biological realists, all sex is right if it’s safe. For Platonists, the flesh inhibits the spirit, so sex is naturally tainted in some way. For romantics, the quality of interpersonal love is the primary touchstone that makes sex right or wrong.

**THE CHRISTIAN VIEW**

The Christian attitude toward sex is popularly thought to be the Platonist view, but most definitely it is not. It differs quite radically from each of these three prominent views.

Contrary to the Platonist view, the Bible teaches that sex is very good (Gen. 1:31). God would not create and command something to be done in marriage (1 Cor. 7:3–5) that was not good. The Song of Solomon is filled with barefaced rejoicing in sexual pleasure. In fact, the Bible can be very uncomfortable for the prudish.

Contrary to the realist “sex-as-appetite” view, the Bible teaches that sexual desires are broken and usually idolatrous. All by themselves, sexual appetites are not a safe guide, and we are instructed to flee our lusts (1 Cor. 6:18). Our sexual appetite does not operate the same as our other appetites. To illustrate this point, C. S. Lewis asks us to imagine a planet where people pay money to watch someone eat a mutton chop, where people ogle magazine pictures of food. If we landed on such a planet, we would think that the appetite of these people was seriously deranged.1 Yet that is just how modern people approach sex.

Contrary to the romantic view, the Bible teaches that love and sex are not primary for individual happiness. What the Bible says about sex and marriage “has a singularly foreign sound for those of us brought up on romantic notions of marriage and sex. We are struck by the stark realism of the Pauline recommendations in 1 Corinthians 7. . . but [most of all by] the early church’s legitimation of singleness as a form of life [which] symbolized the necessity of the church to grow through witness and conversion.”2

The Bible views sex not primarily as self-fulfillment but as a way to know Christ and build his kingdom. That view undercuts both the traditional society’s idolatry of sex-for-social-standing and the secular society’s idolatry of sex-for-personal-fulfillment.

## **SEX IS A SACRAMENT**

Christian sexual ethics make little sense unless we first understand the lofty vision of sexuality in the Christian faith. Sex is sacred for three reasons.

**Sex Procreates: The Politics of Sex**

Sex is sacred because, with God, it co-creates a new soul. Sex propagates the human race (Gen. 1:28). Its purpose is not merely for the building up of a family name. The purpose of sex is to create families of disciples, to establish new kingdom communities. And, ironically, the main way we learn this is through the Bible’s remarkable attitude toward singleness.

Christianity, unlike most traditional religions or cultures, holds out singleness as a viable way of life. Both Jesus and the apostle Paul were single. Jesus spoke about those who remained unmarried in order to better serve the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:12). Paul says singleness is often better for ministering as a sign of the coming kingdom (1 Cor. 7:29–35).

*One of the few clear differences between Christianity and Judaism is the former’s entertainment of the idea of singleness as the paradigm way of life for its followers. . . . Singleness was legitimate, not because sex was thought to be a particularly questionable activity, but because the mission of the church was such that “between the times” the church required those who were capable of complete service to the Kingdom. . . . And we must remember that the “sacrifice” made by the single is not that of “giving up sex,” but the much more significant sacrifice of giving up heirs. There can be no more radical act than this, as it is the clearest institutional expression that one’s future is not guaranteed by the family, but by the church.*3



Therefore, we are to choose between marriage and singleness not on the basis of whether we want the personal happiness and status of a family but on the basis of which state makes us most useful in the kingdom of God.

*Both singleness and marriage are necessary symbolic institutions for the constitution of the church’s life as the historic institution that witnesses to God’s kingdom. Neither can be valid without the other. If singleness is a symbol of the church’s confidence in God’s power to affect lives for the growth of the church, marriage and procreation is the symbol of the church’s understanding that the struggle will be long and arduous. For Christians do not place their hope in their children, but rather their children are a sign of their hope . . . that God has not abandoned this world.*4

See, then, how different the Christian prohibition of extramarital sex is from the traditional one? In traditional cultures premarital sex was taboo but so was singleness, because the family and the propagation of its economic and social status were idols. The Christian prohibition of premarital sex is clearly different in its inspiration, because singleness is now considered a viable alternative.5 In traditional societies premarital sex was forbidden because it undermined the family. In Christianity it undermined the kingdom. Why? First, sex outside of a marriage covenant undermines the character quality of faithfulness, which builds community.

*The issue is not just whether X or Y form of sexual activity is right or wrong, as if such activity could be separated from a whole way of life. Rather such questions are but shorthand ways of asking what kind of people we should be to be capable of supporting the mission of the church. . . . Chastity, we forget, is not a state but a form of the virtue of faithfulness that is necessary for a role in the community. As such, it is as crucial to the married life as it is to the single life.*6

Second, we abstain from extramarital sex in order to witness how God works in the gospel. God calls his people into an exclusive relationship, a marriage covenant, and to give him anything less in return is unfaithfulness. “By our faithfulness to one another, within a community that requires, finally, loyalty to God, we experience and witness to the first fruits of the new creation. Our commitment to exclusive relations witnesses to God’s pledge to his people, Israel and the church that, through his exclusive commitment to them . . . people will be brought into his kingdom.”7 So although it is common to hear people say, “Sex is a private affair and no one’s business but my own,” it is not true. How we use sex has significant community and political ramifications.

## **SEX HAS BOUNDARIES**

It’s easy for modern people to find the Christian view of sex to be repressive. To say this, however, is to make some unfounded assumptions. The teachings of Sigmund Freud focused on the conflict between an internal “id,” the innate sex drive, and an external “superego,” the socially formed conscience developed by our culture and upbringing. But this is not science; rather, it is borrowed from romanticism. How does Freud know the conscience to be a totally external, social artifice, separate from an innate, internal basis? He doesn’t, of course, but by setting up the conscience as an external influence and the sexual instinct as an internal influence, he can call all sexual ethics “repressive” and “artificial.” In actuality, evidence exists to prove that the sexual appetite is shaped significantly by the external forces of media, peer pressure, and cultural values.

Sex only works in the fullest way God intended for one man and one woman within the exclusive, permanent, legal commitment of marriage. Put another way: sex is a God-invented way to say to another person, “I belong completely and exclusively and permanently to you.” That cannot be said outside the permanent, exclusive covenantal commitment of marriage. The modern sexual revolution finds this rule so unrealistic as to be ludicrous, even harmful and psychologically unhealthy. Yet despite the incredulity of modern people, this has been the unquestioned, uniform view and law of not only one but all the Christian churches (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant) and of Jewish, Muslim, and most older pagan morality as well.

Today’s young adults take for granted that normal people will have sex if they are in a romantic relationship. Even those who speak of themselves as “conservative” or “traditional” simply mean they will not sleep with a boyfriend or girlfriend until later in the relationship. The Christian ethic of abstinence outside of marriage is considered at best laughably unrealistic, and at worst pathological and abnormal. Christians who profess the biblical sex ethic can expect to be met with incredulity, sarcasm, or hostility. Basically, the mainstream view is that adultery is wrong because it hurts a spouse but that there’s nothing wrong with sex between two loving, consenting unmarried adults. And as Christian leaders, we are finding this view to be widespread inside the Christian community as well. How do we respond?

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