

A CASE FOR CHASTITY

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By some strange shift of values in our society, chastity, which was once prized and praised as an excellent virtue, has now come to be regarded as almost a vice. Many young people who are virgins are ashamed of their virginity and refuse to admit to their lack of sexual experience for fear of ridicule. Some, in fact, regard their virginity as a burden to be discarded as quickly and efficiently as possible. While it is true that there are many in our society who oppose this denigration of chastity and virginity, they are obviously very much on the defensive. They are held in contempt. Their views are barely heard on the media except in distorted form. They rarely influence public opinion.

There was a time when the admission of extra-marital sexual activity was regarded as an exercise in shamelessness, and the defence of it was taken as evidence of a desire to justify personal immorality. But now the tables are turned. People openly admit their immorality without feeling any apparent need to defend themselves and their actions. We have, it seems, a new set of values which regards chastity as something undesirable, if not evil. It champions sexual intercourse as something inherently good, perhaps even the highest good. Promiscuity is taken as the mark of a warm, passionate, caring person, while chastity is, apparently, only to be found in cold, bloodless, miserly souls. The profession of virginity is, it seems, nothing but the sanctimonious self display of a hypocrite or else a shameful admission of inadequacy on the part of a frigid, emotional cripple.

I should therefore like to mount a defence of the virtue of chastity which, as Chesterton once remarked, is by no means as old-fashioned as unchastity. My first series of arguments are moral and rational as I am convinced that chastity is not merely a Christian virtue but part and parcel of human sexuality. My second series of arguments are, however, theological, for unlike many modern theologians, I believe that chastity is a truly Christian virtue and a great gift from God.

A. A Moral Case for Chastity

This argument for chastity both before marriage and in marriage has as its foundation the conviction that sex, though obviously physical, is also a deeply personal matter. For better or worse, it touches and affects me in my very self. It has as much, if not more, to do with my soul than with my body. If sex is not properly personalised, it can depersonalise those who engage in it.

There are those who argue that sex is a natural, physical need, like eating, and it should be similarly satisfied (cf 1 Cor 6:12-13). They maintain that they merely give of their bodies to each other, when they have sexual intercourse with each other. Their soul, their self, however, remains as uninvolved and detached from the other person, as from food when it is eaten. So, for them, chastity has no more moral value than refraining from eating or drinking.

Now the analogy of eating food does not quite hold, since we must eat to remain alive. What's more, any kind of sexual intercourse, except masturbation, necessarily takes in another person, which is not the case with eating, unless you happen to be a cannibal. It is

true that a person can become mentally and emotionally detached from the process of sexual intercourse, so that it becomes nothing but an exercise in physical mechanics, like the transaction between a prostitute and her client. But that can be achieved only by violating the unity of body and soul, and at great cost to both. In schizoid fashion the mind splits itself off from the body and takes control of the sexual process, so that desire is willed and sex is made to follow the dictates of the mind and its imagination. Paradoxically, sex then increasingly becomes a disincarnate, mental matter - DH Lawrence's sex on the brain. It leads to the severance of the soul from the body, and with it from the world of nature and natural sexuality. The body is then regarded as a mere thing, the focus of adoration or else of disgust. It is thoroughly depersonalised and falsely abused. Such activity leads to the denial of natural sexuality.

At best, casual sex, where people deliberately withhold themselves from each other, devalues the currency of physical intimacy. It is then no longer capable of enacting those levels of personal intimacy and affection which cannot otherwise be enacted. At worst, it leads to a division within the self which either retains some shreds of its integrity by retreating into the fortress of the mind, or else it disintegrates as it loses the sense of its own unity, continuity and responsibility. Depersonalised sex depersonalises the people who engage in it.

Another group of people agree that sex is in some sense a personal matter, but for them it is a means, if not the means, by which they achieve their personhood. It is held to be a rite of passage into personal fulfilment and wholeness.

Unlike most traditional societies, we have no clear rites of passage for the young in our society which bridge the transition from childhood to adulthood. And so sexual intercourse is looked upon by many young people as such a rite of passage by which they achieve the status, identity, wisdom and power of an adult. By it they expect to find themselves and fulfilment for themselves. In recent years this rather crude notion has been refined under the influence of certain kinds of psychology which in turn have borrowed certain aspects of eastern mysticism. In some circles sexual intercourse is now held to aid the passage from a lower trammelled state of consciousness to a higher, liberated consciousness. By it a person is initiated into a larger, superior sphere of being with the gift of greater energy, better health, fuller freedom, clearer bliss and higher consciousness. By submitting to the cosmic current of sexuality in and about them, they have arrived; their souls have become whole. They are at harmony with themselves and their environment. They have both come to themselves and gone beyond themselves. So sex is prized as a kind of therapy, perhaps even a religion, which promises salvation and transcendence to those who participate in it. Such sex has value apart from the other person and a relationship with a particular person of the opposite sex. It is part of the cosmic order which gives us life and shapes our being. To it chastity is anomaly, a denial of the demand for maturity and growth.

Now there are considerable problems with this view of sexual intercourse as a rite of passage, as everyone who has made this transition knows. Most people feel no such transformation of themselves. They often feel nothing but some intangible sense of loss. Some feel disillusioned by the whole business and wonder what the fuss was all about, especially as initial attempts at sexual intercourse are often botched up. Some fear that they have compromised and perhaps even lost themselves in some inexplicable way.

Sex in itself does not make me somebody. It does not give me my self, nor does it heal my soul; it merely enhances or diminishes, refines or corrodes my existing self-esteem and sense of self. If I am unsettled, uncertain or deficient in myself, sex will confront me most powerfully with the truth about myself and may even prove to be rather destructive. This is especially so with young people who become sexually involved, before they have a firm sense of themselves as persons in their own right, and before they are emotionally ready for those kinds of contact with the opposite sex which make sexual intercourse so much more than mere physical intimacy. Urged on by public pressure and a sense of their own deficiency, they expect to find and prove themselves in sexual intercourse, only to experience disillusionment and damage to their self-esteem. Premature sexual intercourse is therefore much more likely to lead to a loss of self rather than its gain. Hence most sensitive people view it with fear as much as with desire.

Sex is part of a relationship between two people who join together and complement each other physically. Whether they know it or not, they always give something of themselves to each other in sexual intercourse. In many cases they give much more than they first plan to do, as they often come to appreciate, when they lose each other after a period of contact and cohabitation. Ideally, two people in a sexual relationship give themselves totally and unreservedly to each other. That is the Christian ideal, the positive side to its more frequently voiced negative strictures, the reason for its advocacy of chastity. Sexual intercourse therefore involves the gift of the self physically in love to another.

Such self-giving is not complete at any one point in time, or on any one occasion. My soul is not a static fixed entity, but an historical continuum which stretches back and reaches forward in time. The gift of myself sexually thus includes my past and foreshadows my future. If that is so, then the acceptance of marriage as a process of mutual giving and receiving of marriage necessarily gives rise to the demand for chastity before and within marriage. Both fornication and adultery short-circuit and inhibit this self-surrender. They prevent it from happening.

Chastity before marriage frees two people to give themselves totally with their whole past to each other. In a sense, they are in possession of themselves by virtue of their chastity. They have not been given to another, but still have themselves unencumbered to give to the person they love. There is, theoretically speaking, no part of themselves which is sexually reserved for another and cannot therefore be shared. There is no root for sexual jealousy which inflicts and afflicts even the most rational and enlightened people. Neither the man nor the woman bring with them the fear of recurring sexual failure and any basis for unwelcome sexual comparisons. Couples may, of course, and must confess their previous sexual liaisons, if their marriage is to be set on a firm basis, but that necessarily involves a partial repudiation of their past, which, I would argue, remains outside their marriage, even though it is still part of themselves and their experience. Chastity, which reserves itself sexually for marriage, cannot then by any means be equated in itself with a lack of passion and emotional generosity. Rather, it clears the way for total and passionate self-abandonment to another without any suspicious reservations and the haunting fear of hurt or failure from previous sexual experiences. Chastity creates trust, that precious prerequisite of all personal relationships.

Don't get me wrong! I don't at all claim that people who have had no sexual experience before marriage will therefore automatically have better sexual relationships with each other. That may or may not be so. We have no way of telling, as so many diverse factors influence sexual adequacy and the capacity for sexual enjoyment. Chastity does not

guarantee super-sex, but ensures that sex does not become an end in itself, a beautiful but destructive idol. It sets sex firmly within the context of stable, personal relationships where it is a token and pledge of continuous self-giving and self-giveness. It subordinates sexual intercourse to the relationship between husband and wife. It personalizes sex which otherwise threatens to depersonalise people.

B. A Theological Case for Chastity

People have always sensed a close link, if not an overlap, between sex and religion. This was especially so in the ancient world with its fertility cults and the marriages of its deities. Sex is still the one area of life where apparently secularised people sense something sacred. In it they experience something of the captivating, yet frightening power of holiness which has so fascinated the human race for most of its chequered history. In both religion and sex we are threatened and gripped more deeply as persons in our souls than in any other areas of experience, except perhaps the mysteries of parenthood and death. In sex we come upon something mysterious, something larger than us, something beyond our control, something that takes us out of ourselves and beyond ourselves.

It is interesting that in Romans 1:24-25 Paul argues that people don't just dishonour each other's bodies by engaging in unchastity; they dishonour God. They exchange the truth of God for a lie; they worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator. In other words he argues that unchastity in all its manifestations involves idolatry and apostasy from the living God (cf. Eph 5:6; Col 3:5). And in this he merely echoes the Old Testament. Unchastity is rebellion against God and a denial of reality our creaturely status. It is false worship, for it seeks from a person what nobody can give. It makes an idol of a body and puts it in God's place.

If unchastity destroys our relationship with God, then the opposite must be also true. Chastity enhances our relationship with God. That is what gives chastity its spiritual value. Its value differs slightly, depending on whether a person is single or married, but ultimately it is the same for both.

Chastity has spiritual value for an unmarried person. This is spelt out most clearly by our Lord in Matthew 19:10-12 and by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:7-8 and 25-35. Neither of them sees celibacy as a matter of shame for a Christian, as it was so often in the ancient world and is even today. Under certain circumstances, it could even be a good thing, a charisma, a special gift of grace, for those who have a special vocation from God (1 Cor 7:7). Its purpose of celibate chastity is threefold. First, it frees single people to give themselves more simply, more directly and with fewer distractions to the Lord in his service than married people, whose loyalty is always divided between their spouse and their Lord. Secondly, it acknowledges that the chief loyalty of Christians is to their Lord who has reclaimed them totally for himself and his service. It is, lastly, a reminder that marriage, even at its best, is but a provisional reality limited to this age. The union of husband and wife prefigures the ultimate, perfect physical union with Christ and intimacy with each other in the communion of saints. So the celibacy of single Christians is a by-product of their physical devotion to the Lord and an aid to it.

Chastity in the form of marital fidelity has an equally important spiritual value for those who are married. According to Paul in Ephesians 5:17-33 and 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, marital chastity has to do with the bodily sanctification of those who are Christians and therefore holy in Christ. It is God's will that all our relationships with each other should be grounded

on Christ and consistent with his relationship with us. God's fidelity requires and inspires the fidelity of husband and wife to each other in marriage. Where such fidelity cements husband and wife together in the body of Christ, there the Holy Spirit can get on with his work of sanctifying people bodily for increasing participation in the divine life of the Holy Trinity. Through its chaste fidelity a couple is not only refined for closer fellowship with each other but also prepared for deeper intimacy with God. So, although sexual intercourse in itself neither consecrates nor defiles two married people, they are sanctified by the Holy Spirit in their physical fidelity to each other and their Lord. On the other hand, sexual infidelity and impurity defile Christian couples and so desecrate their holiness. It gives Satan a foothold in their lives. He uses it to do his destructive work in them.

Ultimately the demand for chastity is, as St Paul affirms in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, linked with our belief in the resurrection of the body. Since God created the body, and with it our sexuality, our bodies and their sexuality are in themselves good (1 Tim 4:1-5). But, like all created things, they can be abused and defiled. They are meant to be sanctified and made for fellowship with God. Our souls are closely and intimately connected with our bodies. We don't just possess bodies; we are embodied souls. Hence salvation involves our bodily nature, and with it the whole physical world. What we do with our bodies affects our relationship with God. Any split within ourselves between our bodies and souls damages this relationship as much as it does us. Since our bodies are consecrated as shrines of God's presence and temples of the Holy Spirit, they can be desecrated and defiled by sexual unchastity, and so be rendered unfit for God. They are, already now, meant to share in the eternal life of God and convey something of this physically to others. We are to glorify God in our bodies which have been redeemed for intimacy with a holy God.

Chastity is thus a fine virtue and an excellent gift, because in it we have a foretaste and pledge of the resurrection of our fully personalised, humanised, glorified bodies (cf. Rev 14:1-5). By the hope of the resurrection our bodies acquire a dignity and glory which far exceeds their apparent glorification in Playboy and other similar magazines. In fact, these magazines and the whole cult of nudity tend to trivialize, depersonalise and ultimately desecrate the body beautiful which they idolize. At the resurrection our bodies will be unveiled in such wholesome, yet dazzling splendour as will make the ritual disroblings at nudist beaches seem rather sad attempts to achieve purely physical innocence and a wholly desacralised chastity. They will no longer mask our true selves, as they have since the fall of our first parents, for we will have nothing to hide and nothing to fear from disclosing ourselves. We shall be fully at home in our bodies. They will be utterly translucent and able to show us fully as we are. Then at last we shall be truly chaste. We shall be as totally and radiantly chaste before God as Christ would have us be and as he promises to make us. Our Lord will present us to his Father holy and splendid, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing (Eph 5:27).

In spite of all that I have said I must add two final qualifications to all this. First, at the end of the chapter on Sexual Morality in *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis reminds his readers that Christians should not consider unchastity as the supreme vice. It is not an unforgivable sin nor does it spoil us permanently. Sins of the flesh may be bad, but the sins of the Spirit, such as unbelief and pride, are far worse. Conversely, chastity is by no means the supreme Christian virtue. In fact, St Paul doesn't even mention it among the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, even though he lists fornication, impurity and licentiousness among the works of the flesh. The greatest virtue, the most important gift of the Spirit, is selfgiving love, and Christian chastity is a by-product of that kind of love. Secondly, unlike

virginity which, once lost, can never be regained, chastity can be regained through the forgiveness of sins. Those who confess their unchastity and put their trust in Christ's purity are as chaste and pure as Christ himself, for 'the blood of Jesus. . . cleanses us from all sin' (1 John 1:7). And that includes all kinds of sexual impurity.