

Is Sex Outside of Marriage Okay for Christians Today?

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Before I take on this subject, I want to explain why I am writing about it. I don't want to be mistaken for moralizing, being a legalist, or laying guilt on anyone. I am not trying to sic the law on anyone or be judgmental.

I am writing this article because I am concerned that the secular humanist society we live in and which dominates the media and education is beginning to have more of an influence on Christians than Scripture. In fact, this reasoning is behind much of what I write. But, in this area of life particularly, the effect of our secular humanist culture, the failure of parents and the church to pass on a truly biblical world view, and the neglect of Christians to studiously examine the Bible for themselves are resulting in Christians becoming ignorant of the standard of behavior that becomes a Christian. Or, if they are aware of this standard, they fall for the relativist argument that it is old fashioned and no longer applies to Christians today. And so we have people—usually young people but not always—who think that petting, casual sex, friends with benefits, and even living together unmarried are acceptable behaviors for Christians. They are not, and I want to explain why.

We live in a world that considers itself in a state of moral flux. That is, right and wrong are thought of as not concrete but change as society develops. In such a society, it is common for even Christians to wonder whether sex outside of marriage is okay.

If you ask different people, you will get different answers. That's because there are various theories of morality. In one, for example, whatever the majority thinks is right or wrong is what should really be accepted as right or wrong. Another theory is what I'll call evolutionary morality. According to this theory, morality evolves as human civilization evolves. What was wrong yesterday may not be wrong today. In fact, it would be childish to live by yesterday's "old fashioned" morality because society is now so much more "mature" than it was back then. Another theory of morality is utilitarian. That is, if a moral standard is useful, it is right. If it is not useful, it is wrong. All of these standards of morality are, at their root, ultimately subjective (people determine them) and based on the assumption that people are inherently good and, therefore, are qualified to determine what is right or wrong.

Christians, however, are supposed to have another standard. It is called the Bible, which is the Word of God. It is objective

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(outside of us), given to us from God. Also, it is based on God's knowledge that man is (since the Fall in the Garden of Eden) inherently bad: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Romans 5:12); and "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Romans 3:10-12).

I said that Christians are *supposed* to have this standard. Unfortunately, experience shows that, all too often, Christians (or those who claim to be) are living as the world, using the world's moral standards to determine how they behave.

In this article, I intend to briefly address one specific area of behavior: sex (all forms of sexual intimacy) outside of marriage. I do this in the hopes that some Christians who have been swept away by the flood of this world's ungodly views of right and wrong may regain a mooring and rest secure on the Word of God.

Is sex outside of marriage okay for Christians today? The plain answer is no. Both direct commands and several principles teach us that sexual intimacy is to be confined to marriage. I could give even more reasons than the ones listed below, but I think these should be sufficient to convince anyone bearing the name Christian. Some of them might surprise you.

1. Sex outside of marriage dishonors Jesus Christ and makes a mockery of His marriage to the church.

Romans 7:4 says, "Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God." Spiritually speaking, Christians are married to "him who is raised from the dead," that is, Jesus Christ.

We see this pictured again in the Book of Revelation. In Revelation 19:7, we read, "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready." Revelation 21:2 and 9-10 show us this in an allegorical figure: "And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.... And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials

full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife. And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God."

Being spiritually married to Christ does not mean we cannot be physically married in this life. But it does teach us that marriage is something very real and very sacred to God.

Ephesians 5:22-33 is very clear about this. I am going to quote this passage and give comments every so often.

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord." A wife cannot submit herself to her "own husband" if there is no such thing as marriage, and living together outside marriage would violate this Scripture. In John 4, we read of a woman who was living with a man who was not her husband. Jesus clearly agreed that the man was not her husband: "Jesus saith unto her, Go, call thy husband, and come hither. The woman answered and said, I have no husband. Jesus said unto her, Thou hast well said, I have no husband: For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly." Without any doubt, Jesus did not consider living together to be the same as marriage.

Continuing in Ephesians 5: "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing." Marriage is a type or picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. Sex outside of marriage breaks that picture and dishonors Christ.

Continuing: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence

her husband.” This beautiful relationship between a husband and wife, which pictures the relationship between Christ and the church, cannot exist outside of the commitment of marriage.

2. Sexual intimacy outside marriage violates God’s purpose for sex and marriage.

After God created Eve from Adam’s rib, we read, “And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:23-25).

Jesus verified the accuracy of this account in the New Testament: “The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matthew 19:3-6). Notice Jesus’ use of the phrase “for this cause.” What cause? The cause that God made them male and female so that they could cleave to one another and become one flesh—in other words, sexual intimacy.

But if sex outside of marriage is okay, what would be the purpose of marriage? Clearly, God never intended a couple to share sexual intimacy without being joined together by Him in marriage.

3. Sex outside of marriage is directly forbidden by Scripture.

The two most common Greek words used in the New Testament for sexual intimacy outside of marriage are *moicheuō* and *porneia*. *Moicheuō* is the word translated adultery. It refers to a married person having sexual intimacy with someone who is not his or her spouse. Matthew 5:32 uses both of these words and is revealing: “But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication (*porneia*), causeth her to commit adultery (*moicheuō*): and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery (*moicheuō*).” Matthew 5:32 is often understood as saying that adultery is the only biblical grounds for divorce. But, in fact, Jesus uses the more general word *porneia*, which includes both adultery and sexual

intimacy before marriage. In other words, God considers sex before marriage so serious a sin that, if, *after marriage*, a spouse finds out about a sexual relationship the marriage partner had with someone before marriage, it is grounds for divorce.

By the way, the Bible calls a person who commits *moicheuō* a *moichos* (adulterer) or a *moichalis* (adulteress). The Bible calls a person who commits *porneia* a *pornos*. In the King James Version, this is translated as either fornicator or whoremonger. First Corinthians 6:9-10 states, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators (*pornos*), nor idolaters, nor adulterers (*moichos*), nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind...shall inherit the kingdom of God." Hebrews 13:4 says, "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers (*pornos*) and adulterers (*moichos*) God will judge." God could hardly be any clearer.

Notice 1 Corinthians 6:16-18: "What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot (*pornē*) is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. Flee fornication (*porneia*). Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication (*porneuō*) sinneth against his own body." Basing his argument on the Genesis account of the institution of marriage, Paul says that a man having sex even with a harlot or prostitute joins the two of them as one flesh. This is a sin against the man's own body because he has joined his body to that of a prostitute. The principle, of course, would apply to any sex outside of marriage. Flee fornication!

4. The Bible specifically says that living together before marriage is a non-Christian, worldly way to acquire a wife that is based on lust and is forbidden to a Christian.

"For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-7).

"Possess his vessel" in this passage is not telling us how to hold a bottle of power drink. Nor is it saying "control his body" as some Bible

versions mistranslate it. The Greek word translated "possess" here is *ktasthai*. In other places in the Bible where this word is found, it means "acquire," "obtain," or even "purchase." But it does not mean "possess" or "control." The word translated "vessel" is *skeuos*. In 1 Peter 3:7, this same word clearly relates to a husband honoring his wife: "Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered."

"Lust of concupiscence" can be translated, "passion of desire." So, this passage is saying that a man should acquire his wife in sanctification—in a holy manner, not in the passion of desire as those who do not know God do. To do otherwise is to defraud his brother, and we are solemnly warned that "the Lord is the avenger of all such." God does not take our society's casual approach to sex lightly. A Christian man is not to acquire a wife (and a Christian woman is not to acquire a husband) by trying things out first by living together. This is something that only ungodly people do.

I want to add that sex before marriage blinds the couple to seeing whether they are really a good match. Many times, couples live together thinking that this will help them know whether they should get married. The opposite is true. Sexual intimacy is blinding and binding. A man and woman should keep their relationship non-physical so that they can unemotionally determine whether they are suitably matched. Once the passions are involved, this cannot be done. Couples who live together may eventually marry because they are unable to break their ties of intimacy. But, months or years later, when their incompatibilities surface, the marriage becomes rocky and may break up. It does not pay to violate the order that God has ordained.

5. Sex outside of marriage is an offense to Christian brethren and the world.

You can bet that if you have ever named the name of Christ, the world is watching you, and so are your brethren. And rightly so. You are an example. It is amazing but true, but the non-Christian world often seems to know the standards a Christian is to live by better than many Christians. They know that Christians are not to have any sexual intimacy outside marriage. That's why they are so quick to come down on pastors and televangelists who are involved in sex scandals. Such scandals make Christianity stink in the nostrils of the world, and they turn people from Christ. These scandals cause people to see Christians

as hypocrites. And your exploits into sex outside marriage will have the same results. You will offend them.

Remember that your brethren are also watching, especially your weaker brethren. If, by your poor example, you turn them from Christ or cause them to also sin, you are guilty of offending them. Jesus tells us that it is inevitable that offenses will come, but you had better make sure they do not happen because of you: "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh! Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire" (Matthew 18:6-8). In other words, it is better to cut out anything in your life rather than cause an offense that turns someone from Christ. Jesus is telling us that if we turn someone from Christ, we will regret it.

As out of step as it may seem in today's world, the Bible tells us to avoid even the appearance of evil: "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22). If you are spending a large amount of time with someone of the opposite sex, especially if you are ever alone together, others will assume a sexual relationship, even if there really isn't one. In this way, even if you are not sinning sexually, by not making sure that you are not abstaining from the appearance of evil, you can be responsible for offending someone. It is of no use to blame them for being busybodies. The Bible places the responsibility on your shoulders to be careful not to offend anyone.

6. Sex outside of marriage dishonors the Christian parents of one or both of the partners.

Echoing the Fifth Commandment from the Old Covenant, Ephesians 6:2-3 commands, "Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth." It is the misunderstanding of many Christians today to think that just because someone is now an adult, the person no longer has the responsibility to honor his or her parents. The Bible says nothing of the kind. Nor does the Bible define "honoring" as merely sending a card on Mothers' and Fathers' days, birthdays, and Christmas. It means to live an exemplary life that will not bring shame on your Christian upbringing and will, in fact, bring

honor to your parents: "A wise son makes a glad father, But a foolish son is the grief of his mother" (Proverbs 10:1, *New King James Version*).

7. Sex outside of marriage risks a pregnancy which then forces you to make one of three poor choices.

No matter how careful you are, sexual intercourse can lead to pregnancy, and any other sexual intimacy can lead to sexual intercourse as your passions cause you to put caution out of your mind. The choices are: a) Have the child out of wedlock and raise it as a single parent. This is tough on the mother and a tragedy for the child who will not have a committed, full-time father and a happy, whole family to grow up in simply because a man and woman were unwilling to control themselves. b) Terminate the pregnancy, which is a newspeak way of saying murder the baby. For a Christian, abortion should be an unthinkable option, and it says something about the perversity of our society that it is an available choice at all. c) Marry for the sake of the baby. Such a marriage may be a real struggle, but, in most cases, it is probably better than single parenting. But it is better not to have to face such a choice! Because of the possibility of pregnancy and the effect the above choices will have on the resulting child, sexual intimacy outside of marriage reveals itself as a supremely selfish act.

8. The Bible condemns even little sexual intimacies outside marriage.

How do I know? Because such intimacies are based on the carnal desire for someone. But if that person is not your spouse, you have no right to such a desire; it is what the King James Version calls covetousness, lust, inordinate affection, and evil concupiscence, all of which are clearly condemned (see, for example, Romans 1:29; Ephesians 5:3-5; and Colossians 3:5-6 in the King James Version). Matthew 5:28 says that even looking on a woman to lust after her is adultery: "But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." How much more sinful, then, is kissing, fondling, petting... someone whom God has not set apart in marriage to you?

9. Sex before marriage is sin; after marriage it is blessed.

This is really based on all we have already examined, but I say it because there are still some who will argue that there is really no such

thing as marriage. But we have seen that God instituted marriage at Creation and He clearly defines fornication and adultery, sins which could not exist if there were no such thing as marriage. No doubt, someone will ask, What is marriage? Who has the right to perform marriage? the church or the state? What about common law marriage?

I'll answer the last first. The question of common law marriage always comes up when it is of advantage to the person asking, and it is never asked when it is a disadvantage. That is, when he or she doesn't want to be called a fornicator, he or she will say, We have been living together for a long time, and that is common law marriage, so we are married. But when the couple wants to dissolve the union, he or she will say, Oh, we were never married. We were just living together.

The following should not be taken as legal advice, but in the United States, only a few states recognize common law marriage. Of those that do, the law requires that the couples live together for a significant amount of time, use the same last name, call each other husband and wife, and file a joint tax return, and if they want to break up, they must get a divorce. This is not an acceptable choice for Christians because of the requirement that the couple live together for a significant amount of time before they are considered married. This means they would have to be committing fornication during that time.

Although wedding customs vary from culture to culture and age to age, there are two consistent characteristics in the Bible that make a relationship between a man and a woman a marriage: a) the union is covenanted before God, and b) the union is publicly witnessed. Many people today seem to have forgotten that marriage is a covenant (a formal, solemn, and binding agreement). The man and woman are to come before God and, at the very least, covenant that they will stay together for better or worse until they are parted by death. The Christian couple should also add that the husband will love his wife, the wife will submit to her husband, and they will raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. They should also ask for God's blessing on the marriage. And all of this (Adam and Eve and people on deserted islands excepted) must be witnessed by other people.

But who is to perform the wedding? Frankly, the Bible does not say. God has left this detail up to us as long as the criteria I mentioned above are met. In the Old Testament, marriage covenants were probably made between the parents of the couple, perhaps years before the marriage took place. The covenant came into force when the man "went in unto" the woman or "took" her and "knew" her (e.g.

Genesis 4:17; 24:67; 29:23; Ruth 4:13), meaning he had sexual relations with her.

The Bible says we are to obey the law as long as it does not conflict with God's commands for us (Romans 13:1; Acts 5:29). Therefore, besides the criteria I have mentioned, a marriage should meet the legal requirements where you live. In the United States, weddings can usually be performed by judges, justices of the peace, and "licensed ministers." The problem with the latter is that the Bible knows nothing of "licensed ministers," and it never gives the state the power to license the servants of Jesus Christ. For that matter, the Bible never says that any particular kind of person must perform a wedding or even that weddings must be "performed." That is, the Bible gives us no wedding ritual. In many cases, you can arrange to say your own Christian marriage vows in a civil ceremony. Check beforehand. But you can always opt to have a quick civil wedding to satisfy the state and then, if you wish, an exchange of vows before your Christian brethren.

Is sex outside marriage okay for Christians today? Without doubt, it is not. Christians should refrain from sex before marriage, get to know their future spouse in a pure relationship in which they see each other in the company of others or in public, and enjoy sex after being committed to each other before God as God intended from the beginning. For those who have already made a mistake, immediately take steps to make sure it does not happen again, and remember that the Lord is "very pitiful, and of tender mercy" (James 5:11) and that "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1).