



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Study Guides for

Chastity

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to examine how the virtue of chastity is exemplified in married life and singleness, and why its beauty has become difficult for us to appreciate. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

Human Sexuality and Radical Faithfulness 2

Christians have always acknowledged two routes for embodying faithfulness in the way we have sex or do not have sex, two routes for publicly declaring – and displaying – that God is faithful: celibate singleness and faithful marriage. In both conditions, we testify, with our bodies, to the power of God.

Living “The Long Defeat” Together 4

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Focus Article:

📖 Radical Faithfulness
(*Chastity*, pp. 10-19)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Mary's Worthy Suitor
(*Chastity*, pp. 66-67)

📖 A Couple's Intimacy
(*Chastity*, pp. 70-71)

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Human Sexuality and Radical Faithfulness

Christians have always acknowledged two routes for embodying faithfulness in the way we have sex or do not have sex, two routes for publicly declaring – and displaying – that God is faithful: celibate singleness and faithful marriage. In both conditions, we testify, with our bodies, to the power of God.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Hosea 2:16-20

Meditation†

We need to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the beauty of chastity, and we can begin by admitting that it is something we only dimly understand. Rather than trying to think for ourselves, we should listen to the community of faith before us, around the world and through time. They knew something we didn't know.

We live in a reckless age that is amnesic and self-fascinated. Welding together fresh opinions in the basement will not solve this problem. We need to take the time to listen to the wisdom of our forebears in faith – and, harder still, to find the courage to put it into practice. If they are right, in practicing chastity we will begin to experience healing joy. Then, perhaps, we'll find the words for it.

Frederica Mathewes-Green

Reflection

We must “think well – and Christianly – about sex,” Beth Felker Jones observes, because it is important “what place bodies have in the life of discipleship and how it is that God intends for us to thrive as men and women.” She admits that from the beginning some Christian ideas about sex have seemed strange – that is to say, out of step with the wider culture – because Christians see sex as not just about us, but about the nature of God and God's purposes in creation.

The creation story implies God's good, creative intention is for a man and woman to enjoy sexual intimacy within an exclusive and unbreakable bond of marriage (Genesis 2:24). Many passages of Scripture “speak frankly about sex and about how our bodies honor God,” Jones notes. For instance, Paul warns that we must shun *porneia* – that is, sex that denies who God is and tells lies about what it means to be human – because our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:18).

The central idea running through Christian views on sex is “that sex should express radical faithfulness, that our faithful sex is meant to reflect God's faithfulness.” A dramatic illustration of this is the prophet Hosea, at God's behest, marrying a prostitute named Gomer and remaining true to her as a sign of God's faithfulness to God's people (Hosea 1:2-9).

Jones explains, “Faithful witness is the reason Christian ethics have always held open two paths for Christian sexual fidelity. The path of faithful marriage is a sign of God's faithfulness. The path of celibate singleness is a sign of God's faithfulness. When a single person does



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not have sex, his body is a testament to God's utter refusal to forsake us. When a married person remains faithful, her body is a testament to the same God.

- ▶ *Celibate singleness* was especially esteemed by the ancient Church as a sign of unfettered devotion to God. "To remain single and chaste was to declare that God was your everything, so much so that you had no need of marriage and children to secure your place in society or your legacy after you died," Jones notes. "God, and not the empire, was the meaning of life."
- ▶ *Committed marriage* is also a sign of God's faithfulness. "The husband and wife who are faithful to one another, while being different from another, are a sign of the ways that God is faithful to us, while being different from us," Jones writes. "The expectation that sex belongs within marriage and that marriage is an unbreakable union is the steady teaching of Scripture.... [Thus] married sex can testify – publicly and radically – to the way God is faithful to God's people. To have sex only in marriage...excludes premarital and extramarital sex along with adultery."

Jones concludes, "For Christians, women are not property or baby makers. We are witnesses to the life of Jesus Christ in our bodies, including in the ways we choose to have and not have sex. For Christians, men are not lust machines or power mongers. They are witnesses to the life of Jesus Christ in their bodies, including in the ways they choose to have and not have sex."

Study Questions

1. "Much in the way Christians teach about sex has gone wrong," Beth Felker Jones suggests. How does she think Christian teaching has gone wrong, and what is the root cause of the mistaken approach?
2. According to Jones, why did the Church in the ancient world elevate singleness and virginity to a status above marriage? Why did Protestants emphasize marriage over singleness? In each case, what public message about sex was being sent?
3. Consider how both celibate singleness and faithfulness between a husband and wife in marriage can be a public testimony to God's faithfulness today.
4. "A good theology of sex needs to reclaim and proclaim the good of both marriage and singleness," Jones observes. How well are we doing this today?
5. Consider how Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin* and Rembrandt's *Portrait of a Couple as Isaac and Rebekah, known as "The Jewish Bride,"* depict faithfulness in sex. How do these paintings proclaim (or fall short of proclaiming) what Jones calls "a good theology of sex"?

Departing Hymn: "Intense the Love God Molded"

† Frederica Mathewes-Green, "Sex and Saints: A New Vocabulary for an Oversexualized Culture," *Christianity Today*, 44.4 (April 3, 2000), 88.



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Focus Article:

📖 The Long Defeat
(*Chastity*, pp. 20-31)

Suggested Article:

📖 Christian Sexual Ethics in
an Age of Individualism
(*Chastity*, pp. 89-93)

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Living “The Long Defeat” Together

Within a sexually-sodden culture, the life of chastity may seem like a lonely, long defeat, especially to gay and lesbian believers. How can churches provide the good company which celibate, same-sex attracted believers need for their Christian pilgrimage?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:18-25

Meditation†

Vibrant Christian communities where married couples and celibates live side by side in deep friendships could be a powerful counter-cultural sign, witnessing to the fact – almost unbelievable to many of our contemporaries – that clear limits set to the bodily expression of love do not keep one from finding happiness and fulfillment.

Brother John of Taizé

Reflection

“As someone who has not received one iota of the promised ‘change’ in my sexual orientation that some Christians have held out to me, and as someone who also has not been able to embrace a more progressive understanding of same-sex marriage, I often feel like I am fighting a kind of long defeat,” Wesley Hill writes. He borrows “a long defeat” from J. R. R. Tolkien, who used it in *Lord of the Rings* and later embraced it to depict his own life of faith. Tolkien was sure of God’s final victory but prepared to endure his Christian walk with only glimpses of it.

Hill says that Paul’s view of the Christian life in Romans 8:23 “goes a long way toward explaining how I and many of my fellow celibate gay friends view our discipleship. We are fighting a long defeat, not necessarily expecting to find a satisfying substitute in this life for the marital happiness we are choosing to live without and instead pinning our hopes for spousal union on the future marriage supper of the Lamb. We are groaning and waiting, often without much natural ‘fulfillment,’ and counting on a future weight of glory that will far surpass our present groans.”

Yet the long defeat is “meant to be lived in good company, with other guests who are bound for the same Wedding Supper that is to come,” Hill notes. Thus, he commends ministries that welcome LGBT believers and provide good company to them and all disciples on their pilgrimage. The most helpful ministries

- ▶ do not underestimate the power of small gestures that recognize same-sex attracted believers. Among “people who are not afraid to raise the issue,” Hill says, “gay and lesbian Christians can be honest without fear of judgment or disgust.”
- ▶ do not make one-size-fits-all assumptions about the causes of same-sex attraction. “Helpful ministries have assumed my story is unique, my gayness is not the same as anyone else’s, and this uniqueness is worthy of attention and respect and dignity.”
- ▶ know sexual orientation affects the entire person, but does not define a person. “Our sexuality is more like a facet of our personalities than a separable piece of our behavior,” Hill notes. Yet realizing “sexual orientation as we know it is culturally constructed,” rather than a “fixed script” one must follow, lets him “explore historic Christian,



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chaste ways to express [his] love for men.” Admittedly, “opting out of the dominant way of understanding ‘gay’ often feels more like martyrdom than freedom. But if traditional Christianity is true, then self-denial – taking up one’s cross and following Jesus – is, in fact, regardless of how it feels to us, real freedom.”

- ▶ *value Scripture and theology.* Since they “must make concrete choices about how to ‘glorify God in our bodies’ (1 Corinthians 6:20),” many same-sex attracted believers “are impatient with hasty arguments and shallow scriptural reasoning.” They “want to know whether the church’s historic opposition to gay sex is just about cultural prejudice or it is rooted in the Bible’s basic view of human nature and redemption.”
- ▶ *imagine how hard it is to be gay and stay single and, thus, create paths to spiritual kinship and friendship.* Hill is consoled by a friend’s view: “We ask our homosexual brethren, and our divorced brethren without annulments...to live as celibates in a sexually-sodden culture where they may never find the alternative of deep, committed friendships. We ask them to risk loneliness we don’t risk.” Ministries that “refuse to look down on celibacy as ‘second best’” have helped him “imagine a single life overflowing with familial ties and hospitality and ‘thick’ kinship commitments.”
- ▶ *nurture the gifts of all believers and focus on gospel basics.* They view LGBT Christians not as “pitiable or ‘broken’ ... but as complex, in-the-process-of-being-redeemed persons – ‘glorious ruins’ (in Francis Schaeffer’s fine phrase) – whose experiences of temptation, repentance, grace, and growth” give them “unique perspectives” and “a certain sensitivity that can be drawn out for the good of the church.”

“The kind of ministry I most crave – because it most helps – is the regular, bog-standard ministry of Word and Sacrament,” Hill concludes. “Sitting under preaching that points me to Jesus and receiving Communion (which is ‘Jesus placing himself in our hands so we know exactly where to find him’) are the hallmarks of the ministry I need. Kneeling at the altar rail is where I receive the strength to keep going on this long journey.”

Study Questions

1. What does Wesley Hill mean by living “a long defeat” in community? Do you agree that God would require believers to experience life as “a long defeat” or “a long loneliness”?
2. Discuss Hill’s view that “Too often the possibility of chaste, committed friendship goes unexplored because of we are determined to get as far away as possible from singleness.”
3. How does your congregation support celibate, same-sex attracted believers? Do some features cited by Hill characterize your efforts? Which ones do you want to develop?
4. Consider how the arc of God’s love, flowing through human beings from their creation to final consummation, is depicted in Terry York’s hymn, “Intense the Love God Molded.”

Departing Hymn: “Intense the Love God Molded”

† Brother John of Taizé, *Friends in Christ: Paths to a New Understanding of the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 153-154.



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Focus Article:

📖 Chastity as a Virtue
(*Chastity*, pp. 32-37)

Suggested Article:

📖 Love in Control
(*Chastity*, pp. 68-69)

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Chastity as a Virtue

Chastity is not a teeth-gritting ability to avoid violating the sexual rules. Rather, chastity is a habit of reverence for oneself and others that enables us to use our sexual powers intelligently in the pursuit of human flourishing and happiness.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:18-25

Meditation†

Those who are chaste are fully at peace with their bodies and their sexuality. Chastity is not best seen as the ability to keep oneself from violating the sexual “rules”; rather, it is “a dynamic principle enabling one to use one’s sexual powers intelligently in the pursuit of human flourishing and happiness.”

If chastity is a virtue, it is an aspect of character that a person can aspire to, achieve, stray from, regain. Notice that when the virtue at the top of this spectrum is chastity, there are three different ways of being unchaste – continence, incontinence and the vice of lustfulness.

Caroline J. Simon

Reflection

“The virtue of chastity calls us, as sexual beings, to revere ourselves as creatures made in the image of God and made to honor God through our actions – through how we do have sex and do not have sex,” Matt Fradd writes. “And it calls us to revere other persons for the sake of the other person’s good and ultimate happiness. When we think about it, this loving reverence for ourselves and others is what we deeply desire.”

However, these truths about the virtue of chastity are easily forgotten today. There are some reasons for our amnesia.

- ▶ *We are unfamiliar with the language of “virtue.”* Caroline Simon notes above that chastity (like other virtues that temper human desire for pleasure) is actually an ideal trait, a settled and comfortable “peace” with our well-ordered desires and pleasures – in this case, our desires for and pleasures regarding sex. Chastity is neither mere continence (a difficult, but successful struggle against disordered desires) nor incontinence (a losing struggle); chastity is not a struggle at all. Of course, many of us continue to struggle with wayward sexual desires. But this suggests that we are not yet chaste and not yet at peace with proper sexual desire, as we want to be.
- ▶ *We experience some resentment toward morality generally and toward specific ideals like chastity.* The emotion-stance of *resentment* “involves disparaging and rejecting what is good and strong because we feel unable to attain it,” Fradd explains.

We long to be at peace with sexual desire in relationships that “accord with our human dignity and...weave into the happiness that God intends for us in this life.” But this ideal seems unattainable. “All around us we see marriages that are impermanent, personal loyalties that are problematically divided, and spouses and friends who are unfaithful. Sexuality is misused, within marriages and in singleness, in ways that are selfish, in ways that are abusive, and in ways that do not honor God,” he notes. “So, we end up despising the ideal. We call chastity ‘oppressive’; we call it ‘naïve.’”



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Lacking the strength in ourselves and having little community support to obtain the ideal we desire, we end up resenting it.”

▶ *We mistakenly think chastity revolves around not having sex.* Yes, during singleness and at times in marriage it is appropriate to not have sex. But abstinence is not the heart of this virtue. “Simply put, chastity is a sort of reverence: a chaste person reveres and respects the other person by making sure that before they have sex, both are united in a common aim—namely, a marriage commitment whose mutual goal is the gift of self to the other,” Fradd writes. “When people will the good for one another in this way, they do not act solely on passing desires and feelings, but rather on their commitment to help the other person attain the good and honor God.”

▶ *We mistakenly think chastity revolves around repressing sexual desire and not thinking about sex.* This is “almost exactly backwards,” Fradd notes. Chastity has no interest in eliminating true sexual desire, which says, “This is my body given for you,” but it would like to rid our lives of the lust that says, “This is your body taken for me.”

Furthermore, chastity has no interest in stopping our thinking about sex, but it would like for us to think carefully and well about sex. Fradd says, “The place to start is with the telos for which God created us, and why God made the other creatures and us sexual beings: ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ (Genesis 1:22, 28). This tells us that sex, sexual desire, and orgasms are good. Chastity wants us to think about what good it is that they were created for. How do they fit within God’s plan for us to love one another and honor God?”

Study Questions

1. What is the virtue of chastity? Discuss how we aspire to, achieve, stray from, and regain it.
2. By what process, according to Matt Fradd, do people come to feel *ressentiment* against morality in general and the ideals of chastity in particular? Consider how this might be averted.
3. What are the common misconceptions about chastity today?
4. Given the differences among chastity, continence, and incontinence regarding sexual desire and pleasure, how do you interpret the meaning of Botticelli’s *Pallas and the Centaur*?

Departing Hymn: “Teach Us to Love the True”

Teach us to love the true,
the beautiful and pure,
and let us not for one short hour
an evil thought endure.
And give us grace to stand
decided, brave, and strong,
the lovers of all holy things,
the foes of all things wrong.

Walter J. Mathams (1913)
Suggested tune: DIADEMATA

† Caroline J. Simon, *Bringing Sex into Focus: The Quest for Sexual Integrity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 75-76.



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Focus Article:

📖 A Good Samaritan Response to Hookup Culture
(*Chastity*, pp. 38-45)

Suggested Article:

📖 Sexuality and Spirituality in American Adolescents
(*Chastity*, pp. 84-88)

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A Good Samaritan Response to Hookup Culture

What college students living within hookup culture need most is a listening and sympathetic ear. They need someone who sees them for who and where they really are, and who sympathizes with their uncertainties, their confusion, and, sometimes, their regret and loss.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37

Meditation†

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: "What are you going through?" It is a recognition that the sufferer exists.... For this reason it is enough, but it is indispensable, to know how to look at him in a certain way.

This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.

Only he who is capable of attention can do this.

Simone Weil (1909-1943)

Reflection

The hookup culture that pervades Catholic, mainline Protestant, private-secular, and public universities in America is "a true culture of casual sex, in that it sells its citizens the notion that the 'normal' attitude to have about sex is an ambivalent one — ambivalence about both one's partner and sexual intimacy," Donna Freitas explains. But rather than making them "happy or fulfilled," she notes, for many students "this learned ambivalence [is] a kind of suffering in and of itself."

College students generally define hookups with three criteria.

- ▶ *Hookups involve some sexual intimacy*, ranging from a kiss to "having sex," however the students define that term. Using this wide range of intimacy is intentional, because it allows students to report more encounters as a hookup. (There is great social pressure to be hooking up.) It also protects reputations: "By leaving the content of a hookup vague, women can protect their reputations by implying they did 'less' even if they did 'more,' and men can imply the exact opposite."
- ▶ *Hookups are brief*—"as short as five minutes of kissing or as long as an entire night of 'sex.'" Theoretically, they happen just once, but "plenty of supposed one-time hookups...turn into 'serial hookups' or friends with benefits."
- ▶ *The participants are not supposed to get attached*, but should remain ambivalent about the experience and their partner. Freitas calls this the "social contract" of the hookup. While it "truly defines the hookup, it is also the part that most students — both men and women — struggle with and typically fail at upholding," she notes. Students "find themselves caring about each other and wanting something more, even though in theory they promised not to do this very thing."

A fourth "unofficial" criterion is alcohol, which students use to dull their emotions and minimize their responsibility for the hookup. In



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theory, hooking up should be “a fun, one-time, unfettered, and exciting experience of sexual intimacy,” but within a hookup *culture* it actually involves fulfilling others’ expectations more than satisfying one’s sexual desire. “Hookups are just what people do in college, so you do them, too. Sexual intimacy is turned into something you shrug at, and you must prove you can do that shrugging along with everyone else around you.”

How should Christians respond to hookup culture? How can we best help college students who feel trapped within it? Freitas warns, “Offering preachments on chastity, warnings against premarital sex, and talk of sexual sin—however nicely these are put—is akin to talking loudly over the pleas of those young people who come to us for help, and offering advice to them as though we cannot even see their lives.” She urges us, instead, to see students with (what Simone Weil calls) the “creative attention” that the Good Samaritan models in Jesus’ parable.

“Few Christians are paying such creative, restorative attention to young adults struggling within hookup culture,” Freitas fears. Yet, “only through such self-emptying attention which allows us to truly see these young adults for who and what they are, can their deep spiritual needs be met.”

Study Questions

1. What are the defining features of hookup *culture* on most American college and university campuses? How does it deflect students from chastity?
2. Freitas reports that hookup culture does not exist on a subset of Christian college campuses. Why is this?
3. How and to what extent, according to Donna Freitas, are college students being victimized by hookup culture?
4. What does Simone Weil mean by “creative attention”? How is it exhibited by the Good Samaritan? Consider why Freitas commends it as a Christian stance toward students caught up within hookup culture.

Departing Hymn: “Help Us to Help Each Other, Lord”

Help us to help each other, Lord,
each other’s cross to bear;
let each some friendly aid afford,
and feel another’s care.

Help us to build each other up,
your Spirit in us move;
increase our faith, confirm our hope,
and fill us with your love.

Up into you, the living head,
let us in all things grow,
till you have made us free indeed
and spotless here below.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788), adapted from “Try Us, O God, and Search the Ground”

Suggested Tunes: DUNFERMLINE or ST. PETER (Reinagle)

† Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001 [1951]), 64-65.



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Focus Articles:

- 📖 Beyond the “Ring by Spring” Culture
(*Chastity*, pp. 46-54)

- 📖 Relationships with “More than Friends”
(*Chastity*, pp. 75-83)

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Beyond the “Ring by Spring” Culture

The “ring by spring” culture at Christian colleges and universities can pressure students to become engaged or to marry before they graduate. This may muddle their perceptions of marriage and vocation, and deflect them from receiving more formative preparation for marriage.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Song of Solomon 7:10-13 and Psalm 63:1-8

Meditation†

Our sexual lives are ways of life we live into because our hearts and minds have been captivated by a picture of the so-called good life.

...We are creatures of habits, and such habits are formed in us by the rhythms and rituals we are immersed in, even (indeed, even more so) if we don’t realize it. Our loves and longings and desires – including our sexual longings – are not just biological instincts; they are learned. But the pedagogies of desire that train us rarely look like lectures or sermons. We learn to love on the register of the imagination.

James K. A. Smith

Reflection

So, exactly *why* do we date? Students at Calvin College are usually surprised (and some giggle) when their College Chaplain Mary Hulst answers: we date in order to “draw closer to Jesus and become better for the kingdom of God.”

She means that we should seek for friends and (when led by God) “more than friends” those individuals who imitate Christ in being generous and loving persons of integrity. Relationships with them inevitably will make us better for the kingdom of God immediately around us – that is, among the people we meet, our family members, and other friends. If all goes well, these folks will say: “You are so much better since you started dating that person. It is *awesome*. We want you with that person *forever*.”

One important – and, perhaps, unexpected – implication of adopting this perspective on dating, Hulst notes, is that we will begin to appreciate singleness as a beautiful and important state of being. It is an opportunity “to learn how to attend to God, how to talk to and listen to our Lord. In the process, we can find God really interesting and find ourselves really interesting.” Indeed, she worries her students may become so focused on dating and trying to be liked by others that “they will not learn what they really love...about God [and] what God is inviting them to do with their lives.”

Certainly, Hulst would agree with Stacy George’s concerns about the ring by spring culture that is pushing traditional (18- to 22-year-old) students on Christian campuses – and particularly women – to marry or become engaged before graduation. George warns, “Instead of encouraging men and women of faith to live out their individual vocations which may or may not include marriage, ring by spring culture pressures students to fulfill this sacrament as a cultural requisite for Christian college success.” In George’s research,



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students report that the pressure to marry young comes mainly from society (34%) and peers (33%), but also from their families (26%) and churches (24%). And these expectations add up: “the more involved students are in a church community, the more pressure they feel to be engaged or married before they graduate from college.” She further discovered that among the engaged couples, “Only 43% were enrolled in pre-marital counseling and only 20% had purchased marital preparation books or materials.”

Why is this? “Christian communities may be falling short in properly preparing young adults for intimate relationships,” George suggests. “Christian young people may think the only way to overcome temptation is to marry.” But overcoming sexual temptation is a shaky foundation for lifelong commitment to marriage. That is one reason she warns that “The ring by spring culture, with its attendant pressure to marry young with little to no marital preparation, may be an unhealthy practice on Christian campuses.”

Those who marry young often fail to consider that they may change greatly after their college years. Also, early marriage may distract them from pursuing their callings. They may find it difficult “to pursue post-graduate education, establish themselves in their careers, and become financially stable.”

Finally, “the pressure to marry early often leads to the vocation of singleness being undervalued in Christian communities,” George observes. “Singleness then becomes invisible, as though it is not an option for adult Christians. This only increases the pressure to find a partner as way to be seen as ‘successful’....”

George, like Hulst, believes that Christian colleges “have a responsibility to guide students to pursue healthy relationships. This does not imply thwarting all engagements on campus or stifling students’ personal goals of finding a spouse. Rather, faculty and staff should use their disciplinary knowledge, theological convictions, professional training, and personal relationships to better educate students on the implications of their marital engagement for life ‘beyond the ring.’”

Study Questions

1. What are the defining features of ring by spring *culture* on Christian college and university campuses? How can it deflect students from chastity?
2. List the pros and cons of becoming engaged or marrying before college graduation. Do you think the ring by spring culture serves college students or the kingdom of God well?
3. How can your congregation best support students who feel pressured to marry within the ring by spring culture?
4. Do you agree with Stacy George that Christian communities tend to undervalue singleness? Why does this occur?
5. Mary Hulst notes that “we all have a list” of attributes for an ideal friend or spouse. Discuss the list she commends from Psalm 15. How does it fit with the idea that we date to “grow closer to Jesus and become better for the kingdom of God?”

Departing Hymn: “Intense the Love God Molded”

† James K. A. Smith, “Foreward,” in Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015), 10.

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Human Sexuality and Radical Faithfulness

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand that how we have sex and don't have sex is a way of publicly declaring and displaying God's faithfulness.
2. To value both celibate singleness and committed marriage as equal expressions of radical faithfulness.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Chastity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with some Stories

Beth Felker Jones highlights the countercultural nature of Christian ideas about sex with stories from the early centuries of the Church. For instance, Eusebius tells how the slave Potamiaena resisted the sexual advances of her owner:

Endless the struggle that in defense of her chastity and virginity, which were beyond reproach, she maintained against lovers, for her beauty — of body as of mind — was in full flower. Endless her sufferings, till after tortures too horrible to describe...she faced her end with noble courage — slowly, drop by drop, boiling pitch was poured over different parts of her body, from her toes to the crown of her head. Such was the battle won by this splendid girl.¹

"Agatha's story is similar," Jones writes. "She wanted to devote her whole life to God, and so she refused a senator's many offers of marriage. He had her tortured — including, at least according to legend, having her breasts cut off... Lucy was the daughter of a wealthy family, and she too made a vow of perpetual virginity, a vow that would free her from marriage and allow her to give her fortune to the poor. The man she was betrothed to denounced her as a Christian, and she was sentenced to forced prostitution. When God protected her from this fate, she was burned and then died in prison of terrible wounds."

Jones admits the details of such stories may be questioned, but they represent "a real historical phenomenon: Christians devoting their virginity to the Lord, even to the point of death."

"Is it possible for us to imagine why any woman would make the choices Lucy, Agatha, or Potamiaena made?" Jones asks (*Chastity*, p. 11). Jones's charitable interpretation of these virgin martyrs' lives guides us to fresh insights about Christian ideas about sex.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking the Holy Spirit to guide and enable you to express God's radical faithfulness through how you have sex and don't have sex.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Hosea 2:16-20 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Admittedly, traditional Christian ideas about sex are out of touch with views in the wider culture. This makes those ideas more difficult to understand and appreciate, even for Christians. Beth Felker Jones suggests those Christian views seem strange because they take how we have sex and do not have sex to be not primarily about us – our pleasures and needs – but about the nature of God and God’s intentions in creation.

If members would like to explore Jones’s take on traditional Christian sexual ethics further, encourage them to study together her short book *Faithful: A Theology of Sex* (Zondervan, 2015).

Study Questions

1. Beth Felker Jones says “in our efforts to keep young people from making mistakes, we have done a great deal of damage” by reducing sexual ethics to “a list of rules, a set of dos and don’ts” without a theological context. We have put the focus on ourselves – our needs and pleasures – rather on “who God is and... God’s good intentions for creation.” If we are to understand why Christians have valued celibate singleness and committed marriage, and how through their bodies all persons are free to honor God, then we must shift our focus back to how, in having sex or not having sex, we can publicly express God’s faithfulness.
2. Singleness and virginity were countercultural in the Roman world. Jones explains, “Roman women were not free to not marry” because their bodies were controlled by men, or needed to preserve the state. “Christian women could choose – even insist on – celibacy.” Later, Protestants emphasized committed marriage to show “married people – people who have sex – could be Christian teachers and leaders.” In each case, Christians were responding to distortions in their culture and showing that men and women are free to testify, by how they have sex or do not have sex in line with scriptural teaching, to God’s faithfulness.
3. Celibate singleness is still a public witness that we do not “need to have sex to be happy, to be fulfilled, and to live a full and flourishing human life,” Jones writes. Sex is not god, and it is the true God who will care for us. She endorses Todd Billings’s view that “Precisely because they are sexual beings, Christian virgins demonstrate that even unfulfilled sexual desires point to another ultimate desire: the desire for God.”

Through exclusive, committed marriage a husband and wife publicly testify how God, despite being different from us, remains faithful to the people God loves.

4. Jones believes that we overemphasize marriage today. She writes, “There is no doubt that our contemporary church does a bad job of valuing and supporting the single life. Single adults are subject to suspicion or are constantly asked about when they will marry or are segregated from the rest of the body of Christ in singles groups meant to get them unsingle. Maybe we have bought into the distorted cultural belief that there is something wrong with people who are not having sex. We are in desperate need of reclaiming a positive vision of singleness.” Discuss how your congregation teaches the goods of singleness, encourages single members and develops their gifts, and involves single members in ministry.
5. Raphael’s *Marriage of the Virgin* depicts a legend about Mary that was popular in the middle ages, when the Church continued to emphasize singleness and virginity for preachers and teachers. By the third century, some theologians were teaching that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life – as a sign of ultimate devotion to God. This legend does not counter that view, but it emphasizes God’s care for Mary by providing Joseph to be her husband.

Rembrandt’s painting popularly known as *The Jewish Bride* reflects a Protestant emphasis on exclusive, committed marriage. The artist links the married couple’s intimacy and tenderness to the biblical story of Isaac and Rebekah.

Both images, in different ways, value the goods of marriage. We will have to look elsewhere to see the value of celibate singleness and its public testimony to God’s faithfulness.

Departing Hymn

“Intense the Love God Molded” is on pp. 55-57 of *Chastity*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Living “The Long Defeat” Together

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To appreciate how the life of discipleship for all Christians might be characterized as “a long defeat” lived in good company.
2. To consider how congregations and ministries can be the good company that celibate LGBT believers need for their pilgrimage.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Chastity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with Stories

Wesley Hill writes, “I have come to think about my life as a gay, celibate believer in terms of what J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) calls ‘the long defeat.’ His regal character Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings*, surveying the long years of her immortality and all the seasons of mingled loss and triumph she has witnessed, says, ‘... through the ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.’ And Tolkien himself identifies with her: ‘I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect “history” to be anything but a “long defeat” – though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpses of final victory.’”

Hill notes that, “Much of what Dorothy Day (1897-1980) says in *The Long Loneliness*, a memoir of her conversion and activism for social justice through the Catholic Worker movement she founded with Peter Maurin, dovetails with what Tolkien calls ‘the long defeat.’” When Day entered the Church, she had to relinquish her common law marriage to a man named Forster who wanted nothing to do with her newfound faith. Hill is especially drawn to Day’s story because she “improves on Tolkien’s vision of the ‘long defeat’ when she stresses that surrendering to God in this way – by giving up hope of ‘natural’ fulfillment – paradoxically does not lead to a life without human love: ‘We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community’” (*Chastity*, pp. 20-23).

In this study we follow Hill’s exploration of how Christian congregations can become the loving communities that will support LGBT believers in their Christian pilgrimage.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking the Holy Spirit’s guidance to be a loving community that supports all believers in their Christian pilgrimage.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 8:18-25 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Features of contemporary Western culture are making a life of chastity seem especially onerous for single adult believers, particularly for those with same-sex attraction. In this study Wesley Hill's testimony to the difficulties of living a celibate, gay Christian life becomes a springboard to considering how congregations and ministries can best welcome and support celibate singles generally and LGBT believers in particular.

If members would like to explore Wesley Hill's perspective on traditional Christian sexual ethics further, encourage them to study together one of his short books *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*, enlarged edition (Zondervan, 2016), or *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Brazos Press, 2015). The latter book is one of three recent works that Julie Morris commends in *Christian Sexual Ethics in an Age of Individualism* for their examination of the role faith communities play in supporting both married couples and celibates in faithful sexual behavior.

Study Questions

1. Living "a long defeat," a phrase Wesley Hill borrows from J. R. R. Tolkien, describes living in expectation of God's victory, but being prepared to endure much difficulty along the way with only "some samples or glimpses of final victory." Alan Jacobs calls this perspective "the ideal one for anyone who has exceptionally difficult, frustrating, even agonizing, but nevertheless vitally important work to do." Hill uses it to characterize the spiritually difficult, costly obedience of celibacy that God calls him to give as a gay believer. The burden of this "long defeat" is meant to be shared by all believers in faithful community.

"I suspect that many of our debates about 'mandatory gay celibacy' in the church today involve, at the end of the day, differing understandings of the character of God. Would God in Christ ask his children to embrace a lifelong loneliness, a long defeat?" Hill writes. "Can some of our disagreement about whether gay sex is morally appropriate for Christians be traced back to differing beliefs about whether God might ask us to do what feels well-nigh impossible: to give up the one thing that our 'natural' selves most want?"

2. The avoidance of celibate singleness crosses political lines. Hill notes, "Many people on the left side of the spectrum want same-sex marriage rather than celibacy, while those on the right favor ex-gay approaches that hold out the promise of opposite-sex coupling rather than celibacy." Consider why we seem unable to imagine, or unwilling to support, "a single life overflowing with familial ties and hospitality and 'thick' kinship commitments."
3. Create small groups to discuss some clusters of the features cited by Hill. Identify the features that characterize your efforts and those that need to be developed. If there is a feature that do not seem important to members, discuss why Hill values it so much.
4. The Holy Spirit pours God's love into our hearts (Romans 5:5; cf. 15:30). In the first stanza of Terry York's hymn, "Intense the Love God Molded," this divine infusion of love begins when God's breath/spirit that enlivens "the dust of the ground" (Hebrew: "adamah") to form the first human (Hebrew: "adam") (Genesis 2:7). From this beginning, humanity's love is oriented toward God: "The Holy Spirit is that Breath / and guides the love to God."

In the second stanza, this human love, expressed variously through "marriage, friendship, [and] deepest prayer," is described as a form of praise and worship offered to God.

The final stanza reminds us that in Christ we can see the model of this love which flows from and returns to God: it is "chaste and freely shared," "shaped by sacrifice," and characterized by "compassion" until death. The final couplet beautifully depicts the *telos* or consummating goal of this divine process: "Then shall we in new bodies rise / to breathe not air, but Love."

Departing Hymn

"Intense the Love God Molded" is on pp. 55-57 of *Chastity*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

The Virtue of Chastity

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To define the virtue of chastity and distinguish it from continence regarding sexual desire and pleasure.
2. To consider how we can develop *ressentiment* toward morality in general and the ideals of chastity in particular.
3. To examine some common misperceptions of the virtue of chastity today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Chastity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Teach Us to Love the True,” locate the tune DIADEMATA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with a Story

What comes to mind when you hear the word “chastity”? It reminds Matt Fradd of a romantic evening when he danced with his wife in the streets of San Diego’s Little Italy, oblivious to all the passersby, while he played Dean Martin’s “Sway” on his iPhone. “It was silly and inelegant, but we made each other sway as our friend Dean Martin crooned through the cell phone speakers. And we came home from the date ready to make love.

“Now, my wife and I use natural family planning.... There we were ready to make love, and my wife said, ‘Honey, I’m fertile.’ We had a decision to make – together. So, we discussed our situation, saying things like: ‘Are we ready for another child?’ ‘I know we are hard on money right now. Is this the right decision?’ ‘The kids right now are a handful. I’m worried I can’t handle more at this moment.’ Our common bond of married love guided the discussion of the action we should take together. That particular night we decided not to have sex. We watched our favorite show *The Office* instead. Not as much fun, but still fun....

“The decision to not have sex was not the essential feature of chastity that evening,” Fradd notes. “My wife and I could have said, “OK, let’s go ahead with our sexual desires and be open to another child,” and that equally would have been an expression of chastity. Chastity came to the fore in our reverence for one another, in our stopping to acknowledge and examine our sexual desires, and in orienting our lives toward the good, as we saw it together” (*Chastity*, p. 35).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide your understanding of and appreciation for human sexuality.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 24:13-35 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

At the heart of Christian sexual ethics is not a dour set of rules, but a fetching trait: the virtue of chastity. This study defines chastity and distinguishes it from other, less winsome traits in the neighborhood, such as continence regarding sexual desire and pleasure. It also explores some reasons why many people find it difficult to appreciate the virtue of chastity today.

Study Questions

1. As a virtue, chastity is a character trait rather than a particular action or type of action. It is a species of temperance – the virtue that tempers human desires for pleasures – in regard to sexual desire and pleasure. Matt Fradd describes chastity as “a habit of reverence for oneself and others that enables us to use our sexual powers intelligently in the pursuit of human flourishing and happiness.” Other descriptions include “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*), and “Those who are chaste are fully at peace with their bodies and their sexuality” (Caroline Simon).

I think of chastity as the condition of peace when we know what is good and proper in regard to sexual desire and pleasure and this coincides exactly with what we physically desire and enjoy. Chastity is in contrast to sexual continence or self-control, where we know what is good but don't physically desire or enjoy it, though we are successful in controlling our behavior. The continent person struggles against wayward desires, and wins. The incontinent person struggles against wayward desires, but loses the battle. Chastity is pretty rare. Most of us struggle, more or less successfully, with wayward desires for sexual pleasure.

2. Matt Fradd, through the example of a young cola-fanatic, describes one way we can develop *ressentiment*. When other people tell us how we should think or act or feel, but they do not or cannot explain why we should live that way (or we are too immature to pay attention to their reasons), we might conclude they are just trying to control us. He suggests many people respond this way to moral guidance. A tendency toward individualism and relativism makes us ripe for believing our own way is as good as any other and no one has moral expertise to share. It is easy to distrust others and suspect their motives in giving advice.

Ressentiment is best averted by people giving good reasons for their advice within a context of trust. How well does your congregation help its members develop mutual trust and the requisite skills in scriptural reasoning and discernment on sexual ethics?

3. Form three small groups to review how Fradd responds to these three misconceptions about chastity: that it is a purely negative stance of refraining from sex (that is, abstinence), it revolves around repression of sexual desire, and it involves not thinking about sex.

To the idea that chastity is purely negative, he admits that chastity calls for abstinence during singleness and sometimes in marriage. However, it is not just abstinence because people can refrain from sex for the wrong reasons, and because chastity involves a positive attitude of reverence toward the beloved.

He admits that chastity involves repression (or rejection) of lust, but that is not the same as sexual desire. And he admits that chastity avoids constant obsession with sex and “slavering” over it, but obsessive slaving is not the same as thinking. Chastity promotes proper sexual desire and careful thinking about it.

4. Heidi Hornik says the archer centaur represents “wild, sensual instincts and passions” and the female figure represents reason, or knowledge of the good regarding sexual desire and pleasure. That the two figures are battling and the woman is subduing the centaur suggests this is a depiction of sexual continence rather than the virtue of chastity. However, the battle for control is ultimately in the service of virtue; Hornik explains, it is “an allegory of reason ruling over instinct in order to nurture virtue and control vice.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

A Good Samaritan Response to Hookup Culture

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the nature of hookup culture on America college campuses.
2. To explore Simone Weil’s idea of “creative attention.”
3. To frame a Good Samaritan response to students who seek alternatives to hookup culture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Chastity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn, “Help Us to Help Each Other, Lord,” locate one of the familiar tunes DUNFERMLINE or ST. PETER (Reinagle) in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with an Observation

“Amid the seemingly endless partying on America’s college campuses lies a thick layer of melancholy, insecurity, and isolation that no one can seem to shake,” Donna Freitas reports.

“College students learn from the media, their friends, and even their parents that it’s not sensible to have long-term relationships in college. College is a special time in life – they will never get the chance to learn so much, meet so many people, or have as much fun again. Relationships restrict freedom – they require more care, upkeep, and time than anyone can afford to give during this exciting period between adolescence and adulthood. They add pressure to the already heavily pressured, overscheduled lives of today’s students, who, according to this ethos, should be focusing on their classes, their job prospects, and the opportunity to party as wildly as they can manage. Hookups allow students to get sex onto the college CV without adding any additional burdens, ensuring that they don’t miss out on the all-American, crazy college experience they feel they must have. They can always settle down later.

“Students play their parts – the sex-crazed frat boy, the promiscuous, lusty coed – and they play them well. But all too often they enact these highly gendered roles for one another because they have been taught to believe that hookup culture is normal, that everyone is enjoying it, and that there is something wrong with them if they don’t enjoy it, too. What could be better than sex without strings? Yet, in fact, many of them – both men and women – are not enjoying it at all.” (*The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused about Intimacy* [New York: Basic Books, 2013], 1-2.)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to bless college students and guide their discernment regarding faith and sexuality.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 10:25-37 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Beneath its glamorous appearance in popular culture, the real hookup culture on college campuses is rather mundane and spiritually deadening. It leads students to disconnect their religious faith from their sexuality and to stifle their hopes and dreams for faithful love. This study examines how we can walk beside and best care for the students living within hookup culture.

To better understand and guide how young people relate faith to sexuality, members may read the books Lauren Taylor commends in *Sexuality and Spirituality in American Adolescents*.

Study Questions

1. Donna Freitas lists three defining features of a hookup: participants have sexual intimacy that is brief and (ideally) should not involve or generate personal attachments. Often alcohol is used to dull emotions and avoid full responsibility. "We should distinguish individual hookups from a *culture* of hooking up," she notes. "The latter is a culture where sexual intimacy is obliged, casual, and ambivalent, where sex and one's partners become a shrug...."

Hookup culture undermines the virtue of chastity in several ways. First, it discourages thinking and caring about one's sexuality and planning the role that sex should play in one's relationships and life plans; rather, it presses citizens to cede control of their sexuality to the community's expectations. Furthermore, both celibate singleness and committed marriage become culturally impossible; neither is a way for its citizens to fit in and be "normal."

2. When Christian schools "ban alcohol on campus...this changes everything," Freitas notes. "Alcohol is the fuel of hookup culture, and without it, hookup culture has a difficult time getting off the ground." These schools may have a student-supported purity culture in which "students feel pressure from each other to abstain from sex (to remain chaste according to the standards of Christianity) and to abstain from most forms of sexual intimacy (sometimes this even includes kissing) outside of a committed long term relationship that will lead to marriage." There may be a "ring by spring" culture as well, which is the topic of the next study guide in this series.
3. Students face peer pressure to remain casual and ambivalent toward their sexual activity and their partners. Freitas writes, "Plenty of students, both men and women, loathe hookup culture or, at the very least, live within it reluctantly. They participate because they feel it is the only option they have, at least if they want to maintain any semblance of a normal social life during college. They would like other options; they would like ideas on how not to sacrifice their own needs and desires in the face of peer pressure. They would like a place and some time to puzzle through how they really feel about sex and their sexuality."

Furthermore, in the quotation above (from *The End of Sex*), she explains how this on-campus pressure is layered upon prior expectations students form through "the media, their friends, and even their parents that it's not sensible to have long-term relationships in college." They are shoved toward the roles of "sex-crazed frat boy" and "promiscuous, lusty coed." Of course, feeling pressure and succumbing to it (and even embracing it) are different things. But Freitas raises an important question about how to distribute the moral responsibility for the hookup culture and an individual student's participation in it. The suffering is real, regardless of the extent to which is it self-imposed. Freitas is especially concerned for students who have seen through its limitations on them, but cannot escape it.

4. In giving attention to another person, Simone Weil writes, "The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth." Attention is "creative" when it allows us to see "what does not exist [for us]." Freitas explains, "This is because it is so difficult for us to see suffering.... In fact, we do not like to see those who suffer, so we refuse to see them and, likewise, the suffering itself. In this sense, they do not exist for us." The Samaritan set aside his political and religious agendas to stop, see, and address the suffering of the traveler who was beaten by robbers. Freitas is concerned that we will be so quick to judge and correct students caught up in hookup culture that we will not stop to understand, empathize with, and address their suffering.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Beyond the “Ring by Spring” Culture

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the ring by spring culture on Christian college and university campuses.
2. To explore Christian reasons why persons might date and marry.
3. To consider how congregations can provide traditional (18- to 22-year-old) Christian students an alternative to ring by spring culture.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Chastity (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

“My exposure to Christian higher education began my freshman year as an undergraduate at a small, Christian liberal arts university in the northwestern United States,” Stacy George recalls. “I was...overwhelmed by the enormous pressure I felt to fit in the day I arrived on campus. Hearing the chattering of other young women on my floor about who they pegged as their future husband at the nearby all-male dorm, I was immediately aware that my success in college would be measured not only by achieving a college degree, but also by whether I had an engagement ring on my finger by the time I graduated.

“Though I failed to get my ring by spring, I succeeded academically and eventually returned to Christian higher education a decade later as a professor. In the first weeks of teaching, I was stunned to hear that the ring by spring culture still pervaded student life. Within the first two weeks of the fall semester I had three students, all single women, approach me with concerns about leaving college before finding a husband. They were already dreading graduation, rather than anticipating what lies ahead for them in the future. They were focusing only on their ‘failure’ at not being engaged at twenty-two, all the while overlooking their incredible academic accomplishments” (*Chastity*, pp. 46-47).

In this study, we survey George’s research into the pressures and pitfalls of the “ring by spring” culture and explore how congregations can support the students exposed to it at Christian colleges and universities.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to bless college students and guide their discernment regarding faith and sexuality.

Scripture Readings

Ask two group members to read Song of Solomon 7:10-13 and Psalm 63:1-8 from a modern translation. Preface the first reading “In Praise of Marital Desire” and the second reading “In Praise of Desire for God.”

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study pairs two articles—Stacy George’s empirical study of the ring by spring culture on Christian college campuses and Mary Hulst’s winsome Christian speech to traditional (18- to 22-year-old) college students on sex, dating, and marriage during their college years. These authors overlap in their concerns about inattention to vocation, inadequate preparation for Christian marriage, and the devaluation of singleness in congregational life. You might make one of these themes the focus of your discussion.

Study Questions

1. “The tagline ‘ring by spring’ signifies the tongue-in-cheek ambition of many traditional (eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old) Christian college and university students to be engaged by spring semester of their senior year,” writes Stacy George. “It dispenses a social psychological burden that follows students, particularly young women, throughout their undergraduate experience.” George is concerned that it pushes students to marry early with limited discernment of their vocations and inadequate preparation for life-time commitment.

Ring by spring culture can undermine the virtue of chastity in several ways. It may discourage thinking through the role that sex and marriage should play in one’s vocation; rather, it may press students to cede control of these to the (perceived) expectations of their peers. Furthermore, celibate singleness is devalued and committed marriage may be threatened by wrong-headed purposes and inadequate marital preparation.

2. Form two groups to brainstorm the pros and cons of engagement or marriage during traditional college years. The “cons” group will have an easier task since George focuses on the dangers; but members might add that the marriage decisions are more likely to occur away from family and church advisors, be motivated by desires to conform and appear successful among peers, be limited by the available partners at the school, etc. The “pros” group may note that colleges may offer a concentration of available Christian partners, faithful guidance by caring staff and faculty members, and opportunities for safe and meaningful dating.

Recall that George does not recommend “thwarting all engagements on campus or stifling students’ personal goals of finding a spouse.” She wants Christian schools to foster healthy relationships that support the students’ vocations and serve the kingdom of God.

3. Consider the ‘location’ of your congregation. Does it host many undergraduate or graduate students who are attending school away from home, or serve longtime members who stay in touch as they attend nearby schools, or keep up with longtime members who have moved away for their education? The answer may suggest what form of programming is appropriate—a Bible study, special group gatherings over school holidays, one-on-one mentoring, an electronic chat, keeping up through email, providing written materials, helping members find support at their schools, and so on. The goals should include “creating space for...rich theological reflection about sexuality and marriage, exposing young people to nonmarried Christian lifestyles, and providing professional pre-marital programs,” George writes.
4. Despite Paul’s teaching “singleness is a *gift* that many are called to live out, and faithfully embracing it is righteous in the eyes of God,” George notes, “rarely is singleness celebrated or encouraged in this way in Christian circles. Too often, being single is seen as deviant or abnormal. Healthy family-based gatherings and couples’ retreats are pervasive in Christian communities, but many single-focused groups are perceived as glorified ‘meet-markets,’ places for nonmarried individuals to mingle with potential marriage partners. Singlehood then becomes invisible, as though it is not an option for adult Christians. This only increases the pressure to find a partner as a way to be seen as ‘successful’ in those communities.”
5. Psalm 15 describes persons of righteous character, who “may abide in [the LORD’s] tent (15:1). Mary Hulst interprets the psalmist’s checklist this way: such persons “love holiness, are open to the Holy Spirit correcting them, and want to move from death to life” (15:2); “speak kindly about their past relationships, even about the people who have hurt them (15:3); are liked and trusted by others, for “they have a clear idea of what is wrong, and keep working to move from wrong to right” and “they keep their promises, even when it costs them” (15:4); and “they are wise with money and ‘stuff,’ and generous with others” (15:5). Consider what members would add to this checklist for a friend or spouse.

Departing Hymn

“Intense the Love God Molded” is on pp. 55-57 of *Chastity*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.