



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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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.

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.