

## **The Christian View of Sex: A Time for Apologetics, not Apology**

by Prof. Janet E. Smith

To observe that we live in a society that is suffering greatly from sexual confusion or, if you will, sexual misconduct is not a novel insight. There is little need to provide a full set of statistics to demonstrate the consequences of the sexual revolution, for who is not familiar with the epidemic in teenage pregnancies, venereal diseases, divorces, and AIDS? Our society has undergone a rapid transformation in terms of sexual behavior, and few would argue that it is for the better. Today, one out of two marriages end in divorce. Six out of ten teenagers are sexually active. The millions of abortions over the last decade and the phenomenal spread of AIDS indicate that our society has serious problems with sexuality. In the last generation, the incidence of sexual activity outside of marriage-with all of its attendant problems-has doubled and tripled, or worse. We have no particular reason to believe that we have seen the peak of the growth in sexually related problems.

Statistics do not really capture the pervasive ills attendant upon sexual immorality. Premature and promiscuous sexuality prevents many from establishing good marriages and family life. Few deny that a healthy sexuality and a strong family life are among the most necessary elements for human happiness and well being. While many single parents do a worthy and valiant job of raising their children, it remains sadly true that children from broken homes grow up to be adults with a greater propensity for crime, a greater tendency to engage in alcohol and drug abuse, and a greater susceptibility to psychological disorders.

These realities touch every realm of life. They affect people's ability to relate to friends and family; they affect people's ability to do well at their studies and their jobs; and they affect the whole of society, which needs stable and secure individuals to lead us out of our troubles. Those who do not experience love from family and friends tend to seek any semblance of love they can find – and thus become involved in illicit sexual relationships – and the cycle starts again. The multiple varieties of abuse of sexuality and the grievous consequences of such abuse are not only damaging the current generation, they are threatening to ruin the chances of future generations to live happy and fulfilled lives.

Twenty years ago, when the sexual revolution was in full swing, many argued that it would liberate men and women from the repressive view of sexuality pervasive in society; people would be free to make love to those whom they loved without the strictures of marriage. Many pointed to Christianity as the source of sexual repression. But the Christian view of sex is looking a lot more like wisdom. Christians no longer need to offer apologies for their insistence upon sexual morality, for their insistence upon reserving sex for marriage. Some in high public places are now beginning to counsel abstinence before marriage and to extol faithful monogamous marriages. They have begun to see these as practices of great practical wisdom.

### **Christian Sexuality**

In a certain sense, Christian morality-especially sexual morality-is quite similar to natural or commonsense morality. One does not need to be a Christian to understand why certain sexual practices are wrong. Christians differ from unbelievers not so much in the understanding of what is moral as in their commitment to trying to live morally. A Christian understands that when he is doing wrong, he is not only violating good sense, he is violating God's law; he is failing to be the loving and responsible person God made him to be. Thus, Christian apologetics about sex may not seem much different from commonsense apologetics about sex, but the Christian tradition has most faithfully preserved the common wisdom about sex. Clearly it is easy to "forget" or become confused about the common wisdom about sex; Christians are blessed with the powerful aid of revelation and tradition to counsel them regarding sexual morality.

Yet, despite the fact that most Christian denominations have remained steadfast in their allegiance to traditional Christian wisdom in sexual issues, few Christians have not been deeply affected by the saturation of modern culture with a view of sexuality radically opposed to the Christian view. Ten minutes of watching MTV or of a soap opera; ten minutes of listening to any rock, pop, or country music station; one visit to the corner-store magazine rack; or two minutes at the beach should serve to convince anyone that our society has very little respect for Christian moral norms regarding sexual relations. Christians, too, have begun to lose sight of the understanding of sexuality advanced by their tradition. Thus, now is the time for Christians to offer apologetics for their understanding of the role of sexual relations within human relationships. Apologetics is a term used to refer to the energetic attempt to explain one's position to others. But Christians, I think, need to be as concerned with providing apologetics about sex to themselves and to fellow Christians as

with bringing their message to others. Both internal and external evangelization is necessary, for few, if any can escape being adversely affected by the distortions of our times. Christians need to strengthen themselves as well as their compatriots.

Christians have to learn about their own tradition before they can become effective witnesses to those in the larger society who desperately need to encounter individuals who are in control of their sexuality and happy because of it. There are multitudes of Christian truths that can assist us in escaping the ravages of a disordered sexuality. The time seems to be ripe for making the most persuasive case we can for Christian morality. Certainly, many are ceasing promiscuous behavior because of their fear of contracting AIDS. But that is not the only reason for the growing disenchantment with the sexual revolution. Many find that their sexual encounters leave them lonely and looking for something more. There are increasing reports of sexual indifference, with many claiming to have lost an interest in sex, even with those whom they love. There seems to be an increasing weariness with premarital sex and abortion, and a growing interest in reducing both. Many are beginning to see that the call for more and better sex education or more and better access to contraceptives is not the solution. Rather, we need a better understanding of the relations between sex, love, marriage, and children. And it is this understanding that Christianity can provide.

### **Three Truths of Sexuality**

Let us focus on three fundamental truths about sexuality stressed throughout the Christian tradition: that marriage is the only proper arena for sexual activity; that marriages must be faithful for the love of spouses to thrive; and that children are a great gift to parents.

Why should sexual union only take place within marriage? It can hardly be denied that sexual relations create powerful bonds between individuals, even between those who do not desire such bonds. Those who have sexual intercourse are engaging in an action that bespeaks a deep commitment to another. Pope John Paul II uses an interesting phrase in his teachings on sex: "language of the body." He claims that, like words, bodily actions have meanings, and that unless we intend those meanings with our actions, we should not perform them any more than we should speak words we do not mean. In both cases, lies are "spoken." Sexual union means "I find you attractive;" "I care for you;" "I will try to work for your happiness"; "I wish to have a deep bond with you." Some who engage in sexual intercourse do not mean these things with their actions; they wish simply to use another for their own sexual pleasure. They have lied with their bodies in the same way as someone lies who says "I love you" to another simply for the purposes of obtaining some desired favor.

But some who engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage claim that they do mean all that sexual union implies and that, therefore, they are not lying with their bodies. They are, though, making false promises, for those engaging in sexual intercourse outside of marriage cannot fulfill the promises which their bodily actions make. They have not prepared themselves to fulfill the promise of working for another's happiness, or of achieving a deep bond with another. Such achievements take a lifetime to complete; they cannot be accomplished in brief encounters.

The existence of the institution of marriage acknowledges the importance of love for the happiness of human beings, of the lifetime unconditional love that marriage facilitates. Love nourishes human goodness like no other force. For instance, love assists us in feeling secure in ourselves; it gives us the confidence to dare to exercise our talents; it gives us the assurance to reach out to others. Love also serves to heal past wounds. Love in almost any form can promote these benefits to mankind, but marital love provides special benefits. Human beings are complicated and are not easily known by others; a lifetime relationship seems hardly time enough to get to know another. Sexual intimacy plays a major role in the revealing of one person to another. It provides an opportunity for giving oneself in an exclusive way. Only in marriage can sexual intimacy achieve the goals that it is meant to serve.

The Christian insistence on reserving sexual union for marriage, then, has as one of its chief justifications a concern that sexual relations are meant to express the desire for a deep and committed relationship with another. That relationship can only be built within marriage, because marriage is built upon a vow of faithfulness to one's beloved. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, regularly condemns the sin of adultery. Faithful marriage is used as the paradigm for the kind of relationship which God's people should have with God. Those who are not faithful to God are likened to adulterers. Proverbs and the whole of wisdom literature harshly condemn the adulterous spouse. Most spouses are devastated at the mere thought that their beloved desires another, let alone that their spouse may have actually been unfaithful. Faithfulness is essential to create the relationship of trust, which is the bedrock of all the other goods that flow from marriage.

We take vows in marriage because we realize that we are all too ready to give up when the going gets tough; we realize that our loves wax and wane. Indeed, society at large seems to have a fondness for marriage. After all, in an age where there is little moral pressure against living together outside of marriage, most still choose to take marriage vows. Couples realize that marriage vows help them express and effect their commitment to each other. But as the divorce rate indicates, modern society ultimately does not take these vows very seriously – or at least modern couples do not prepare for marriage in such a way that they are prepared to keep their vows.

## Preparing for Marriage

A talk with a pastor, an “Engaged Encounter” weekend, or a “Pre-Cana” conference does not prepare one for marriage. Real marriage preparation must occur for many years before we enter marriage. Young people enjoy the exercise of drawing up a list of characteristics that they would like their future spouse to have. But their time might be better spent drawing up a list of characteristics that they themselves should have in order to be a worthy spouse. They need to reflect upon their expectations of marriage; many may find that their expectations are largely selfish. Most of us dream much more about how happy our spouses are going to make us than about how much we are going to do for our spouses.

Since marriage requires loving, faithful, kind, patient, forgiving, humble, courageous, wise, unselfish individuals – and the list could go on – young people should strive to gain these characteristics. Marriages cannot survive unless the spouses acquire these characteristics. Certainly it would be foolish to require that individuals have all of these characteristics before they marry, for none of us do. Indeed, the experience of marriage itself undoubtedly helps foster these characteristics. But if we do not work at acquiring them before marriage, we will be acquiring their opposites – selfishness, haughtiness, impatience: characteristics that are death to a marriage.

Although faithfulness is one of the cornerstones of marriage, it may seem odd to speak of the need to be faithful to one’s spouse before marriage. But in a sense, one should love one’s spouse before one even meets him or her. This means reserving the giving of oneself sexually until one is married – for in a sense, one’s sexuality belongs to one’s future spouse as much as it does to oneself. A few generations ago, it was not uncommon for young people to speak of “saving themselves” for marriage. While scoffed at today, this phrase is nonetheless indicative of a proper understanding of love, sexuality, and marriage. One should prepare oneself for marriage, and one should save oneself for marriage.

How does one do so? Obviously, by remaining chaste – and that is not an easy prescription. For instance, it means being attentive to what provokes sexual thoughts and desires and avoiding these provocations. It means, most likely, dissociating oneself from many of the forms of entertainment popular today. Those who view sexuality as a gift, which one offers one’s spouse at the time of marriage, cannot fall victim to the constant sexual stimulation that Americans face daily. We need to be careful what music we listen to, what movies and TV shows we watch, and what clothes we wear. We need to try to save sexual thoughts and sexual stimulation for the time when they will not be frustrations, but welcome preludes to loving union with our spouses. Sexual temptations are, of course, impossible to avoid, especially since our society provides temptations around the clock. Christ’s teaching that lust in one’s heart is wrong tells us that we must guard our inner purity as well as govern our actions.

Few people, Christian or not, think it sensible for those who are engaged to wait until their wedding night to enjoy sexual union. Many think waiting until marriage would make sexual intimacy too awkward. Most think that, since one is soon going to take vows, it makes little difference whether sexual intimacy begins before or after a ceremony which simply ratifies a commitment already felt.

What difference does waiting make? Well, certainly a vow is not a vow until it is spoken; unspoken, unratified commitments are all too easy to break. There are practical reasons as well. Father James Burtchaell at Notre Dame has written a marvelous book, *For Better or Worse*, explaining why it is best for couples to wait until marriage before they begin their sexual intimacy. He speaks eloquently of the period before marriage as an irreplaceable opportunity for lovers to get to know one another. Engaging in sexual intercourse creates a false sense of closeness; it creates a bond that may obscure elements in a relationship that need work. Courtship is a time for getting to know each other; for sketching out dreams and plans; for expressing worries and hesitations. The delight of sexual union can easily distract couples from preparation for marriage.

There is also a deeper reason, and that is the question of honesty and trust. Few of those who have sexual relations before marriage, especially Christians, can be fully open about their actions. This means that people engaging in such relationships inevitably are deceiving someone – their parents, their teachers, and perhaps their friends as well. The

ability to practice such deception does not bode well for one's integrity. A woman observes that her lover is good at deception and will file away this information. She will have reason to wonder in the future if her spouse is being honest with her – after all, he had no trouble deceiving others whom he or she respected. Many Christians feel terrible guilt at violating their deeply held moral principles; after they are married, they may continue to have guilty feelings about sex. In a sense, they have programmed themselves to think of sexual intercourse as a furtive and naughty activity.

On the other hand, couples who do wait until marriage have a special kind of euphoria about their sexual union. Because they waited, they see sexual pleasure as a privileged good of marriage. They have an easier time developing a deep and abiding trust and consideration for each other. Their willingness to wait, to endure the strains of sexual continence out of love and respect for one another, is a great testimony to their strength of character. They have shown that sexual attraction is not the most important part of the relationship, and they can enjoy each other's company even when the delights of sexual union are not available to them. Such faithfulness and chastity before marriage ensure greater faithfulness and chastity during marriage. Because of pregnancy or illness or separation, all couples must abstain at some time in marriage; the acquisition of the virtue of self-mastery before marriage facilitates such abstinence.

## **The Contraceptive Mentality**

Chastity before marriage – and, consequently, chastity during marriage – has been undermined by the widespread availability of contraception. Indeed, contraception seems to be one of the chief facilitators of much of the sexual misconduct of our time. There were fewer teenage pregnancies, fewer abortions, and a lesser incidence of sexually transmitted diseases before contraception became widely available. Contraception has made people feel secure that they can engage in sexual union apart from the obligations of marriage and child rearing. Yet contraceptives do not remove the responsibilities that come with the child-making possibilities of sexual intercourse, since contraceptives do not always achieve their purpose. We must help our young people to understand that they are not ready for sexual intercourse until they are ready to be parents, for sexual intercourse always brings with it the possibility of being a parent.

Getting young people to associate sex with child bearing is not easy, but it is necessary; in fact, it is important for adults to encourage young people to try to think like parents. It is good to get them thinking about what they would like to do with their children; to get them thinking about what they want to be able to provide for their children. Parents must convey to their children that they are not a burden to them, that they consider their children to be great gifts from God. Our society tends to look upon children as a burden: they are expensive, noisy, and troublesome; they stand in the way of careers and adventuresome travel. This view, of course, has not stopped people from having babies, but one senses that many children are just another possession of their parents, or just another experience that adults wish to have. Many couples seem to want a few “designer children” as adornments to their lives – not as reasons for their lives

## **The Christian View of Children**

God, it seems, has a preference for children; after all, one of His first commands was to “be fruitful and multiply.” Throughout the Old Testament, having many children is listed among the signs of prosperity that indicate God's favor. Psalm 127 states “Behold, sons are a gift from the Lord; the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy the man whose quiver is filled with them.” Psalm 128 is one of my favorites; it states:

*Happy the man who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways!  
You shall eat of your hand's labor; blessed are you, and it shall be well with you.  
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your house;  
Your sons, like olive shoots around your table.  
Behold, in this way shall be blessed the man who fears the Lord.*

God has arranged matters such that parents and children need each other. The experience of child rearing, like the experience of marriage, both requires and fosters many virtues. Having children generally does adults a lot of good; most find they become more selfless, patient, kind, loving, and tender when they have children. Learning to live with children has many of the same advantages of living with a spouse: it forces one to accommodate oneself to others, to acknowledge that one has constant tendencies to be selfish. Staying awake at night with children, dealing with their daily joys and sorrows, and learning to be a good example for them contributes greatly to the maturity of adults.

Christians have a radically different view of children from the rest of society. They understand that their offspring are not possessions through which they are to live their unfulfilled dreams and win the respect of the world around them. Rather, Christians see children as a gift from God, as souls entrusted to them, whom they are to return to God. Among Christians there is a predisposition toward children, for they understand that God loves life and wishes to share His glorious creation. Christians are generally more eager and willing to have children because they realize the importance of children to God and depend upon Him to assist them in providing for the children He has given them.

Recently, a relative of mine mentioned that he wanted to have a large family, but he did not know how it would be possible to manage financially. He had noticed that I had a large number of friends who started their childbearing early and had lots of children. Few of the women are employed outside their homes. He wanted to know how they did it. I think I know the answer: they trust in God. They regularly live on the edge of things-for the first few years, they experience occasional anxiety that another child will be an undue strain on the budget, or that they will not be able to afford a car or house large enough for the growing brood, or that they may not be able to meet food and medical costs. But after a few years, they find that their needs are fulfilled. To be sure, they learn to budget and scrimp and save, they are not ashamed to take hand-me-downs, and they often learn to live a life that is a little tacky around the edges. But they lack none of their true needs and often enjoy luxuries of which they never would have dreamed. So they come to trust God and live without a lot of obvious security. Trust in God replaces the standard American understanding of perfect security: accumulating enough money and material goods to serve as a buffer against the world. With trusting and light hearts, they proceed to enjoy their growing families and to soak up the love that flows in big families. Those with large families seem to have a special generosity and hospitality about them. Guests are always welcome and interruptions seem not to be an annoyance; members of large families seem quite ready to drop everything to help someone else. Slowly but steadily, they become better Christians.

Discussions of the Christian preference for large families always seem to broach a topic that is sensitive and controversial, namely, contraception. Although the belief that contraception is not in accord with God's will has, since *Humanae Vitae*, been identified almost exclusively with the Catholic Church, the fact is that all Protestant denominations were opposed to contraception up until 1930. Early in this century, the Anglican Church twice condemned contraception, before passing a resolution in 1930 that its use was morally permissible for married couples. Thus, acceptance of contraception is a relatively new phenomenon. Catholics have, perhaps, preserved the teaching against contraception more faithfully, but it is not a teaching exclusive to them.

In much the same way, Protestants have more faithfully preached the necessity of tithing, a doctrine not exclusive to Protestants. Many Catholics are now rediscovering the practice of tithing at the prompting of their Protestant brethren. They have found great spiritual growth through this practice and now regularly urge their fellow Catholics to embrace this time-honored way of expressing gratitude to God and of trusting in Him. Indeed, I think the doctrine on tithing has some similarities with the teaching that in one's childbearing, one must be generous with God. Some refuse to tithe since they believe it is foolish to give away money that they think they need for their own well being. Yet those who are committed to tithing know that, on occasion, one must give to God what one believes one needs oneself. They give to God and His causes because they know He wants them to, and they trust Him to provide. Being generous in childbearing is not very different. Many a married couple will testify that they thought having another child would be an undue hardship, only to find that having another child was a source of wonderful blessings and splendid joy to them.

## **Natural Family Planning**

Of course, couples on occasion may have good reason to curtail their childbearing, at least for a while. Many do not see why couples may not responsibly use contraceptives to help them space their children or to delay childbearing if sufficiently good reason exists. They consider contraception a marvelous invention of technology, and see no reason not to use it responsibly. They find the Catholic counsel of periodic abstinence to be irrational. They argue that, if both contraception and natural methods of family planning are designed to limit family size, why not use the most effective method?

Oddly enough, NFP, or natural family planning, is one of the most effective means, if not the most effective means, of planning one's family. NFP, of course, is not the outmoded rhythm method, which was based simply on the calendar. Rather, NFP is a highly scientific way of determining when a woman is fertile, based on observing various bodily signs. The statistics of its reliability rival the most effective forms of the Pill. Moreover, NFP is without the health risks and dubious moral status of contraceptives. The IUD is an abortifacient: that is, it works by causing an early-term abortion. Ovulation still occurs, and, therefore, conception may occur; the IUD then prohibits the fertilized egg, the tiny new human being, from implanting in the wall of the uterus. Most currently popular forms of the Pill work the same way. Furthermore,

the Pill and the IUD have proven to be dangerous to women in many ways – and no one yet knows what the long term effects may be. So those who are opposed to abortion and those interested in protecting the well being of women would certainly not want to use or promote these forms of contraception. The other forms, known as barrier methods, have aesthetic drawbacks or are low on reliability.

NFP no longer means “Not For Protestants.” Many non-Catholics are turning to NFP as a means of family planning precisely because they do not want to use abortifacients, and they fear the physical risks of contraception. They are finding that the use of NFP has positive results for their marital relationships, for their relationship with their children and for their relationship with God.

Many find it odd that periodic abstinence should be beneficial to a marriage. Certainly, most who begin to use NFP, especially those who were not chaste before marriage and who have used contraception, find the abstinence required to be a source of strain and a cause of considerable irritability. Abstinence, like dieting or any form of self-restraint, has its hardships; but it also has its benefits. As spouses learn to communicate better with one another, as they learn to communicate their affection in non-genital ways, and as they learn to master their sexual desires, they find a new liberation in the ability to abstain from sexual intercourse. Many find that an element of romance reenters the relationship during the times of abstinence, and an element of excitement accompanies the reuniting. Spouses using NFP find that they come to understand and respect one another more.

Why is it that couples who initially find difficult the restraint required by NFP eventually come to sing its praises? One of the answers seems to be that couples advance in the virtue of “self-mastery” through their use of NFP. That is, they begin to realize that their sexual feelings can be controlled to some degree and that they need to be subordinated to the goods of marriage. Thus, if spouses determine that they could not responsibly have another child at a given time, they have the self-mastery to control their sexuality so that it does not conflict with what they have determined to be good for the family. This self-mastery spills over into their family life with favorable results.

Spouses using NFP become very good examples to their children, especially their teenagers who may be wrestling with new and powerful sexual feelings. One man told me that his practice of NFP assisted him in being a good witness for chastity among the young men at his place of work. They would tease him about being able, as a married man, to have sex on demand, but he responded that through the use of NFP, he was required to abstain. He argued that if, night after night, he was able to sleep beside the woman he loved and not have sexual intercourse with her, they could learn to refrain from sexual intercourse with their girlfriends. He believed that parents who practice NFP could much more persuasively urge their children to be chaste before marriage.

Another reason for the enthusiasm for NFP is that couples who use it experience a greater bonding than those who use contraception. There is a more complete giving of oneself to another in a non-contracepted act of sexual intercourse. This may be why divorce is nearly non-existent among couples who practice NFP.

Couples who use NFP also claim that it brings them closer to God. They believe that God made the human body and that respecting the way the human body works is a way of respecting God. They believe that contraceptives are an obstacle not only to union with their spouses but also to union with God. They believe that God is the source of love and life and that He has privileged them with being the transmitters of life through an act of love. They feel that they are leaving God space to perform His act of the creation of a new soul, if He so chooses.

### **Christianity, Contraception, and Chastity**

Christians need to explain why faithfulness and responsibility toward children are two of the defining characteristics of marriage. Men and women today are tired of unfaithfulness, tired of shallow and brief relationships. They crave something more meaningful, something on which they can rely. Young people are sick of divorce. There is virtually no one who does not know children who have suffered greatly from divorce. Certainly many of us, because of our own foolishness, weakness, or wickedness, or because of the foolishness, weakness, or wickedness of others, may not be able to form the marriages and families that we want and need. We must trust in the grace of God to provide for all those who turn to Him for aid. Christians, who have the wisdom of the centuries, should strive to live chaste lives and to form loving marriages and families, for such is vital to their eternal salvation, and such may well be vital to the temporal well being of the whole of society.

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