

Sex

Why does the Bible care about what consenting adults do in private?

Our culture is hopelessly confused about sex. On the one hand, it is meant to be special, the most intimate of relationships. On the other, sex is considered trivial – something reflected in the idea of ‘casual’ sex. Sex is used to market just about everything from coffee and cars to phone contracts and footwear. We claim it has no consequences, and that if we’re not harming anyone else then sex between consenting adults is no one else’s business.

The Bible treats sex very differently. In the Bible, sex has both physical and spiritual consequences. The ideal is that sex takes place only within the context of marriage: a lifelong, faithful relationship between a man and a woman. Does this seemingly outdated view have any relevance to a culture that often treats sexual relationship as a disposable commodity?



Thinking Biblically About...

What's the problem?

Sex is everywhere. This so-called private activity between consenting adults is a ubiquitous feature of TV and film, books and magazines, adverts and entertainment of all kinds.

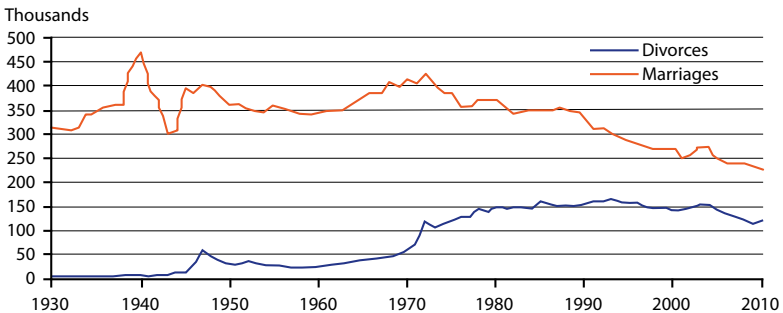
The way sex is treated in the media both reflects and influences our culture. In the process of using sex to sell consumer goods, we have effectively made sex itself another one of these consumer goods. We treat sexual relationship both as a must-have accessory and as disposable – to be dropped, picked up or redefined depending on what is most convenient for us at the time. Casual sex and low-commitment relationships are considered normal, desirable and even healthy. Living together before or instead of marriage is the norm.

At the same time, we still hold up the sexual relationship as the best kind of relationship there is, the only way you can truly find intimacy with another person. (This completely ignores the very real intimacy experienced outside of sexual relationship with close friends and family members.)

Although marriage rates have dropped, the majority of people who have never married would still like to marry one day. The consumer mindset is one that likes to keep its options open: we want the freedom of casual sex but we also want long-term, committed relationships. It rarely occurs to us that these two desires are at odds with each other.

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What we do is habit-forming and character-forming. We cannot ‘practise’ for a faithful, stable marriage by having many short-term or low-commitment relationships.



Marriage rates are the lowest in living memory, but 7/10 single people aged 20-35 would like to marry one day

‘Consenting adults’

The idea of ‘consenting adults’ underpins sexual relationships: so long as there is informed consent between two adults, the law claims that no one else is affected and therefore it is no one else’s business.

“We really mean something more like, ‘Sex between consenting adults is such an important principle to us that it is worth any amount of collateral damage.’”

In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. We do not exist in isolation: everything we do affects other people, whether we recognise it or not. The churn of sexual relationships brings an inherent lack of stability, as we struggle to resist the consumer values of choice and change in relationships we might otherwise hope would be long term and committed. This brings many consequences, not only to the couple in the relationship but also to their future partners, their families, friends and colleagues, and society as a whole.

- Infidelity becomes normal and we justify it to ourselves through what we see on TV and in films.
- Children and extended families have to deal with the fallout of a couple separating, and often lose contact with people they love.
- Friendship groups and workplace dynamics are disrupted by relationships that are temporary or have ended badly.

- Taxpayers pay for treatments of sexually transmitted infections and the many immediate costs around relationship breakdown, and pick up the long-term bill for absent fathers and mothers.
- More people living on their own means more homes and cars are needed, pushing up prices and carbon emissions.

In imagining we can separate sex from its wider relational context, we end up seriously damaging the relationships we often take for granted – and many more that we don’t think about at all.

The idea of consenting adults is badly flawed. When we claim, ‘Sex between consenting adults doesn’t harm anyone else’ we really mean something more like, ‘Sex between consenting adults is such an important principle to us that it is worth any amount of collateral damage.’

The Bible recognises the impact of sex beyond the couple directly involved, and seeks to maintain healthy relationships across every area of life that might otherwise be adversely affected.

Q: How does the principle of ‘consenting adults in private’ fall short in justifying a sexual relationship?

What does the Bible say?

Both Testaments contain many verses about how the Israelites and early Christians should behave in their sexual relationships. The majority of these are framed as 'Do not...'. These verses are often quoted and argued over as proof texts to support different views about same-sex marriage, divorce, and sex outside of marriage.

If we want a *positively-stated* view of human sexuality, we need to look at the Creation narrative, right at the beginning of the Bible.

Genesis 1:26-27 read:



"Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'

God created men and women 'in our likeness'. Although it is not entirely clear how, the division of humanity into male and female somehow reflects the nature of the Trinity. The unity of marriage mirrors the relationships of the Trinity.



"Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones

and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.'

(Genesis 2:22-24)

This Creation ideal, before the Fall, sets out the pattern for sexual relationships. Although the word 'marriage' is not used in these verses, it is quite clear from elsewhere in the Bible that 'one flesh' does refer to sex and marriage. These verses, and the way they are used in both Testaments, make it clear that the Genesis ideal is that marriage is:

- A complementary relationship between one man and one woman
- Lifelong (no divorce)
- Exclusive (no adultery)
- Mutual support and dependence
- Takes precedence over relationship with parents

The rest of the Bible's teaching on marriage, divorce, adultery and other topics is entirely consistent with this 'one flesh' Creation ideal for sex.

Q: For our culture as a whole, what are the pros and cons of promoting individuals' freedom of choice (in all areas)?

“The Bible states that sex has spiritual significance.”

One flesh in the New Testament

The ‘one flesh’ principle is taken up by Jesus and Paul in the New Testament, in different contexts. Jesus quotes it during a discussion

with the Pharisees about divorce (specifically the equivalent of ‘no fault’ divorce – the acceptable grounds for divorce was a topic of debate between different schools of rabbis at the time).



‘Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” “Haven’t you read,” he 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 flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”’ (Matthew 19:3-6)

Paul also quotes this verse, this time in the context of sex with prostitutes (and, by implication, any temporary

sexual relationship – including what we might call casual sex). Some from the Corinthian church were claiming that because their souls had been saved it did not matter what they did with their bodies. Paul vigorously refutes this:



‘Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.” But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.’ (1 Corinthians 6:16-17)

The Bible states that sex has spiritual significance. ‘Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.’ (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) Arguments that the biblical approach to sex outside of marriage was solely about protecting children and families, and that contraception has made this view obsolete, overlook this spiritual dimension.

Modern and biblical attitudes towards sex

In the Bible		Today
Concern for stability	Vs	Emphasis on freedom of choice
Family and social significance		Individual pleasure
Spiritual and physical consequences		Few consequences recognised
Connected to every other area of life		Compartmentalised from rest of life

The way that the Bible treats sex shows that it was expected to take place within the context of lifelong, faithful marriage. In fact, sex often *is* marriage: sex between an unmarried man and woman was usually expected to result in marriage (Exodus 22:16-17), though the Bible recognises that this is not always realistic or desirable in a fallen world.

Limits to love

The Bible has a positive view of sexuality. The Song of Solomon, for example, is a celebration of intimacy and sexual relationship. However, the biblical vision for sex means that the sexual and marriage relationship is also carefully guarded. It is not something to be treated lightly.



“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”
(Matthew 5:27-30)

Jesus warns that lust is tantamount to unfaithfulness, since it is the attitude of the heart that precedes adultery. The Old Testament is full of stories of characters whose lust led to tensions, idolatry, violence and murder – including Samson (Judges 13-16), Amnon (2 Samuel 13) and Solomon (1 Kings 11:1-13).

Sex and intimacy

At the same time, the Bible does not elevate sex to become the idol that our culture has made it. In TV and film, sex is often presented as the best form of relationship – the only way it is possible to find genuine intimacy with another person.

In the Bible, singleness and celibacy are legitimate and even desirable lifestyles, though Jesus recognises that they are not for everyone (Matthew 19:11-12). Paul and Jesus were both single, but there is no indication that they were unfulfilled. Both had many close friends of both sexes who helped care for and support them in their ministries, and they also had a close relationship with God. In our culture, identity is often bound up in sexuality and our sexual partners; in the Bible, identity comes from our relationship with Christ, as well as with a wide range of friends, family members, colleagues and other people.



‘At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.’
(Matthew 22:30)

Moreover, we need to recognise that even if we are married, it is always a temporary state. We are unmarried for the first part of our lives, and there may well be another period of singleness at the end of our lives, too. Even if we are married for most of our lives, Jesus says that there is no marriage in heaven – and, by implication, no sexual relationships.

Where do we go from here?

Our culture has a confused and often harmful approach to sex. It treats it as more important than any other kind of relationship, but at the same time as something trivial and disposable. Sexual relationship is often seen as the only way to achieve real intimacy, but it's also something that is discarded if it no longer serves the desires of the individual.

Given our attitudes to sex, it's not surprising that many people are uncertain what to think. The Church hasn't always provided the right

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leadership and many Christians have been hurt, both by sexual relationships that have taken place before or while they were Christians, and by the Church's response to them. The Church has often

been judgmental of some kinds of sexual relationship outside of marriage, whilst overlooking others.

Whilst there is a clear message in the Bible that sexual relationship should ideally take place within marriage, the chief message the Church needs to communicate is one of grace and hope. One of the main needs of Christians – both new to faith and long-term – will be healing and restoration.

Q: How could the Church (or your local church) better address issues of sexual ethics?



We need to reclaim the idea of sex as something special, not only as a relationship between two people but as part of the way we reflect God's nature.



“The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?”
(1 Corinthians 6:13-15)

Many in our culture and in our churches have fallen short of the biblical ideal for sex, and suffered hurt, rejection or abuse in relationships. The world can't offer a lasting solution to this. Only Christ can bring forgiveness, healing and freedom from our past actions and experiences. Alongside clear teaching on sex, then, there is a need for pastoral guidance and counselling as well as accountability. Few churches have engaged with the prevailing cultural mindset around sex. However, the way we treat sex goes to the heart of our identity as Christians and our relationships with each other. When we redefine sex to suit our own purposes, we also redefine the nature of our faith and our relationship with God, who made us in his image.

Is it time we started thinking differently about sex?



- Our culture claims that sex which takes place between consenting adults in private harms no one else and is no one else's business
- The Bible has a much wider and holistic view of sexual relationship, and sees it within the context of family and community life, and society as a whole
- Our so-called sexual freedom has impacts on other people and, the Bible states, spiritual consequences too. The gospel's message is one of forgiveness and freedom from past sin and hurtful experiences.

Thinking Biblically About... is a series of 2,000-word guides that unpack modern-day issues from a biblical perspective. The **TBA** series aims to give Christians a firm foundation for engaging with some of the most difficult questions of our times: money and debt, sex and marriage, how we spend our time, how we treat the environment and what the role of government ought to be.

You can also read our **Long Distance Christian** series, a collection of 10,000-word booklets looking at key issues in more depth.

The Jubilee Centre is a Christian social reform organisation based in Cambridge, UK. We believe that the Bible's teaching applies to every area of modern life and has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the 21st century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-40)

Find out more at www.jubilee-centre.org/sex