

Chastity - the Teaching of The Bible



"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (Gen 2.24)

These words about marriage from The Bible's account of creation were quoted and affirmed by The Lord Jesus Christ when he was asked a question about divorce.

He gave them added weight when He declared that they were not just the words of the writer of Genesis, but the words of God:

"Haven't you read," Jesus replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female', and said 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one." (Matt. 19.4-6a)

Clearly, coming as this teaching does in the creation account, it applies to all mankind, not just to Jewish people and Christians.

The words "be united to" ("cleave" in older English versions) translate a Hebrew word meaning literally to be stuck together, or, in modern parlance, to be glued together. Hence Jesus' exposition of it: "So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." (Matt 19.6)

Marriage, Then Sex

God's order of verbs in Genesis 2 is clear: firstly leaving, secondly being united, thirdly becoming one flesh.

Now while becoming one flesh has deeper meaning than the physical act of sex, sex expresses it and fulfils it. Sex should follow after marriage: after the leaving of the father and mother and being united into a lifelong relationship.

The rest of Scripture enlarges on this. We will look at relevant passages from the rest of the Old Testament and then at those in the New Testament.

Old Testament

Deuteronomy 22 Verses 18-21 contain laws as to what shall happen if a man takes a wife and then accuses her of not being a virgin. If the accusation is false "the

elders shall take the man and punish him. They shall fine him 100 shekels of silver and give them to the girl's father, because this man has given an Israelite virgin a bad name. She shall continue to be his wife, he must not divorce her as long as he lives." They have married. She was pure. The marriage shall be lifelong.

"If, however, the charge is true and no proof of the girl's virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you".

Whatever we may think about the unequal treatment of the sexes in those days, (though there are laws to protect virgins later in the chapter) any act of sex before marriage is called "evil" and is described as promiscuity. Indeed it is just as promiscuous in a man as in a woman. In the light of the New Testament such sin is forgivable but it is still sin.

Application of this passage to cohabitation cannot be avoided by saying that a cohabiting couple have set up together in their own house, both because it is likely that they had already begun to have sex while she was "still in her father's house" and because acceptance of cohabitation is acceptance of trying out sex with others experimentally until the right partner is found.

Indeed great importance is attached to virginity in Scripture. In Exodus 22:16-17 we read of the Law for when an Israelite man seduced a virgin who was not pledged to be married and slept with her; he was to pay the bride-price for her and must marry her and "if her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins." (This was not a purchase price, as if the girl was a possession to be bought, but was understood by the Rabbis to be a marriage settlement paid to provide for her in case of the death of her husband or divorce.) (I am grateful to Roger Beckwith for this information)

In Leviticus 21:13-14 it is laid down that a High Priest must marry a virgin. There were three alternatives, all forbidden to him, a widow, a divorcee or one who has been "defiled by prostitution". In Ezekiel's vision of the ideal temple this prohibition is extended to all Priests (Ezekiel 44:22)

Virginity is extolled as the desirable state for unmarried women throughout Scripture. In Genesis 24:16 it was one of the attributes of Rebekah that made her suitable to be Isaac's wife. In Judges 21 it was only virgins who were fit to be wives for the Benjamites. In 1 Kings 1:2 it was only a virgin who was suitable to keep the aged King David warm. In Esther 2 it was the "beautiful young virgins" for which a search was made to find a new Queen. Supremely, when God sought a woman to bear His Son, He sought a virgin.

It has been suggested that virginity was only of temporary cultural significance because women were chattels in biblical times and needed to be unsullied. That does not equate with what the Bible actually says about women, e.g. in the Song of Songs and in Jesus' attitude to women. Also, would God have created women in the way He has if virginity was only to be significant for part of historical time?

The Hebrew word for virgin is *Bethulah*. It comes from a root meaning "to separate", and is the common word for a woman who has never had sexual intercourse. (Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Inter Varsity Press, Article VIRGIN). It is sometimes translated "young woman" but since there is another Hebrew word for "young woman", *Almah*, it seems reasonable to understand that *Bethulah* always means "virgin" where it is used.

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah use *Bethulah* as a parallel to "bride" (Isaiah 62:5; Jeremiah 2:32). It is also frequently used by a whole range of writers in parallel to "young man", indicating that virginity is the normal state of a young woman (2 Chronicles 36:17; Psalms 78:63; 148:12; Jeremiah 31:13; 51:22; Lamentations 1:18; 2:21; Ezekiel 9:6; Amos 8:13; Zechariah 9:17)

New Testament

The New Testament opens with Joseph's refusal to have Mary as his wife because she appeared to have been unchaste (Matthew 1:18-19). If Mary had told him about the angel's appearance to her, he cannot have believed her. It took an angelic visitor to him to convince him of the truth, (Matthew 1:20-25)

Matthew clearly understood Isaiah had prophesied about a virgin (Matthew 1:23), for he uses the Greek word *Parthenos*, virgin. It has also been suggested that this word means "young woman" rather than "virgin". But this would make nonsense of Luke 1:34. There would be no point in Mary replying to the angel's message that she would bear a son by saying: "How will this be, since I am a young woman?"!

The most frequent use of *Parthenos* is in 1 Corinthians 7. Paul is at one with the Old Testament: for him too, the normal state of a woman prior to marriage is virginity (1 Corinthians 7:25-28, 36-38). Later, in 2 Corinthians 11:2, he speaks of his aim for the Church "I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him". Sex before marriage is by implication, impure.

Interestingly, *Parthenos* is used of men in a verse in Revelation (Revelation 14:4) which is evidence that the Lord is concerned with male purity as well as with female.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews wrote: "Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral", (Hebrews 13:4). The writer speaks of adultery and of other sexual immorality, so the latter must refer to immorality between two unmarried persons. The marriage bed should be kept pure from both adultery and from sex before marriage.

1 Thessalonians 4 also contains a strong warning against sex outside of marriage: "It is God's will that you ... should avoid sexual immorality, that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable ..." "The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you, and warned you". "For God did not call us to be impure but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God ..." (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8a).

Not only the act, but as the Lord said, even a lustful look is wrong, (Matthew 5:27-28). Many of us will have had to seek forgiveness for that.

Finally, there is Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. The American writer, Richard Foster, (*Money, Sex and Power*. Hodder, p.117-118) calls this the most graphic passage of all. He writes: "Paul is dealing with the case of a man in the Christian fellowship who had been involved with a prostitute. He writes: 'Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two shall become one flesh" ' This passage makes it unmistakably clear that Paul sees sexual intercourse as the act par excellence that produces a "one flesh" bond. Biblical morality reserves sex for the covenant of marriage. Sexual intercourse involves something far more than just the physical, more than even the emotions and psyche. It touches deep into the spirit of each person and produces a profound union that the biblical writers call "one flesh".

'Therefore, Paul is saying no to sexual intercourse outside of marriage because it does violence to the very nature of the act itself. The act draws us into the profound mystery of a "one flesh" reality. It unites and bonds in a deep and wonderful way, wonderful, that is, when it is linked to a covenant of permanence and fidelity. The Hebrew word for intercourse means "to know". The biblical writers understood that in sexual intercourse a special kind of knowledge was conveyed, a special kind of intimacy came into being. This reality they called "one flesh". This then is why the Bible reserves sexual intercourse for the covenant of marriage.'

There are also references to Betrothal in Scripture, an arrangement much more binding than engagement today. But it was not a relationship in which sex was allowed. The betrothed whose condition is mentioned in Scripture were all virgins. (Deuteronomy 22:23; Joel 1:8; Matthew 1:18). Nor is there in Scripture any occasion when a marriage was reckoned to have happened retrospectively, and there is direct or indirect reference to marriage in 49 of the 66 books of the Bible!

When Does A Marriage Begin?

The answer in Genesis 24:66 is that it began when Isaac took Rebekah into his home (his tent). Likewise the first act of sexual intercourse constituted Jacob's marriage (Genesis 29:18-30). Verses 25-27 make clear that it was sexual intercourse which determined whom Jacob had married, not the feast, though "the men of the place" had a feast as a preliminary. But the rapes of Dinah and Tamar did not constitute marriage (Genesis 34:2-4 and 2 Samuel 13:11-14).

In the New Testament a feast was very much to the fore: a great celebration to mark the start of a marriage. We read of one at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1-10) and of others in the parables of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 22:1-10 and 25:1-12.). On the other hand as we have seen, Paul makes very clear that sexual intercourse with a prostitute is not marriage but immorality (1 Corinthians 6:12-20) and as we also saw the writer to the Hebrews includes in 13:4 a reference to immorality outside marriage without suggesting that it constitutes marriage.

The answer is clearly that the inauguration of marriage takes place by whatever means was currently recognised as marriage. There is no difference between

Biblical marriage and legal marriage. There may be some nations or tribes today in which beginning to live together is recognised as the start of lifelong marriage as in Isaac's day. But a marriage in twenty-first century England or Wales is now regulated by law and has to take place in a Church or Register Office or in some other authorised place, and must be overseen by a Minister or Registrar. (A feast - though Biblical - is not necessary!)

Cohabitation is not recognised as marriage, nor do the large majority of those who cohabit wish it to be recognised as marriage.

In Conclusion

The Bible is quite unequivocal on the subject of chastity, and God's word on it needs to be clearly and widely taught to adults and to young people. Christian leaders and teachers fail in their responsibility if they do not do so. Sexual intercourse is one of God's good gifts - *for marriage*.

There is no provision in Scripture for experimenting with sex, or for trial marriage. God loves us and He, our Maker, knows what is best for us: we need to follow our Maker's Instructions (!) His way is the route to real happiness.

This is also the way for our nation to put into reverse the growing number of teenage pregnancies - the highest in Europe - and the frightening increase of sexually-transmitted diseases.

A psalmist wrote: "How can a young man (woman) keep his way pure? By living according to Your word. I seek You with all my heart; do not let me stray from Your commands. I have hidden Your word in my heart, that I might not sin against You....I gain understanding from Your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path" (Psalm 119. 9-11, 104)

Website recommendation - www.celibrate.org is a site which gives helpful support and advice to people seeking to remain chaste

Edward Pratt