

## CHASTITY AND THE GOODNESS OF GOD: THE CASE FOR PREMARITAL SEXUAL ABSTINENCE<sup>1</sup>

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I still identify myself as a religious woman, but I feel that the Lord has a big world out there to take care of, and I take care of my sexuality. I feel that some of the proclaimed [sexual] rules that the churches have were made and interpreted by men, and they have no right to try to control my body.<sup>2</sup>

Surely one of Satan's most wide-spread, persistent lies is that one must go outside of God's commandments to find well being because God's interests and our best interests don't always intersect. This misconception lay behind the very first recorded sin in Genesis three. In fifteen years of pastoral ministry working with adolescents and university students, over and over again I heard young adults express the misconception that if they scrupulously followed biblical sexual guidelines, they would have a diminished life. They assumed they were infinitely more concerned about their emotional and sexual well being than God was. Thus, I want to frame this essay around the concept of sex as a divine gift—not to promote an anthropocentric, feel good theology (“trust Jesus and you will be healthy, wealthy, and have better orgasms”). Rather, I want to exalt the goodness of God in an area of life where his character is most frequently maligned because his commandments are so frequently misconstrued.

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<sup>1</sup> This presentation is an update of an article published in *Themelios* 31 (2006): 54-71.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel S. Janus and Cynthia L. Janus, *The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993), 244.

The creation account in Genesis 1-2 makes it very clear that God is the gracious creator of everything in the universe, including humans and sexuality. God made humans sexual beings, not as a begrudging afterthought, but as a deliberate way to manifest his own character. We see this in Gen 1:26-27: "then God said, 'let us make man in our image, according to our likeness'...and God created man in his own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created him."<sup>3</sup> Since God does not have gender, the obvious question here is "how does creating humans as sexual beings (male and female) reflect the image of God? The answer is suggested in the very grammar of the passage, for plural pronouns are used of God ("us," "our"), suggesting that God is not a solitary being, but rather that God is in intimate relationship with himself.<sup>4</sup> Further biblical revelation fleshes this out, for Scripture teaches that the divine being has three equal persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are in perfect intimate union with each other (John 17:21). Thus, human sexuality is central to humans being made in the image of God, for our sexuality gives us the longing and the capacity for intimate relationships.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, some have said that our sexuality is the most God like part of who we are as humans.

But if the creation account affirms that God designed our gender, does it follow that the sex act itself is a gift from God? Absolutely, for the two are inextricably

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the NASV.

<sup>4</sup> For an exegetical defense of the view that the plural pronouns in Gen 1:26 refer in some manner to fullness within the godhead (as opposed to taking them as unassimilated fragments of polytheistic myths, plurals of self-deliberation, plurals of majesty, or a reference to the angelical court), see D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 62-69; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 132-134; Gerhard Hasel, "The Meaning of 'Let Us' in Gn 1:26," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 13 (1975): 58-66.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth most notably has developed image of God in terms of gender, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 183-212. On the way sexuality is beautifully designed by God to drive humans to intimate relationship, see Lewis B. Smedes, *Sex for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 32-33; see also Stanley J. Grenz, "The Purpose of Sex: Toward a Theological Understanding of Human Sexuality," *Crux* 26 (1990): 27-34; Donald M. Joy, *Bonding: Relationships in the Image of God*, rev. ed. (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1997).

connected. Immediately after creating the man and the woman, God blessed them and commanded them to "be fruitful and multiply." In other words, in a clear context of divine blessing, God essentially commands Adam and Eve to have sexual relations. Furthermore, when God was finished creating he reflected on what he had made, including human gender and procreation through the sex act, and pronounced it "very good" (Gen 1:31). It is quite sad that Christians often imply that sex is dirty and unspiritual, for this is not God's verdict. He created sex as a divine gift, and put his enthusiastic stamp of approval on it by exclaiming that sex as an expression of love between a husband and a wife is not just good, but "very good."<sup>6</sup>

Additional divine approval (and hence blessing) of the sex act is found in the very words he uses to describe the man and the woman he created. In Gen 1:26, the Hebrew words "zachar" and "nekebah" are used to convey "male" and "female." These two words are expressly sexual, and literally mean "piercer" and "one pierced." So in the very words God uses to describe the male and the female he created, he graphically describes the sex act. Clearly, God is not embarrassed by sexual intercourse; it was his good creation. A final indication that sex is a gift from God is seen at the end of the creation account, where after God made a wife for Adam, the author declares that in marriage a man and a woman are to create a new family unit and become "one flesh." Thus, the sex act in marriage is intended by God to express, reinforce, and reenact the marital covenant itself.

<sup>7</sup> This helps to explain the beautiful Hebrew euphemism for marital sex—"to know."

Adam, who had been given Eve as his life companion on the sixth day of creation, could

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<sup>6</sup> For a very helpful articulation of sex being a divine gift as revealed in the biblical creation account, particularly in terms of God creating humans with a body (unlike angels), see Lewis B. Smedes, *Sex for Christians*, 29-30.

<sup>7</sup> Steve Tracy, "The Mystery of Marriage," *Christianity Today*, January 7, 2002, 63.

continue to express and reenact their union throughout their earthly days by “knowing” Eve sexually (Gen 4:1). What a beautiful picture of sex bringing pleasure and bonding a man and a woman in marriage. Thus, marriage and the sex act itself are wonderful gifts from God.

Sadly, very few people today understand that God is a loving creator who wants to bless his creation, and thus his commandments are not capricious or inimical to our well being. Satan, not God, wants to corrupt goodness, diminish joy, and steal our well being. We see this conflict clearly when Jesus declares: "The thief comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy; I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Similarly the psalmist proclaims: "no good thing does He [God] withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Ps 84:11). Since God is good and desires to bless, his commandments are always in our best interest. In this vein Cornelius Platinga brilliantly clarifies the nature of sin. He begins by using the concept of shalom to explain God's desire for creation, and then shows how sin violates shalom:

In the Bible, shalom means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural need are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.

God hates sin not just because it violates his law but, more substantively, because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be.

(Indeed, that is why God has laws against a good deal of sin.) God is for shalom and *therefore* against sin.<sup>8</sup>

This theological understanding that God's commandments are always designed to bless us is not a modern capitulation to a narcissistic culture. For instance, seventeenth century Puritan pastor Richard Baxter in *A Christian Directory*, his magisterial work on spirituality, argues that Satan's greatest lie is that God's commandments are not in our best interest, and that a life of obedience to God will result in "a terrible or tedious life."<sup>9</sup> But in reality, "God doth not command us to honour him by [telling us to do] anything which would make us miserable."<sup>10</sup> In other words, obedience to God will always result in blessing, not boredom, happiness, not misery. And this is true regardless of the subject matter, be it salvation or sex.

### Biblical Teaching Regarding Premarital Sexual Relations

There are countless liberal religious voices proclaiming that consensual sexual relations outside of marriage are morally acceptable. Liberal Christian ethicists have generally made this case in one of two ways: (1) they argue that a careful reading of Scripture reveals that the New Testament does not actually condemn non-married adults

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<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 10, 14.

<sup>9</sup> *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, vol. 1, (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, reprinted 2000), 52. It is worth noting that no less a theocentric theological giant than J. I. Packer maintains that Richard Baxter's *Christian Directory* is "the fullest, most thorough, and in this writer's judgment, most profound treatment of Christian spirituality and standards that has ever been attempted by an English-speaking Evangelical author." *ibid.*, introduction, vii.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 64. The point here is certainly not that God exists simply to make us happy, but that his glory and our happiness or well being are not mutually exclusive. In fact, he is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in him. John Piper, a modern pastor and prolific author who stands in the reformed tradition of Richard Baxter, has thoroughly developed this concept in *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1986).

having consensual sex<sup>11</sup>; (2) they more commonly argue that while some writers of Scripture did condemn all sexual activity outside of marriage, these authors wrote from a pre-modern perspective which must not be accepted wholesale by modern Christians. The spirit of the gospel allows for consensual sexual expression in non married loving adult relationships.<sup>12</sup>

But this is a very recent Christian perspective. The overwhelming consensus of historical Christian teaching as well as modern evangelical biblical scholarship is that sexual relations are only appropriate in marriage.<sup>13</sup> We see this sexual ethic given explicitly and implicitly in numerous biblical passages. For example, virginity before marriage is greatly prized in Scripture (Gen 24:16; Lev 21:14; Luke 1:27), so much so that a new bride kept the bloody sheet from the first night she slept with her husband as proof that she entered marriage as a virgin (Deut 22:15-17). Loss of virginity before marriage was cause for severe sanctions (Deut 22:20-21). Overall, there are not a large number of Old Testament passages which specifically address pre-marital sex, since sexual chastity among singles was apparently thoroughly accepted and practiced. This is

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, L. William Countryman argues that Old Testament sexual prohibitions against sex outside of marriage are primarily based on Mosaic purity codes from which the New Testament believer has been freed, *Dirt Greed & Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Taking a slightly different line of argument but arriving at the same conclusion is Joseph Fletcher, who argues that the Bible never expressly forbids premarital sex; it only condemns extramarital sex, "Ethics and Unmarried Sex," in *Moral Issues and Christian Responses*, ed. Paul Jersild and Dale Johnson (New York: Holt & Winston, 1971), 113.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Christine E. Gudorf argues that we must dismiss various biblical sexual texts as divine revelation because they are permeated with patriarchy, misogyny, and anti-sexual attitudes "which are in conflict with the central message of the gospel." Instead, the spirit of the gospel (which accepts sex as a divine gift) leads us to a Christian sexual ethic which chooses "sexual pleasure as the primary ethical criterion for evaluating sexual activity," *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 11, 115. See also James B. Nelson, *Body Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); John Shelby Spong, *Living in Sin? A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Thus, Richard B. Hays in his magisterial work on New Testament ethics summarizes the biblical sexual ethic as follows: "from Genesis 1 onward, Scripture affirms repeatedly that God has made man and woman for one another and that our sexual desires rightly find fulfillment within heterosexual marriage," *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 390.

seen in the widespread use of the term "virgin" simply to signify those who were unmarried (Lam 1:14, 18; 2:10; Amos 8:13; Zech 9:17).

Due to the sexually permissive Greco-Roman culture, the New Testament gives much more specific attention to pre-marital sex. Various terms are used in the New Testament to indicate sexual sin, but by far the most important term is porneia. A careful reading of the New Testament reveals that porneia is a broad term for sexual sin, including prostitution (1 Cor 6:13, 18), and promiscuous sexual activity (Matt 15:19; 1 Cor 7:2; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3; 1 Thess 4:3-5). It certainly includes pre-marital sex, though it is not limited to it. A study of the Koine papyri reveals that in the first century secular writings porneia had the same meaning as in the New Testament--illicit sexual activity, including prostitution, adultery, and pre-marital sex.<sup>14</sup> Though some liberal scholars have sought to restrict the meaning of porneia to prostitution or non-consensual sexual activity,<sup>15</sup> the data is clear. New Testament sanctions against porneia forbid premarital sexual activity.

Other New Testament passages affirm the fact that pre-marital sex is forbidden. One of the clearest examples is in 1 Cor 7:1-5, where Paul responds to the Corinthians' suggestion that it is best for a married man to not have sexual relations with his wife. Paul's response is that because of immoralities (porneia), each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and the husband and wife must meet each other's sexual needs so that they do not fall into sexual temptation. There is no moral loophole here for

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<sup>14</sup> James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 529.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Malina argues that porneia has a more restricted meaning than has been previously understood, and that it does not prohibit non-commercial, non-exploitive premarital sex, "Does Porneia Mean Fornication?," *Novum Testamentum* 14 (1972): 10-17. Joseph Jensen however, counters Malina's arguments, and gives abundant evidence that all forms of premarital sex are included in the scope of the biblical use of porneia, "Does Porneia Mean Fornication? A Critique of Bruce Malina," *Novum Testamentum* 20 (1978): 161-84.

pre-marital sex, for Paul instead argues that marriage is the only God ordained provision for sexual needs. Other passages such as Heb 13:4 link those who practice pre-marital sex (“fornicators”) with adulterers, indicating that sex before marriage and sex after marriage to someone other than one's spouse are equally condemned (“God will judge”). The marriage bed is cited as the exclusive place for God ordained sexual activity.

In summary, both the Old and the New Testaments bless sex in marriage as a gift from God, and unequivocally condemn sex outside of marriage. But the affirmation of sex in marriage and the prohibition of sex outside of marriage are both based on the fact that sex is a gift from God. As the good and holy creator, he knows the best way for us to use his gifts, and he has every right to govern their expression.

#### Arguments for Premarital Sex Based on Sex as a Basic Right

In the past three decades there has been a dramatic shift in the western world regarding the moral acceptability of premarital sex.<sup>16</sup> Most modern westerners find the biblical sexual ethic to be illogical, outdated, and utterly unacceptable. Thus, by age nineteen, 85% of American males and 77% of females will have had intercourse.<sup>17</sup> In England and Wales, 39% of non-married adults ages 25-29 are cohabiting, as are 35% of non-married adults ages 30-34.<sup>18</sup> A recent trend among adolescents and especially college students called “hookups” epitomizes the current sexual climate in America. “Hookups” is a deliberately ambiguous term which connotes any sexual activity between two people

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<sup>16</sup> Pamela J. Smock in an excellent survey of cohabitation in the western world and especially the United States, notes that cohabitation before marriage rose 10% in the United States between 1965 and 1974, but it rose to over 50% of those marrying between 1990 and 1994, “Cohabitation in the United States,” An Appraisal of Research themes, Findings, and Implications,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 3.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Guttmacher Institute, “Teen Sex and Pregnancy”; can be viewed on the web at [http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb\\_teen\\_sex.pdf](http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_teen_sex.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> *National Statistics Population Trends* 119 (2005): 69; can be viewed on the Web at [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_population/PT119v2.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_population/PT119v2.pdf).



who have little or no commitment. Thus, they can “unhook” easily because there is no romantic involvement. One journalist who investigated this phenomenon argues that it reflects a major cultural shift in which young adults “have virtually abandoned dating and replaced it with group get-togethers and sexual behaviors that are detached from love or commitment—and sometimes even from liking...Sex is becoming the primary currency of social interaction.<sup>19</sup> One researcher who surveyed 555 undergraduate college students found that four out of five reported having engaged in hookups and half surveyed had gone out for the evening planning to have sex with no particular person in mind.<sup>20</sup>

From the outset of the sexual revolution in the 1960s, sexual expression has increasingly been viewed as a basic right that no one has a right to restrict. Singer Billy Joel powerfully articulated this ethic in his song "My Life" in which he stated that people have a right to sleep with anyone they want to; they answer only to themselves. Hence, he doesn't care what others think about his sexual behavior. He declared that those who want to restrict his sexual expressions should live their life and "leave me alone." While Billy Joel simply offers an artistic proclamation that premarital sex is a basic right, some liberal Christian ethicists academically argue the same point.<sup>21</sup>

Flowing out of the idea that unrestricted sex is a basic right, other arguments are commonly given for premarital sex. One of the most common is that sexual abstinence is unnatural and leads to psychologically unhealthy sexual repression. This argument was

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<sup>19</sup> Laura Session Stepp, *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love and Lose at Both* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007), 4.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel McGinn, “Mating Behavior 101,” *Newsweek*, October 4, 2004; Elizabeth L. Paul, Brian McManus, and Allison Hayes, “Hookup’s: Characteristics and Correlates of College Students’ Spontaneous and Anonymous Sexual Experiences,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 37 (2000): 76.

<sup>21</sup> Douglas J. Miller, “Sexual Activity as a Basic Human Right,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 8 (1989): 84-93.

first articulated by the influential sex researcher Alfred Kinsey.<sup>22</sup> Many argue that premarital sex strengthens future marriage by helping couples adjust to each other and by insuring that they are sexually compatible. Hence it ultimately strengthens marriage. Others note that sex is a powerful way to deepen love between two people and enhance the relationship. Hence, couples who love each other should have sex, regardless of whether or not they are married. All of these arguments fly in the face of the biblical teaching that sex is to be reserved for marriage. If in fact sex is a good gift from a gracious Creator who prohibits premarital sexual relations, what evidence is there that abstinence before marriage is good and healthy? Are we simply to take the biblical sanctions against premarital sex by faith and tell others they must do the same?

#### Arguments for Premarital Sexual Abstinence based on the goodness of God

While Christians are called to "walk by faith" and obey God's word regardless of whether it makes sense, this is not a call to intellectual suicide. In fact, there are numerous cogent arguments for premarital sexual abstinence which are supported by modern medical and social science research. In particular, we will note five arguments for reserving sex for marriage. All of these show the wisdom and benevolence of biblical premarital sexual prohibitions.

1. Abstinence before marriage enhances personal and marital health.

The sex act is the most intimate form of human interaction. The very fact that sex involves being naked before another person and embracing them in their nakedness

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<sup>22</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Company, 1948), 197-213.

suggests great vulnerability and exposure. Furthermore, this very act can have dramatic, life or death consequences (the creation of life or the ultimate loss of life through sexually transmitted diseases). For these reasons, sex is most meaningful and healthy in a relationship in which a couple has made a vow of life long commitment to each other. This provides the safest and most intimate setting for sex, for only in marriage is sex experienced in a relationship in which all of life is shared together.<sup>23</sup> Premarital sex is not the best context in which to experience this powerful act, and undermines personal and future marital health.

In terms of personal health, those who are sexually active before marriage often struggle later in life with the need to change their perceptions of what sex means, lack of trust, comparisons of the sexual performance of their spouse with former boyfriends/girlfriends, and struggles with the demands of fidelity in marriage. My wife (who is a family therapist) and I continually counsel women as well as men who are experiencing emotional and marital struggles due to sexual experiences before marriage. For many of the people we work with, their sexual health in marriage was negatively impacted by their sexual behavior before marriage. Premarital sex is also negatively correlated with mental health. For instance, in a study sample of over 13,000 adolescents, engaging in sexual intercourse predicted increased depression for girls.<sup>24</sup> Another study of 6500 adolescents quantified this relationship. The researchers found that sexually

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<sup>23</sup> Thus, in a recent study of sexual satisfaction among married, cohabiting, and dating couples, researchers found that married men and women experienced significantly more emotional satisfaction with sex than sexually active singles. They in particular linked married men's 60% higher emotional satisfaction rate to "the greater emotional investment of those who are married in their wife, than of those who are cohabiting or single in their girlfriend," Linda J. Waite and Kara Joyner, "Emotional and Physical Satisfaction with Sex in Married, Cohabiting, and Dating Sexual Unions: Do Men and Women Differ?," in *Sex, Love, and Health in America: Private Choices and Public Policies*, ed. Edward O. Laumann and Robert T. Michael (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 266.

<sup>24</sup> Denise D. Hallfors, et al., "Which Comes First in Adolescence—Sex and Drugs or Depression?" *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 29 (2005): 163-170.

active girls were more than three times more likely to be depressed and nearly three times more likely to have attempted suicide than adolescent girls who were not sexually active.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of marital satisfaction, one of the most wide-spread modern myths is that couples need to live together before they get married to see if they are sexually and relationally compatible and thus to enhance future marital health and satisfaction. In reality, research shows that couples that live together before marriage have higher infidelity rates, lower marital satisfaction rates, and higher divorce rates than those who don't live together before marriage. In spite of the intuitive logic that cohabitation should have a beneficial affect on subsequent marital stability by allowing individuals to truly get to know their partner before committing to marriage, research on this specific dynamic has shown “no positive effect of cohabitation on marital stability.”<sup>26</sup> In fact, there is a tremendous amount of social science research, particularly studies of cohabitation, which demonstrates the injurious personal and relational effects of premarital sexual relations. For instance, in one major recent study, 1,425 couples were studied to determine the relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital dysfunction. Researchers found that couples who cohabited before marriage “reported poorer marital quality and greater marital instability.”<sup>27</sup> This dynamic of cohabitation

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<sup>25</sup> Robert E. Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, and Lauren R. Noyes, “Sexually Active Teenagers Are More Likely to Be Depressed and to Attempt Suicide,” Heritage Center for Data Analysis, 2003, [www.heritage.org](http://www.heritage.org), cited in anonymous, *Unprotected* (New York: Sentinel, 2006), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Lee A. Lillard, Michael J. Brien, and Linda J. Waite, “Premarital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Dissolution: A Matter of Self-Selection,” *Demography* 32 (1995): 455.

<sup>27</sup> Claire Kamp Dush, Catherine Cohan, and Paul Amato, “The Relationship between Cohabitation and Marital Quality and Stability: Change Across Cohorts,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 539-549. See also Alfred DeMaris and G. Leslie, “Cohabitation with the Future Spouse: Its Influence Upon Marital Satisfaction and Communication,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 46 (1984): 77-84; A. Elizabeth Thomson and Ygo Colella, “Cohabitation and Marital Stability: Quality or Commitment,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 54 (1992): 259-267.

having a negative impact on subsequent marriage has been replicated in so many different studies that some social scientists have labeled it “the cohabitation effect.”<sup>28</sup> Hence, it is not surprising that the research shows cohabiters are more likely to divorce or separate if they do get married. A study of over 4,000 Swedish women reported that women who cohabit before marriage have an 80% higher marital failure rate than women who did not cohabit with their future spouse.<sup>29</sup> In short, living together and having sex before marriage does not prepare one for marriage, but decreases the likelihood of a future healthy marriage.

In terms of sexual satisfaction, it is very interesting to note that in the Sex in America Survey, one of the largest studies released in the last decade of American sexual practices, married couples reported considerably higher rates of sexual satisfaction than singles, and among women, conservative Protestant women had the highest rates of orgasm.<sup>30</sup> These secular researchers made the following comments that support the contention that marriage is the best environment to experience sex, and reserving sex for marriage can in fact enhance future marital satisfaction. They comment on their findings:

Those having the most partnered sex and enjoying it the most are the married people. The young single people who flit from partner to partner and seem to be having a sex life that is satisfying beyond most people's dreams are, it seems, mostly a media creation. In real

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<sup>28</sup> Catherine L. Cohan and Stacey Kleinbaum, “Toward a Greater Understanding of the Cohabitation Effect: Premarital Cohabitation and Marital Communication,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64 (2002): 180-192.

<sup>29</sup> N. G. Bennett, A. K. Blanc, and D. E. Bloom, “Commitment and the Modern Union: Assessing the Link between Premarital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Stability,” *American Sociological Review* 53 (1988): 127-138. See also Alfred DeMaris and K. Vaninadha Rao, “Premarital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Stability in the United States: A Reassessment,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54 (1992): 178-190; David R. Hall and John Z. Zhao, “Cohabitation and Divorce in Canada: Testing the Selectivity Hypothesis,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57 (1995): 421-427.

<sup>30</sup> Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann, et al., *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (New York: Time Warner, 1995), 127-128.

life, the unheralded, seldom discussed world of married sex is actually the one that satisfies most people.<sup>31</sup>

While these findings do not tightly prove that sex before marriage is unhealthy, they point that direction by strongly suggesting that marriage is the healthiest, most satisfying context in which to have sex. The findings also suggest that those who have conservative sexual values, which in most cases would include a commitment to save sex for marriage, have better sex lives when they do get married.

2. Abstinence before marriage increases the likelihood of being respected and treated with dignity

This point flows out of the previous point. Marriage is by far the best, safest, and healthiest environment for sex because it involves the highest level of relational commitment. For instance, studies indicate that seventy per cent of couples that live together fail to get married and soon break up. The majority of cohabiting couples are together less than two years, and the average time together is only thirteen months.<sup>32</sup> It is safe to say that when sex is practiced outside of marriage, it is inevitably expressed in a context that lacks the highest level of commitment, and this creates great potential for disrespect and selfish manipulation. It also creates much greater potential for harm and heartache. For instance, countless women have been pressured into sex by boyfriends who manipulated them by saying they loved them when in reality they just wanted to use them. Surveys reveal that a high percentage of singles, especially males, admit to lying

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>32</sup> L. Bumpas and J. Sweet, "National Estimates of Cohabitation," *Demography* 26 (1989): 22-24; C. Surra, "Research and Theory on Mate Selection and Premarital Relationships in the 1980s," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52 (1990): 844-865.

about their sexual history, including having a sexually transmitted disease, so that they could have sex. It is much more likely that a man will abandon his girlfriend who becomes unexpectedly pregnant, than a husband will leave a wife who becomes unexpectedly pregnant. While domestic violence is problematic in all spheres of society, including those who are married, research shows that cohabiting couples are much more likely to physically abuse each other than are married couples or non cohabiting dating couples.<sup>33</sup> According to a 2002 U.S. Department of Justice report on intimate partner violence, unmarried women are almost five times more likely to experience violence at the hands of their sexual partner than are married women.<sup>34</sup>

A final example of the way that premarital sex can weaken respect and increase potential for being harmed is seen in rates of infidelity. In one major study of couples living together, cohabitators were found to be almost twice as likely to be unfaithful as those who were married. Upon analysis, this was found to be due to the weaker nature of the cohabitators' relationships compared to married couples, not to cohabitators having lower expectations of fidelity than married couples. The researchers noted: "this finding suggests that cohabitor's lower investments in their unions, not their less conventional values, accounted for the greater risk of infidelity."<sup>35</sup>

Not only can premarital sex foster disrespect and even abuse, but it can mask abusive character which already exists. Saving sex for marriage allows couples to get to

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<sup>33</sup> Lynn Magdol, Terrie E. Moffitt, Avshalom Caspi, et al., "Hitting without a Licence: Testing Explanations for Differences in Partner Abuse between Young Adult Daters and Cohabitators," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 60 (1998): 41-55; Jan E. Stets, "Cohabiting and Marital Aggression: The Role of Social Isolation," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 53 (1991): 669-680.

<sup>34</sup> Callie Marie Rennison and Sarah Welchans, *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Intimate Partner Violence*, a special report prepared at the request of the Department of Justice, May 2000, rev. 1/31/02, Appendix table 8.

<sup>35</sup> Judith Treas and Deirdre Giesen, "Sexual Infidelity among Married and Cohabiting Couples," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62 (2000): 59.

know the other person for who they really are, for sex has an amazing way of creating instant romance and connection that may well be shallow and ultimately deceptive. Sex often blinds people to the reality of the other person's character, which can be very costly if the other person has serious character flaws. Conversely, saving sex for marriage forces couples to get to know their partner in a much deeper way. It also tends to create more respect and love for the other person because it forces them to sacrifice their immediate sexual needs for the greater long term good.<sup>36</sup>

3. Abstinence before marriage helps one develop self-control and character necessary for a healthy marriage (and for life in general).

The popular notion that premarital sexual abstinence is psychologically unhealthy is curiously inconsistent and groundless. It is curiously inconsistent because in virtually every domain of life except for the sexual, western culture strongly affirms the propriety and healthiness of denying our physical appetites for a greater long term good. We particularly affirm and handsomely reward athletes who abstain from sleep, food, physical comfort, and even medical care to get an Olympic gold medal, win the Tour de France, or climb Mount Everest. We recognize that when a greater good is in view, it is commendable, healthy, and beneficial to give up various physical pleasures. Our culture does not apply this same logic to sex, but it should. It is the Christian sexual ethic that is most logical and defensible. Christians affirm that food, drink, sex, and physical comfort are all good gifts from God, but God graciously proscribes the use of those gifts. And a primary way he asks singles to live out their sexuality is to abstain from this physical

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<sup>36</sup> Sociologist George Gilder brilliantly expresses this in terms of the way saving sex for marriage "tames the male barbarian," who would otherwise put his own needs above the woman's and become increasingly disrespectful, crass, and unfaithful, *Men and Marriage* (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 1992).



pleasure for the greater good. For most, this will mean abstaining until marriage. For some who are called to a life of singleness, it will mean life long abstinence for the greater good of the kingdom of God. Jesus himself modeled this principle.

The argument that sexual abstinence before marriage is psychologically unhealthy is also groundless. As long as one is abstaining from sex for the right reason (saving a divine gift for a greater good), abstinence is very healthy. In particular, sexual abstinence before marriage can enhance sacrificial love and respect for one's partner. It also develops self-control that is essential for healthy personal and marital life. Young singles often have the mistaken impression that their sexual frustrations would disappear if they could just hurry up and get married and enjoy limitless sex. While the Bible itself instructs married couples to enjoy regular sexual relations (1 Cor 7:1-5) the rude fact is that in the most healthy marriages spouses get sick, wives menstruate and get pregnant, and small children dissipate the time and energy needed for passionate sex. The beauty of the biblical sexual ethic is that marriage is a life-long commitment of love and fidelity. So if illness or pregnancy precludes sexual relations for a week or even months, the love and the commitment live on. And sex will be celebrated when it can be celebrated. Most people deeply long for a life partner who will love them unconditionally, someone they can bond with, share life with, and enjoy sex with for the rest of their life. One of the greatest threats to this type of wonderful life long intimate love is marital infidelity. And abstaining from sex before marriage develops self-control, and enhances fidelity after marriage.

Social science researchers have noted the correlation between premarital sex and marital infidelity. For instance, the Kinsey report on female sexuality revealed the more

premarital sex a woman engaged in, the more likely she would be to commit adultery once married.<sup>37</sup> More recently, in a major study on sexual infidelity researchers demonstrated a causal relationship between premarital sex and marital infidelity. In fact, they actually quantified the effects of premarital sex on subsequent marriage. They discovered that early sexual experience increased sexual infidelity in marriage 1% for each partner between ages eighteen and marital union."<sup>38</sup> These research findings are predictable, for sexual abstinence before marriage helps to develop self-control and character that later enhances marriage.

4. Abstinence before marriage guarantees that one will not have to deal with an unplanned pregnancy

Since abstinence is the only 100% effective form of birth control, singles who practice abstinence will never have to deal with an unexpected pregnancy. Though married couples also have unplanned pregnancies, they are generally much better equipped to handle them in a healthy manner given the committed nature of their relationship. Many researchers are now saying that out of wedlock births are the single most significant factor influencing long-term poverty in America. In many inner city areas of America, up to 2/3 of the births are to unwed mothers, and these single parent children are much more likely to live below the poverty line, drop out of high school, end up in prison, become single parents themselves, and get locked into a cycle of poverty.<sup>39</sup>

The point here is certainly not to condemn single mothers (who need and deserve

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<sup>37</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Company, 1953), 427-28.

<sup>38</sup> Treas and Giesen, "Sexual Infidelity among Married and Cohabiting Couples," 56.

<sup>39</sup> For a very readable overview of the negative individual and societal impact of single parenting, see, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Dan Quayle Was Right," *Atlantic Monthly*, 271, issue 4 (April, 1993): 47-68.

compassion and assistance) but to underscore the fact that much long-term, even generational suffering is a direct result of sex outside of marriage. God forbids sex outside marriage to save us from individual and societal harm.

5. Abstinence before marriage eliminates the threat of contracting STDs.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are at epidemic rates in many countries and communities, and are literally disrupting the modern world. There are more than fifty STDs, and STD rates in the United States are among the highest in the industrialized world. In 2005 the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported that nineteen million STD infections occur annually in the U.S., with almost half of these infections occurring among youth ages fifteen to twenty-four.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the CDC notes that in addition to potentially severe health consequences for the populace, STDs create a great economic burden, creating direct annual U.S. medical costs of 14.1 billion dollars.<sup>41</sup> The physical and financial burden of STDs is a much greater burden around the world. According to the World Health Organization, STDs are "among the most common causes of illness in the world," and have far reaching health, economic, and social consequences.<sup>42</sup> In spite of medical advances, several STDs are currently incurable, notably HIV, genital herpes, hepatitis B, and human papilloma virus (HPV). In fact, it is estimated that in the U.S. half of the people who are annually infected with an STD are

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<sup>40</sup> "STD Surveillance 2003," available at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats/trends2003.htm>.

<sup>41</sup> "Trends in Reportable Sexually Transmitted Diseases in the United States, 2005," available at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats/trends2005.htm#trendschlamydia>.

<sup>42</sup> "Guidelines for the Management of Sexually Transmitted Infections" (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2003): vii, available at [http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/rhr\\_01\\_10\\_mngt\\_stis/guidelines\\_mngt\\_stis.pdf](http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/rhr_01_10_mngt_stis/guidelines_mngt_stis.pdf).

infected with one that is incurable.<sup>43</sup> In the western world the strategic governmental and medical response to the STD crisis has largely been the promotion of condom usage. While proper condom usage has been shown to be effective in reducing some STD transmissions, particularly male and female HIV and male gonorrhea transmission, their efficacy is low or unclear in the prevention of numerous other STDs, including HPV, female gonorrhea, chlamydia, and genital herpes.<sup>44</sup> It should also be noted that consistent and proper usage of condoms by sexually active young adults is still quite problematic. For instance, in one study of 158 college men, 60% did not discuss condom use with their partners before they had sex, 42% disclosed that they had wanted to use condoms before sex but didn't because none were available at the time, and nearly one third reported breakage or slippage during sex.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, a high percentage of young adults report having partners (women as well as men) who tried to dissuade them from using condoms.<sup>46</sup>

The HIV virus, which leads to AIDS, is particularly devastating much of the developing world. It is estimated that there are almost 40 million people with HIV

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<sup>43</sup> "Tracking the Hidden Epidemics: Trends in STDs in the United States 2000," 1, available at [http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/dstd/Stats\\_Trends/Trends2000.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/dstd/Stats_Trends/Trends2000.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health, "Workshop Summary: Scientific Evidence on Condom Effectiveness for Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) Prevention," 2001. This can be accessed at: <http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/research/topics/STI/pdf/condomreport.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Crosby, "Condom Use Errors and Problems among College Men," *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* (2002): 552-557. Similar problems with condom use are reported by women. For instance, one study found that 51% of the women reported putting the condom on their partner after starting sex, 48% wanted to use a condom but didn't because one wasn't available, and 28% reported slippage, breakage, or both, Stephanie Sanders, et al., *Journal of the American Women's Medical Association* 58 (2003) 95-98.

<sup>46</sup> In one study of undergraduate college students, 41% of the women and 38% of the men reported having had a sexual partner who tried to dissuade them from using a condom," Renee M. Oncale and Bruce M. King, "Comparison of Men's and Women's Attempts to Dissuade Sexual Partners from the Couple Using Condoms," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 30 (2001): 379-391.

worldwide, with over 4 million new cases a year, half of which are children.<sup>47</sup> While the overall rates of new HIV infections world wide has dropped somewhat, the percentage of new infections involving children is rising. In 1990, 40% of new HIV infections were among children, but it has currently risen to 50%.<sup>48</sup> Africa has been most affected by the AIDS epidemic, having some communities with the majority of adults HIV+. Sub-Saharan Africa has just 10% of the world's population, but accounts for 2/3 of the world's population living with HIV (roughly twenty-five million).<sup>49</sup> In 2004 it was estimated that 3.1 million people in the region became newly infected with HIV, and almost 2.5 million died of AIDS.<sup>50</sup> AIDS is having an overwhelming economic and social impact in Africa. For instance, in nine African countries AIDS has lowered life expectancy rates below forty years of age.<sup>51</sup> It is estimated that there are currently over 15 million AIDS orphans in the world, and over 12 million of these orphans are in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>52</sup> While the HIV virus can be spread through contact with blood or other bodily fluids (particularly through childbirth or sharing of infected needles) the vast majority of HIV infections world wide are the result of heterosexual sexual activity.

While AIDS rates in the United States are nothing like Africa's, other STD rates in America are very high and very dangerous. Currently the most common sexually transmitted disease in the United States is the human papilloma virus (HPV). The CDC estimates that 20 million Americans are currently infected with HPV, 6.2 million

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<sup>47</sup> World Health Organization, "Global AIDS Epidemic May 2006," can be accessed at: [http://www.who.int/hiv/mediacentre/2006\\_Epi\\_backgrounder\\_on\\_methodology\\_en.pdf](http://www.who.int/hiv/mediacentre/2006_Epi_backgrounder_on_methodology_en.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> UNAIDS, "Global Facts and Figures 2006," available at [http://www.who.int/hiv/mediacentre/200605-FS\\_globalfactsfigures\\_en.pdf](http://www.who.int/hiv/mediacentre/200605-FS_globalfactsfigures_en.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> UN Aids Fact Sheet, available at [http://www.unaids.org/html/pub/publications/factsheets04/FS\\_SSAfrica\\_en\\_pdf/FS\\_SSAfrica.html](http://www.unaids.org/html/pub/publications/factsheets04/FS_SSAfrica_en_pdf/FS_SSAfrica.html).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Avert, "AIDS Orphans," available at <http://www.avert.org/aidsorphans.htm>.

Americans contract a new genital HPV infection each year, at least 50 percent of sexually active men and women acquire genital HPV infection at some point in their lives, and 80 percent of American women will have acquired a genital HPV infection by age 50.<sup>53</sup>

What is most troubling is that certain HPV types cause abnormal Pap smears and are etiologically related to cervical, vulvar, anal, and penile cancers; other types cause genital warts, recurrent respiratory papillomatosis, and low-grade Pap smear abnormalities.

Gynecologists report that virtually all abnormal Pap smears indicating precancerous cells are a result of infection from HPV.<sup>54</sup> Since HPV infection is most often asymptomatic, most who have it do not realize it and hence often do not get treatment or take precautions against infecting others. It is also important to note that condoms do not prevent HPV infection.<sup>55</sup> While recently an HPV vaccine has been developed, it only protects against four strains out of roughly forty strains of genital HPV (the four which cause the majority of cervical cancers and genital warts). It doesn't protect from the HPV strains which cause almost a third of cancers, is of no help once one has contracted HPV, only works for females, and has mainly been tested on young women who have not been previously exposed to those four strains of HPV.<sup>56</sup>

A final common STD we will note is chlamydia, the second most common STD in the United States. In 2005, 976,445 chlamydial infections were reported to the CDC

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<sup>53</sup> "Genital HPV Infection - CDC Fact Sheet," available at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV.htm#common>.

<sup>54</sup> See Joe S. McIlhane, *Sexuality and Sexually Transmitted Diseases* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

<sup>55</sup> Lisa E. Manhart and Laura A. Koutsky, "Do Condoms Prevent HPV Infection, External Genital Warts, or Cervical Neoplasia? A Meta Analysis," *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* 29 (2002): 725-735; Rachel L. Winer, et al., "Genital Human Papillomavirus Infection: Incidence and Risk Factors in a Cohort of Female University Students," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 157 (2003): 218-226.

<sup>56</sup> Center for Disease Control, "HPV and HPV Vaccine—Information for Health Care Providers," rev. 2006, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/STDFact-HPV-vaccine-hcp.htm>.

nation-wide.<sup>57</sup> Chlamydia is often particularly devastating for women, for as the infectious organism (*Chlamydia trachomatis*) begins multiplying in a woman's uterus, tubes, and ovaries, it causes inflammation of the pelvic region (PID). This can cause permanent damage to the reproductive organs, which is why chlamydia is one of the leading causes of infertility. Over 50% of all preventable infertility is caused by STDs.<sup>58</sup> It is estimated that 10%-40% of women with untreated chlamydia will develop PID, and of those with PID 20% will become infertile, 18% will develop debilitating chronic pain, and 9% will have an ectopic (tubal) pregnancy.<sup>59</sup> Physician Joe McIlhane asserts that if a woman's reproductive organs have been infected one time by chlamydia, she has a 25% chance of becoming sterile. If she is infected a second time, she has a 50% chance of sterility.<sup>60</sup> Chlamydial infection also increases the risk of HIV infection by 300-500%.<sup>61</sup> What is particularly troubling about chlamydia is that while it is treatable, symptoms often don't appear for weeks after exposure if they appear at all (studies indicate that 75% of the women and 50% of the men who have chlamydia are unaware of it; it is asymptomatic). Furthermore, since it is spread by skin-to-skin contact in the genital region, condoms offer limited protection against transmission.<sup>62</sup>

While these STD statistics are depressing, it is important to put this discussion back in the context of the essay. Sex is a wonderful divine gift, but when engaged in in

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<sup>57</sup> "Trends in Reportable Sexually Transmitted Diseases in the United States, 2005," available at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats/trends2005.htm#trendschlamydia>.

<sup>58</sup> Julie Louise Gerberding, "Report to Congress: Infertility and Prevention of Sexually Transmitted Diseases 2000-2003," available at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/infertility/ReportCongressInfertility.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Joe S. McIlhane, *Sexuality and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, 98.

<sup>61</sup> D. T. Fleming and J. N. Wasserheit, "From Epidemiological Synergy to Public Health Policy and Practices: The Contribution of Other Sexually Transmitted Diseases to Sexual Transmission of HIV Infection," *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 75 (1999): pp. 3-17.

<sup>62</sup> "Workshop Summary: Scientific Evidence on Condom Effectiveness for Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) Prevention," 2001, pp. 16-17. This can be accessed at: <http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/research/topics/STI/pdf/condomreport.pdf>.

the wrong context, it can bring devastating consequences. This truth is nowhere made more clear than with STDs. We can again see the goodness of God in the premarital chastity ethic, for if both partners practice sexual abstinence before marriage and remain faithful after marriage, they virtually eliminate the possibility of contracting an STD in their lifetime.

At this juncture it is important to offer a word of encouragement to those who have had premarital sex and suffered negative consequences. God is a God of grace. The beauty of the gospel is that God loves fallen sinners and calls them to be his children not because of their innate moral beauty but in spite of their sin. Thus, the apostle Paul reminds us "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). Furthermore, scripture is replete with examples of God forgiving and healing sexual sinners (Josh 2:1-21; 2 Sam 12:1-23; Hosea 1-3; John 4:1-39). The negative consequences of premarital sexual activity need not be final, for God delights in restoring broken sinners (Joel 2:25-27).

### Conclusion

As strange as it sounds to modern ears, sex before marriage is morally wrong because God prohibits it. But God did not prohibit premarital sex because he is whimsical or mean. As the almighty, holy creator, he has the right to dictate human sexual behavior. And as a loving creator, his commandments are always for our good. God prohibits premarital sex not because sex is bad, but because it is such a precious and powerful gift. God knows that reserving sex for marriage enhances the gift, builds personal and



relational health, and protects us from harm. Oh that more singles would experience the goodness of God in their sex lives!