

SEX AS A GIFT FROM GOD: THE CASE FOR PREMARITAL SEXUAL ABSTINENCE

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In just a few days I will celebrate my birthday. I know the routine well--my family will fix my favorite meal. I will be teased about my age. I will wrestle my son to the ground to show the world that I am not yet over-the-hill. My family and friends will honor me with cards and gifts. I love these birthday celebrations, not because I am greedy, but because I have the greatest loved ones in the world. Their cards and gifts make me feel very loved and understood.

A. The Gift of Sex

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

But if the creation account affirms that God designed our gender, does it follow that the sex act itself is a gift from God? Absolutely, for the two are inextricably connected. Immediately after creating the man and the woman, God blessed them and commanded them to "be fruitful and multiply." In other words, in a clear context of divine blessing, God essentially commands Adam and Eve to have sex. Furthermore, when God was finished creating he looked at what he had made, including human gender and procreation through the sex act, and pronounced it "very good" (Gen 1:31). It is quite

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the NASV.

² Karl Barth most notably has developed image of God in terms of gender, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 183-212. On the way sexuality is beautifully designed by God to drive humans to intimate relationship, see Lewis B. Smedes, *Sex for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 32-33.

sad that Christians often imply that sex is dirty and unspiritual, for this is not God's view. He created sex as a divine gift, and put his enthusiastic stamp of approval on it by exclaiming that sex as an expression of love between a husband and a wife is not just good, but "very good."

But the most explicit blessing God pronounces on the sex act is found in the very words he uses to describe the man and the woman he created. In Gen 1:26, the Hebrew words "zachar" and "nekebah" are used to convey "male" and "female." These two words are expressly, graphically sexual, and literally mean "piercer" and "one pierced." So in the very words God uses to describe the male and the female he created, he graphically describes the sex act. Clearly, God is not embarrassed by sexual intercourse; it was his good creation. A final indication that sex is a gift from God is seen at the end of the creation account, where after God made a wife for Adam, the author declares that in marriage a man and a woman are to create a new family unit and "become one flesh." Thus, the sex act in marriage is intended by God to express, reinforce, and reenact the marital covenant itself.³ This helps to explain the beautiful Hebrew euphemism for marital sex—"to know." Adam, who had been given Eve as his life companion on the sixth day of creation, could continue to express and reenact their union throughout their earthly days by "knowing" Eve sexually (Gen 4:1). What a beautiful picture of sex bringing pleasure and bonding a man and a woman in marriage. Thus, marriage and the sex act itself are wonderful gifts from God.

Sadly, very few people today understand that God is a loving creator who wants nothing more than to bless His creation. Everything he created comes from his desire to give us good gifts (Jas 1:17). Jesus declared "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The psalmist proclaims: "no good thing does He [God] withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Ps 84:11). Recently I have been blessed by reading *A Christian Directory*, arguably the finest work on the Christian life written by an English-speaking author. It is written by a seventeenth century Puritan pastor named Richard Baxter, who was deeply passionate about helping people understand that God is a loving God who wants to bless us. Baxter argued that Satan's greatest lie is that God's commandments are not in our best interest, and that a life of obedience to God will result in "a terrible or tedious life."⁴ But in reality, "God doth not command us to honour him by [telling us to do] anything which would make us miserable."⁵ In other words, obedience to God will always result in blessing, not boredom, happiness, not misery. And this is true regardless of the subject matter, be it sex, marriage, or salvation, God's commands on any subject are for our good because he is a loving creator who gives good gifts to his children.

³ Steve Tracy, "The Mystery of Marriage," *Christianity Today*, January 7, 2002, 63.

⁴ *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, vol. 1, (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, reprinted 2000), 52.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 64. The point here is not that God exists simply to make us happy, but that his glory and our happiness are not mutually exclusive. In fact, he is most glorified in us, when we are most satisfied in him. John Piper, a modern pastor and prolific author who stands in the reformed tradition of Richard Baxter, has brilliantly developed this concept in *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1986).

B. Biblical Teaching Regarding Premarital Relations

Since God is the Lord of the universe, since he created sex in the first place, and since he gives only good gifts, then it is eminently logical to look to Scripture to direct our sexual behavior. We have seen that God sanctions and blesses sex in marriage, but what about sex before marriage?

Scripture is quite clear that sex is to be reserved for marriage. We see this principle given explicitly and implicitly in numerous biblical passages. For example, virginity before marriage is greatly prized in Scripture (Gen 24:16; Lev 21:14; Luke 1:27), so much so that new brides kept the bloody sheet from the first night they slept with their husband as proof that they entered their marriage as a virgin (Deut 22:15-17). Loss of virginity before marriage was cause for severe sanctions (Deut 22:20-21). Overall, there are not a large number of Old Testament passages which specifically address pre-marital sex, since sexual chastity among singles was apparently thoroughly accepted and practiced. This is seen in the widespread use of the term "virgin" simply to signify those who were unmarried (Lam 1:14, 18; 2:10; Amos 8:13; Zech 9:17).

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

Other New Testament passages affirm the fact that pre-marital sex is forbidden. One of the clearest examples is in 1 Cor 7:1-5, where Paul responds to the Corinthians' suggestion that it is best for a married man to not have sexual relations with his wife. Paul's response is that because of immoralities (porneia), each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and the husband and wife must meet each other's sexual needs so that they do not fall into sexual temptation. There is no moral loophole here for pre-marital sex, for Paul instead argues that marriage is the only God ordained provision for sexual needs. Other passages such as Heb 13:4 link those who practice pre-marital sex with adulterers, indicating that sex before marriage and sex after marriage to someone other than one's spouse are equally condemned ("God will judge"). The marriage bed is cited as the exclusive place for God ordained sexual activity.

⁶ James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 529.

⁷ Bruce Malina argues that porneia has a more restricted meaning than has been previously understood, and that it does not prohibit non-commercial, non-exploitive premarital sex, "Does Porneia Mean Fornication?," *Novum Testamentum* 14 (1972): 10-17. Joseph Jensen however, counters Malina's arguments, and gives abundant evidence that all forms of premarital sex are included in the scope of the biblical use of porneia, "Does Porneia Mean Fornication? A Critique of Bruce Malina," *Novum Testamentum* 20 (1978): 161-84.

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

C. Arguments for Premarital Sex Based on Sex as a Basic Right

Few people today want God to direct their sex life. Most modern westerners find the biblical sexual ethic to be illogical, outdated, and utterly unacceptable. From the outset of the sexual revolution in the 1960s, sexual expression has increasingly been viewed as a basic right that no one has a right to restrict. Singer Billy Joel powerfully articulated this ethic in his song "My Life" in which he stated that people have a right to sleep with anyone they want to; they answer only to themselves. Hence, he doesn't care what others think about his sexual behavior. He declared that those who want to restrict his sexual expressions should live their life and "leave me alone."

Flowing out of the idea that unrestricted sex is a basic right, other arguments are commonly given for premarital sex. One of the most common is that sexual abstinence is unnatural and leads to psychologically unhealthy sexual repression. This argument was first articulated by the influential sex researcher Alfred Kinsey.⁸ Many argue that premarital sex strengthens future marriage by helping couples adjust to each other and by insuring that they are sexually compatible. Hence it ultimately strengthens marriage. Others note that sex is a powerful way to deepen love between two people and enhance the relationship. Hence, all couples who love each other should have sex, regardless of whether or not they are married. All of these arguments fly in the face of the biblical teaching that sex is to be reserved for marriage. If in fact sex is a good gift from God, and not simply a basic right, what evidence is there that abstinence before marriage is good and healthy? Are we simply to take the biblical sanctions against premarital sex by faith and tell others they must do the same?

D. Arguments for Premarital Sexual Abstinence based on Sex as a Divine Gift

While Christians are called to "walk by faith" and obey God's word regardless of whether it always makes sense, this is not a call to intellectual suicide. In fact, there are many compelling arguments for premarital sexual abstinence. The gift giver of sex knows the best way to protect and enjoy this wonderful gift. When we look at the facts, we can see that the biblical prohibitions against premarital sex are good prohibitions; they are for our welfare. In particular, we will note five arguments for saving sex for marriage.

1. Abstinence before marriage enhances personal and marital health.

The sex act is the most intimate form of human interaction. The very fact that sex involves being naked before another person and embracing them in their nakedness suggests great vulnerability and exposure. Furthermore, this very act can have dramatic, life or death consequences (the creation of life or the ultimate loss of life through sexually transmitted diseases). For these reasons, sex is most meaningful and healthy in a relationship in which a couple has made a vow of life long commitment to each other.

⁸ Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Company, 1948), 197-213.

This provides the safest and most intimate setting for sex, for only in marriage is sex experienced in a relationship in which all of life is shared together. Premarital sex is not the best context in which to experience this powerful act, and undermines personal and future marital health.

In terms of personal health, those who are sexually active before marriage often struggle later in life with unresolved guilt, the need to change their perceptions of what sex means, lack of trust, comparisons of the sexual performance of their spouse with former boyfriends/girlfriends, and struggles with the demands of fidelity in marriage. My wife (who is a family therapist) and I continually counsel women as well as men who are experiencing emotional and marital struggles due to sexual experiences before marriage. For many of the people we work with, their sexual health in marriage was negatively impacted by their sexual behavior before marriage.

In terms of marital satisfaction, one of the most wide-spread modern myths is that couples need to live together before they get married to see if they are sexually compatible and thus to enhance future marital health and satisfaction. In reality, research shows that couples that live together before marriage have higher infidelity rates and lower marital satisfaction rate than those who don't live together before marriage. In one major recent study, 1,425 couples were studied to determine the relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital dysfunction. Researchers found that couples who cohabited before marriage "reported poorer marital quality and greater marital instability."⁹ Cohabiters are also more likely to divorce or separate if they do get married. A study of over 4,000 Swedish women reported that women who cohabit before marriage have an 80% higher marital failure rate than women who did not cohabit with their future spouse.¹⁰ In short, living together and having sex before marriage does not prepare one for marriage, but decreases the likelihood of a future healthy marriage.

In terms of sexual satisfaction, it is very interesting to note that in the Sex in America Survey, one of the largest studies of American sexual practices in the past decade, married couples reported considerably higher rates of sexual satisfaction than singles, and among women, conservative Protestant women had the highest rates of orgasm.¹¹ These secular researchers made the following comments that support my contention that marriage is the best environment to experience sex, and saving sex for marriage can in fact enhance marital satisfaction. They comment on their findings:

Those having the most partnered sex and enjoying it the most are the married people. The young single people who flit from partner to partner and seem to be having a sex life that is satisfying beyond most people's dreams are, it seems, mostly a media creation. In real life, the unheralded, seldom discussed world of married sex is actually the one that satisfies most people.¹²

⁹ Claire Kamp Dush, Catherine Cohan, and Paul Amato, "The Relationship between Cohabitation and Marital Quality and Stability: Change Across Cohorts," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (2003): 539-549. See also A. DeMaris and G. Leslie, "Cohabitation with the Future Spouse: Its Influence Upon Marital Satisfaction and Communication," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 46 (1984): 77-84.

¹⁰ N. G. Bennett, A. K. Blanc, and D. E. Bloom, "Commitment and the Modern Union: Assessing the Link between Premarital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Stability," *American Sociological Review* 53 (1988): 127-138.

¹¹ Robert T. Michael, John H. Gagnon, Edward O. Laumann, et al., *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (New York: Time Warner, 1995), 127-128.

¹² *Ibid.*, 131.

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

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

This point flows out of the previous point. Marriage is by far the best, safest, and healthiest environment for sex because it involves the highest level of relational commitment. For instance, studies indicate that seventy per cent of couples that live together fail to get married and soon break up. The majority of cohabiting couples are together less than two years, and the average time together is only thirteen months.¹³ It is safe to say that when sex is practiced outside of marriage, it is inevitably expressed in a context that lacks the highest level of commitment, and this creates great potential for disrespect and selfish manipulation. It also creates much greater potential for harm and heartache. For instance, countless women have been pressured into sex by boyfriends who manipulated them by saying they loved them when in reality they just wanted to use them. Surveys reveal that a high percentage of singles, especially males, admit to lying about their sexual history, including having an STD, so that they could have sex with their boyfriend or girlfriend. It is much, much more likely that a man will abandon his girlfriend who becomes unexpectedly pregnant, than a husband will leave a wife who becomes unexpectedly pregnant. While domestic violence is problematic in all spheres of society, including those who are married, research clearly shows that cohabiting couples are much more likely to physically abuse each other than are married couples. According to a 2002 Department of Justice report on intimate partner violence, unmarried women are almost five times more likely to experience violence at the hands of their sexual partner than are married women.¹⁴

A final example of the way that premarital sex can weaken respect and increase potential for being harmed is seen in rates of infidelity. In one major study of couples living together, cohabitators were found to be almost twice as likely to be unfaithful as those who were married. Upon analysis, this was found to be due to the weaker nature of the cohabitators' relationships compared to married couples, not to cohabitators having lower expectations of fidelity than married couples. The researchers noted: "this finding suggests that cohabitor's lower investments in their unions, not their less conventional values, accounted for the greater risk of infidelity."¹⁵

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

¹³ L. Bumpas and J. Sweet, "National Estimates of Cohabitation," *Demography* 26 (1989): 22-24; C. Surra, "Research and Theory on Mate Selection and Premarital Relationships in the 1980s," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52 (1990): 844-865.

¹⁴ Callie Marie Rennison and Sarah Welchans, *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Intimate Partner Violence*, a special report prepared at the request of the Department of Justice, May 2000, rev. 1/31/02, Appendix table 8.

¹⁵ Judith Treas and Deirdre Giesen, "Sexual Infidelity among Married and Cohabiting Couples," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62 (2000): 59.

know the other person for who they really are, for sex has an amazing way of creating instant romance and connection that may well be shallow and ultimately deceptive. Sex often blinds people to the reality of the other person's character, which can be very costly if the other person has serious character flaws. Conversely, saving sex for marriage forces couples to get to know their partner in a much deeper way. It also tends to create more respect and love for the other person because it forces them to sacrifice their immediate sexual needs for the greater long term good.¹⁶

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

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

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

¹⁶ Sociologist George Gilder brilliantly expresses this in terms of the way saving sex for marriage "tames the male barbarian," who would otherwise put his own needs above the woman's and become increasingly disrespectful, crass, and unfaithful, *Men and Marriage* (Gretna, LA: Pelican, 1992).

abstaining from sex before marriage develops self-control, and enhances fidelity after marriage.

Secular researchers have noted the correlation between premarital sex and marital infidelity. For instance, the Kinsey report revealed the more premarital sex a person had, the more likely he or she would be to commit adultery once married.¹⁷ More recently, in a major study on sexual infidelity we referred to earlier, researchers affirmed a causal relationship between premarital sex and marital infidelity. In fact, they actually quantified the effects of premarital sex on subsequent marriage. They discovered that early sexual experience increased sexual infidelity in marriage 1% for each partner between ages 18 and marital union."¹⁸ These social science findings are predictable, for sexual abstinence before marriage helps to develop self-control and character that later enhances marriage.

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

Since abstinence is the only 100% effective form of birth control, singles who practice abstinence will never have to deal with an unexpected pregnancy. Though married couples also have unplanned pregnancies, they are generally much better equipped to handle them in a healthy manner given the committed nature of their relationship. Many researchers are now saying that out of wedlock births are the single most significant factor influencing long-term poverty in America. In many inner city areas of America, up to 2/3 of the births are to unwed mothers, and these single parent children are much more likely to live below the poverty line, drop out of high school, end up in prison, become single parents themselves, and get locked into a cycle of poverty.¹⁹ The point here is certainly not to condemn single mothers (who need and deserve compassion and assistance) but to underscore the fact that much long-term, even generational suffering is a direct result of sex outside of marriage. Again, God knows the best way to use his gifts. He forbids sex outside marriage to save us from individual and societal harm.

5. Abstinence eliminates the threat of contracting STDs.

Sexually transmitted diseases are at epidemic rates in many countries and communities, and are literally disrupting the modern world. There are more than 50 STDs, and STD rates in the US are among the highest in the industrialized world. In 2000 the Center for Disease Control reported that in the US more than 65 million people are living with an incurable STD, and an additional 15 million people become infected with an STD each year (half of whom contract a lifetime infection). According to the World Health Organization, STDs are "among the most common causes of illness in the world," and have far reaching health, economic, and social consequences.²⁰ In spite of medical advances, several STDs are currently incurable, notably HIV, genital herpes, hepatitis B, and human papilloma virus (HPV).

¹⁷ Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin, et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders Company, 1953), 427-28.

¹⁸ Treas and Giesen, "Sexual Infidelity among Married and Cohabiting Couples," 56.

¹⁹ For a very readable overview of the negative individual and societal impact of single parenting, see, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Dan Quayle Was Right," *Atlantic Monthly*, 271, issue 4 (April, 1993): 47-68.

²⁰ "Guidelines for the Management of Sexually Transmitted Infections" (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2003): vii.

The HIV virus, which leads to AIDS, is particularly devastating much of the developing world. There are now some forty-two million people with AIDS worldwide, with five million new cases a year. Africa has been most affected by the AIDS epidemic, having some communities with the majority of adults HIV+. ²¹ In the country of Botswana, 36% of the adult population is HIV+. AIDS is having an overwhelming economic and social impact in Africa. For instance, in South Africa, AIDS has cut life expectancy from seventy years to thirty. In the past 20 years AIDS has created 30 million African orphans, and some estimate that by the end of the decade there could be 100 million AIDS orphans in Africa. While the HIV virus can be spread through blood contact, particularly through childbirth and as well as the sharing of infected needles, the vast majority of HIV infections are the result of sexual activity.

While AIDS rates in the United States are nothing like Africa's, other STD rates in America are very high and very dangerous. The most common sexually transmitted disease in the United States is the human papilloma virus (HPV). In 2003 the Center for Disease Control reported that approximately 20 million Americans are currently infected with HPV. At least 50% of sexually active men and women acquire genital HPV infection at some point in their lives. By age 50, at least 80 percent of women will have acquired genital HPV infection. About 5.5 million Americans get a new genital HPV infection each year. What is most troubling is that certain HPV types cause abnormal Pap smears and are etiologically related to cervical, vulvar, anal, and penile cancers; other types cause genital warts, recurrent respiratory papillomatosis, and low-grade Pap smear abnormalities. Gynecologists report that virtually all abnormal Pap smears indicating precancerous cells are a result of infection from HPV. ²²

Gonorrhea is another very common and dangerous sexually infectious disease. CDC estimates that more than 700,000 persons in the U.S. get new gonorrheal infections each year. Only about half of these infections are reported to CDC. Sixty percent of women and twenty percent of men with a gonorrhea infection have no symptoms, making diagnosis and treatment very difficult. Gonorrhea is believed to be the principal cause of arthritis in young adults. In addition to chlamydia, it is a leading cause of infertility among women, since it is a major cause of PID (pelvic inflammatory disease). After a single gonorrhea infection a woman has a 12% chance of becoming sterile; after a second gonorrhea infection a woman has a 25% chance of becoming sterile. As is true for several other STDs, antibiotic-resistant strains of gonorrhea are becoming increasingly common in the US. Other forms of treatment are up to ten times more costly than penicillin, and the delay in effective treatment can lead to major damage to the female reproductive organs.

A final common STD we will note is Chlamydia. In 2002, 834,555 chlamydial infections were reported to the CDC nation-wide. Chlamydia is often particularly devastating for women, for as the infectious organism (*Chlamydia trachomatis*) begins multiplying in a woman's uterus, tubes, and ovaries, it causes inflammation of the pelvic region (PID). This can cause permanent damage to the reproductive organs, which is why chlamydia is one of the leading causes of infertility in America. Physician Joe McIlhaney notes that if a woman's reproductive organs have been infected one time by chlamydia,

²¹ For a brief summary of the impact of AIDS in Africa, see "All the Dying People," *Canada and the World Backgrounder* 67, issue 3 (December, 2001):28-31.

²² See Joe S. McIlhaney, *Sexuality and Sexually Transmitted Diseases* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

she has a 25% chance of becoming sterile. If she is infected a second time, she has a 50% chance of sterility.²³ What is particularly troubling about chlamydia, is that while it is treatable, symptoms often don't appear for weeks after exposure, if they appear at all (studies indicate that 75% of the women and 50% of the men who have chlamydia are unaware of it, as it is asymptomatic). Furthermore, since it is spread by skin-to-skin contact in the genital region, condoms offer little protection against chlamydia transmission.

While these STD statistics are depressing, it is important to put this discussion back in the context of the essay. Sex is a wonderful gift, but when engaged in in the wrong context, it can bring devastating consequences. This truth is nowhere made more clear than with STDs. We can again see the wisdom of the biblical sexual ethic, for if both partners practice sexual abstinence before marriage and remain faithful after marriage, they virtually eliminate the possibility of contracting an STD in their lifetime.²⁴

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

Conclusion

As strange as it sounds to modern ears, sex before marriage is morally wrong because God prohibits it. But God did not prohibit premarital sex because he is whimsical or mean. As the almighty, holy creator, he has the right to dictate our sexual behavior. And as a loving creator, his commandments are always for our good. God prohibits premarital sex not because sex is bad, but because it is so great. God knows that reserving sex for marriage enhances the gift, builds personal and relational health, and protects us from harm. Oh that more of us would trust and obey our good God with our sex lives!

²³ Ibid., 98.

²⁴ This statement must be qualified, since some illnesses, such as HIV, which are considered STDs can be contracted non-sexually. But this is the decided exception.