

The Problem of 'Purity'

MARA PATRICK DAVIES

Don't get me wrong: in the aftermath of the 60's "free love" movement and the 80's glut of promiscuity, our Christian culture does need to examine how to establish a moral presence in an atheistic world. However, I see a reactionary response lurking on the horizon that, if unchecked, could lead to another Victorian era of counterproductive conservatism within Christian society, and I think it safe to say that all but a few acknowledge that the Victorian era was rather, well, unhealthily repressed.¹

As a matter of fact, Christian society is still suffering some of the aftershocks of Victorianism. While the rest of the world is wallowing in "freedom of filth," Christian circles are clamping down, equating all kinds of updated Victorian social norms and specified political views with Christianity. While a standard code of conduct is essential to the functioning of any society, it is the Christian's responsibility to make sure that she does not judge based on a Christian *societal* norm over and above a *Biblical* principle, and even more importantly, that the two are not confused.

This leads me to one of the areas that Christians, as a whole, have failed to recover from Victorian oppression: Sexuality. In truth, humans are essentially sexual beings. It is a completely inherent drive that, unlike eating, unites all aspects of the human person: the soul, the body, the mind and the emotions. It permeates our persons in that the same hormones that develop the maleness or femaleness give rise to secondary characteristics that may or may not be essential to the biological functions of that sex, but are adornments that otherwise beautify the human form. Men tend to have the robust, defined muscles from their sex-determining hormone; in contrast, women have graceful lines that have been prized in art for centuries. Sexuality is a curious notion, but it is essentially good, and rooted in Perfection.

That Christians as a society have reacted violently to damaging cultural ideals is not surprising or blameworthy. However, regardless of what "the world" does or engages in, Christians are still charged with the responsibility of being good stewards of all our Lord has equipped and blessed us with. Human Sexuality is no exception. While I am all in favor of abstinence until marriage, having practiced it myself, it is rather disturbing to me to see all of the Christian propaganda on "Purity"— the new buzz word, the new hot topic. One difficulty lies in semantics: Christians are called into *lives of purity* that outlast the teenage and twenty-something courtship period and extend well into every area of life, not just sexuality. We see a need for this emphasis in the following statistic: Christian divorce rates are the same as non-Christians in the US.² While I will not get into the myriad causes of such a situation, the crux of the problem is that Christian culture appears to be missing the forest for the trees.

Before we move on, we need to look at what sexuality is. Sexuality is a gift from God, and the main goal is not the pleasure. Of course, the pleasure resulting from sexual union is an integral part of the point, but the highest purpose of sexual intimacy is the demonstration of God's intimacy with us; the mere physical sensation of pleasure is eclipsed by the awe-inspiring spiritual act of worship. The act of consummating marriage is in many respects similar to the Sacrament of Communion: it is one avenue Christians have been given to experience the power and presence of Christ as a reminder of Himself until He comes back for us (Ephesians 5:31-32).

Because sexuality in its rightful place is such a holy act that in its demonstration reveals one of the mysteries of our Lord, the Adversary will do everything in his power to distract, corrupt, pervert, and otherwise destroy any possibility for humans to experience proper sexuality. It cannot be overemphasized that the sexual union is one way of "experiencing God," as the popular Christian term goes. Some of Satan's weapons are familiar to us: perversion, fornication, adultery, lust; however, others of his arsenal are yet hidden to many, and this is where the heart of our discussion lies.

"Purity"—a commitment to abstinence before marriage as understood in the Christian societal context—is in danger of becoming the end, rather than one of the essential ingredients to the rightful end. In other words, our Christian culture is in danger of making an idol out of abstinence. And believe it or not, Satan is more than happy to work with this. We've already seen Abstinence undermined: Britney Spears made it a joke, and I wouldn't bet fifty cents that Jessica Simpson really "made it." But have we seen yet Abstinence out of context? It disturbs me greatly to hear about unwed, even unengaged young women going public with their "commitment to Purity"; they are not taking the Sacrament of Holy Orders. I would no more set myself up on a pedestal, but I, a married woman of some years, have a right to talk about being abstinent until marriage. My husband and I "saved ourselves" for each other until our wedding night, *and* we can talk about the end to which abstinence contributed. Rebecca St. James and the Barlow Girls still have their trials by fire ahead of them—yet even my husband and I had the good sense to not go blathering about "our commitment" until the feat had actually been accomplished.

What these young women are trying to promote is wonderful, but it is dangerously one-sided. And Satan can take advantage of this by removing the beauties of the proper sexual relationship from our minds. Abstinence for its own sake will not get a person very far: recent studies have shown that those committed to virginity until marriage have comparable rates of STDs and engage in risky sexual behaviors, getting at "everything but."³ Christians may lash back at such studies by declaring them biased, but from a common-sense standpoint, abstinence as a means of birth control, or even as a means

of obedience to God,⁴ does not provide much motivation. No one naturally responds to “Thou Shalt Not” except in the opposite direction (one aspect of the truth Paul wrote about when he said the Law condemns, see Romans 7, particularly verses 5 and 8). However, this problem can be addressed by providing a model to young adults on the reason we are sexual creatures in the first place.

I have seen some attempts made at this in materials I came across during the pre-marital counseling my husband and I went through. Blasé, nonspecific, empty adjectives described what waited for us when we participated in sexuality as God meant for us to: “wonderful,” “whole,” “beautiful.” Christian literature was rather shallow in its promises for a properly exercised spiritual-sexual union. And how could it be anything but? With sexuality a taboo subject except for “True Love Waits” slogans, where is there room to discuss the Heaven-sent?

There is one way in which exercising a proper relationship is like the way of salvation: “narrow is the road.” It is riddled with dangers before *and* after the wedding ceremony. Before is the oft-addressed call to abstinence, but *after* lies the call to continued purity (in the real sense of the term)—there are pressures that beset the marriage on all sides that our current campaigns of “waiting hearts” do not address.

So what keeps people going for the long haul? My suggestion is one of universal appeal: let’s loosen up a little bit. I’m not talking about forming Christian swingers. But I am suggesting that perhaps taking the taboo off of conversations, studies, Christian fiction even, and providing a model of proper Christian sexuality would be a good way to start. Let’s pull out the King James version (or even The Message!) of Song of Solomon and celebrate the sensual desire that parallels how our God hungers for us in the deepest part of His being. Let’s re-examine Classical and Medieval literature that’s not afraid to go there.

Let’s, for example, talk about *Nicole of Prie Mer*, though I will not spend much time here. It is my understanding that Ms. Hardy has set off something of a fire-storm among some of her Christian readers for the “sex” scenes in *Nicole*. I suppose that first, a distinction should be made between the inexcusable blow-by-blow scenes within romance novels (if you’ve never stumbled on one, consider yourself fortunate) and what Ms. Hardy depicts: the big-picture blissful out-workings of a properly exercised sexuality within a married couple’s relationship. Ms. Hardy provides a model for both those waiting for marriage as well as those already married. We do not witness R-rated scenes (and those who maintain that they *are* R-rated have nothing in their experience legitimately against which to compare them). However, in her characters’ sexuality we see an alternative to the damaging sexuality that runs rampant in society, and we see the grace that flows in Nicole’s and Ares’ relationship *as a direct result* of their marital faithfulness.

Unfortunately, this is beginning to sound much like Sir Philip Sidney's "The Defense of Poesy,"⁵ when "stories" were coming under societal attack after a conservative political rout by Puritans in Britain. However, what was good enough for him is good enough for me—he is by far my elder and better. "But what! shall the abuse of a thing make the right use odious?"; Sir Philip exclaims. This is in answer to the allegation that "[Imaginative fiction/poetry] is the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires; with a siren's sweetness drawing the mind to the serpent's tail of sinful fancies" (and this is especially applicable to stories with happy endings as pointed out by Chaucer, Sidney notes). Sidney also bemoans the abuse that the subject of love has taken over the centuries, remarking that she has no defense, and that as the victim she is being punished for others' improper use; then, he goes on to note Love is a powerful tool that, because of its great potential, may be used for good or for ill. He ends this section of his argument with the following analogy: "Truly a needle cannot do much hurt, and as truly—with leave of ladies be it spoken—it cannot do much good. With a sword thou mayst kill thy father, and with a sword thou mayst defend thy prince and country." And so I put forth: Satan has stormed Christian territory, taking marital love and perverting it, and uses it against the world. Let us now take it back, I say, so that we may indeed, "Defend our Prince and country." But the sword of truth is not paired with blinders.

The model of a proper sexual relationship is more well-rounded than an abstinence-only campaign. Momentarily, put yourself in the place I was in some years ago, and the same situation many young women are faced with every wedding season. For my whole courtship, abstaining had been the aim, the rule, the way of life. During the wedding ceremony, my whole existence was turned upside-down, and in the span of thirty seconds and two "I do's," sex went from being taboo to something expected of me. Then, a few hours later, I was faced with the physical invasion of my own body—what had been mine, and in seconds, was no longer. My husband, as seems to be the case with men, had no difficulty in transition. However, I know that I am not the only female who found herself in a conundrum in that, though I desired it and loved and trusted my husband, was inherently scary and foreign. Holding onto abstinence left me nothing after the wedding vows. I had no Nicole and Ares as my model; only a dark, unexplored road ahead of me, that, due to its foreignness, seemed ominous. Now take note: this situation served me no good—one who was already acclimated to obedience. How much more does this silent model of sexuality allow itself to be perverted to Satan's uses?

This is not a healthy way to deal with sexuality. While William and I blazed our own route, and with time and plenty of understanding came into our own, I still resented the Christian schema thrust upon me, and soon began to be disturbed by the greatly increasing publicity for abstinence. "Those with ears to hear, let them hear." Let us not give

Satan yet another opportunity to steal sexuality from us by over-emphasizing abstinence, but let us instead be mindful of *all* the ingredients of a healthy relationship. Let us honor those couples whose sexuality is a witness of God's love. And let us not be afraid to read and discuss not only Song of Solomon but also those pioneering authors who offer us something more than the packaged Christianity; who offer more than a "Thou Shalt Not"; but something a teenager may conceivably say, "I want that—I want to have a relationship like that. I see the value of sex in its proper place, and I want that."

And above all, let us give thanks for *all* things God has granted us, including that great mystery of existence as a sexual being.

¹ For more information on Victorian-era morality, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victorian_morality

² The Barna Group: "**Born Again Christians Just As Likely to Divorce As Are Non-Christians**", found at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=170>

³ "Study: 'Abstaining' Teens Still Risk STDs," <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,150902,00.html>, March 21, 2005

⁴ In no way is it my intent to undermine the importance of obedience. In all things, if we understand nothing else, we are preserved in our attempts to follow God. However, with our once-saved-always-saved, forgiveness is the rule Christian culture, old-fashioned obedience is not a motivational point for many, and this is what I am attempting to highlight.

⁵ Sir Philip Sidney, "The Defense of Poesy"; text taken from <http://www.bartleby.com/27/1.html>, line 64. Excellent analysis and background information may be found from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume 1B, Seventh Edition, pages 933-954.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mara Patrick Davies resides in North Texas with her husband, William. Mara specializes in Inkling studies, but really has a fondness for most all of the Great Works. She can be reached at MaraPatrickDavies@yahoo.com, but does not check her e-mail much.