

Single and Sexual: The Challenge of Holiness for Unmarried Christians

Karen Pack

Single and Sexual in the Twenty-first Century

The sexualization of modern Western culture has seen the gap between the sexual standards of society and the actual behaviour of confessing Christians narrow to such an extent that the difference is all but negligible. The increasingly “open” attitude to sex within our culture has permeated the church, influencing the practice of Christians (both lay and clergy) and often leading to revisionist theology. **In many cases, instead of standing counter-culturally, the church has gradually assented to cultural sexual norms.** This is coupled with a tendency to believe that traditional Christian views on marriage and sex were based either on ignorance or an overly-legalistic interpretation of Scripture. **The great revelation of the twenty-first century church seems to be that Christianity is all about grace.** This is one of the hallmarks of the gospel, for it is “by grace [we] have been saved” (Eph 2:8). **Yet a pop-culture understanding of grace is not marked by the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit teaching us to walk in holiness, but an insipid permissiveness that allows an ever-widening array of lifestyles, as long as these exhibit “love.”**

The permissiveness of society and the church is facilitated in part by declining marriage rates, increases in the average age of people getting married, and an understanding of the human person as fundamentally sexual.¹ Foucault stated that “sexuality” is used today in much the same way that “soul” was used in the Middle Ages to unite various aspects

of one’s humanity in a single umbrella term. The result is that notions of “self,” “identity,” and “sexuality” become so intertwined as to be interchangeable.² This informs the belief that one who is not sexually active is repressed and unfulfilled.

Within the church, the “rightness” of sexual behaviour is frequently determined not by an overarching moral absolute, but by the presence of “loving commitment,” or at least mutual consent between adults.³ Essentially, this amounts to an ego-centric teleological ethic in which “to deny a sexual relation to oneself or to anyone else simply on the basis of marital status, sexual orientation, or gender identification ... is tantamount to denial of one’s sexuality and so oneself.”⁴ The result of such a view has been to elevate sexuality to become the primary category of personhood, **and to equate intimacy with genital sexuality.** Commenting on this phenomena, one scholar writes, “There is more to life than sex, but you would never know it from watching and listening to our advertising, music and movies. **Today’s relationships, it seems, are only considered serious when they take on a sexual tone.**” He adds, “our culture seems to say that serious relationships end up either in bed or nowhere, **the Christian Gospel disagrees.**”⁵

This last statement is the focus of the current discussion. What is it that “the Christian Gospel” declares about human sexuality? In contemporary Western society, what does it mean for a single Christian to fulfill the command to “be holy as I am holy” (1 Pt 1:16)?



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How Can "Love" Ever Be Wrong?

Today, sexual behaviour within the church largely resembles secular practice. Philip Turner notes the gap between what churches officially consider "normative" for singles, and the actual behaviour of unmarried Christians.⁶ This is visible in the number of couples living together before marriage (sometimes in a "trial marriage"), or cohabiting as an alternative to marriage. Philip Nesvig, recognizing

this trend, comments, "When heterosexual couples meet with pastors to plan their wedding, it is rare to discover a couple who [is] not already living together. The marriage has already happened. The marriage ceremony elicits a sigh of relief from many who say, 'It's about time.'" ⁷ While not all Christian couples are choosing to live together, it seems the overwhelming majority are forsaking the traditional practice of abstinence before marriage. Dick Westley cites statistics suggesting that up to 90 percent of young people marrying have already had sex with their partner, and 94 percent have engaged in genital stimulation to orgasm.⁸

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Such praxis is by no means universally condemned. Clare Amos, writing from the perspective of the Church of England, articulates a virtue ethic that does not see inevitable dichotomy between premarital sex, cohabitation, or same-sex union and the "spirit of Jesus Christ." She suggests that these options may be "legitimated theologically through the sharing of life together in a similar spirit." Buoyant that our enlightened age has seen theological progress comparable to that which brought an end to the slave trade, Amos ends her article declaring, "Thank God for Jesus."⁹

Similarly, Westley argues that extramarital sex "can be, depending on the quality and kind of relationship involved as well as other circumstances, truly human and truly good." Acknowledging that this attitude may "fall short of higher ideals," he nonetheless asserts that sex outside of marriage "need not be immoral, and may even not be sinful either. Whether it is sinful for the Christian will depend on whether it negates and contradicts one's fundamental *option* of commitment to God and his dream of the Kingdom."¹⁰ In such a schema, on what basis does one judge the "quality and kind" of a given relationship? Westley does not give any clues, and the Bible does not figure in his argument (though other sections of his book are permeated with Scripture). It would seem we are to appeal to the romantic criteria, "do you love each other?" Westley seems to promote a combination of teleological and virtue ethics, in which he is unable to separate his own enculturation from his desire to inculturate the gospel. Thus he notes that "premarital sex always contains a strong element of dissatisfaction. It is, after all, not quite the way things should be among us." Yet two paragraphs later he declares that "the experience [of premarital sex] is instructive for all," both the young people and their parents. His final analysis is that non-relational (casual) sex is "rightly frowned upon both by human experience and Christian faith"; relational non-committed sex has "its pluses and minuses"—the "pluses" evidenced by "the care and love experienced" and "growth in selflessness." Lastly, "relational and committed sex" (he is still discussing sex outside of marriage) "is accepted as being realistic and in accord with the demands of our human nature and the Kingdom."¹¹ Again, the Bible is conspicuously absent from his discussion.

Such views are typical of the new "reformist ethic" in which "there is no inherent right or wrong; sexual morality is determined by matters such as commitment, openness, vulnerability and care."¹² Thus

Adrian Thatcher calls for a change in official church teaching “towards a pastoral realism that maintains that Christian marriage is the right place for procreative sexual intercourse, but that there are other contexts where non-procreative sex is legitimate.” Later in the same article he laments, “Christians have worried more about whether sexual intercourse was lawful than whether it was loving.”¹³

In light of this, the options currently pursued by Christian singles wanting to express their sexuality in a “healthy” (unrepressed) manner include premarital sex, preferably within the context of a committed relationship, cohabitation, oral sex, and other forms of genital sexuality that stop short of full penetrative intercourse. **While they may be in the minority, some single Christians are attempting to live by the ideal of abstinence before marriage, excluding all forms of interpersonal genital sexuality.** Such persons are often encouraged, both by society at large and some within the church, to masturbate for its “health-giving benefits” and as a way of relieving sexual tension.¹⁴

Attempting a Trinitarian, Incarnational Ethic for Christian Singles

In this environment, in which sexuality is equated with one’s core self, teleological or virtue ethics are insufficient in establishing a biblical sex ethic, because **what is “right” and “good” tends to be determined by egocentric measures of self-fulfillment and enjoyment, or by ethereal concepts of what it means to be “loving” and live in “grace.”** We need an ethical foundation that is *theocentric*, rather than *anthropocentric*. Furthermore, if it is to be specifically Christian, then it must be both Trinitarian, for God cannot be understood apart from his triune nature, and incarnational, for our knowledge of God is mediated by the God-man, Jesus Christ, and our life as Christians is a participation in his life through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Such an ethic will not be a detached “no!” Nor will it consist of “blind obedience to laws, principles or

virtues.”¹⁵ Rather, it will emerge out of a dynamic relationship with God, who himself embodies and undergirds biblical moral guidelines. **A Trinitarian perspective mandates that ethical living takes place not in individual isolation, but within the context of a redeemed community.**¹⁶ This is a theology of hope and empowering grace, rather than capitulation to dominant social trends. Christian singles face the challenge of holiness within a covenant community in which, ideally, they experience deep, authentic relationship with those who share their biblical values (1 Pt 1:13–25).

With these guidelines in place, we may consider what constitutes a biblical sexual ethic for those who are not married. Packer argues that when interpreting Scripture, contemporary application may differ from the original cultural application, but the ethical *principle* remains the same.¹⁷ When this praxis is applied to the sexual ethics of Scripture, a pattern emerges. **Time after time it is affirmed that the only context for sexual intercourse is marriage between a man and woman.** This is clear in

the teachings of the Pentateuch, the oracles of the prophets, and the wisdom sayings of Proverbs. In the New Testament, it is a principle to which both Jesus and Paul return. When Jesus was asked his views on divorce, he went beyond the concessions of the Mosaic law to cite Genesis 1:27 and 2:24. He affirmed God’s original intention for creation—the marriage of a man and a woman in a permanent, insoluble union (see Mt. 19:3–8). To hold to a Genesis view of marriage is not legalistic and outmoded, it is *imitatio Christi*. As Nesvig contends, “The biblical texts about marriage and sexual ethics favour a simple interpretation. We are remiss if we do not interpret them for

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what they are—affirmations of heterosexual marriage. And we are unfaithful if we bless what God has not blessed.”¹⁸ Or as Carmen Berry expressed with candour and humour,

“As a single person, I am very sad to announce that there is not a shred of biblical support or legitimate church tradition that

— gives any credence to having ‘righteous’ sex outside the context of marriage.”¹⁹

Remembering that Jesus was both fully God and fully human we can embrace Christ as fully sexual yet sinless in order to find a foundation for our sexuality. In doing so we discover that an ethic of abstinence for all who are unmarried is not repressive, but joyfully cruciform.

A Trinitarian ethic recognizes that human sexuality reflects our creation in the image of God. It recognizes that our sexuality “involves everything that makes us male or female,” as well as “our created need and capacity for intimate human relationship.”²⁰ Yet it

does so without sexualizing relationships. One of the effects of the sexualization of society has been that any intimate relationship is suspected of being actively sexual. An incarnational Christian ethic stands against this tide, affirming the expression of single sexuality in healthy non-genital ways, while leading a fulfilled life with rich, deep relationships. As Berry asserts, “When we take seriously the idea that Jesus was human, fully so, then it makes it harder to desexualize Jesus.”²¹

Remembering that Jesus was both fully God and fully human, we are faced with the reality that “we do not have a high priest who is unable to

sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Heb 4:15, emphasis added). Thus we can embrace Christ as fully sexual yet sinless in order to find a foundation for our sexuality.²² In doing so we discover that an ethic of abstinence for all who are unmarried is not

repressive, but joyfully cruciform. God does not hold us to an impossible standard, but gives us his indwelling Spirit, empowering us to live lives that please him.²³

Single, Sexual, Whole (and Holy)?

Single Christians wanting to live according to a Trinitarian, incarnational ethic in the expression of their sexuality start by affirming with Genesis that sex is good, marriage is good, and that male and female together reflect the image of God. Our sexuality reflects all aspects of our embodied experience as gendered persons who hunger for intimate, embodied connection with others.²⁴ Yet intimacy can be expressed on a variety of levels: intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical. Sex does not equal intimacy; it is an expression of intimacy. Moreover, genital sexuality may only be properly, biblically expressed within the context of monogamous marriage—the context in which it was gifted to us for our delight.²⁵

Nesvig points out that we cannot bless cohabitation because “such an arrangement looks tentative.”²⁶ Gill concurs, noting that “sexual relations are intended to express uninhibited freedom, but they cannot flourish in the absence of covenant and commitment.”²⁷ Thus any sexual intercourse outside the covenant of marriage constitutes sin, and is inappropriate for a Christian pursuing fullness of life in Christ. Against the tide of public pressure, “the traditional Christian sex ethic rightly advocates chastity in the form of abstinence in singleness and fidelity in marriage.”²⁸

Single Christians are nonetheless able to express their sexuality in “various non-genital ways.”²⁹ This includes appropriate physical touch, emotional intimacy, and a shared way of life. The key is that sexuality does not become an *incurvatus in se* mode of living (a life turned in on itself, for itself, rather than for others). Benedict Ashley suggests, “to argue that masturbation may help someone learn to have better orgasms in intercourse misses the point that it also teaches them to treat intercourse as a mere

search for self-satisfaction.”³⁰ In spite of the growing trend to affirm its benefits, **Christians should be wary of compulsive masturbation, which may reinforce feelings of guilt and isolation.**³¹ From a Trinitarian perspective, sexuality must be oriented to the other, not the self. Spirit-empowered love of neighbour is the fundamental trajectory of Christian discipleship, and thus all of life.

Incarnating Love in the Life of the Church

Initially, proscriptions against premarital and extramarital sex may seem unduly repressive. This is not the case. Single Christians are given the opportunity to appropriately express our sexuality within a covenant community of believers. This must not be considered a consolation prize; both marriage and singleness may be experienced incarnationally as signs of the kingdom of God.³² **Singleness allows Christians to bear witness to the New Testament redefinition of the “primary human bond” as that between disciples of Jesus Christ.**³³ Singles are not expected to live asexual, unfulfilled lives, for such was modelled neither by Jesus nor Paul. Gill expresses this best when he states, **“Sex may not be crucial to everyone, but committed relationships certainly are. Jesus and Paul had full, rich lives without sex, but not without intimate friendships.** Authentic human life is *koinonia* life.... Not just casual but intentional relationships are essential for discernment and growth, for good thoughts and actions.”³⁴

In the current social climate, pastors need to promote an integrated theology embracing both marriage and singleness. We must become more deliberate about fostering biblical, covenant friendships. Herein pastors must be careful not to send mixed messages, affirming the preciousness of non-genital intimacy and friendship, while avowing that “permanence” only properly belongs to marriage.³⁵ The statement of unconditional commitment, “Where you go I will go...” is frequently quoted at weddings. Yet Gill is right to remind us that this was originally “a pledge

between two women.”³⁶ The covenant of friendship between David and Jonathon **as lifelong and fervent, while not involving genital sexuality.** To suggest otherwise is to eroticize their relationship in a manner that more accurately reflects our cultural moment than the dynamics of their intimacy. **These relationships (Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan) can serve as examples of profound, non-genital intimacy.**

The challenge for single Christians today is to live in light of the Genesis mandate for human sexuality, standing against the tide of cultural expectations. To do this we must redefine intimacy so it is not sexualized, and deliberately cultivate deep, God-honouring friendships within the church. **Our paradigm for relationships needs to be faith-filled and hopeful, not phobic and capitulating.** We need to move the discussion of sexuality from a focus on *my* rights, and restore a rightful focus on discipleship—*imitatio Christi*. The appropriate question to ask is not “How far can I go without going too far?” Instead, we prayerfully ask, **“What does it mean to die to myself and live to Christ in the area of my sexuality?”**

How do I live as one fully human, perfect in Christ, and in the process of being made holy?” The answer will be sought not in pop-psychology or social trends, but in a Trinitarian, incarnational ethic distilled from the Bible as the Word of God. In this way, within **a society that has fallen victim to its sexual appetite even while longing for love and intimacy,** Christians may faithfully witness to the truth of the kingdom of God, living by the power of the Holy Spirit, in imitation of Christ, to the glory of the Father. X

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Endnotes

1 For current statistics on marriage and single-ness, focussed on the North American context, see Alternatives to Marriage Project, <http://www.unmarried.org/statistics.html>.

2 These aspects of Foucault's thought are derived from volume one of his *History of Sexuality*, and are cited in Philip Turner, "Sex and the Single Life," *First Things First*, no. 33 (May 1993): 17.

3 Turner, "Sex and the Single Life," 15.

4 Ibid., 15. Note that sexuality here is equated with self.

5 David Gill, *Doing Right: Practicing Ethical Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 227, 232.

6 Turner, "Sex and the Single Life," 15. While acknowledging the complex issues related to same-sex attraction, particularly in light of contemporary sexualization of intimacy, this article will limit its focus to heterosexual sexuality.

7 Philip M. Nesvig, "Is It Lawful to Marry?" *Word & World* 23, no. 1 (2003): 68–69.

8 Dick Westley, *Morality and Its Beyond* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1984), 211.

9 Clare Amos, "Marriage—and Its Alternatives: An Anglican Perspective, Yesterday and Today," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17, no. 3 (July 2006): 278.

10 Westley, *Morality and Its Beyond*, 204. Emphasis added.

11 Ibid., 211–213.

12 Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 121.

13 Adrian Thatcher, "Postmodernity and Chastity," in *Sex These Days: Essays on Theology, Sexuality and Society*, eds. Jon Davies and Gerard Loughlin (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 122, 135.

14 William R. Stayton, "A Theology of Sexual Pleasure," in *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender*, eds. Adrian Thatcher and Elizabeth Stuart (Leominster, England: Gracewing Fowler Wright, 1996), 340–41; Douglas E.P. Rosenau, "Sexuality and the Single Person," in Thatcher and Stuart, *Christian Perspectives*, 421.

15 Hollinger, *Choosing the Good*, 64–5.

16 Gal 6:2. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM Press, 1981), 199.

17 J.I. Packer, "What Did the Cross Achieve?" in *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement*, eds. J.I. Packer and Mark Dever (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 65.

18 Nesvig, "Is it Lawful to Marry?" 72.

19 Carmen Renee Berry, *The Unauthorized Guide to Sex and the Church* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2005), 153.

20 Thomas E. Schmidt, *Straight and Narrow? Compassion and Clarity in the Homosexuality Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 45; Gill, *Doing Right*, 231.

21 Berry, *The Unauthorized Guide*, 145.

22 Ibid., 146; cf. Gill, *Doing Right*, 240.

23 See Rom. 8:1–11; Gal. 5:16–25; Eph. 1:18–21.

24 Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, "Sex in Public: How Adventurous Christians Are Doing It," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 489.

25 Gill, *Doing Right*, 224.

26 Nesvig, "Is It Lawful?" 74.

27 Gill, *Doing Right*, 232.

28 Stanley J. Grenz, "Homosexuality and the Christian Sex Ethic," in *Christian Perspectives on Gender, Sexuality, and Community*, ed. Maxine Hancock (Vancouver, BC: Regent College, 2003), 133.

29 Ibid., 132.

30 Benedict M. Ashley, *Living the Truth in Love: A Biblical Introduction to Moral Theology* (New York: Alba House, 1996), 219–20.

31 For a helpful, balanced discussion of masturbation see Richard J. Foster, *Money, Sex, and Power: The Challenge of the Disciplined Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 123–27.

32 Hauerwas, "Sex in Public," 499; Grenz, "Christian Sex Ethic," 132.

33 Grenz, "Christian Sex Ethic," 130.

34 Gill, *Doing Right*, 245.

35 Cf. Grenz, "Christian Sex Ethic," 132, 137.

36 Gill, *Doing Right*, 247.



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