

A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO PREMARITAL SEXUAL ETHICS: OR, WHAT SAINT PAUL WOULD SAY ABOUT "MAKING OUT"

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One of the more vexing issues facing pastors today is the question of premarital sexual ethics. Simply put, we pastors are not quite certain how to counsel singles and teens regarding appropriate sexual boundaries. Of course, we clearly teach that sexual intercourse should be reserved for marriage. But beyond this, there is no consensus among evangelical clergy about where the boundaries should be drawn. Instead we tend to push the burden of this question back onto singles. One pastor typifies the counsel regularly given by evangelical clergy:

You may want me to tell you, in much more detail, exactly what's right for you when it comes to secular boundaries [in dating relationships]. But in the end, you have to stand before God. That's why you must set your own boundaries according to His direction for your life. ... I want you to build your own list of sexual standards.¹

But do we really mean to say that Christian singles should "build their own list of sexual standards"? Certainly this can't be right. Is oral sex permissible? Fondling? Mutual masturbation? Passionate kissing? No one seems to really know. Certainly Christian singles don't know.² And the confusion here is no small matter. There is every reason to suspect that our lack of clear direction regarding premarital boundaries is putting singles in a precarious position. The September/October 2011 edition of *Relevant Magazine* includes a remarkable update regarding evangelical sexual ethics.³ In the article, "(Almost) Everyone's Doing It" author

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¹ Jeremy Clark, *I Gave Dating a Chance: A Biblical Perspective to Balance the Extremes* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2000), 108-09.

² According to one study, the percentage of evangelical teens who believe it is "always or sometimes appropriate for two people who are in love, but not married" to engage in the following activities is as follows; embracing and some kissing (97%); heavy French Kissing (81%); fondling of breasts (35%); fondling of genitals (29%); sexual intercourse (20%). See Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Right from Wrong: What You Need to Know to Help Youth Make Right Choices*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994), 278.

³ Tyler Charles, "Almost Everyone's Doing It," in *Relevant Magazine*, September/October, 2011. The article gets its data from the National Survey of Reproductive and Contraceptive Knowledge, conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwanted Pregnancy, Dec., 2009. The survey can be found online at: http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/fogzone/PDF/survey_questionnaire.pdf, accessed October 24, 2011.

Tyler Charles, drawing upon data gathered by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwanted Pregnancy, informs us that forty-two percent of evangelical singles between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine are currently in a sexual relationship, twenty-two percent have had sex in the past year, and an additional ten percent have had sex at least once. Assuming the accuracy of Charles' data, this means only twenty-percent of young evangelicals have remained abstinent.⁴

Even if the survey's data were wrong by half, the numbers would still be concerning. And as a pastor, I am indeed concerned. In my own experience, I see a significant amount of confusion and compromise among Christian teens and singles, particularly as it relates to premarital sexual ethics. Sometimes Christians flounder because the church fails to address crucial issues; sometimes they flounder because the leaders of the church address crucial issues wrongly. Both the former and the latter are at work here. On the one hand, evangelical scholars and theologians have devoted little attention (if any) to the issue of premarital sexual ethics; we've left it to popular-level books to plumb the Scriptures' teaching on this matter. And when pastors do speak explicitly to this issue, we send a confusing and mixed message. We've told Christian singles that it's fine (or at least might be fine, or at least we can't say it's not fine) to prepare the meal—just as long as they don't consume it. We've left the door open to sexual foreplay, while insisting that singles refrain from consummating that foreplay. In essence, we're telling Christians singles that it is (or might be) permissible to start having sex, just as long as they don't finish. It is little wonder then, that many Christian singles—while largely agreeing that intercourse should be reserved for marriage⁵—find themselves unable to live out their own ideal.

If the pastoral community is unclear on this issue, it is little wonder that singles are likewise unclear. Given the present lack of consensus within the pastoral community, this essay will explore the New Testament's sexual ethic with a view to constructing an objective, Christocentric sexual ethic for all premarital relationships. Supported by both a "movement" hermeneutic and a "Christocentric" hermeneutic, this essay will conclude that fidelity to the trajectory and ethic of Scripture necessitates *reserving any and all sexual activity for the marriage relationship*. Or to state it again, the New Testament conveys—both theologically and exegetically—that all premarital relationships are to be completely non-sexual. Or one more time: premarital "making out" is a sin.⁶ We begin with a brief look at the New Testament's sexual ethic.

⁴ There may be reasons to suspect the survey does not represent a completely accurate picture of evangelical sexual conduct. For a helpful analysis regarding the methodology of the survey, see Kevin DeYoung, "Premarital Sex and Our Love Affair with Bad Statistics," n. p. [cited 16 December 2011]. Online: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevindeyoung/2011/12/13/premarital-sex-and-our-love-affair-with-bad-stats/>.

⁵ Charles goes on to note that "76 percent of evangelicals believe sex outside of marriage is morally wrong." See "Almost Everyone," 65.

⁶ In many respects, this essay represents an extended defence of the opening two chapters of my book (written along with Jay Thomas), *Sex, Dating and Relationship: A Fresh Approach* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012).

I. A BRIEF LOOK AT THE NEW TESTAMENT'S SEXUAL ETHIC

The sexual mores of the first-century Greco-Roman world were in most every respect more liberal than our contemporary culture. Prostitution was viewed as a legitimate way for a man to satisfy his sexual urges; keeping a personal mistress or a slave for sexual gratification was normal for those who could afford such things;⁷ homosexual sex between men and boys, while not without its critics, was largely viewed as normal and permissible. But the one place where the Greco-Roman culture was more conservative than our contemporary culture was the way in which it viewed premarital sexual relations between a man and another man's virgin daughter.

The ability of a respectable young woman to find a suitable marriage partner was, in no small part, contingent upon her father's ability to prove her chastity. Since a daughter's contribution to the family was often found in her ability to secure a socially or economically advantageous marriage, a father in the ancient world typically took great pains to protect the sexual integrity of his daughter's reputation until the day of her marriage. Respectable young women did not leave the home unescorted, and the practice of cloistering (i.e., where a young woman was kept in the home and secluded away from any male nonrelatives) was often employed. In fact, respectable young virgin women in the ancient world were, in many respects, not easily afforded the opportunity to engage in sexual misconduct.⁸

Given the cultural dynamics of the ancient world, New Testament proof texts on premarital sexual ethics are in short supply. In a culture that prized female virginity, utilized arranged marriages, and often practiced cloistering, the authors of the New Testament had no need to be overly specific regarding chastity rules for premarital relationships. Simply put, the reigning ethic—even in the pagan culture—was, “keep your hands off my daughter.” Thus we cannot expect the Bible to offer us a detailed list about which activities (e.g., fondling, kissing, oral sex, etc.) are permissible in premarital relationships.

⁷ So Plutarch, in his *Conjugal Precepts*, 16, “If an ordinary man is licentious and dissolute in his pleasure and sins a bit with a prostitute or a servant, his wife should not be indignant or angry but should reckon that out of respect for her he transfers his drunken behaviour, license, and lust to another woman.”

⁸ This is not to say that female promiscuity never occurred; only that it was generally condemned in ways that male promiscuity was not. For more on the opportunities for female promiscuity, see Robert M. Grant, “A Woman of Rome: The Matron in Justin, 2 Apology 2.1-9,” in *Church History*, 54 no. 4 D, 1985, 461-72. For a detailed discussion regarding the general cultural context of the New Testament, see Susan Treggiari, “Marriage and the Family in Roman Society,” and David W. Chapman, “Marriage and Family in Second Temple Judaism,” both in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken Campbell (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003). Also William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2007), 234-40, as well as Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), 183-90.

Yet despite the lack of an explicit statement about “how far is too far” in premarital relationships, the New Testament does offer us a clear sexual ethic: *sexual relations are to be reserved for the marriage relationship*. Adultery (Romans 2:22), homosexuality (1 Corinthians 6:9), prostitution (1 Corinthians 6:12–20), fornication (1 Thessalonians 4:3–8), and polygamy (1 Timothy 3:2) are all explicitly condemned in the New Testament. Additionally, the New Testament uses the term *πορνεία* (sexual immorality) as a “catch all” term to forbid all extra-marital sexual activity. As has been shown by New Testament scholars, the New Testament’s use of *πορνεία* is properly understood against the backdrop of the Torah, and thus adultery, fornication, bestiality, incest, homosexuality, and prostitution—all condemned by the Torah—fall within its semantic range.⁹ We find a working example of this basic ethical framework, specifically as it relates to premarital sexual activity, in 1 Corinthians 7:1–9. Discussing celibacy and marriage, Paul writes,

I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion (ESV vss. 7–9).

Here Paul is responding to a series of questions posed to him by the Corinthians. Many at Corinth viewed celibacy as the ideal Christian state. Even married individuals, it seems, were attempting to live a celibate life.¹⁰ Paul notes his own commitment to celibacy and agrees that celibacy is indeed ideal for increasing one’s capacity to serve in Christ’s kingdom. Yet Paul recognizes that the ability to live a chaste and celibate life is a unique gift from God—one that God has not given to everyone. Given the ever-present temptation toward sexual immorality, Paul instructs those who have a strong desire for sexual intimacy (i.e., “burn with passion”) to fulfill that desire within the context of a marriage relationship.

The ESV rightly glosses “to burn” (from *πυροῦσθαι*) as “to burn with passion” (vs. 9). Viewing unfulfilled sexual desire as a “burning” was a

⁹ Etymologically, *πορνεία* referred to prostitution or fornication, but was frequently used more broadly to denote any and all forms of sexual misconduct. For an analysis of the use of *πορνεία* in the New Testament, see Raymond Collins, *Ethics and the New Testament: Behavior and Belief* (New York: Cross Road Publishing Company, 2000), 80–83; William Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 71–76. Countryman, *Dirt, Greed and Sex*, 73. The terms *ἀσέλγεια* (sexual immorality, impurity) and *κόιτη* (sexual immorality, lasciviousness), also function as general terms denoting sexual misconduct, but are used in the New Testament with less frequency. For the full range of terms denoting sexual misconduct, see the entry in Louw-Nida on sexual misbehavior (88.271–88.282).

¹⁰ My brief reconstruction here follows the standard interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7, i.e., that Paul is addressing a form of asceticism. For interpretations along these lines, see Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2004), 77, and Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S. J., SP (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 253. Contra this reading, see Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*, 173–211. In either case, my central point above remains valid regardless the extent to which the ascetic question is resolved.

common enough metaphor in Paul's world. The picture of lovers "afire with love" and lying in each other's arms "on fire" is found throughout Greco-Roman literature.¹¹ In this respect, Paul's analysis of sexual desire is common to his times; his solution, however is unique. In the ancient world, the solution to "burning" with sexual desire was release through intercourse. In other words, sex—not marriage—was the solution to passionate burning.¹² But for Paul, the marriage relationship is the only legitimate context for satisfying one's sexual passions. To attempt celibacy without the *χάρισμα* (*gift*) would be a mistake. Indeed, Paul not only recommends marriage as a bulwark against sexual temptation, but in fact commands it (note Paul's use of the imperative form of *γαμέω*—*to marry*—in verse 9). Failure to seek legitimate means of sexual release places oneself in harm's way, and creates temptation toward illegitimate sexual activity. Those who have a strong desire for sexual intimacy must not continue to "burn" indefinitely, nor seek to quench that burning in illegitimate ways outside the marriage bounds. The sexual ethic here is clear: sexual activity is to be reserved for the marriage relationship. The working assumptions that drive Paul's logic in 1 Corinthians 7 are operative throughout the New Testament. The church—in keeping with this New Testament ethic—has historically viewed sexual relations as appropriate only within the context of a monogamous, permanent, heterosexual marriage.¹³

Thus far we have broken no new ground. Nearly all evangelical pastors and ministry leaders agree that sexual activity should be reserved for the marriage relationship.¹⁴ But it is here that evangelical sexual ethics begin to flounder. Our problem is not that we have failed to recognize the New Testament's prohibition against premarital sexual activity; rather we have failed to fully reckon with the reality that there is more to sexual activity than intercourse. Oral sex, fondling, and mutual masturbation, for example, are all sexual activities. It is inconceivable that the New Testament's ethic—insofar as it is an extension of the Torah—intends to leave room for such activities outside of marriage. Once we embrace the biblical ideal that sexual activity must be reserved for the marriage relationship, the question, "How far is too far?"—a perennially vexing

¹¹ Xenophon of Ephesus, *An Ephesians Tale* 1.3.3, and 1.9.1. For additional examples see L. A. Alexander, "Better to Marry than Burn: St. Paul and the Greek Novel," in R. F. Hock et al., *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (SBLSymS 6; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 235-56. See also Sirach 23:17, "Desire, blazing like a furnace, will not die down until it has been satisfied; the man who is shameless in his body will not stop until the fire devours him."

¹² See the helpful comments of David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), 274-75.

¹³ Only in relatively recent times has this sexual ethic been questioned. The contemporary rise of homosexuality, combined with a post-modern way of reading texts, has raised questions about the church's traditional sexual ethic. For a detailed analysis of the New Testament's sexual ethic, see Collins, *Ethics and the New Testament*; Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament*; Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*.

¹⁴ The Colorado Statement on Biblical Sexual Morality offers us a standard evangelical articulation: "Sex outside of marriage is never moral. This includes all forms of intimate sexual stimulation that stir up sexual passion between unmarried partners." Quoted in Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality*, 370.

question for singles—is easily answered. If an activity is sexual, it is to be reserved for the marriage relationship.

Yet for the sake of clarity we must press this further. Beyond the seemingly obvious activities above, there is real confusion among evangelicals about what constitutes sexual activity. There are a wide array of physical activities that are inherently non-sexual; holding hands, a kiss on the cheek, a peck on the lips, hugging, walking arm in arm, etc., are all non-sexual activities. While sexual arousal may indeed accompany such activities, the activities themselves are not inherently sexual. But there are other physical activities that are exclusively sexual. It is these activities (at least) that must be reserved for the marriage relationship. But how are we to tell which is which?

Perhaps the most objective way to determine the sexual nature of an activity is to consider it against the backdrop of the family relationship. Within the context of family relations, there are certain physical forms of affection that are inappropriate (fondling, oral sex, etc.). And the reason they are inappropriate is precisely because such activities are sexual. Thus we can quickly intuit which activities are sexual by considering an activity within the context of the family relationship. If an activity would be *sexually* inappropriate between a mother and a son, then that action is clearly of a sexual nature. Or again, the activities that we intuitively exclude from family relationships *because those activities are sexual*, are, in fact, sexual activities. To clarify, note here that this way of identifying sexual activity is not primarily concerned about what *I* would (or would not) do with *my* mother, but rather about what is deemed to be generally appropriate between biological relatives. While a particular man might never hold hands with his mother (given the interpersonal dynamics of their relationship), that same man would not view it as sexually inappropriate for a mother and son to hold hands. If Genesis 26:8-10 is any indication, even ancient pagan cultures have distinguished between sexual and non-sexual activity *via* the context of the family relationship.¹⁵

This criterion becomes enormously helpful when considering appropriate premarital boundaries, particularly as it relates to one of the most common activities in contemporary dating relationships: passionate kissing. Many (perhaps most) Christian dating couples regularly engage in passionate kissing. And for the most part, evangelical pastors and leaders have not provided definitive, biblical counsel here. Clearly some forms of kissing are non-sexual. Fathers kiss their children, and sons their mothers. But there are other forms of kissing that men reserve exclusively for their lovers. And the reason they do so is because such forms of kissing are sexual. When we consider passionate kissing against the backdrop of the family relationship it quickly becomes clear that passionate kissing is not merely affectionate, but sexual. Under no circumstances would it ever

¹⁵ Even in ancient pagan Greek culture (not known for espousing a moderate sexual ethic), familial relations were assumed to be non-sexual. See Alcibiades' comment regarding his attempted seduction of Socrates, "My night with Socrates went no further than if I had spent it with my own father or older brother!" (Plato's *Symposium*, 219d).

be appropriate for a brother and sister to engage in passionate kissing. Thus we conclude the following:

- 1) All sexual activity must be reserved for the marriage relationship.
- 2) Some forms of kissing are sexual. Therefore,
- 3) Sexual forms of kissing must be reserved for the marriage relationship.

The logic of the above is, I believe, inescapable. In order to legitimize sexual forms of kissing in a premarital relationship, one would need 1) to provide a cogent rationale for why passionate kissing is not sexual; or alternately, 2) to legitimize sexual activity outside of the marriage relationship. The first is counter-intuitive to the way human sexuality actually functions. The second runs counter to the ethic of the New Testament.

The objective definition provided by the family test is not the last word on sexual purity. There is, of course, more to purity than how one behaves with the body (Matthew 5:27). And every “objective” boundary can be worked around by sin-inspired creativity. But in spite of its limitations, it does provide a solid framework for clearly identifying which bodily activities are inherently sexual. Humans are embodied beings; as such, we need an embodied ethic. While it *may* be a sexual act for a particular man to look at (talk to, etc.) a particular woman, it is *always* a sexual act when he does something with her that would be sexually inappropriate between immediate blood relatives. To be sure, there may be good reasons to refrain also from non-sexual acts of intimacy outside of the marriage relationship.¹⁶ If Jesus condemns even the look that leads to inappropriate sexual desire, how much more the touch (sexual or not) that leads to inappropriate sexual desire. But while wisdom may often call for a more restrictive posture than what is required by the family ethic, it never calls for less.

Pastors and ministry leaders have been sending a mixed message about premarital sexual activity. On the one hand, in keeping with the sexual ethic of the New Testament, we’ve clearly articulated that sexual activity should be reserved for the marriage relationship. But on the other hand we’ve largely ignored—or actually legitimized—sexual forms of kissing. We are in effect saying that while sexual activity is not permissible in premarital relationships, sexual activity is permissible in premarital relationships. If the preceding sentence doesn’t make sense to the readers of this essay, it’s not making sense to singles either.

At its heart, the New Testament ethic calls for premarital relationships to be completely non-sexual. Sexual forms of kissing fall afoul of this ethic,

¹⁶ Even non-sexual touch can arouse sexual desire. Further, physical affection (whether sexual or not), makes a statement about one’s intentions, and often creates misplaced expectations. For a discussion about the mixed messages men and women send to each other via non-sexual interaction, see my *Raising Purity: Helping Parents Understand the Bible’s Perspective on Sex, Dating, and Relationships* (Rolling Meadows, Ill.: Iustificare Press, 2010), 53-100.

likewise any activity that is sexually inappropriate between immediate blood relatives. Simply put, if an activity is inherently sexual, it is to be reserved for the marriage relationship.

II. *πορνεία* THEN AND NOW: MOVING BETWEEN THE ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURES

For many, the above argument will suffice as a clear explication and contemporary application of the New Testament's teaching on premarital sexual ethics. But some will want more. With the rise of postmodernity, the need to take seriously the cultural distance between the world of the Bible and our own has been increasingly felt. Is it legitimate to import the Scripture's vision of sexual ethics directly into today's culture? After all, the world of the Bible knew nothing of contemporary dating relationships. As we've seen, the New Testament was not forced to provide specific guidance about premarital sexual boundaries. In what sense, then, can we ask the Bible to speak to an issue that does not find an exact parallel in the culture of the Bible?

I'm not at all certain the cultural distance between the world of the Bible and our own is as insurmountable as some suggest. To point out that the Bible does not mention dating relationships is a *non sequitur*. Of course it doesn't. But it *does* offer us a clear sexual ethic for unmarried men and women—*sexual activity is to be reserved for the marriage relationship*. And it is this explicit sexual ethic that must inform contemporary premarital relationships. Evangelicals err when they allow transient cultural structures (i.e., dating relationships) to negate Scripture's clear transcultural sexual ethic. As N. T. Wright correctly observes,

We cannot relativize the epistles by pointing out the length of time that has passed between them and us, or by suggesting any intervening seismic cultural shifts which would render them irrelevant or even misleading. It is an essential part of authentic Christian discipleship both to see the New Testament as the foundation for the ongoing [mission of the church] and to recognize that it cannot be supplanted or supplemented.... That is what it means to live under the authority of Scripture.¹⁷

That there is cultural distance between the ancient world of the Bible and today is true enough; but the mere observation of this fact does not suffice as an adequate objection to the central claim of this essay.

However, as with any paradigm shift, marshaling all the available data is important. What follows is a preliminary offering of three distinct theological readings of the Scriptures that support the premarital ethic argued for above. The first two approaches draw upon the work of unlikely allies—Christian Smith and William Webb. The last approach looks closely at the intra-canonical movement of the Bible regarding sexual morality. We begin with Smith.

¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 125-26.

A. A CHRISTOCENTRIC READING OF SEX: SEXUAL UNION
AS A TYPE OF CHRIST'S SPIRITUAL
UNION WITH THE CHURCH

In his provocative book on hermeneutics, *The Bible Made Impossible*, Christian Smith argues that the only right way to read and apply the Bible is to examine its ethical teaching through the lens of Christ and the gospel. The Bible, Smith argues, does not offer us a discernibly coherent and unified stance on any one topic. Thus, for Smith, all attempts to arrive at a “biblical” position on any topic (e.g., sexual ethics, finances, relationships, politics, etc.) are doomed from the start. Instead we are to use the Bible solely as a means of understanding Christ and the gospel. Smith writes,

The Bible is not about offering things like a biblical view of dating—but rather about how God the Father offered his Son, Jesus Christ, to death to redeem a rebellious world from the slavery and damnation of sin.... This is not to say that evangelical Christians will never have theologically informed, moral and practical views of dating and romance.... They may and will. But the significance and content of all such views will be defined completely in terms of thinking about them in view of the larger facts of Jesus Christ and the gospel.¹⁸

Smith goes on to muse, “Perhaps God has no interest in providing to us [through the Bible] all of the specific information people so often desire...perhaps God wants *us* to figure out how Christians should think well about things like war, wealth, and sanctification.”¹⁹ According to Smith, Christians are to use the Bible as a means of gaining a picture of Christ and the gospel, and then use this picture as a means of developing one’s own appropriate ethic. In some instances, a Christocentric reading of the Bible may lead us in a different direction than the actual stated imperatives of the New Testament.

I do not here highlight Smith’s work because I find it to be the best representation of a Christocentric hermeneutic. Indeed, I find Smith’s approach significantly problematic.²⁰ But insofar as critics of my position

¹⁸ Smith, *Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicalism Is Not A Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich., Brazos Press, 2011), 111.

¹⁹ Smith, *Bible Made Impossible*, 112.

²⁰ Smith’s proposal represents a radical departure from the way the Bible has been historically read by the church catholic (not just evangelicals). It’s one thing to note, as Smith does so effectively, the difficulty Christians have had in ascertaining the Bible’s teaching on a given topic (what Smith calls the problem of “pervasive interpretive pluralism”). It’s quite another to deny, as Smith seems to do, that such a teaching even exists. Smith cites the “four views” books produced by evangelicals (e.g., four views on the second coming, etc.) as evidence of pervasive interpretive pluralism. Smith overreaches here. The fact that we do not have total agreement on a given issue does not mean that we have no agreement. Evangelicals may have four views on the Lord’s return, but we all believe he is coming again. As far back as the Fathers, the moral imperatives of Jesus and the Apostles as encoded in Scripture and properly interpreted, have been looked to as binding on and by the church. Certainly Smith is correct that there are many things in Scripture about which God has not given us a full picture. But the church, broadly and universally construed, has not shared Smith’s severe pessimism about the legitimacy

on premarital sexual ethics tend to resonate with Smith's work, I intend to show that Smith's Christocentric hermeneutic—like the more traditional Christocentric readings of other evangelical scholars—actually supports the central argument of this essay.

Fortunately, when it comes to sexual ethics, searching for a Christocentric starting point need not take us long. As it happens, Paul provides us with an obviously Christocentric reading of sex in Ephesians 5:30–32. In what is certainly the New Testament's most developed treatment of sex and marriage, Paul pointedly describes the sexual relationship within marriage as an image of the spiritual relationship between Christ and the church. For Paul, sex and marriage typologically point beyond themselves to an ultimate fulfillment in Christ's marriage to the church. Which is to say, sex is fundamentally about Christ and the gospel. Note carefully the significance of the last sentence of verse 32 within its context.

For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church (ESV, emphasis added).

Paul is here discussing the relational dynamics of Christian marriage. And as he gives instruction to husbands and wives about how they are to treat one other, he draws a tight parallel between human marriage and Christ's relationship with the church. The way Christ treats the church, Paul tells us, serves as the pattern for the way in which a husband is to treat his wife. And the way the church relates to Christ is the way a wife is to relate to her husband. But by what logic does Paul ask husbands and wives to relate to one another as Christ and the church? The answer is found in verse 32. The sexual oneness of human marriage, Paul tells us, "refers to Christ and the church." Drawing upon the ancient marriage formula of Genesis 2:24, Paul reveals that sexual oneness within marriage was created by God to serve as a typological foreshadowing of the spiritual oneness that has now begun to exist between Christ and his church. The New Testament's many references to the church as the "bride" of Christ, and to Christ as the "bridegroom" further highlights this parallel. Additionally, many of Christ's parables use the wedding motif as an illustration of his return and consummate union with the church. And the

of attempting to discern and apply the imperatives of Scriptures—however difficult this may be to do well. In my estimation, a hermeneutic driven by Smith's hyperbolic fear of biblicism truncates the church's capacity to speak definitively and objectively about ethics and morality—something Christians sorely need today. For a more balanced hermeneutic that takes seriously the challenges of applying the biblical imperatives across cultures, see Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005), and N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1992), 121–44.

book of Revelation explicitly refers to the wedding supper of the Lamb as inaugurating the dawn of the eternal age.²¹

What Paul says here about marriage is equally true about sex itself. True Christian marriage cannot be constituted apart from sexual union. The phrase “οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν” (*the two shall be one flesh*), used in 5:31 speaks specifically about sexual union, not simply marital union in a general, legal sense. (See 1 Corinthians 6:16 where Paul deploys the identical “one flesh” phrase to denote sexual union with a prostitute.) Within the context of the Ephesians passage, the metaphor of bodily union (i.e., head to body) is tied intimately to the sexual relationship. For Paul, sex establishes and creates the bodily union upon which true marriage is based.²² Thus Paul’s statement that marriage is a type of Christ’s relationship to the church is at the same time a statement that sexual union is a type of Christ’s spiritual union with the church (again see 1 Corinthians 6:16-17 for this close parallel).

²¹ The church has traditionally understood the marriage relationship through a typological framework. So 2 *Clement*, “Now I do not suppose that you are ignorant of the fact that the living church is the body of Christ, for the Scripture says, ‘God created humankind male and female.’ The male is Christ; the female is the church,” 2 *Clement* 14:2. Also Augustine, “It is of Christ and the Church that this is most truly understood, ‘the twain shall be one flesh,’” *On Forgiveness of Sins, and Baptism*, I.60. And of course Catholic theology views the marriage relationship in a sacramental (and thus typological) sense. See Thomas, *Summa* III.42.1, and John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, (Boston, Mass.: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), cat. 87-102. The Reformers—given Reformation polemics—were less sanguine about highlighting the typological (and thus potentially sacramental) nature of the marriage relationship. But Calvin, commenting on Ephesians 5:23, nonetheless states, “Christ has appointed the same relation to exist between a husband and a wife, as between himself and his church,” *Commentary on Galatians and Ephesians* (trans. William Pringle; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2003), 317-18. So too Luther, while denying that types are inherently sacramental, still affirms, “Christ and the church are... a great and secret thing which can and ought to be represented in terms of marriage as a kind of outward allegory,” *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (trans. A. T. W. Steinhauser; Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1970), 223. Edwards, who did not share the Reformer’s reservations, stated explicitly, “[Christ is] united to you by a spiritual union, so close as to be fitly represented by the union of the wife to the husband,” “The Excellency of Christ, 1758” in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, (eds. Wilson H. Kinnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 186. Barth also follows this pattern in his extended comments on the relationship between men and women. See his *Church Dogmatics*, III.2, 285-324. Many modern evangelical commentators embrace this typological interpretation as well. See O’Brien’s, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 428-36; Ray Ortlund, Jr., *God’s Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996) 152-59; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians: Word Biblical Commentary*, (Dallas, Tx.: Word Books, 1990), 352-53; and John Stott, *The Message of the Ephesians*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979), 230-31.

²² In the ancient world—far more than today—sex was viewed as the means by which a marriage was constituted. However, even in the ancient world there was more to marriage than sex (e.g., see John 4:18 and the woman at the well). Marriage in the ancient world began at betrothal—generally a formal agreement between the families of the bride and groom. For more on marriage in the ancient world, see Ken M. Campbell, ed., *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003).

And of course this makes sense when we consider the relational dynamics of sex. Sex, when understood from a Christocentric framework, is the mutual self-giving and joyful receiving of the husband and wife. John Paul II, in his *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, pushes back against the Cartesian depersonalization of the body and rightly presses home the point that man does not simply *have* a body, but in a certain sense *is* a body. Thus sex, as the union of male and female bodies, is properly (and theologically) understood as a form of personal communion—a “gift of self.” Thus, when a man pursues a woman sexually, what he desires (even if he does not realize it) is not simply the surrendering of her body to him as a material object, but rather her *personal* openness to receive him as a gift. In sex the man offers himself to the woman as a gift, and he finds his joy in her opening herself to receive him as the gift he offers of himself. And she, for her part, finds her joy in yielding herself to another before whom she is vulnerable, who seeks her joy in the giving of himself, who uses his strength to bless rather than totalize. And in this way she too is gift to him, for she gives herself as gift to him in that she opens within herself a place for him to dwell, trusting and receiving the man’s gift of self, and returning it in like kind. Most significantly, this mutual giving and receiving of the self may result in new life—a child; the man places his very life in the woman, and she receives and nurtures it (and thus him) in an expression of personal communion so profound that it actually has the power to instantiate the *imago Dei*.

All of this finds its deepest meaning in Christ’s relationship with the church. We give ourselves as gift to Christ in the free surrender of ourselves, that we might joyfully receive him as gift. He *himself* is the gift of grace that we receive, and we *ourselves* are the gift that we give to Christ. We find our joy in opening to him and making room for him to dwell within us, and he finds his joy in placing himself—and thus his life via his Holy Spirit—inside of us, and being joyfully received by us. Thus Paul frames for us a view of sex and marriage whereby they are not ends in themselves, but rather are *types* of something higher, pointing to the deeper reality of the believer’s union with Christ. Just as the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb in the Old Testament foreshadowed Christ’s atoning sacrifice in the New, so too the mutual self-giving and joyful receiving of spousal love “refers to Christ and the Church” (Ephesians 5:29).²³

Even without considering the explicit imperatives in the New Testament, Paul’s Christocentric reading of sex provides us with a theological framework for thinking about the whole of sexual ethics. Because sexual union functions as a living witness of the spiritual oneness between Christ and the church, our sexual conduct should be patterned after the way in which Christ and the church relate spiritually.

²³ This typological reading of sex can be found throughout the church’s history. Among the Fathers, Origen is noteworthy; see his *Commentary and Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Medieval exegetes likewise read spousal love in this way. See especially St John of the Cross’, *Spiritual Canticle*, and Bernard of Clairvaux’s *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. For recent interpretations, see John Paul II’s, *Man and Woman*, especially 500-03, and Peter Leithart, “The Poetry of Sex,” n. p. [cited 17 January, 2012]. Online : <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2012/01/the-poetry-of-sex>.

The prohibitions against homosexuality, polygamy, incest, prostitution, fornication, bestiality—indeed all forms of *πορνεία*—find their ultimate explanation against the backdrop of this reality.²⁴

And most significantly, it is within this Christocentric framework that we can begin to think constructively about premarital sexual activity. Were we to look beyond the direct imperatives of Scripture (as Smith would have us do) and construct our own premarital sexual ethic based exclusively on a Christocentric reading of sex and marriage, we would be pointed toward a conclusion consistent with what I've argued for above. God has ordained sex as a means of foreshadowing the one-spirit relationship between Christ and the church; therefore we misuse our sexuality when we express it outside the context of the marriage relationship.

Most fundamentally, our sexuality has not been given to us simply for our own use and pleasure. We are not self-referential. As *eikons* made in the image of God, all of our humanity—not least our sexuality—exists as a means of representing the One in whose image we have been made. Premarital sexual activity therefore, must be assessed in light of this fundamental context of meaning. Given the theological and typological import of sexual relations, it is difficult (if not impossible) to justify *any* amount of sexual activity outside the context of the marriage relationship, even if that sexual activity stops short of intercourse. The man who uses his sexuality in a premarital relationship fails to use his sexuality in a way consistent with the ordained intent of sex. God calls us to reserve our sexuality for the marriage relationship, because it is only in the marriage relationship that the image of Christ's relationship to the church can be lived out.

B. WILLIAM WEBB'S "MOVEMENT HERMENEUTIC:" MOVING FROM THE ANCIENT CULTURE TO THE BIBLE

Beyond a Christocentric reading of sex, William Webb, in his important book, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, offers us a second reading of Scripture that supports the premarital sexual ethic of this essay. Webb's hermeneutic, like Smith's, is concerned with navigating between the world of the Bible and our own. Key to Webb's thesis is the idea that we must observe the "movement" of the biblical text as it relates to its host culture. In some cases (e.g., slavery) the Bible represents movement away from the host culture toward a more *generous* ethic. In other cases (e.g., homosexuality) the Bible moves away from the host culture toward a more *restrictive* ethic. This "movement" of the Bible in relation to the host culture helps us discern the spirit of the text with a view to application in our contemporary context. When we see the Bible adopting a consistent posture on a given topic (e.g., always constrictive), we appropriately project and apply this posture in our current context.

²⁴ In brief, homosexuality fails to denote the union of the masculine and the feminine (i.e., the strong and the vulnerable); prostitution, divorce and adultery fail to denote Christ's single-minded fidelity to his bride; incest fails to portray the union of dissimilar natures (i.e., the divine and human). See Gerald Hiestand, *Raising Purity*, 156.

I have reservations about certain aspects of Webb approach,²⁵ but I find his emphasis on movement insightful. Most saliently for our purposes, Webb examines the “movement” of Scripture as it relates to sexual ethics (homosexuality, specifically). Webb rightly observes that the Bible consistently offers a more rigid sexual ethic than that of the host culture.²⁶ The Torah’s strict sexual code represented a significant departure from the culture of the ancient near east. Sexual cultic activities common in the ancient world are forbidden by the Torah; homosexuality is strongly condemned. Prostitution—a practice as old as humanity, and often celebrated in pagan worship—is severely chastised. The Levitical purity codes likewise banned incest and bestiality. About the only common ground one can discern between the sexual ethics of the ancient near east and that of the Torah is a mutual rejection of adultery, and fornicating with another man’s virgin daughter.

The same constricting movement can be seen as we move from the Greco-Roman world to the New Testament. The sexual ethics of the Greco-Roman culture differed little from the pagan culture of the Old Testament. Homosexuality in Greco-Roman culture was socially acceptable; likewise concubines, prostitution, and cultic sexual worship. Fornication was considered inconsequential, as long as it occurred between a male and his prostitute/mistress/slave. For its part, the New Testament offers a sexual morality just as counter to the Greco-Roman culture as does the Torah to the Canaanite culture. And indeed Jesus’ sexual ethic as contained within the Sermon on the Mount pushes the discontinuity to an even deeper level. Not only does Jesus condemn sexual immorality, but he condemns even the *desire* to commit sexual immorality. Again, the only common ground between the world of the New Testament and the larger Greco-Roman culture is a mutual rejection of adultery, as well as a mutual rejection of fornication between a man and a respectable virgin.

The Bible’s posture here is consistent. Throughout the canon’s development, the biblical movement has always been toward a more constrictive sexual ethic than that of the pagan culture. Webb rightly concludes that this consistency indicates we must not “loosen” the Bible’s sexual ethic regarding homosexuality. Webb’s conclusion is equally

²⁵ Webb (not unlike Smith) asks us to consider the possibility that Scripture is pointing to an “ultimate ethic” beyond the pages of Scripture. Thus for Webb, in many instances we will need to “move beyond” the teaching of the Bible and develop an ultimate ethic that captures the “spirit” of the original text. See *Slaves, Women, and Homosexual: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2001), 33. Webb is to be commended for grappling with the difficult reality that the Bible’s ethic (particularly as it relates to the Torah’s statements about women, slavery, war, etc.) often seems less judicious than that of contemporary society. But Webb does not sufficiently consider how the “intra-canonical” movement of the Bible (explicated in well-formed biblical theology) can provide an “ultimate” ethic without moving beyond the pages of the New Testament. Which is to say, all trajectories in Scripture reach their consummation with the advent of Christ and the dawn of the New Covenant. For an extended critique of Webb along these lines, see Thomas Schreiner, “William J. Webb’s *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals*: A Review Article,” *SBJT* 6 (2002): 46–64.

²⁶ Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 39–40.

appropriate regarding the whole of sexual ethics. Given the overall movement of Scripture, the instinct to see a more restrictive premarital sexual ethic is well founded.

North American culture is not yet as pagan as first century Greco-Roman culture. But certainly the sexual revolution of 1960's began a sea change regarding our culture's vision of sexual morality that put it severely—and increasingly—at odds with the New Testament.²⁷ Webb's movement hermeneutic is not sufficient in itself to establish the premarital ethic being argued for in this essay. But if we wish to embrace a sexual ethic that is consistent with the Bible's historic engagement with the culture, it seems almost impossible to legitimize or remain ambivalent about premarital sexual activities such as oral sex, fondling, or passionate kissing. Such ambivalence fails to fully reckon with the way the Bible has consistently served as a conservative and restricting element for the people of God in light of pagan sexual ethics. Or again, a contemporary sexual ethic that allows for sexual activity prior to marriage does not do justice to the sort of cultural distance the Bible has regularly put between the City of God and the City of Man.

C. INTRA-CANONICAL MOVEMENT: THE GRADUAL REDUCTION OF SEXUAL ACTIVITY FROM CREATION TO NEW CREATION

Webb's insight above is helpful. But even more instructive is the *intra-canonical* movement of the Bible regarding sexual ethics. Not only do we observe a constricting movement as we transition between the pagan culture and the Bible, but we also see a constricting movement within the Bible itself. The sweep of the biblical narrative can be assessed through four distinct epochs: from creation to Torah, from Torah to the New Testament, from the New Testament to the eschaton, and then finally into the eternal age.²⁸ As we will see below, salvation history points us toward a sexual ethic that is finally and fully realized only in the eschaton. In each epoch we observe a continual and gradual funneling of sexual activity into the structure of God's original typological design for sexual relations, which in turn leads inevitably then to the end of sex itself. This overall funneling movement strongly supports the premarital sexual ethic being advocated for in this essay. We will examine each epoch in turn.

1. EPOCH ONE: FROM CREATION TO TORAH.

The Genesis account clearly establishes—and indeed encourages—the sanctity of the sexual relationship between husband and wife (Genesis 2:22-25). But beyond this, the biblical narrative makes it clear that

²⁷ Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*, 13.

²⁸ The recognition that sexual ethics move along a trajectory need not lead us to the conclusion that God's ideal sexual ethic has evolved, or that sexual ethics are relative and arbitrary. Just as divorce was not God's ideal "from the beginning" (Mathew 19:8) yet was permitted—indeed legislated—due to hardness of heart, so too we can understand the progressive nature of biblical sexual ethics. See John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 267-77, for a helpful discussion regarding how the definition of adultery was progressively expanded by Israel from creation to the time of Christ.

God has not yet imposed upon his people a stringent sexual ethic. The patriarchs regularly engaged in polygamy, prostitution, incest, and the taking of concubines. Only adultery is met with God's firm disapproval (Genesis 20).

As is the case in much of the ancient world, sexual misconduct for the patriarchs was not so much about temperance and the need to master one's passions (as one finds in Plato, Aristotle, and Paul), but rather an important aspect of respecting one's fellow man. Consorting with a prostitute was not considered an impropriety (suffice she was paid; see Genesis 38:1-23), since she did not belong to anybody. But sexual relations with a respectable man's daughter, or with another man's wife, was viewed in the ancient world as a form of stealing.²⁹ Thus the offense was not primarily against an abstract "purity" law, nor was it principally against the woman involved in the incident. The offense was against the man to whom the woman belonged. (Note that the Lord's rebuke of David focuses on David's sin against Uriah. Nathan compares David's sin to that of a rich man stealing a poor man's ewe lamb; see also 2 Samuel 12, 1 Kings 15:5.) Thus there was a sort of "natural law" instinct within the ancient world against the most basic forms of sexual immorality (i.e., adultery, and fornication with a man's virgin daughter). But beyond this minimal ethic, neither divine revelation nor the culture constrained the males of the ancient world in their sexual conduct.

2. *Epoch Two: From Torah to the New Testament.*

The giving of the Mosaic Law represents the first real constricting movement of the Bible away from the sexual ethics of the pagan culture. Polygamy is still permissible, as are concubines; but incest (Leviticus 18:6), and prostitution—particularly of the cultic variety—is forbidden (Leviticus 18:29). Fornication with an unbetrothed virgin is penalized and discouraged (Deuteronomy 22:29). Divorce is regulated in a way that encourages monogamy (Deuteronomy 22:19, 29). Homosexuality and bestiality are banned under pain of death (Leviticus 19). It is not a coincidence that a more stringent sexual ethic coincides with the Lord's indwelling of his people *via* the tabernacle. This begins to indicate that something more than property rights and "honor thy neighbor" is at work in divinely sanctioned sexual ethics. As the Lord's indwelling of his people under the Old Covenant pointed typologically toward the indwelling of his people in the New Covenant, it is to be expected that biblical sexual ethics should develop in step with the approach of the anti-type. Sex is not merely about respecting the rights of one's fellow man, but is in some way reflective of personal holiness in view of one's union with God.

At the same time that sexual activity is being funneled more restrictively into the marriage relationship, the marriage relationship is itself celebrated. This period of redemptive history continues to affirm, along with the creation account, the beauty and worth of sex and marriage

²⁹ For an extended discussion here, see Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex*, 144-63.

(Song of Songs, Proverbs 5:18-19). Though the Levitical purity laws tie together marital sex with ceremonial uncleanness, the overall force of this negative inference is offset by the celebration of sex in the Wisdom literature, as well as the Torah's affirmation of children as a blessing from God.

3. Epoch Three: From the New Testament to the Eschaton.

The teachings of Jesus and the Apostles represent the third epoch of the Scripture's sexual ethic. The New Testament assumes and affirms the sexual ethic of the Torah, and then moves beyond this to an even more constrictive sexual ethic. This constriction can be seen in at least four ways.

First, Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:27-30 regarding lust places an emphasis upon sexual purity not fully developed in the Torah.³⁰ Not only must one maintain sexual purity as it relates to *sexual activity* (per the Law), but also as it relates to *sexual desire* (per the coming Kingdom of God). This ethic of desire, while perhaps seminally present in the Torah (e.g., "thou shall not covet") is given a more central and penetrating focus in the New Testament.

Second, polygamy is at last laid aside. Though no longer practiced widely in the first century, the writings of the Apostle Paul formally codify the necessity of monogamy for the Christian community (1 Timothy 3:2). Thus not only is marriage now the only context for sex, but marriage itself is limited to a single partner.³¹

Third, the New Testament's teaching on divorce restricts sexual activity to a single life-long relationship. Under the Torah, divorce was legislated in a way that, while discouraged, left room for a man to have multiple marriages, and thus multiple sexual relationships. However one interprets the New Testament's teaching on divorce and remarriage, it is clear that the New Testament holds out life-long monogamy as the ideal. The net effect is not only the limiting of sexual activity to a monogamous marriage, but the limiting of marriage itself to a single occurrence.

Fourth, and perhaps most notably, celibacy is for the first time highlighted as a positive—if not ideal—state. The personal examples of Jesus and Paul, as well as Paul's explicit teachings in 1 Corinthians 7, all mark a significant shift away from the creation mandate of Genesis 1:28 and the general posture of the Torah toward marriage and children. Throughout much of the Old Testament, the people of God were given only a minimalist view of the "afterlife." Consequently, a heavy emphasis was placed upon physical offspring as the means of "living forever." But

³⁰ So, John Paul II, "[The Law's stance on sexual ethics] is not concerned directly with the order of the 'heart' but with the order of social life as a whole..." *Man and Woman*, 272. Whether one interprets Christ's teaching in the Sermon as a higher ethic than the Mosaic Law, or an illumination of the intent of the Law, it is clear that Christ's overall ethic strongly pushes beyond sexual behaviour to the intentions and desires of the heart in ways that the Law did not fully do.

³¹ Loader rightly observes, "Polygamous marriages gave men greater flexibility for what was seen as legitimate sexual expression," *Sexuality in the New Testament*, 40.

the close of the Old Testament and the advent of the New brought clarity regarding a future resurrection; thus the significance of children began to recede into the background, making way for a new embrace of celibacy. Under the New Covenant marriage is no longer the ideal state. While the New Testament continues to see sex and marriage as laudable, the in-breaking of the age to come reveals that we are moving toward an epoch where not only extra-marital sex will be discontinued, but even marital sex itself will be set aside. As Cyprian notes of consecrated virgins: "That which we shall be, you have already begun to be."³²

4. Epoch Four: The Eternal Age and Beyond

We arrive now at the fourth epoch. Jesus' comments in Matthew 22:29-32 about the temporal nature of marriage reveal that marriage—and thus sexual relations—do not extend into the eternal age.³³ No longer will we marry or be given in marriage. The typological relationship between human marriage and Christ's marriage to the church helps us make sense of this final abolition of sex. Once the anti-type has been fully realized, there is no longer a need for the type. In the same way that Christians no longer sacrifice the Passover lamb, so too human marriage will no longer be necessary as a pointer to Christ and the gospel. When the sun has risen to its zenith, the shadow is no more. Celibacy, then "points out the 'eschatological' virginity of the risen man, in which...the absolute and eternal spousal meaning of the glorified body will be revealed in union with God himself."³⁴ It makes sense, then, that the New Testament's emphasis on celibacy and permanent monogamy corresponds to dawning of Christ's incarnation and his betrothal to the church.

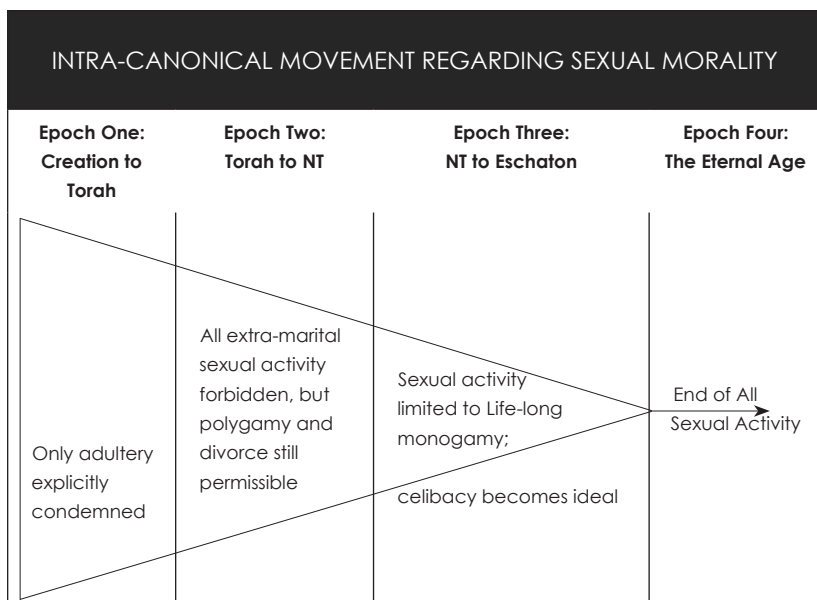
In sum we find ourselves now living at that point in the biblical narrative where sexual activity has been reduced to monogamous, permanent relationships, and celibacy highlighted as an ideal. Further, we are moving toward an age (an age which has already dawned) where sexual relations will be set aside all together. The figure below provides a visual representation of the Bible's movement from a broad, permissive sexual ethic, toward the ultimate absolution of sex and marriage.³⁵

³² Cyprian, *The Treatises of Cyprian*, 2.22.

³³ Barth rightly observes that Jesus' comments here refer to the cessation of marriage, not the abolition of gender. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.2, 296. So to Augustine, who perhaps had more cultural pressure to argue for the abolition of gender (particularly femininity) at the resurrection. See *City of God*, 22.17.

³⁴ John Paul II, *Man and Woman*, 419. See all of catechesis 75.

³⁵ For a thorough biblical-theological treatment of this trajectory, specifically as it relates to celibacy and singleness, see Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness*.



The implications are clear. Even without an explicit statement from Scripture about premarital sexual ethics, the overall trajectory of the Biblical narrative, as it moves from a broad sexual ethic toward the complete absolutism of sex itself, strongly supports the limiting of all sexual activity—even minor sexual activity—to the marriage relationship. Given the trajectory of the Bible’s sexual ethic toward complete abstinence, it is nearly impossible to suppose that premarital sexual activity such as oral sex, passionate kissing, fondling, etc., represents fidelity to the spirit and redemptive-historical movement of Scripture. Such a conclusion would unnaturally “widen” the assumed sexual norms of both Testaments, and run counter to the overall restricting trajectory of the Bible.

CONCLUSION

Ambrose once said, “The condition of the mind is often seen in the attitude of the body...Thus the movement of the body is a sort of voice of the soul.”³⁶ Indeed it is. And nowhere does the voice of the soul speak louder than in our sexuality. Sex carries such significance in our lives because it was ordained by God to point toward that which is most significant—Christ’s relationship with the church. Thus the misuse of sex damages us in ways that other bodily sins do not. As the Apostle Paul states, “Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body (1 Corinthians 6:18).

While “thou shalt not make out” is not as explicit as “thou shalt not commit adultery,” the Bible does indeed offer us a clear sexual ethic: sexual activity is to be reserved for the marriage relationship. When we combine

³⁶ *On the Duties of Clergy*, 1.18.

this sexual ethic with an intuitive understanding that sexual activity includes more than sexual intercourse, we can confidently conclude that all forms of sexual activity—even sexual forms of kissing—must be reserved for the marriage relationship.

For too long pastors and Christian leaders have neglected to provide definitive instruction about the appropriate boundaries of premarital relationships. Telling singles that the Bible has nothing explicit to say about premarital sexual activity beyond its prohibition against intercourse is an unacceptable fulfillment of our pastoral responsibility. The stakes are simply too high, and human sexuality simply too important.

The reigning premarital sexual ethic of evangelicalism is muddled and unclear. The pressing need of the moment is for evangelical pastors and leaders to articulate a clearer, more pastorally responsible premarital ethic—one that is biblically authoritative, theologically robust, and sufficiently objective.³⁷ May this essay be a step in that direction.

³⁷ Embracing this ethic will inevitably necessitate a rethinking of contemporary dating relationships. For my views of on this, see Hiestand and Thomas, *Sex, Dating, and Relationships*.