



"What's Wrong with Sex Before Marriage?"

Amy Orr-Ewing

How on earth can you answer this question? It is the 21st century after all; surely God doesn't hate you enough to make you say something so ridiculous and old-fashioned that you will lose all your friends! In the gospels, Jesus was asked many difficult questions and he frequently responded with a question before answering more fully. He did this so often that I think we are probably meant to notice it and learn something.

What is wrong with sex before marriage? How about: 'What is wrong with anything?' In other words, where do you get the moral code by which you live your life? There may be a whole number of different responses: 'I do what I feel is right' - my morals are entirely personal and arbitrary. Or 'society decides what is right and wrong' - laws are made and as long as I stick within them everything is OK. Or anything in between those two responses.

For us as Christians, right and wrong are not purely up to the individual; after all, what you feel is good for you may hurt me. It is not only up to society either; lots of societies have allowed things to be 'legal' that you or I might take issue with. Right and wrong for the Christian come from a higher standard than any individual or group of humans - they come from God. The creator is also the moral lawgiver. So when I say that I believe that sex is designed to be expressed within marriage, I am not setting *myself* up as judge and jury and deciding to make life difficult for single people - I am trying to follow the maker's instructions.

It may sound strange, but this question about sex

is actually a vitally important question for many in the search for God. In fact, sometimes sexual and moral issues provide the main foundation for a person not believing in God. The atheist and writer Aldous Huxley wrote quite openly about his motivation for believing that life had no meaning and that there is no God:

I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently I assumed that it had none and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption.... For myself as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation ... liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom.... There was one admirably simple method in our political and erotic revolt: We could deny that the world had any meaning whatsoever. [1]

This is not to say that ethical objections to becoming a Christian are not sincere or heartfelt. I have met many students close to becoming a Christian who have asked, 'If I become a Christian, do I have to stop sleeping with my boyfriend?' This is a real question which cuts to the heart of meaning and happiness.

Sometimes sexual and moral issues provide the main foundation for a person not believing in God

It could be re-phrased: 'If I become a Christian, do I have to give up the one thing in my life which brings me happiness?' If this is the real question then our answer needs to deal with the question of happiness. Jesus talked about this a lot in the gospels - in fact his most famous teaching in the Sermon on the Mount promised blessing or happiness to those who followed in His way. We need to be careful here - we are not talking about a prosperity gospel: 'Come to Jesus and everything in your life will be fantastic!' We are talking about a real dynamic relationship with God which offers us satisfaction at the very deepest level - it does not shrink from suffering or difficulty, but gives us the promise of God's nearness and blessing even when life is tough.

Sex is good

However, this question may be asked from a completely different perspective. It could be that

our friend is genuinely sceptical about Christ because of the out-of-date ideas about sex that Christians have. How can sex be wrong? It may come as a surprise that the biblical view of sex is extremely positive. God thought of sex - he gave us this wonderful expression of love for another. There is a whole book of the Old Testament devoted to extolling the beauty of sex and showing God's delight in what he has made pleasurable and good.

The very beginning of the bible lays a foundation for a Judaeo-Christian approach to sex. The early chapters of Genesis tell us that God created the first man and woman and, seeing what He had made, declared that it was 'very good'. Genesis provides the original context for sexual intercourse and shows that God has designed this wonderful thing to be expressed within a lifelong marital relationship between one man and one woman. Jesus grounds his teaching on sexuality on those words.

The divine image is expressed as *both* male and female, and so the man and woman are equally human despite their physical, anatomical and procreative differences. As they are joined together as husband and wife their unity and diversity is expressed. 'So a man will leave his father and his mother and be united with his wife, and they will become one flesh' (Genesis 2.24). Here we have a blueprint for human sexual love - through the sexual act the man and woman have a new, incredible kind of intimacy. This is called being 'one flesh' - designed to be exclusive and faithful. Both Jesus and Paul pick up on this in the New Testament - emphasising the beauty of monogamous marriage.

In this way, the question of how sex outside marriage could be wrong can be approached by looking at the beauty, intimacy and preciousness of sex. God designed that this happen in a safe and committed context of love and devotion. According to the maker, this is where sex is at its best.

1 Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946), pp 270-273.