The Gospel and Sex

by Tim Keller

PART I: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SEX

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

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

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

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

While the first perspective sees sex as an inevitable biological drive and the second view sees it as a necessary evil, the last view sees sex as a critical way of self-expression, a way to "be yourself" or "find yourself." For biological realists, all sex is right if it's safe. For Platonists, the flesh inhibits the spirit, so sex is naturally tainted in some way. For

romantics, the quality of interpersonal love is the primary touchstone that makes sex right or wrong.

THE CHRISTIAN VIEW

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

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

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

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

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

SEX IS A SACRAMENT

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

Sex Procreates: The Politics of Sex

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sex Delights: The Dance of Sex

Further, sex is sacred because it is the analogy of the joyous self-giving and pleasure of love within the life of the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in a relationship of glorious devotion to each other, pouring love and joy into one another continually (cf. John 1:18; 17:5, 21, 24-25). Sex between a man and a woman points to the love between the Father and the Son, as well as that between Christ and the believer (1 Cor. 11:3).

Despite 1 Corinthians 7, which explodes the romanticist views of sex as strictly personal fulfillment, the Bible rather baldly and openly celebrates the delights of sex. Sex is supposed to be wonderful because it mirrors the joy of relationship in the Trinity and because it points to the eternal ecstasy of soul that we will have in heaven in our loving relationships with God and one another (Prov. 5:18–20; Deut. 24:5).

The role of the woman throughout the Song [of Solomon] is truly astounding, especially in light of its ancient origins. It is the woman, not the man, who is the dominant voice throughout the poems that make up the Song. She is the one who seeks, pursues, initiates. [In Song 5:10–16] she boldly exclaims her physical attraction. . . . Most English translations hesitate in this verse. The Hebrew is quite erotic, and most translators cannot bring themselves to bring out the obvious meaning. . . . This again is a prelude to their lovemaking. There is no shy, shamed, mechanical movement under the sheets. Rather, the two stand before each other, aroused, feeling no shame, but only joy in each other's sexuality. (8)

Sex is, then, an important part of what Lewis calls the "great dance." According to Lewis, all of God's reality— from the stars and solar systems to the act of sexual intercourse—form an ongoing, dynamic dance, in which "plans without number interlock, and each movement becomes in its season the breaking into flower of the whole design to which all else had been directed." (9)

Sex Unifies: The Ceremony of Sex

Third, sex is sacred because it constitutes a covenant renewal ceremony. The original purpose of sex was to "become one flesh," meaning a complete personal union. Sex creates deep intimacy, oneness, and communion between two people (Gen. 2:24; 4:14). In the Bible oneness is not simply a matter of emotion but is always the creation of a covenant. Romanticism considers emotional happiness to be the main condition for marriage; if there is interpersonal happiness, sex is warranted, and then comes marriage. But when love dies, it is also allowable to walk away from the marriage. In the biblical view, however, the main condition of marriage is a binding covenant. In the romantic view, sex is self-expression; in the biblical view, sex is self-giving.

The Bible is full of covenant renewal ceremonies. When God enters into a personal relationship with someone, he is not so unrealistic as to think that mere emotion can serve as the basis for it. He knows that human emotions come and go and that there needs to be something binding to provide consistency and endurance. So God requires a binding, public, legal covenant as the infrastructure for intimacy. It is far easier to be vulnerable to someone who has bindingly promised to be exclusively faithful to you than to someone who is under no obligation to stay with you for more than one night. Thus God demands covenants. But even that is not enough. He regularly gets his people together to reread the terms of the covenant, remember the history of his acts of grace in their lives, and recommit themselves through renewal of the covenant. The ultimate covenant renewal ceremony is the Lord's

Supper. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper renews the covenant made at baptism; through the breaking of bread and the pouring out of wine it reenacts the selfless sacrifice of Jesus to us. In addition, in the receiving and eating of the sacrament it reenacts the giving of ourselves to Jesus. We reenact the total commitment and oneness we have in Christ as a way of renewing and deepening that oneness.

In the same way, marriage is a covenant, one that creates a place of security for vulnerability. But though covenant is necessary for sex, sex is also necessary for covenant. The covenant will grow stale unless we continually revisit and reenact it. Sex is a covenant renewal ceremony for marriage, the physical reenactment of the inseparable oneness in all other areas—economic, legal, personal, psychological—created by the marriage covenant. Sex renews and revitalizes the marriage covenant.

SEX HAS BOUNDARIES

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

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

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

The Pervasive Understanding of the Bible

It is rather typical to hear Christians say, "I know that the Ten Commandments forbid

adultery, but the Bible doesn't really forbid sex between two unmarried people." The idea of premarital sex was so outrageous in ancient cultures, however, that it was simply assumed in many passages. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul wished more Christians would choose, as he has, a single life. He believed there were great advantages for singles in the work of the kingdom. "I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about . . . how he can please his wife" (1 Cor. 7:32–33). He wished more people were like him (1 Cor. 7:7, 26, 32) and stated, "It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor. 7:8–9). In other words, Paul simply assumed that a single person would be celibate. If you cannot stay celibate, he said, you should get married. There is not even a hint that a single person should be having sex. The idea that Jesus Christ, as a first-century Jew, could have thought that sex between unmarried people was permissible is historically laughable.

The Meaning of *porneia*

Still, we can be sympathetic to Christians who find it hard to cite chapter and verse against premarital sex. One of the problems involves the difficulty of translating the word *porneia* or *pornos*. In the older King James Version this word was usually translated "fornication," but that word is archaic. Modern translations have rendered the word as "sexual immorality." But that is too vague a term, as can be seen from 1 Corinthians 6:9 ("Neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers . . . will inherit the kingdom of God") and Hebrews 13:4 ("Marriage should be honored . . . for God will judge the adulterer and all fornicators").

We see in these and many other such references that fornication means something more than just adultery. The authors are clearly thinking of different kinds of sins, or they wouldn't be distinguishing between these groups of persons in the lists. Nearly all commentators tell us that *pornoi* has reference to those who engage in sexual relationships outside of marriage. The word *moichoi* "denotes those who are unfaithful to the vows of commitment expressed in marriage." (10) So *porneia* refers to any sex other than sex with your own spouse. In other words, while adultery is always fornication, fornication includes premarital sex as well as extramarital sex or adultery.

The biblical condemnation of "fornication" or sex outside of marriage is comprehensive. (11) Paul's epistles contain so many reminders to Christians to abstain from premarital sex that it is obvious his readers lived in a culture similar to our own.

The Unity in the Unities

One of the ways some Christians try to mute the impact of biblical teaching is to point out that *porneia* is also translated (in some contexts) "harlotry" or "prostitution." Therefore, it is occasionally maintained that "fornication" only means sex with prostitutes, not sex between two people who love one another. But Paul's case study of sex with a prostitute in 1 Corinthians 6 is very instructive and disproves this reasoning: "Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh' " (1 Cor. 6:17).

Clearly "one flesh" must mean something different here from mere physical insertion, or Paul would be reciting a mere tautology: "Don't you know that when you have physical union with a prostitute you are having physical union with a prostitute?" So what does it mean? "'One flesh' . . . refers to the personal union of man with woman, woman with man,

at all levels of their lives." (12) To become "one flesh" means to become one new person—a new human unit. So when Paul used the word *pornos* about the case of sex with a prostitute, he cannot mean that one is automatically married in some kind of magical way. Rather, Paul is decrying the monstrosity of physical oneness without all the other kinds of oneness that every sex act should mirror. "Paul . . . here displays a psychological insight into human sexuality, which is altogether exceptional by first-century standards . . . he insists that it is an act which . . . engages and expresses the whole personality in such a way as to constitute an unique mode of self-disclosure and self-commitment." (13)

In short, sex with a prostitute is wrong because every sex act is supposed to reflect an absolute and complete covenant unity. There must be no physical union unless there is also every other kind—a legal, economic, personal, emotional, and spiritual union. There must not be one unity without all the rest. Likewise, C.S. Lewis likened sex without marriage to tasting without swallowing and digesting. (14)

Worldview Analysis
When someone says, "Sex with a prostitute is wrong but not sex with someone you love," we have the presupposition of a romanticist worldview. In this worldview, what makes sex right or wrong is whether it is an expression of sincere love, and therefore prostitution is wrong because it is done for money, not love.

But Paul has a very different presupposition. In his worldview, the purpose of sex is not personal self-expression (in order to be happy) but personal self-donation (in order to imitate God) as a witness to the gospel of the kingdom. He says what makes sex with a prostitute wrong is that sex always obligates you to complete giving of self. Sex without the giving of oneself is a monstrosity, akin to a body walking around without a head.

A NEW SEXUAL ETHIC

As we have seen, our character and witness are a very public matter. How we handle our sexual life can either affirm or contradict what we believe about God. God gave himself to us unconditionally in Christ, and he calls us to give ourselves unconditionally to him. God does not offer or ask for intimacy without complete whole-life commitment. If you demand intimacy yet keep control of your life, you are a living contradiction of both the way God relates to you and the way we are to relate to each other in the Christian community.

First Need: Spousal Love of Jesus
Sex is for fully committed relationships because it is to be a foretaste of the joy that comes from being in complete union with God. The most rapturous love between a man and woman is only a hint of God's love for us (Rom. 7:1–6; Eph. 5:21–33). On the one hand, this analogy anticipates the joy of meeting God face to face. But on the other hand, we realize that sex cannot completely fill the cosmic need our souls seek and that only the beatific vision will bring our loneliness to an end.

Paul is realistic that not everyone has the "gift" of lifelong celibacy, but everyone is called to celibacy at some point, and many are called to do so even in marriage itself for various reasons, such as illness, pregnancy, or temporary separation. We can learn to handle celibacy from both a negative and a positive perspective:

+ We need to realize that much of our "burning" comes from being brain washed by the romanticist and realist views of the world, which make an idol of sex. We can then deal with it like any other idol. We can re- mind ourselves that sex as a god will never deliver on its promises; it will let us down.
+ Positively, we are called to experience the spousal love of Jesus. Our singular focus means we are more available for prayer and have greater flexibility for service. Single people are often unaware that they have greater flexibility and freedom with their time and therefore have a greater opportunity for a rich and meaningful prayer life.

Second Need: A Community Practicing a New Sex Ethic
It is typical for Christians to think of sexual ethics in purely individualistic terms, but that is not the right way to read the Scripture. For example, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 reads, "Do not be deceived: neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor homosexuals nor greedy nor slanderers . . . will inherit the kingdom of God. But you were washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." Richard Hays, in his First Corinthians commentary, responds:

First Corinthians 6:9–11 has provided the launching pad for countless moralistic sermons that decry the types of sinners listed here. In fact . . . the concern of the passage as a whole is . . . to call the Corinthians to act as a community . . . and to assert the transformed identity of the baptized. . . . The Corinthians are to stop seeing themselves as participants in the "normal" social and economic structures of their city and to imagine themselves instead as members of the eschatological people of God, acting corporately in a way that will prefigure and proclaim the kingdom of God. . . . [Paul] is seeking to resocialize them into a new way of doing business, a new community consciousness. (15)

Hays notices that Paul is calling the church not just to individual moral behavior but to be a kingdom community in which the world's values do not hold. Notice that Paul lumps broken sexuality and greed together. Moderns view sex as a medium of exchange for fun and convenience and view money as something sacred, special, worth sacrificing for, not something easily shared. But biblical Christianity espouses just the opposite view. Money is merely an exchange, a way to procure goods and services. It is not special or sacred; it is something to be shared, to be given away to those who need it. Sex, on the other hand, is sacred and special and to be enjoyed only in the right context of pointing us toward the eternal. Paul, then, is calling Christians not just to individual moral behavior but to form a community in which consumerism—both sexual and material — is rejected.

Christians will fall prey to the world's views of sex unless we create a community, an alternative city. In this alternative city, singles enjoy their kingdom mission and practice sexual abstinence joyfully. They live in community with Christian families, who do not make an idol out of family or make singles feel abnormal. One of the reasons it is hard to practice the discipline of sex-free romantic involvement is that we don't have a sufficiently large community of people creating this alternative city.

PART II: SINGLENESS, DATING, AND MARRIAGE

THE GOODNESS OF THE SINGLE LIFE

In a difficult passage, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short" (1 Cor. 7:27–28). This passage is very confusing on its surface. This begrudging view of marriage seems at odds with the exalted picture of marriage in Ephesians 5:21–33 and seems to have been conditioned by a conviction that Jesus was coming back any day.

But immediately following these verses, Paul wrote: "From now on, those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy as if it was not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:29–31). Here we see that behind "the time is short" phrase is a much more sophisticated view of history. Paul, like Jesus, taught the overlap of the ages. The kingdom of God—God's power to renew the whole of creation—has broken into the old world through Christ's first coming. The kingdom is here in a substantial but partial way (Rom. 13:11–14). On the one hand, it means that the social and material concerns of this world still exist. But on the other hand, the gospel brings us an internal peace and a hope in the future that transforms all our earthly relationships (Rom. 14:17). Therefore we must not over-invest ourselves in anything besides the kingdom. Though we have possessions, we should live as if they weren't really ours, for our real wealth is in God (Luke 16:1–16). Paul applies this principle to marriage and singleness. We are to be neither overly elated about getting married nor overly disappointed about not being so—because Christ is the only spouse who can truly fulfill us and God's family the only family that will truly embrace and satisfy us. The Christian gospel and hope of the future kingdom dethrone the idolatry of marriage.

Christianity upholds single adulthood as a viable way of life. Prior to Christianity, nearly all religions and cultures made family and childbearing a foundational cultural value. There was no honor without family honor, and there was no lasting significance or legacy without heirs. By contrast, the early church did not pressure people to marry, as we see in Paul's letters. Moreover, it supported widows so they did not have to remarry.

Should they be widowed, Christian women also enjoyed very substantial advantages. Pagan widows faced great social pressure to remarry; Augustus even had widows fined if they failed to remarry within two years. . . . In contrast, among Christians, widowhood was highly respected and remarriage was, if anything, mildly discouraged. . . . The church stood ready to sustain poor widows, allowing them a choice as to whether or not to remarry. (16)

This striking countercultural view of singleness was a further sign of hope in the future kingdom of God.

The First Theological Purpose of Marriage

Do you see how the gospel changes our view of marriage and singleness? Christians are to choose between marriage and singleness not for the basic contemporary motive of personal fulfillment, nor for the traditional motive of propagating family legacy. Rather, we are to marry or to remain single on the basis of which state best makes us a sign of the kingdom. Hauerwas says that single Christian adults were a startling witness to the coming kingdom in that ancient world by showing that their hope and significance was not in family or heirs but in the kingdom.

It follows, then, that being married is also a way to be a sign of the kingdom. Because one of the main purposes of marriage is to build kingdom-exhibiting community—to show the world how Christ transforms everything, including marriage—God forbids Christians from marrying nonbelievers. A Christian who knowingly marries a nonbeliever shows that his or her motive is not mission or kingdom exhibition. One of the main ways—and perhaps the main way—that married Christians witness to Christ is to show the difference Christ makes in a marriage.

This explains why many single Christian adults do not marry even though they desire to do so. If one non- negotiable reason for marriage is kingdom exhibition, then that removes a lot of otherwise good prospects! When a single Christian remains single largely because he or she will not compromise on this point, then he or she is paying a price for the kingdom and will be blessed for that (1 Peter 4:13–14, 19). Furthermore, God will use the Christian's singleness to minister to others in ways that married people cannot (cf. 1 Cor. 7:32–34).

In summary, then, the purpose of both singleness and marriage is to create communities that reflect the glory of the coming kingdom of God. Every church, then, needs a combination of Christian married couples and Christian singles. Couples and singles can minister to each other; there are advantages and disadvantages in ministry for both singles and married members. The world needs to see both.

A High View of Marriage Equals a High View of Singleness

Paradoxically, the lofty view of marriage in Ephesians 5:21–33 provides support for the goodness of being single. Ephesians 5 tells us that marriage is not ultimately about sex or social stability or personal fulfillment; rather, marriage was created to be a human reflection of the ultimate love relationship with the Lord. This exalted view of marriage, however, shows us that marriage is only penultimate. It points to the true marriage that our souls need and the true family our hearts want. No marriage can ultimately give us what we most desire and truly need. According to Ephesians 5, even Christians married to Christians will do a terrible job of conducting their marriage if they lack a love relationship with Christ. If we don't have that, married people will put too much pressure on their marriage to fulfill them, and that will always create pathology in their life. Similarly, if singles don't have the same fulfilling love relationship with Jesus, they will put that pressure on their dream of marriage, which will create pathology in their life as well. But if singles rest in and rejoice in their marriage to Christ, they will be able to handle single life without devastating loneliness. Singles must realize that the very same idolatry of marriage that is distorting their single life would (or will) distort their married life.

Practical Implications for the Church

The gospel-based community practices a view of singleness that is contrary to the idolatry of marriage often seen in traditional culture. A gospel-based community acknowledges the truth of 1 Corinthians 7, thereby freeing singles from the shame of being unmarried. It speaks realistically and not sentimentally about marriage. It treats single members as equal partners in the leadership of the church.

THE FREEDOM OF THE SINGLE LIFE

Gospel-based communities will practice a view of singleness that is contrary not only to that

of traditional culture but also to that of contemporary culture, which tends to be very cynical about marriage to the extent of fearing it and forgoing it as long as possible. As we have seen, however, the biblical view of marriage is quite favorable and lofty (Eph. 5:21–33). While traditional societies, with their focus on family and children, tend to make an idol out of marriage, contemporary societies, emphasizing personal choice and happiness, tend to make an idol of independence. The traditional motive for marriage was social duty, stability, and status; the contemporary motive for marriage is personal fulfillment. Both of these motives ultimately tend to become idols if the gospel has not changed one's mind and heart.

We live in a contemporary Western society that idolizes independence and personal fulfillment, and Christian singles are often affected by these cultural values in subtle ways. One major fruit of the contemporary culture is that singles are extremely perfectionistic and impossibly difficult to satisfy as they look at prospective spouses. For example, when contemporary singles say they want "personal fulfillment" in marriage, they usually mean sexual fulfillment (appearance) and material fulfillment (money), not the fulfillment of godly character.

As a result, modern dating can be a crass form of self-merchandising: one must look good and make money if one is to attract a partner.

The Second Theological Purpose of Marriage

While our culture sees the purpose of marriage as personal satisfaction, the Bible says the purpose of marriage is personal sanctification: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:25–27).

According to Scripture, then, marriage is one of the best possible ways to learn about our sins and progress in knowledge of the gospel. We also see that this process of sanctifying marriage requires sacrifice on the part of the spouse. None of this fits into the contemporary view of marriage as personal fulfillment! Instead, as much as possible, contemporary singles desire a partner who has already pulled himself or herself together, one who is low maintenance and does not require a lot of self-sacrifice.

I think it is only fair to say that while there have been many happy exceptions, the Christian community of singles operates in much the same way. Most candidates are automatically eliminated from consideration on the basis of appearance, status, poise, or other superficial factors. What a difference it would make to our dating lives if instead we understood that marriage is a vehicle for helping our spouse become his or her best and sanctified self through sacrificial, selfless service. We are to fall in love with the glorious thing God is doing in our spouse's life. We become committed to our spouse's future glory. In a beautiful irony, this view of marriage does provide personal and lasting fulfillment in the long run.

Reasons for Marriage Avoidance in Our Culture

Many sociological explanations exist for why modern singles delay marriage and resist commitment. One reason given is the fact that a large number of young adults are children of divorce, the product of broken families. Another reason is the fact that many Christian singles are relatively new to the Christian faith, and while they were adept at contemporary dating, they begin to realize that Christian dating relationships should be different, more serious and intentional. The seriousness may be rather scary to one who is accustomed to the

casual dating and sexual encounters of the modern singles scene.

Still another reason is the fact that some people by temperament highly value individual freedom and autonomy; a disproportionate number of these people live in global cities where they can construct their own lifestyle free from the constraints and expectations of more traditional settings. It is likely that these urban singles have made an idol of personal freedom and feel stifled by any loss of freedom, especially the serious loss of freedom that marriage demands. But the church is called to a different way.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR SEASONAL MARRIAGE-SEEKING

So how does a Christian single strike a balance between marriage idolatry and marriage avoidance? I suggest this balance is found through what I call "seasonal marriage seeking." By this I mean that while much of a single's life can be spent in a relatively passive state of waiting to meet someone and dating for fun, there are certain times when he or she should be deliberately looking for a prospective marriage partner.

BACKGROUND: A BRIEF HISTORY OF DATING

In the United States prior to 1910, young adults engaged in the practice of "calling." A man asked if he could "call on" a woman; this meant visiting and getting to know her in her home surrounded by her family. Some- time after World War I a new system arose that was loosely termed "going out." A man would ask a woman to accompany him to a place of entertainment. In her book From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth- Century America, Beth Bailey sums up what this change meant, the foremost change being a shift in power from the woman to the man. (17) When "calling," the man entered an unfamiliar setting in which the woman was at ease and controlled the time, tone, and agenda of their time together. In "going out," the man gained the power to determine the setting, tone, and agenda.

A second change was a shift in focus from the family to the couple. With calling, the man first entered the woman's family, and the family had a great deal of control over whom its young adults were seeing and spending time with. With going out, however, the couple gets to know one another with little or no family input. Families have far less information and far less opportunity to counsel regarding the advisability of a relationship.

A third change was the shift in emphasis from assessing character to having a good time. Instead of the qualities that make a person a good mate (faithfulness, steadiness, honesty, responsibility), the desirable qualities became superficial ones like attractiveness, sexual chemistry, and social status.

In the last several years there has been a movement within the Christian community to reject the contemporary system of dating and return to the traditional system of "courting." (18) This approach, though seemingly noble, is not without its problems. For one thing, it creates a hard-and-fast distinction between traditional society (courtship) and contemporary society (dating) without noting the underlying idolatries at the root of both. Those who wish to return to courting are arbitrarily idealizing just one past phase in human social history. But one might legitimately counter, Why this one particular social practice? Why not go all the

way back to arranged marriages?

Another problem with the courtship approach involves modern-day sociocultural factors. For one thing, the courting system of the nineteenth century assumed a more homogenous, less mobile society. Most readers will acknowledge the difficulties involved in attempting modern-day courting. How can a thirty-something Christian single person living two thousand miles from his or her family engage in traditional courting? Still another problem is the choice and limitation of terms. Removing the word dating from one's vocabulary creates more problems than it solves. In everyday English nearly every social engagement can be considered a date. (We call our personal planners "date books," after all.) If one says, "I don't date," does this mean he or she will never do something social with a person of the opposite sex?

Instead of abandoning the concept willy-nilly, we should admit the problems with contemporary dating models and dialogue about how dating can be different in a Christian community.

FOLLOWING ARE SOME SPECIFIC GUIDELINES PERTAINING TO BEING SINGLE AND SEEKING MARRIAGE.

1. Seasonality.
The seasons of life include many times in which active dating and marriage-seeking do not have to be pursued, such as when one enters a period of significant transition—starting a new job, beginning a graduate program, or assisting a critically ill family member. In fact, it is advisable to avoid marriage seeking during and immediately following an emotionally charged life transition, since our judgment may be cloudy and our motives suspect.

2. Singleness as a "Gift"?
In the 1 Corinthians 7 text on being single, Paul most likely means that the "gift" of being single accompanies a low need for romantic relationship. Be advised, however, that it is possible that a low need for relationships, far from being a spiritual gift (1 Cor. 7:7), may mask an idol of personal freedom. Or it may stem from an in- ability to create deep relationships. One should be careful not to mistake a selfish spirit or an inability to keep friendships as the "gift of singleness." It is also possible that a gift like this is not a permanent condition but rather is given for a definite period of time with need for periodic evaluation. Lacking either a spiritual gift or season of singleness, one should be actively dating and marriage seeking. Why is this important?
+ to affirm people of the opposite sex within the Christian community
+ to help one another learn the intricacies of cross-gender communication, discernment, and relationship
+ to stay open to God's own leading toward marriage or singleness
+ to avoid the contemporary idols that make dating and marriage threatening
+ to avoid avoidance (dating and marriage-seeking is a process of self-discovery and cross-gender understanding; as such, it should not be avoided)

PRINCIPLES FOR SEASONS OF MARRIAGE-SEEKING

Following are a few practical principles to remember in the dating and marriage-seeking process.

1. Strive to be balanced.
As was outlined above, courtship is oriented toward character assessment and consideration of marriage pros- pects. It is pure marriage seeking. Dating is oriented toward recreation and companionship. If we try to insist that we should never date without marriage seeking, we are going to fall into legalism. There are too many social occasions that call for something like a date. On the other hand, those who preponderantly engage in recreational dating, especially as they get older, will be playing with the emotions of others. There must be gentle ways to signal the seriousness with which you ask or agree to a particular date. The older you are, and the more often you go out, the quicker both people must be to acknowledge that marriage seeking is an important part of dating.

2. Do not allow yourself deep emotional involvement with a non-believing person of the opposite sex.
2 Corinthians 6:14–18 contains the important prohibition against marrying outside of one's faith. If your part- ner does not share your faith, then he or she doesn't understand it. And if Jesus is central to you, then that means that your partner doesn't understand you. He or she does not understand the mainspring and motivation of your life. The essence of intimacy in marriage is the beautiful realization that finally you have someone who really understands you and accepts you as you are, someone you don't have to hide from. But if the person is not a believer, he or she cannot understand your very essence and heart.

If you marry someone who does not share your faith, you will have to lose your transparency. In the normal, healthy Christian life, you relate Christ and the gospel to everything you do. You base decisions on Christian principles. You think about what you read in the Bible that day. But if you are natural and transparent about all of these thoughts, your unbelieving partner will find you tedious or even offensive. The other possibility is that you simply move Christ out of a central place in your consciousness. You may even have to let your ardor for Christ cool, in order to keep from feeling isolated from your spouse.

Technically there is nothing in the Bible forbidding you to date a nonbeliever, since there is nothing in the Bible about dating at all. But there is a clear rule against marrying outside the faith. Wisdom dictates, then, that you not get serious with someone who doesn't believe.

3. Look for attraction in the most comprehensive sense.
Physical attraction is something that must grow between marriage partners, and it will come easily if you have the deeper attraction I'm speaking of. "Comprehensive" attraction is something you can begin to experience if you deliberately disable the appearance-and-status screening default mode of our culture.

By "comprehensive attraction" I mean being attracted to a person's character, spiritual fruit (Gal. 5:22–26), and spiritual gifts. Jonathan Edwards said that true virtue in any person—the contentment, peace, and joy of the gospel—is beautiful. When you begin to mine the depths of another person's character, to understand her mission in life, to discover his deepest passions, then you begin to see that person's future self. Ephesians 5 tells us that the purpose of marriage is to help one another become the glorious, unique persons God is making us. Marriage partners can say, "I see what you are becoming and what you will be (even though, frankly, you aren't there yet). The flashes of your future self attract me."

4. Don't romanticize things too quickly.
One of the great advantages of the old courtship approach was a steady relational cadence. In courtship, the courting couple got to see one another in more natural settings, such as the family home, their places of wor- ship, and in the community. Evaluation of character was easier to do in these settings. My suggestion is to focus on friendship experiences early on. The Christian community affords plenty of opportunity for this. Even after you declare to another, "I want to date you," you are able to enter the worlds of one another in the older courtship way that is very difficult outside the Christian community. You can attend a small group fellowship together, study the Bible together, serve in the city together, among many other things. And yes, don't have sex before marriage. The biblical, theological, and practical reasons are voluminous. There is no ambiguity about this in the Bible or in the history of Christian theology and practice; in fact, it is something that all major world religions agree upon!

5. Submit to community input.
Courtship assumed that experienced married people in your extended family would give you input in the selection of a spouse. Many people are now insisting that we return to the old requirement of getting the father's consent or even arranged marriages. But that is seldom practicable, especially for singles who have been away from home for years and for single Christians whose parents have little understanding of the gospel. Regardless, the basic principle is important. Christian marriage, like most Christian practices, is not to be based on a singular decision but rather should take place in the context of community. The Christian community has a deep investment in you and a deep interest in healthy and happy marriages. Also, the community has many married people in it who have much wisdom for single adults.

In the end, there are only a few necessary components in a gospel-centered marriage. Both partners should be on the same page spiritually, that is, able to relate to one another and help each other grow in their faith; both should be able to work through problems without repeating the same ones over and over again, or one person always getting their way; and both should feel attraction in the comprehensive sense, able to share their deep- est joys and longings with each other and not (just) attraction in the physical sense.

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1. How can you better foster a community where singleness is as accepted and as valued as marriage?
2. What does it look like for your community to be a place where sex, money, and in power are used in life-giving ways?

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in The Gospel and Life conferences of 2004 and 2005 and is posted here from Redeemer City to City with permission. The image used was taken by Flickr user Cuentosdeunaimbecila.

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1. See C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, book 3, chapter 5.
2. Stanley Hauerwas, A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 189–90.
3. Ibid., 174, 190
4. Ibid., 191.
5. Unfortunately, many Christian churches continue to make single people feel like awkward outsiders and do not take 1 Corinthians 7 seriously, which seems to indicate that the average Christian church forbids premarital sex more out of a traditional or Platonic view of sex than out of a biblical worldview.
6. Hauerwas, Community of Character, 194–95.
7. Ibid., 190–91.
8. Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III, Intimate Allies: Rediscovering God's Design for Marriage and Becoming Soul Mates for Life (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1999), 253–54.
9. C. S. Lewis, Perelandra (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 217.
10. William Lane, Hebrews 9–13, Word Biblical Commentary 47B (Dallas: Word, 1991), 305.
11. See Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:21; Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, 18; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3–5; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 1 Timothy 1:10; Hebrews 13:4.
12. David John Atkinson, The Message of Genesis 1–11: The Dawn of Creation (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 76.
13. D. S. Bailey, Sexual Relation in Christian Thought (New York, 1959), 9–10.
14 C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, bk. 3, chap. 6.
15. Richard B. Hays, First Corinthians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 98, emphasis mine.
16. Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p.104.\
17. Beth Bailey, From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).
18. One of the better efforts to do this is the well-known book I Kissed Dating Goodbye by Joshua Harris (1997).