

Premarital Sex: Is It A Sin Or Not?

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Compiled, Edited & Augmented by Charles Toy



I've been wanting to compile this article since I was 12 years old, but I was just as much full of guilt, confusion, mixed messages, hormones, and passion as the rest of you may have been at 12. I didn't know which way was up. All I knew was that I burned and I burned frequently. It was an exciting, confusing and painful time. I wish I had this article then. It would have alleviated an enormous amount of cognitive dissonance.

The Bible does not forbid premarital sex.

There is no passage of the Bible that references premarital sex as a sin against God. The association between sin and premarital sex is a new Christian idea. The only possible reference to premarital sex being a sin in the Bible is in the New Testament. This premise although, is generally dismissed by theologians because the Greek word pornei, or sexual immorality is commonly incorrectly translated into the English word fornication.

In Biblical times women were the owned property of a man. Men ruled over women and their children. Women had very few, if any, rights, and men often bought women from their families or at an auction, usually at age twelve and a half. The fathers owned the women (daughters, wives, concubines, handmaidens, servants etc.) and if you wanted to have intercourse with one of his properties, then you had to ask his permission.

If a father sold a daughter, he would get more money for her if she was a virgin. Non-virgins were less expensive to buy. If a man purchased a daughter at a virgin price, and she was not, or she did not bleed during intercourse, then he could return her to her father and get his money back.

Most marriages were arranged for financial reasons. Many couples never even met until the day of the marriage. On the day of marriage the proposed husband would give a dowry, or monetary



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compensation, to the father of a bride. The price of the dowry was different from woman to woman, was determined by the father, and was based on the woman's beauty, ability to bear children, strength, household skills, and status as a virgin.

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In the Old Testament, many verses that people cite for being against premarital sex are actual verses against stealing another man's property.

In Exodus 22:16 - 17, "If a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged, and lies with her, he must pay the bride-price for her, and she will be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride-price for virgins." According to this, the only reason any wrong was done is because the father of the woman lost money when the man and the woman consented to having premarital sex without her father's knowledge. This passage showed that through premarital sex, the man is actually stealing from the woman's father, the difference in value between her as a virgin and her as a non-virgin. It does not show that premarital sex is wrong.

In Deuteronomy 22:28 - 29 it says, "If a man finds a girl who is a virgin, who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her and they are discovered, then the man who lay with her shall give to the girl's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall become his wife because he has violated her; he cannot divorce her all his days." This shows that forced premarital sex, or rape is also stealing, but unlike the book of exodus, this trespass provides a punishment, as the male rapist not only stole from the woman herself but from the woman's father as well.

Another example of premarital sex in the Old Testament is given in Deuteronomy 21:10. This is a case in which a man takes a woman captive and then if he wants to make her his wife he must follow the conditions it sets forth, and then have intercourse with her. Then, if she is found to be desirable he has the option of marrying her or sending her away. This passage not only possibly condones premarital sex, but maybe even divorce as well.

Even the 10 Commandments don't forbid premarital sex. Most Christians would classify premarital sex under the seventh commandment, "Thou shall not commit adultery," but adultery is defined as: voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and a person who is not their spouse. If neither persons are married, it cannot be adultery.

If the man performing the premarital sex was married and the woman was not, in biblical times this did not matter. The reason for this was that in biblical times adultery was defined as a situation in which there was the danger of a married woman being impregnated by another man. This is also why sex with a prostitute is/was not adultery, even if the man is married. In the Hebrew understanding of the Adultery Commandment of Moses, Adultery, as understood by what Moses said, was only wrong for married women, never a married man.

Even Solomon, a great prophet of the Bible who was said to be favored by God had seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines. The Bible shows that polygamy, rape, incest, and orgies were not only accepted, but were often rewarded by God and were common practice of "great men of the Bible," none of whom were ever spoken out against in the Bible.

Christ's teachings at the Sermon on the Mount were that the only law is the law of love. He showed this by reversing four of the Old Testament laws which conflicted with loving people. Therefore, anything that was unkind, not by mutual consent, etc. would be immoral for a Christian, but obviously it would not be immoral to love sexuality before marriage or because of different but natural sexual orientation.

The New Testament says nothing about premarital sex. Some versions though do mistranslate the Greek word pornei, which means sexual immorality, into the English word fornication, which means sexual intercourse with someone who one is not married to.



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Pornei, meaning sexual immorality, included such things as having sex with a woman during menstruations, adultery, temple prostitution, and pederasty.

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Adultery, although, is not the same sin we know today, in which it is common for a man and a woman to be considered equal. The Hebrew understanding of adultery was that it was wrong for a married woman to have sex with another man since that violated her husband's property rights to his wife. It was not wrong for a man because a woman had no such property rights. A married man could have as many wives as he could afford as long as he did not marry another man's property.

Temple prostitution was actually the practice of the prostitutes in the Temples of Corinth selling their services as a part of the worship of a pagan fertility goddess, which was what Paul was warning against when he spoke of uniting the members of Christ with a prostitute in I Corinthians 6:12-17. This passage was not even specifically about prostitution, which was still legal and very popular in modern day Israel, but prostitution used as a form of pagan worship. He was speaking out against idolatry, not prostitution.

Pederasty was one of the worst of all sexual sins and it took on many forms. The practice of pederasty falls into three different categories. The first form is that of a sexual relationship between an older man and a young boy. Second is the practice of having a sexual relationship with slave prostitutes. Third is having a sexual relationship with an effeminate male prostitute, commonly called a "call boy" or Gigolo. Other such practices included two heterosexual males degrading one another by anal intercourse after capturing them in a battle. Another practice was heterosexuals' using anal intercourse to drive away other heterosexual strangers they didn't like. An example of this would be the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis 19:1-5. "The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. "My lords," he said, "please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning."

"No," they answered, "we will spend the night in the square."

But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom, both young and old-surrounded the house. They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them."

This story had absolutely nothing to do with homosexuality. Sexual orientation is a modern concept and was not labeled as such in biblical times. [It is far better understood in the modern era](#). This was a story of hospitality, as displayed by Lot. The men had surrounded the house for the sole purpose of gang raping the unwanted travelers, and Lot, the owner of the house, even offered his virgin daughters to calm the mob and save his guests. This not only shows that pederasty was at times culturally accepted in biblical times, but it also proves that women were thought of as property and little more. That's not saying either one of the above is OK. It was just practiced.

In every case of premarital sex in the Bible there is no punishment for the sexual act. The only penalty is the man had to pay compensation to the father for the woman's change in market value.

Today however, because most women are of a comparable status to men in most parts of the Christian world, there is no market value for daughters in Christian cultures. Given this, it stands to reason that the only penalty for having premarital sex is now gone. In fact, a document authorized by the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church stated that the passages in the Biblical book SONG OF SONGS are "in praise of sexual love, celebrating youthful passion, with no reference to marriage... It affirms that sexual love is in itself good and beneficial."

If the notion of God allowing one practice during certain periods of time and not during others seems absurd to you consider God, speaking through the prophet Nathan, saying that if David's wives and



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concubines were not enough, He would have given David even more. (2 Samuel 12:8) Indeed the whole [polygamy / bigamy](#) thing can be rather confusing as it relates to God's expectations around sex and marriage.

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Today many women have the same social and political freedoms that men have always had. But to say that responsible premarital sex, or fornication is somehow wrong, shows little more than ignorance to biblical teachings. Many of the sexually repressive teachings that developed in the middle ages are still being followed today. These teachings are based on oppressive Christian traditions that have no biblical basis other than ignorance.

As we shall see from further discussion the key word above is "responsible." It remains obvious when one examines the entirety of the Bible that marriage is God's desired endgame for partners in a committed, loving, sexual relationship.

A final note to those who might quote the "one man, one woman" passage in Matthew 19. Jesus is talking about the act of marriage here, not premarital sex. Jesus didn't say one word about premarital sex.

Since Jesus was a Jew he was undoubtedly very familiar with the Torah. Let's examine Judaism's attitude toward premarital sex as well. It's rather intriguing.

After that we'll wrap up with some additional thoughts at the end.

The Torah does not outlaw premarital sex

It doesn't outlaw many other types of sexual relationships either. Nonetheless, marital sex is considered ideal, and premarital sex is traditionally not approved of.

The negative attitude toward premarital sex, to a large degree, reflects the overwhelmingly positive attitude toward sex within marriage. Marriage is referred to as kiddushin, which comes from the Hebrew word for "holy." In Judaism, holy things are things that are set apart and made special and unique.

When sex is reserved for marriage, it too is considered holy. Most Jewish authorities disapprove of premarital sex because it does not take place within the context of kiddushin.

What of a long-term committed sexual relationship in which two people--though not married--have designated each other as their exclusive partner? This question has been raised by some liberal Jewish thinkers; however, both the Conservative and Reform movement (officially) reject the possibility of attributing kedushah (holiness) to such a relationship.

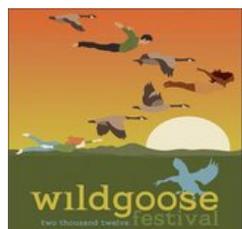
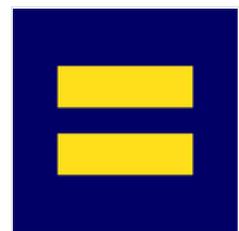
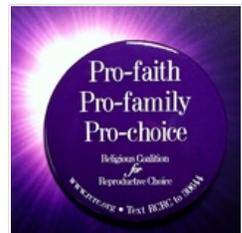
As mentioned, the Torah does not directly prohibit premarital sex. Indeed, at times, rabbinic authorities and traditional sources have been lenient in this area. In medieval Spain, Nahmanides permitted sex with an unmarried woman who was not involved with another man. Nonetheless, for traditional Jews, premarital sex is not without halakhic (legal) complication. The Torah prohibits sex between a man and a woman who is menstruating (known as a niddah). This prohibition is in place until the woman's period is complete and she immerses in a mikveh or ritual bath. This restriction applies to both married and unmarried couples, though it is considered inappropriate for a non-married woman (except for a soon-to-be bride) to immerse in a mikveh. Thus sex between an unmarried man and woman can violate a Torah decree.

Interestingly, the Torah does sanction one type of non-marital sexual relationship: concubinage. A concubine or pilegsh is a woman who, though involved exclusively with one man, does not receive the legal benefits of marriage. In biblical times, concubines were kept in addition to a wife or wives. In



Charles Toy is the founding member of The Christian

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recent centuries, Jewish authorities have, for the most part, dismissed the validity of concubinage. An interesting exception is the 18th century legal authority Jacob Emden, who suggested re-instituting the practice. Today, liberal authorities like Arthur Waskow are once again exploring the viability of this concept.

Other liberal authorities have pointed out the need to develop a new sexual ethic to address the reality of premarital sex. Waskow, a leader in the Jewish Renewal movement, suggests altering our expectation of marriage to "make it easy for sexually active people from puberty on to enter and leave marriages." Even the Conservative and Reform movements, who still stress the ideal of marital sex, acknowledge that Judaism's position on human sexuality is not consonant with the trends of contemporary life. Both denominations have suggested that premarital sexual relationships--where they exist--should be conducted according to the ethical principles that govern married sex: namely with the respect due to all humans as beings created in the image of God. In addition, Conservative rabbi Elliot Dorff has stressed the importance of modesty, fidelity, health and safety in non-marital sex.

Let's learn more about Dorff's notion of "the importance of modesty, fidelity, health and safety in non-marital sex."

The two roles Judaism assigns to sex are procreation and marital companionship. Sexual activity and procreation, of course, can take place outside the context of marriage, but classical Jewish texts do not see that as proper. Marriage (kiddushin) is holy precisely because a man and woman set each other apart from all others to live their lives together, taking responsibility for each other, caring for each other, and helping each other live through life's highs and lows. They also take responsibility for the children they bear. The willingness to assume these responsibilities is critical both for their own pleasure and growth and for the perpetuation of the Jewish community and the Jewish tradition.

Marriage is also important in Judaism because it provides a structure for achieving core Jewish values in our intimate lives--values like honesty, modesty, love, health and safety, and holiness.

Marriage is no guarantee that we will succeed in this, but it does help us attain those values. Thus Judaism is not being irrational, prudish, old fashioned, unrealistic, or mean in demanding that we limit our sexual intercourse to the context of marriage; it is rather responding to concerns that are at least as real and important in the fragmented society of today as they were in the more stable society of times past.

Sometimes, though, people do not meet an appropriate mate despite a conscientious search, and sometimes marriages end in divorce. Moreover, because Jews commonly go to college and graduate school, they are often not ready to assume the responsibilities of marriage until well after they mature biologically. Some can nevertheless adhere to the Jewish tradition's ideal of restricting sex to marriage, but others fall short.

Although Judaism clearly would have Jews restrict intercourse to marriage, singles in our society generally do not abide by that norm. Under such circumstances, it is important to understand that the violation of one Jewish norm does not entitle an individual to ignore all others; it is not an either or situation, in which one either abides by all of what Judaism has to say about these matters or follows none of it.

On the contrary, precisely those values that lead Judaism to advocate marriage--honesty, modesty, health and safety, love, and holiness--still apply to sexual relations outside marriage; they are just harder to achieve in that context. Indeed, precisely because unmarried couples cannot rely on the support of a marital bond to foster those values, it is all the more critical that if they engage in sexual intercourse, they must consciously strive to live by them. Even though their behavior will not be ideal by Jewish standards, to the

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extent that they can make those values real in their lives, they will be preserving their own humanity, their Jewishness, and their own mental and physical health, as well as that of their partner.

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Since sexual intercourse can lead to conception, sexual activity outside marriage raises questions not only in the realm of Jewish morals but also in the arena of medical ethics. Specifically, couples who conceive out of wedlock face the question of whether to abort the fetus, to carry it to term and give it up for adoption, or to raise it under the parentage of one or both members of the couple.

Jewish norms would, first of all, mandate sex education for preteens, teenagers, and adults. The topics should include not only the anatomy of sex and the mechanics of intercourse and contraception but also the overarching concepts and values that should inform a Jew's approach to sex. In addition, it should be emphasized to teenagers in particular that their sexual activity should not be determined by peer pressure and that there are forms of sexual activity short of intercourse that can be quite fulfilling but preclude the possibility of pregnancy and its complications.

Moreover, for all ages, an adequate curriculum in sex education from a Jewish perspective must pay considerable attention to the health and safety risks involved in sex with multiple partners. This is especially important these days, since a number of sexually transmitted diseases that could be cured by antibiotics until the early 1990s have now developed strains that are resistant to the drugs currently available. Moreover, AIDS, at least as of now, is both incurable and lethal. Because these medical developments pose increased danger to those involved in sex outside marriage, and because condoms offer some measure of protection against those diseases, an adequate sex education program must provide condoms and other contraceptive devices with clear instructions on how to use them.

Some fear that if rabbis and Jewish educators frankly discuss sex outside marriage and even make contraceptives available, people will conclude that Judaism is not serious in prohibiting premarital sex. There is undeniably some danger of such misunderstanding. If Judaism is to affect the world as it actually is, though, contemporary applications of its norms dare not ignore the widespread behavior of Jews and others within our society. According to the U.S. government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other studies, fully 72 percent of high school seniors, and 90 percent of twenty two year olds, have had sexual intercourse. Therefore, failure to distribute condoms and other contraceptives invites abortion, AIDS, and the other medical risks of unprotected sex with multiple partners for many, many people.

The Jewish tradition mandates that sex be restricted to marriage for very good reasons. Jewish law also requires, however, that we save lives and limit abortion. We must therefore earnestly engage in sex education, urging young adults to refrain from sexual intercourse before marriage for the many good reasons Judaism provides, but we must also deal realistically, supportively, and therapeutically with the many who fall short of that ideal to preserve their health and their very lives.

Wherever your thinking falls in all of the above admonishments does that mean you should resolve to head out and do the football team or the cheerleader squad as fast as possible? Absolutely not.

Sex is a powerful thing. It's easy to hurt people with sex including yourself. People get attached when they give themselves in this way and if it doesn't work out they can be terribly heartbroken. It's a serious choice and it should be taken seriously. Since the most important law in Christianity is the Law of Love this must apply to sex too. Don't use people. Don't hurt people. Don't hurt their feelings. Don't lead them to think you feel one way when you really don't just to get sex. Don't view them as an object. Don't push them to do something they may not be ready for. Sex must be mutual. Truly care for them before even considering sex. Care for them on a deep level so that you would never dream of hurting them. Be kind and giving to them. Have things in common that you consistently enjoy doing with one another. Don't treat each other poorly or rudely. If you get in an argument resolve it quickly. Be monogamous. Don't cheat. Don't say bad things behind one another's backs. Take care of each

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By Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff

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