

## A BIBLICAL ARGUMENT AGAINST PREMARITAL SEX

by  
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The conversation came as a surprise. I was chatting with a young seminarian in our student lounge—that crucible where classroom theory dons a practical shape—about his future plans and upcoming wedding, when the question of premarital sex somehow came up. “I’m committed to abstaining from premarital sex,” he assured me in the most earnest of tones, “but I’ve never seen a biblical case for abstinence.” I was stunned. The young man in front of me had gone through four years of Christian high school, four years of Bible college, and had been in church weekly since before he could walk. How had this oversight occurred? We chatted a bit more and I trotted out the well-worn case from Genesis 2: God’s created design for humanity, the one-flesh principle, the biblical pattern of “leaving, cleaving, and only afterwards weaving,” the analogy of Christ and the Church, etc.

The student agreed that, though non-prescriptive and a bit abstract, the theological arguments made sense, and added that his sexual impulses had been further checked by other arguments ranging from lingering cultural disapproval, psychological unpreparedness, troubling statistics about the failures of those who has sex before marriage, to the problem of surprise pregnancies that could not only cripple his ministerial plans, but inordinately disadvantage the lives of a young mother and child. These arguments together offered a convincing cumulative case against premarital sex, he opined, but fell short of an *exegetical* case for abstinence.

At this point some interruption or other suspended our conversation, but its memory lingered. And when I was called upon to teach a class in ethics a short while later, I resolved to make this topic one of the first of our class discussions. To prepare, I pulled out all the standard evangelical ethics books and found almost nothing. I also searched the available OPACs and databases—again, mostly nothing. Turning to popular literature and weblogs I found a realm dominated (1) by arguments of the sort that my student described as “sensible,” albeit “abstract” and “non-prescriptive,” mostly from Genesis 2, but also from Ephesians 5, the Song of Songs, etc., and (2) by carefully crafted utilitarian arguments. The biblical argument, when it was made, very often

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reduced to a biblical censure of *πορνεία*, a term broadly assumed to equate with or at least to include premarital sex in its scope.

Stymied at every turn, I set about building an exegetical case more-or-less from scratch, hoping that one of my ethics students would show me up as a terrible researcher and uncover that elusive article/essay/book that had made a convincing biblical case against premarital sex. The jury is still out on my research skills, but one thing I can say: my class came up empty too. The following, then, is a foray into an area somewhat outside my regular “field” to demonstrate the biblical immorality of premarital sex.

## A QUESTION OF METHOD

While approaches to ethics abound, most suggest that there are two major categories into which almost all ethical approaches fall: consequentialist/teleological/utilitarian systems and deontological/virtue-based systems. While this article will adopt the latter of these approaches, a few words need to be said about ethical theory by way of introduction:

### Consequentialist/Utilitarian/Teleological Ethics

In the consequentialist/utilitarian/teleological approach to ethics, some authority structure (e.g., the individual, a committee of elites, or democratic society generally) arbitrarily identifies certain governing ideals or ends for humanity, then assigns moral value to actions based on the success of those actions in achieving those ends.<sup>2</sup> Purely consequentialist systems are non-foundational in nature (i.e., no action is ever *intrinsically* good or bad), and very often relative in expression (i.e., the ideals favored in a given milieu are not universal, and are often permitted to evolve along with society).

The Christian ethical approach is not ultimately a consequentialist one, but this does not mean that it has no consequentialist elements. Scripture sometimes instructs Christians to adjudicate the ethical propriety of actions according to utilitarian standards, viewing certain

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<sup>2</sup>Chief among representatives of this emerging model in the classical period is Plato’s ideal of the “good life,” defined as a utopian state in which all citizens freely and justly pursue the good of the whole city, preferring communitarian altruism over egoist pleasure/wealth (see esp. his *Republic*; but for a nice overview of Platonic ethics see “Plato’s Ethic: An Overview,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Ethics* [online], last edited 13 July 2013, accessed 26 June 2015, available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-ethics/>). In the modern era, John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham loom large, assigning ethical value according to the ideal of the “greatest good,” defined firstly in terms of “flourishing” for the greatest number of people, but also privileging *individual* over *totalitarian* utilitarianism in the absence of “harm” external to oneself—for these the potential anarchy of “social liberty” could also lead to the tyranny of totalitarianism (see principally Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government with an Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. Wilfrid Harrison [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948]; John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Roger Crisp [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998]).

actions as intrinsically neither right nor wrong, but as *becoming* right or wrong based on their purpose/result: eating or drinking is ethically right or wrong depending on whether it glorifies God (1 Cor 10:31), lawful behavior becomes unethical if it fails to advance the Gospel (1 Cor 9:22–23) or causes a brother to stumble (1 Cor 8:13). In all these passages we are specifically directed to look to the consequences of our actions to establish a qualified sort of “relative” morality. Of course, God’s immutability means that his ideals are unchanging, so it is incorrect to describe the Christian system as purely relative; still, consequences can play a real role in establishing Christian morality.

The reasons I mention the preceding are manifold. First, I want to stress that the Christian system does not demand “proof texts” in order to make a valid claim. In the absence of textual proof, the Christian has at his disposal an array of consequential and pragmatic factors to adjudicate the morality/immorality of a given practice—factors that, once established via the Christian Scriptures, are equally authoritative as Scripture’s explicit claims.<sup>3</sup> Second, and theologically, the doctrine of biblical sufficiency teaches us that even when the Bible does not speak comprehensively about a given activity (or even at all), it does speak comprehensively *to* all things: we have, in God’s Word, “everything we need for a godly life” (2 Pet 1:4).<sup>4</sup> God never leaves us without guidance, nor does he cede to us moral autonomy. Specific to our discussion, this means that “sensible” theological principles found in Scripture can carry real ethical freight even when the Scripture writers do not delineate all of the specific implications of those principles. And as we learn God’s system of truth ever more thoroughly, those implications became clearer and more comprehensive every day. Third, the Bible’s own appeals to utilitarian argument assure us that there are reasons for the commands and prohibitions of Scripture. God’s ethical expectations are never arbitrary, but always have a logical basis that may be sought and usually found.<sup>5</sup> A comprehensive Christian ethic labors not only to

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<sup>3</sup>For instance, it is possible to say that when a Christian does some lawful deed (say, eating meat) knowing that it will shut down opportunities for the Gospel or cause a brother to stumble, he is not merely doing something “unwise,” but something actively evil—equally as evil as if he were to lie or kill or steal in violation of God’s explicit command. Similarly, it is possible to offer up a truly *Christian* argument against, say, cocaine use or pornography without locating any explicit biblical prohibition of these practices. Why? Because a comprehensive Christian ethic not only discovers Bible verses, but also incises the motives and consequences of activities and then commends/condemns them for variously promoting or opposing God’s revealed purposes.

<sup>4</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references reflect the NIV (2011). For the distinction between speaking *to* all things rather than *about* all things as a paradigm for discussing biblical sufficiency in the context of ethics I am beholden to Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008), 29; cf. also his *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1970), 16, 139–40.

<sup>5</sup>I say “usually” because the purposes for God’s laws are sometimes hidden, elusive, or, to use my student’s words in the introduction, “abstract.” But given time and a

find proof texts, but also to find the supporting theological network for every ethical standard: our ethic is strongest when it offers arguments both textual (this is *what* thou shalt or shalt not do) and utilitarian (this is *why* thou shalt or shalt not do). In summary, I am arguing that if the present article fails to establish a textual argument for sexual abstinence prior to marriage, we are not for this reason obliged to grant approval to premarital sex. There remain theological, utilitarian, and pragmatic factors that legitimately come to bear on the morality of the practice—factors that exceed bare exegetical evidence. We may *want* a clear Bible verse, but are not reduced to personal whims if we do not get one.

### Deontological or Virtue-Based Ethics

The foregoing being true, the fact remains that Christians want a Bible verse. And that is because the Christian ethical system is not ultimately a consequentialist/utilitarian system, but a deontological (from the Greek δέον/δέω, “to be necessary”) or virtue-based one. In a deontological approach, the moral value of an action is based on its conformity (or lack of conformity) to some prescriptive standard of *duty* or *ought* (e.g., natural law, divine command, or sundry other legal codes). While this approach may include consequentialist features, it vests final authority in a lawgiver and his prescribed ends. In deontological models it does not ultimately matter whether one can explain the utilitarian rationale for an ethical precept or even if there *is* such a rationale; one simply obeys because the law is an extension of the self-authenticating and sovereign lawgiver who is always right. There is no higher court of appeal than the lawgiver.

The Christian ethical system, as an example of “faith seeking understanding,” requires the individual to submit to God’s revealed law irrespective of whether he fully grasps its complex rationale.<sup>6</sup> That is not to say that God’s law is *not* reasonable (it is); however, God does not always reveal its rationale and need not do so. We obey not because we have plumbed the ways and inscrutable decree of our God, but because he is our Sovereign Lord and Righteous Judge.

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sympathetic eye, it is often possible for a Christian to discover implications of divine commands that the unbeliever either cannot or will not see. For instance, the unbeliever who engages in a homosexual act often cannot see the broad civic implications of that act multiplied in human society, and thus expresses libertine anger when faced with biblical prohibitions: “This is consensual,” he says, “We’re not hurting anyone, so back off!” But a believer who patiently takes the “long look” at God’s commands, lingering long over the text to discern their theological basis, is often rewarded with the discovery not only of local and immediate consequences of a given act, but also broad and systemic ones. The twin graces of illumination and wisdom, which God supplies freely to all who seek them, play a critical role in Christian ethics.

<sup>6</sup>Just as the believer should accept God’s Word according to Augustine’s famous rubric, “*Neque enim quaero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam. Nam et hoc credo, quia, nisi credidero, non intelligam*” (“I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand. For this too I believe, that unless I first believe, I shall not understand”), so also he must accept God’s revealed ethic.

All of this suggests that while utility and pragmatics are not to be held in ill regard, the Christian's ethical "gold standard" takes the form of plain, unmanipulated, propositional revelation in Scripture.<sup>7</sup> Christians search first for direct biblical arguments before constructing biblical-theological paradigms that expand the scope of Scripture beyond its most rudimentary truth claims. The Bible is our ethical *norma normans non normata*. With that in view, let us see what Scripture has to say directly about premarital sex.

### PRE-MARITAL SEX AND THE MOSAIC LAW

Because Scripture describes the New Testament believer as no longer under the Mosaic Law (Rom 10:4; 1 Cor 9:20–21; Gal 2:19–21; 3:23–25; Eph 2:15; Col 2:14–16; etc.), it is common to overlook ethical stipulations from the Mosaic economy when building a distinctively Christian ethic. As a dispensationalist I understand this sentiment. Still, unless one opts for some sort of evolving divine ethic,<sup>8</sup> it follows that many of the laws of the OT exist to manifest in history God's immutable ethical character. Some OT laws, to be sure, perpetuate some theocratic and/or cultural utilities that no longer exist today; but in the absence of clear evidence that this is the case, we should give serious attention to the fact that many of Moses's restrictions are historical windows into God's fixed and transcendent standard of righteousness. This being the case, it is appropriate, I think, to begin here.

#### Exodus 22:16–17 (15–16 Heb.)

<p>If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride-price, and she shall be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins.</p>	<p>וְכִי־יִפְתֶּה אִישׁ בְּתוּלָה אֲשֶׁר      לֹא־אָרְשָׁה וְשָׁכַב עִמָּה כְּזָרָה יִמְהַרְנֶהָ      לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה: אֲבִים־יָמָאן וְיָמָאן אָבִיהָ      לְתַתָּהּ לוֹ כֶּסֶף יִשְׁקַל כְּמוֹהָר      הַבְּתוּלָה:</p>
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Before dealing with exegetical details of this passage, we must address a contextual issue that bears on its contemporary applicability. These two verses appear at the juncture of two sections of the text, raising questions of their function. Some observe that verses 16–17 appear

<sup>7</sup>The early chapters of Romans do, of course, speak of natural forms of revelation whereby we receive an ineffable knowledge of God and his ways "from Creation" (1:20) and from the law of God engraved on our hearts (2:15). These direct us to a rudimentary knowledge of what is natural/unnatural (1:26–27) and commendable/blame-worthy (1:32; 2:14–15). While such revelations must surely not be discounted, however, their non-propositional and unverifiable nature renders them secondary in value to the written Word.

<sup>8</sup>I.e., William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), specific to our discussion, p. 46.

at the close of a section on *property rights*, and belong properly to this discussion by virtue of their emphasis on recompense made to the father for his economic loss.<sup>9</sup> If this is the case, then the verse does not speak at all to sexual ethics; indeed, the fact that Western culture by-and-large does not view daughters as property could eliminate contemporary application entirely. Others, however, suggest that these verses appear just as the chapter broadens into a series of detached social responsibilities (including one of a sexual nature in v. 19),<sup>10</sup> and as such have a broader function that is more favorable to contemporary social ethics.

While I am tempted to accept the latter view, the case for the former is stronger: economic rights are undeniably at the center of these verses.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, the resolution of the problem involves more than material restitution;<sup>12</sup> it also carries with it the obligation to *marry* (v. 16). This implies that the seducer has not only deprived the father of his right to compensation, but has also stolen the girl's prospect for security and stability (her virginity) without "paying" for it (i.e., he has used her merchandise without reciprocating with the guarantee of perpetual provision through marriage).<sup>13</sup> Unless the father intervenes, the

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<sup>9</sup>So John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 327; Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 448; Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), 499; Duane A. Garrett, *A Commentary on Exodus*, Kregel Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 507; Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1974), 474; R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 173; Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 538 (though note that he sees these verses as "transitional"—541).

<sup>10</sup>So John D. Currid, *Exodus*, 2 vols., Evangelical Press Study Commentary (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2001), 2:98–99; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Exodus," in vol. 2 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 438; John L. Mackay, *Exodus* (Fearn, Great Britain: Mentor, 2001), 389; John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in Exodus*, 2nd ed. (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1986), 240; Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for Glory*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 733.

<sup>11</sup>Indeed, Moses does not address the seduction of a single but previously engaged or married woman, as this situation involves no financial loss (William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, AB [New York: Doubleday, 2006], 253; and esp. David Halivni Weiss, "A Note on אֲשֶׁר לֹא אֵרְשָׁה," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 [March 1962]: 67–69).

Roland DeVaux helpfully corrects the misconception that women are mere chattel property in the Mosaic system. The groom does not technically offer the bride price (קֶדָה) to *purchase* the bride but rather to compensate her father for his material loss (*Ancient Israel*, vol. 2, *Social Institutions* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966], 26–29). DeVaux's understanding is punctuated by the fact that the father would reciprocate with a very substantial dowry at the wedding proper (see David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 7). It is demonstrable that the Hebrew system improved greatly on the contemporary ANE norm, regarding women more as persons than as property.

<sup>12</sup>Contra the suggestion dubiously forwarded both by Durham (*Exodus*, 327) and Enns (*Exodus*, 450).

<sup>13</sup>So esp. Childs, *Exodus*, 476–77.

perpetrator must marry the girl as the most obvious way of paying for what he has stolen from her. As such, these verses are not a question merely of patriarchal economics, but of personal/sexual ethics.

Having established that sexual ethics are in view, we move on to the exegetical details of these two verses, where we find a pair of classic casuistic (if/then) structures, the second subsidiary to the first. The opening protasis in verse 16 sets the stage for our discussion, offering two key qualifiers that narrow its function. First, we discover that the perpetrator *seduces* a virgin (פְּתוּהָ—alt. to *entice, persuade, or convince*).<sup>14</sup> The use of term has a twofold function: it tells us we are dealing neither with rape (which by its definition involves no persuasion) nor female prostitution, whether ritual or commercial (circumstances that involve either no persuasion or persuasion principally by the woman). Both of these vices are discussed elsewhere in the Torah (Deut 22:25–29 and Lev 21:9/Deut 23:17–18 respectively), but neither is under consideration here. Second, we discover that the victim is a virgin who is “not betrothed” (אֵשֶׁר לֹא־אֵרְשָׁהּ). It may be tempting to suggest that this language is used to make an exception for intercourse between a man and his fiancée during their betrothal period,<sup>15</sup> but this is not at all the point of the qualification; instead, commentators unanimously agree that this qualification is here to distinguish this case from consenting adultery, a capital crime involving an individual or individuals who are betrothed or married to *someone else* (Deut 22:23–24).<sup>16</sup> What we have here in Exodus 22 is a case of premarital sex that is *not* rape, *not* adultery, and *not* prostitution.

The apodosis makes clear that the seduction and consequent intercourse are not simply an alternative path to marriage, but a criminal diversion for which marriage offers a measure of rectitude: the man has done something wrong, not against property but against persons, and must make things right not only by material restitution, but also (unless the father exempts the offender from this obligation) by a lifelong personal commitment. Obviously this is not an instance of *capital* punishment, but there is no escaping the fact that it is *punishment*, and as such implies guilt: premarital sex is plainly wrong.

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<sup>14</sup>HALOT, s.v. “פְּתוּהָ,” 2:985.

<sup>15</sup>So the argument goes, “We should not have sex without some level of mutual commitment, but so long as we are mutually committed to marriage by way of betrothal/engagement, sex is okay.”

<sup>16</sup>So Garrett, *Exodus*, 514. The idea that a modern engagement promise is the same as ANE betrothal is an oversimplification. In fact, the part of the man’s “seduction” in this passage may have included an engaging promise of marriage short of betrothal (so Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 253) In an ANE betrothal, the bride price (קֶדָוּה) transferred legal responsibility for the woman to her suitor—legally speaking, a practically irreversible first step of the marriage process. During the betrothal period the man and woman were not yet (fully?) married and had no conjugal liberties; still, any crime against the girl from the point of betrothal forward was viewed as a violation of the new legal entity (adultery) and not as a crime against the girl’s birth family.

## Deuteronomy 22:20–21

If [a man takes a wife and accuses her of not being a virgin, and] the charge is true and no proof of the young woman's virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done an outrageous thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father's house. You must purge the evil from among you.

וְאִם־אָמַת הָיָה הָדָבָר  
 הָיָה לֹא־נִמְצָא  
 בְּתוּלִים לַנַּעַר וְהוֹצִיאוּ  
 אֶת־הַנַּעַר אֶל־פֶּתַח  
 בֵּית־אָבִיהָ וְסָקְלוּהָ  
 אַנְשֵׁי עִירָהּ בְּאֲבָנִים  
 וּמָתָהּ כִּי־עָשְׂתָה נְבִלָה  
 בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל לְעֵינֵי בֵּית  
 אָבִיהָ וּבַעֲרַת הָרָע  
 מִקִּרְבָּךְ:

ἐὰν δὲ ἐπ' ἀληθείας  
 γένηται ὁ λόγος οὗτος  
 καὶ μὴ εὐρεθῆ  
 παρθένια τῇ νεανίδι,  
 καὶ ἐξάξουσιν τὴν  
 νεᾶνιν ἐπὶ τὰς θύρας  
 οἴκου πατρὸς αὐτῆς,  
 καὶ λιθοβολήσουσιν  
 αὐτήν οἱ ἄνδρες τῆς  
 πόλεως αὐτῆς ἐν  
 λίθοις, καὶ  
 ἀποθανεῖται, ὅτι  
 ἐποίησεν ἀφροσύνην  
 ἐν υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ  
 ἐκπορνεῦσαι τὸν οἶκον  
 τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῆς· καὶ  
 ἐξαρεῖς τὸν πονηρὸν  
 ἐξ ὑμῶν αὐτῶν.

A lengthier and more complex discussion of premarital sex occurs in the second giving of the law, this time involving a woman who engaged in premarital sex with another man, then concealed the secret liaison (note the entire context beginning in verse 13). There is no doubt in this passage that premarital sex has occurred, because the woman is said to have committed her offense “while in her father’s house,” that is, before her legal transfer from the authority and protection of her father to those of a husband. What is less clear in this passage is the precise reason that the girl was to be executed. We have already examined a passage where premarital sex was seen to be unlawful, but not a capital offense. This being the case, it stands to reason that the woman’s offense in Deuteronomy 22 has been compounded beyond the circumstances discussed above in Exodus 22. So what are these compounding factors?

For some, the girl’s chief crime was that she deceived her husband-to-be and married him under the false pretense that she was a virgin. As such, her capital crime, her “outrageous” נְבִלָה (what is “stupid,” “willfully sinful,” and “repulsive”)<sup>17</sup> is a complex of fraud, theft, and above all the disdain of patriarchy—publicly humiliating her father and ruining her new husband.<sup>18</sup> She has completely ruptured Israelite society by

<sup>17</sup>HALOT, s.v. “נְבִלָה,” 1:664.

<sup>18</sup>In Richard Nelson’s words, “The central issue seems to be less her earlier sexual behavior per se than its outcome in marriage under false pretenses, shaming both father and husband” (*Deuteronomy*, Old Testament Library [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002], 271).

committing “a breach of the laws of the ancient sacral tribal confederacy.”<sup>19</sup> Several factors support this understanding. First, Nelson observes favorably an alternate reading that sees the father’s house as the *object* rather than the *place* of fornication: her crime was not being profane *while in her father’s house*, but rather profaning *her father’s house*.<sup>20</sup> Second, the fact that the punishment mirrors that of the recalcitrant son (21:18–21) suggests that the crime was one of “family honor and social integrity”—a deed that jeopardized the patriarchal way of life.<sup>21</sup> Third, the absence of any mention of the man with whom the girl enjoyed her initial dalliance suggests that premarital sex was a trifling matter when compared to what the woman did afterward.<sup>22</sup>

Others suggest that the chief reason (or perhaps another reason) for seeing the girl’s crime as a capital one was that her initial act took place during her betrothal period, and was therefore an instance of the capital crime of adultery.<sup>23</sup> This view suppresses the fact that the sin occurred “in her father’s house” and also argues from silence;<sup>24</sup> its strength, however, is that it offers a stronger criterion for public execution.

A final understanding is that the girl’s elemental crime was nothing more than simple intercourse that took place before she left her father’s house: premarital sex. This view has the greatest textual support. First, it is the plainest construal of the majority Hebrew reading: her “outrageous” crime was “being promiscuous while still in her father’s house.”<sup>25</sup> Second, the Deuteronomist’s choice of the term זָנָה (LXX ἐκπορνεύω), which normally refers to fornication/prostitution, often as performed by

<sup>19</sup>J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 236. See also Anthony Phillips, “Another Look at Adultery,” *Journal for the Society of the Old Testament* 20 (1981): 10.

<sup>20</sup>Nelson, *Deuteronomy*, 265. Specifically, the Samaritan Pentateuch supplies the hiphil infinitive לְהַזְנוֹתָ (“she caused [her father’s house] to be profaned”) rather than the Masoretic qal infinitive לְזַנֶּה (“she was profane [in her father’s house]”). We also note as that the qal reading must supply an “in” (which does not appear in any Hebrew manuscripts) to make sense.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 271. Nelson goes so far as to suggest that this parallel “may provide the key to understanding why this is such a sensitive issue.”

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>So Phillips, “Another Look at Adultery,” 10. Daniel Block also describes her crime as “premarital adultery,” though he does not specify that it is betrothed promiscuity (*Deuteronomy*, NIV Application Commentary [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 52).

<sup>24</sup>An alarming one, at that, since the test of virginity upon which the girl’s life teetered would not be able to differentiate between betrothed promiscuity (a capital offense) and unbetrothed promiscuity (which in this model is *not* a capital offense). See esp. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 206.

<sup>25</sup>Despite Nelson’s argument for the hiphil reading, the qal reading remains the firm majority reading; this coupled with the consonantal emendation necessary to the hiphil creates an obstacle too great for the minority reading to overcome.

unbetrothed girls still under their fathers' authority (e.g., Lev 19:29; 21:9; Ezek 23:3, 5; and esp. Hos 4:13–14), is unusual if he intended to communicate the narrower concept of adultery (normally designated by the Heb. term זנות). In Tigay's words,

The use of the term "fornication" rather than "adultery" suggests that the law refers to intercourse at any time before marriage and is not limited to the period of engagement (contrast vv. 23–24). This is consistent with verse 14, in which the husband does not claim that his bride lost her virginity *after* he betrothed her. The available evidence would not enable him to do so. This clause makes it clear that the girl's crime is the act of fornication, not merely concealing the fact from her husband.<sup>26</sup>

The weakness of this view is that it does not offer so ready an explanation for the extreme punishment meted out on what is elsewhere a non-capital crime (cf. vv. 28–29; also Exod 22:16–17).<sup>27</sup> This is not to say, however, that proponents of this view have no explanation at all. The answer seems to lie in the fact that by concealing her fornication and entering into a marriage covenant under the false pretense of virginity, she *became* guilty of a high-handed breach of her marriage covenant the instant she entered it. By so compounding her sin, she exceeded the situations in vv. 28–29 and in Exodus 22, where, so long as the sin was discovered and addressed immediately, no breach of covenant would occur. But by marrying another man, the woman in our passage became guilty of a capital crime. Her crime was not so much the bruising of a *patriarchal* society, but rather a breach of Israel's *covenantal* society through an unconfessed and subsequently amplified act of premarital sex.<sup>28</sup>

## PREMARITAL SEX AND 1 CORINTHIANS 7

There is no more important informing text for crafting a NT ethic of premarital sex than 1 Corinthians 7. True, Paul does not set out in this chapter to offer us a comprehensive theology of Christian sexuality, much less a comprehensive statement on premarital sexuality; still, he does speak to the issue, and in his statements he demonstrably assumes even more.

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<sup>26</sup>Deuteronomy, 206.

<sup>27</sup>And we surely cannot accept Alaxander Rofé's conclusion that the uniqueness of stoning as a punishment for simple fornication in the ANE world points to a rogue interpolation by the later hand of an anonymous moralizer ("Family and Sex Laws in Deuteronomy and the Book of the Covenant," *Henoah* 9 [November 1987]: 147–50).

<sup>28</sup>So esp. Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1994), 303–4; also J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 340–41. A similar but less fully developed argument is made by Block (*Deuteronomy*, 524) and by Peter C. Craigie (*The Book of Deuteronomy*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], 293).

## The Context: Revisiting 1 Corinthians 7:1

Now for the matters you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”	Περὶ δὲ ὧν ἐγράψατε, καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἅπτεσθαι.
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As with all discussions of 1 Corinthians 7, much hinges on our interpretation of the very first verse of the chapter, for it colors the whole discussion. Paul begins the verse routinely, following his pattern of responding, one by one, to several practical issues that were, so he has been informed by letter, under debate in the Corinthian church (so v. 1a). But in the second half of this verse two significant interpretive questions emerge: a question of literary function (is Paul’s statement καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἅπτεσθαι [v. 1b] the quotation/summary of a Corinthian position or the beginning of Paul’s own answer to an undisclosed Corinthian query?) and a question of connotation (what does this statement and specifically the words καλός and ἅπτω mean?). These questions do not follow a particular order, because the answer to each question informs the answer to the other. So rather than treat them as separate questions, let me offer the following chart of options:<sup>29</sup>

<b>A<sup>1</sup>:</b> Paul is stating that an unmarried, believing man takes the <b>moral high ground</b> when he refuses to <b>literally touch</b> a woman. <sup>30</sup>	<b>A<sup>2</sup>:</b> A Corinthian faction is claiming that an unmarried, believing man takes the <b>moral high ground</b> when he refuses to <b>literally touch</b> a woman.
<b>B:</b> A Corinthian faction is claiming and Paul is concurring (with a few minor caveats) that a believing man (married or unmarried) takes the <b>moral/spiritual/utilitarian high ground</b> when he <b>avoids ordinary sexual intercourse</b> and that believers should aspire to a celibate state. <sup>31</sup>	
<b>B<sup>1</sup>:</b> Paul is dialoging with a Corinthian position that a believing man	<b>B<sup>2</sup>:</b> A Corinthian faction is claiming that a believing man

<sup>29</sup>The shaded blocks are inserted to complete the chart but I could find no representatives of these positions.

<sup>30</sup>This view is something of a grassroots ideal held by (mostly unpublished) sincere folks attempting to offer a biblical basis for a “no-physical-contact” policy among dating couples. The merits of such a policy may be debated (let the reader decide), but our text most definitely does not offer any warrant for this view. All serious commentators agree that the idea of “touching” (Greek ἅπτω and carried into the KJV, NKJV, NASB, and NRSV) is euphemistic—a polite way of referencing sexual activity (so BDAG, s.v. “ἅπτω,” 126). As we shall observe below, the exact nature of this “sexual activity” is debated, but all agree that this verb reflects a figure of speech and should not be read literally.

<sup>31</sup>This both/and position has features of both the following two positions (B<sup>1</sup> and B<sup>2</sup>) and I did not feel comfortable squeezing its proponents properly in either (C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries [New York: Harper & Row, 1968], 154–55; also the NLT [?]).

(married or unmarried) takes the <b>moral/spiritual/utilitarian high ground</b> when he avoids <b>ordinary sexual intercourse</b> , and that believers should aspire to a celibate state. While Paul agrees, he offers lesser, acceptable options for “ungifted” men who cannot aspire to this “higher” ethic. <sup>32</sup>	(married or unmarried) takes the <b>moral/spiritual/utilitarian high ground</b> when he avoids <b>ordinary sexual intercourse</b> , and that believers should aspire to a celibate state—a position with which Paul substantially disagrees. <sup>33</sup>
<b>C<sup>1</sup>: Paul</b> is stating specifically that an unmarried, believing man takes the <b>moral/spiritual/utilitarian high ground</b> when he chooses not to <b>marry</b> .	<b>C<sup>2</sup>: A Corinthian faction</b> is claiming specifically that an unmarried, believing man takes the <b>moral/spiritual high ground</b> when he chooses not to <b>marry</b> . <sup>34</sup>
<b>D: A Corinthian faction</b> is claiming and <b>Paul</b> is concurring that married, believing men take the <b>moral high ground</b> when they avoid <b>selfish, abusive, or perverse forms of sexual activity</b> . <sup>35</sup>	

<sup>32</sup>This was a majority position of earlier generations, embraced by the likes of Charles Hodge, *I & II Corinthians* (repr. of 1857 ed., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 108–9; Frederic Godet, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2 vols. (repr. of 1886 ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 1:319–21; etc. Among more modern proponents see Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 115; and Chrys C. Caragounis, “Fornication’ and ‘Concession?’ in *The Corinthian Correspondence*, ed. R. Bieringer (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996), 552.

<sup>33</sup>This is the modern evangelical consensus, esp. since the release of Gordon Fee’s landmark article, “1 Corinthians 7:1 in the NIV,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23 (December 1980): 307–14. See the NRSV, TNIV, NET, ESV, HCSB, and NIV 2011; also F. F. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 66; Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scriptures, & Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 151 [but see n. 35, below]; Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy*, Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series 83 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 110–14; Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 498–500; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 248–51; Gordon D. Fee, “1 Corinthians 7:1–7 Revisited,” in *Paul and the Corinthians: Studies on a Community in Conflict: Essays in Honour of Margaret Thrall*, ed. T. J. Burke and J. K. Elliott (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 197–213; idem, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed. New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 299, 306–7.

<sup>34</sup>This reading, found in the NIV 1984, is an unfortunate one that Fee roundly rebukes in his aforementioned “1 Corinthians 7:1 in the NIV.” This translational *faux pas*, derived apparently from a misinterpretation of v. 2, is corrected in the NIV 2011. But see Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914), 132.

<sup>35</sup>Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 267, 272. This position builds on Roy Ciampa’s earlier article, “Revisiting the Euphemism in 1 Corinthians 7:1,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (2008): 325–38.

Fee has made the case for position B<sup>2</sup> most persuasively; so well in fact that, while not the first to advocate this position, he has convinced nearly all who have succeeded him: 1 Corinthians 7 represents Paul's largely corrective answer to a Corinthian faction claiming that it is immoral or unspiritual for believers to engage in ordinary sexual intercourse and that their uniform aspiration should be to the state of celibacy.

Fee begins by demonstrating that Paul's idea of "touching a woman" (γυναικὸς μὴ ἅπτεσθαι) is a non-censorious one denoting ordinary sexual intercourse, citing five examples of the phrase in extrabiblical literature and three in the Septuagint (Gen 20:6; Ruth 2:9; Prov 6:29).<sup>36</sup> While further research has demonstrated that "touching a woman" can also include "taking one's fill without honoring the disposition of the soul of the beloved,"<sup>37</sup> this is not the basic meaning of the phrase; furthermore, the problem of selfish, abusive, or perverse sex is not raised in Paul's extended answer. I remain convinced that nothing here suggests that "touching a woman" means anything more than ordinary intercourse in our context.

That Paul later asserts that remaining single is morally "good" (καλός) in verses 8 and 26 has led some to assume that verse 1 is necessarily of the selfsame Pauline cloth as these verses—and perhaps even reflects a Pauline pecking order, viz., that it is *morally acceptable* to burn with unfulfilled desires, *morally better* to marry, but *morally best* to extinguish sexual passion entirely. As Fee points out, however, the term καλός has quite a broad semantic range and probably carries more a utilitarian than a moral sense in verse 26, connoting what is "advantageous" or "expedient" in the "present crisis."<sup>38</sup> It would have been theologically impossible, I would contend, for Paul to affirm without qualification that the unmarried state is morally superior to the married state (Gen 2:18ff). Nor is Paul inclined to play proto-Gnostic game of recognizing tiers of spirituality, where entry-level believers routinely do not-very-spiritual-but-still-morally-acceptable things while enlightened believers do moral-and-also-spiritual things. Celibacy is either a moral imperative for all believers or it is not—and Paul clearly states throughout this chapter that it is not. Celibacy may be required in certain contexts (most notably when people are unmarried—vv. 8–9, 25–38), but it would be theologically and contextually impossible for Paul to make the affirmation that celibacy is the universally moral high ground.

Thus, while Paul the peacemaker is ever gentle and as affirming as he can be in answering the questions of the Corinthian flock, agreeing with them that marriage/sex can sometimes be a practical distraction to Christian ministry, he disagrees with their conclusion that celibacy is a

<sup>36</sup>Fee, "1 Corinthians 7:1 in the NIV," 308.

<sup>37</sup>Rosner and Ciampa, *First Corinthians*, 274.

<sup>38</sup>Fee, *First Corinthians*, 306; so BDAG, s.v. "καλός," 504–5.

morally superior or universal Christian ideal.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, he teaches that married believers must (1) *remain* sexually active with their existing spouses (vv. 2–7)<sup>40</sup> and must (2) *remain* married even to their unbelieving spouses (vv. 10–16, 39–40), and that unmarried believers should (3) *remain* single (vv. 8–9, 25–38)—unless the drive for sexual fulfillment becomes overwhelming (vv. 9, 36).<sup>41</sup> It is to this final block of texts that we now turn.

### 1 Corinthians 7:8–9

<p>Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.</p>	<p>Λέγω δὲ τοῖς ἀγάμοις καὶ ταῖς χήραις, καλὸν αὐτοῖς ἐὰν μείνωσιν ὡς ἐγώ· εἰ δὲ οὐκ ἐγκρατεύονται, γαμησάτωσαν, κρεῖττον γάρ ἐστιν γαμῆσαι ἢ πυροῦσθαι.</p>
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<sup>39</sup>Paul appreciates the Corinthian desire to privilege eternal over temporal concerns (esp. vv. 29–31), but he cannot accede to the manifest Corinthian Platonism that views the temporal and material realms as unwelcome shackles for the soul to shrug off. Instead, he expects the Corinthians to properly order these good and necessary temporal concerns under the broad aegis of serving their Lord Christ.

<sup>40</sup>It is significant for the purposes of this article that I am not appealing to verse 2 as a demonstration that *single* men can avoid πορνεία (i.e., premarital sex) by marrying: marriage is no *remedium concupiscentiae*. While some have made this suggestion (see, e.g., Robertson and Plummer, *First Corinthians*, 132; Joseph Jensen, “Does *Porneia* Mean Fornication? A Critique of Bruce Malina,” *Novum Testamentum* 20 [July 1978]: 181–82; and poss. implied in the NIV1984), it is demonstrable that verse 2 is speaking strictly to *married* men, who incidentally *may* be helped to avoid πορνεία (in this case extramarital sexual dalliances chiefly with prostitutes) by maintaining a healthy sex life within marriage.

While I have demonstrated above that πορνεία is a term broader than adultery and that it includes cultic and commercial sexual liaisons that occur while a girl is “still in her father’s house” (so LXX Lev 19:29; 21:9; Ezek 23:3, 5; and Hos 4:13–14 as cited above), there is no evidence from biblical or secular literature that the term ever refers explicitly and unequivocally to “pre-marital, heterosexual intercourse of a non-cultic or non-commercial nature, i.e., what we call ‘fornication’ today” (Bruce Malina, “Does *Porneia* Mean Fornication?” *Novum Testamentum* 14 [January 1972]: 17; see also the standard discussions in BDAG, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, etc.). We cannot, of course, prove a universal negative, and clear evidence may yet be forthcoming that πορνεία includes premarital sex; indeed, I would be delighted to find it. But I would be guilty of assuming my conclusion were I to appeal to the NT prohibitions of πορνεία as proof of the immorality of premarital sex without first proving that πορνεία includes premarital sex—and at present I cannot do so. We must make our case through other means.

<sup>41</sup>As Fee rightly points out, the running motif that governs Paul’s chapter-long answer is “remaining” (Fee, *First Corinthians*, 298). But his expectation that believers “remain” in their present status is not a monolithic one. Paul categorically demands that believers remain married and remain sexually active (vv. 2–5, 10–13)—they are absolutely not to initiate any changes in this pattern. His expectation of the unmarried, on the other hand, is not a mandate, but a violable suggestion: they are “not sinning” if they marry (v. 28).

The two verses under consideration are significant for us because they specifically address unmarried or, more narrowly, *no longer married* persons (widows and widowers).<sup>42</sup> Paul's primary advice to this group, as noted above, is to remain single. Paul will offer reasons for similar advice to virgins later in the chapter ("the present crisis" [v. 26], the brevity and transitory nature of the present age [vv. 29–31], and the distractions that married life bring to ministry [vv. 32–35]), but offers none here. The proximity and similarity of these texts, however, at least suggest that these reasons apply here as well. Remaining single has the same utilitarian advantages for widows/widowers as it has for virgins.

For Paul's de-married readers who cannot contain their sexual passions (ἐγκρατεύομαι<sup>43</sup>), however, he offers a single, binding alternative to remaining single: they must marry. What is starkly absent is any third alternative: if they cannot bear the burden of celibacy, they *must* marry and by default *must not do otherwise*.<sup>44</sup> This is highly significant. If indeed the married man suffers perpetually from "divided interests" and "concern about...how he can please his wife" (vv. 33–34), it follows that if Paul knew of some morally valid *tertium quid* between abstinence and marriage—a middle way of non-covenantal, non-committal, non-marital sex—then this would be the obvious occasion for him to suggest it. But he does not. Instead, he offers just two valid options for erogenous widows and widowers: they may either remain celibate and burn with unfulfilled sexual desire (πυρόω)<sup>45</sup> or else they

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<sup>42</sup>Anthony Thiselton defends the historically majority position that the ἀγάμοις (lit. the not-married-men) should be read in its broadest sense, noting that a Greek term for "widower" was available for Paul if that was what he meant (*First Corinthians*, 515–16; so Bruce, *I & II Corinthians*, 68; Barrett, *First Corinthians*, 160). Modern scholarship, however, has tilted in favor of the "widower" reading, noting the extreme rarity of the Greek term for widower, the inclusion of the parallel term χήραις (widows), and the contrast of these designees with the *virgins* of verse 25. This understanding is strengthened by the fact that in verse 8b Paul seems to identify personally (ὡς ἐκὼν) with this group (so Fee, *First Corinthians*, 318–19; Rosner and Ciampa, *First Corinthians*, 286–87; Garland, *I Corinthians*, 275–76). If the latter position is correct (and I am inclined to think that it is), these verses technically offer no advice on premarital sex, because the persons were previously married; still, since Paul anticipates the possibility of remarriage, we have a kind of a pre-remarital sex on the table, and so the text is not completely worthless for our discussion.

<sup>43</sup>A phrase agreed by all to mean being unable to "keep one's emotions, impulses, or desires under control; *control oneself, abstain*" (BDAG, s.v. "ἐγκρατεύομαι," 274).

<sup>44</sup>In Rosner and Ciampa's words, "If Paul's preference for singleness is expressed tentatively, *they should marry* is an unequivocal imperative" (*First Corinthians*, 288).

<sup>45</sup>I resist here the suggestion that Paul is offering a choice between (1) marrying and (2) *burning in hell* for the sins of lust and fornication. While such an interpretation may "preach well," its exegetical basis is dubious (though see Michael L. Barré, "To Marry or to Burn: Πυροῦσθαι in 1 Cor 7:9," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 36 [April 1974]: 193–202). It not only demands several unfounded assumptions (that sexual desire is immoral and/or that fornication has occurred, and also that the sin is irremediable), but also fails to account for the figurative use of burning that looms large in Greek literature (BDAG, s.v. πυρόω, 899).

must marry as the only morally acceptable remedy to sexual “burning.” There is no other option.

### 1 Corinthians 7:36

If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married.

Εἰ δέ τις ἀσχημονεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ νομίζει, ἐὰν ἢ ὑπέρακμος καὶ οὕτως ὀφείλει γίνεσθαι, ὃ θέλει ποιεῖτω, οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει, γαμείτωσαν.

In 1 Corinthians 7:25–38 there is no doubt of Paul’s target audience: he is speaking to believing *virgins* and thus to Christians in the premarital state.<sup>46</sup> As in the rest of the chapter, Paul’s baseline advice is for the virgin to “remain as he is” (v. 26). In this case, however, Paul’s advice is more tentative/temporary than in other sections of the chapter. First, by leading with the caveat “because of the present crisis,” Paul suggests that the need for “remaining” is most tentative for virgins, and that most of the impetus for “remaining” would evaporate once the “present crisis” ended.<sup>47</sup> As such, Paul anticipates that a great many of these virgins would marry *after* the present crisis. Second, by eschewing the language of command (“I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is”), Paul opens up the possibility that some might legitimately seek to marry even *during* the present crisis.

Just as he had with the widows and widowers (v. 9), Paul assures virgins that marriage is a morally acceptable option (so vv. 28, 35, 36, and 38): he is no advocate for universal celibacy. He does offer, however, reasons to pause before marrying, and closes off the section with the startling statement that not marrying is “better” (κρεῖσσον) than marrying. The edge is taken off this statement, however, when we understand Paul not to be imposing tiers of *inherent morality*, but tiers of *temporary utility*: it is not that the single life is morally superior, but rather that, in practical/ministerial terms of the day, celibacy was “more useful” or “advantageous.”<sup>48</sup> What emerges clearly, and significantly for

<sup>46</sup>A few suggest that these are *married virgins*—couples who have entered into a “spiritual” marriage in which they agree to abstain from sexual activity (see the NEB; also Roland H. A. Seboldt, “Spiritual Marriage in the Early Church: A Suggested Interpretation of 1 Cor. 7:68–38,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 30 [March 1959]: 103–19; 176–89; and more recently Greg Peters, “Spiritual Marriage in Early Christianity: 1 Cor 7:25–38 in Modern Exegesis and the Earliest Church,” *Trinity Journal* 23 ns [Fall 2002]: 211–24), but this is unlikely. See Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 339.

<sup>47</sup>Two more timeless deterrents to marriage remain (the brevity and transitory nature of the of the present age [vv. 29–31] and the distractions that married life bring to ministry [vv. 32–35]), but this most urgent reason, it seems, would dissipate with time.

<sup>48</sup>BDAG, s.v. “κρεῖττων,” 2a, 566. Also Fee, *First Corinthians*, 390; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 342–43; Rosner and Ciampa, *First Corinthians*, 363.

our thesis, is that there are only two options for an unmarried man and “his virgin”: marriage or celibacy. As in verses 8–9, there is no other valid path.

Our discussion begins with a clause fraught with interpretive decisions: εἰ δὲ τις ἀσχημονεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ νομίζει. This opening protasis finds someone (τις) “not acting honorably” (ἀσχημονέω) toward “his” virgin. Because the possessive pronoun “his” (αὐτοῦ) speaks of authority, ownership, or responsibility, many suggest that the “someone” in view is not the girl’s suitor, but her *father* or *guardian*—after all, a girl does not “belong” to her suitor until after they marry. If this is the case, then the “dishonorable behavior” in view is extreme paternal caution—dad is not “letting go” of his little girl. He should do the culturally expected thing and “let her marry” (γαμείωσαν).<sup>49</sup> Factors such as (1) the terms used (*virgin* instead of *daughter*),<sup>50</sup> (2) the context (advice to virgins, not the rebuke of cautious fathers), (3) the weight of evidence from the thorny verb γαμείωσαν,<sup>51</sup> and (4) the statement, “he is not sinning,” however, point to another interpretation. It is more likely that the “someone” (τις) is a *suitor* and the virgin a girl with whom he has made some commitment short of marriage (i.e., his betrothed, his fiancée, or in today’s world possibly even his “steady girlfriend”).<sup>52</sup> In this case, the “dishonorable behavior”

<sup>49</sup>So the RV and NASB; Robertson and Plummer, *First Corinthians*, 158; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 134; Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, rev. ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 116–18).

<sup>50</sup>Some have objected that παρθένος (“virgin”) is unusual for *both* prevailing views. One would expect “daughter” for the father/daughter view and “betrothed” for the suitor/fiancée view (so Seboldt, “Spiritual Marriage,” 113; Peters, “Spiritual Marriage,” 213). Using the term παρθένος in the context of betrothal, however, is much more likely, even boasting biblical precedent (Luke 1:27).

<sup>51</sup>This verb both gives and takes from the father/daughter view. One might expect, assuming this view, that the verb would appear in the singular γαμείω, “he should let [her] marry” (a minority reading, but a poorly attested one). Paul’s choice of the well-attested plural γαμείωσαν (“let them marry” or “they should marry”) points more logically to the suitor/fiancée view (below). On the other hand, Paul’s choice of γαμίζω (“to give in marriage”) rather than γαμέω (“to marry”) seems to support the father/daughter view. As Fee and Thiselton observe, however, the virtual synonymy of these two verbs in Paul’s day deals a serious blow to the father/daughter argument (Fee, *First Corinthians*, 390; Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 596–97). For the most complete rebuttal of the father/daughter view see Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 336–38.

<sup>52</sup>So the NIV, NRSV, NLT, ESV; also Barrett, *First Corinthians*, 182–84; Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 594–98; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 340–41; Rosner and Ciampa, *First Corinthians*, 357–59; Fee, *First Corinthians*, 386–89.

Paul knows nothing, of course, of the modern conception of a “steady girlfriend,” but were he here today, he might include this idea. Fee and Barrett seem to suggest as much when they interpret παρθένον αὐτοῦ as “his girl” (Barrett, *First Corinthians*, 184; and Fee, *First Corinthians*, 387 n. 354). In any case, what is interesting is that while Paul is addressing virgins generally, his tightest audience is that of *virgins in a committed relationship with a view to marriage*. This is especially notable in a day when premarital sex has become routine in this demographic, even among Christians.

is either imagined,<sup>53</sup> a matter of social expectation,<sup>54</sup> or, better, a matter of moral propriety—escalating sexual desires and advances short of intercourse.<sup>55</sup> The suitor must do right by his girlfriend and marry her.

The second protasis of verse 36 (ἐὰν ἡ ὑπέρακμος καὶ οὕτως ὀφείλει γίνεσθαι) brings another challenge. The consensus interpretation of those who take the father/daughter view (and not a few others) is something like “If *she* is *past marriageable age* and [culturally] ought to be [married].”<sup>56</sup> The alternative interpretation that fits better with the suitor/fiancée view reads something like “If *he* is *becoming overly passionate* and [marriage] needs to happen,”<sup>57</sup> or possibly “If *he* is *becoming overly passionate* and [intercourse] is inevitable.”<sup>58</sup> The major question here is lexical: what does the term ὑπέρακμος mean and whom does it describe? Since ὑπέρακμος is an extremely rare term, the lexicons are of little help.<sup>59</sup> Etymological analysis is not determinative either.<sup>60</sup> Syntactically, it is more likely (but in no wise certain) that the adjective modifies the subject of the previous clause (the man).<sup>61</sup> But the most promising resolution to the question comes from context. Firstly, if we assume, as I have, a measure of correspondence between verses 8–9 and verse 36–38, we should anticipate that the condition of the widowers in verse 9 (οὐκ ἐγκρατεύονται and πυροῦσι—burning with sexual desire and unable to control themselves) will resemble that of the young man in verse 36 (ὑπέρακμος, or brimming with sexual passion). Secondly, if verses 36 and 37 offer two opposite paths for single men, we should anticipate that the condition of the young man in verse 37 (μὴ ἔχων ἀνάγκην, not having acute sexual impulses) is the exact opposite of the young man in verse 36 (ὑπέρακμος, having acute sexual impulses).<sup>62</sup> If

<sup>53</sup>I.e., his desire to marry is being derided as dishonorable by the ascetics when in reality it is not (so Fee, *First Corinthians*, 387).

<sup>54</sup>So Rosner and Ciampa, *First Corinthians*, 357–58.

<sup>55</sup>So Barrett, *First Corinthians*, 182; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 340–41; and esp. Bruce W. Winter, “Puberty or Passion? The Referent of Ὑπερακμος in 1 Corinthians 7:36,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 49 (May 1998): 81–82.

<sup>56</sup>So KJV, NASB, NIV1984, HCSB; Rosner and Ciampa, *First Corinthians*, 358–59.

<sup>57</sup>So NRSV, ESV, NIV2011; Barrett, *First Corinthians*, 182; Fee, *First Corinthians*, 388.

<sup>58</sup>So NLT; Winter, “Puberty or Passion?” 84; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 341.

<sup>59</sup>Remarkably, the leading lexicon of NT Greek details both possible meanings for this *hapax legomenon*, then announces that the term as used in 1 Corinthians 7:36 could have either meaning, “depending on one’s understanding of this pass[age]” (BDAG, s.v. “ὑπέρακμος,” 1032).

<sup>60</sup>The component parts ὑπέρ (extremely, at the apex) and ἀκμή (sexual development) could point to a woman who is sexually mature and ready to marry or to a man who is sexually charged and ready for intercourse.

<sup>61</sup>So Fee, *First Corinthians*, 387.

<sup>62</sup>So Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 341 and esp. Bruce Winter, whose research in “Puberty or Passion?” is highly persuasive.

these parallels stand, the second alternative prevails. We will proceed with this assumption, though our thesis is not lost without it.

Recapping, *if* a male suitor is not acting honorably toward his girl and *if* he has become so passionate that he is alarmed that he will fornicate should he not marry forthwith, Paul says, the young man must “do what he wants” (ὁ θέλει ποιεῖτω), and they should marry (γαμείτωσαν). But standing between these two imperatives, however, is a short statement that is critical to our study: if the young male suitor marries his virgin, “he is not sinning” (οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει). Paul’s point is not to affirm the consequent, but logically, it is impossible to deny it: in Garland’s words, “Paul declares that this person does not sin by marrying, *but will sin if he engages in sexual acts outside of marriage.*”<sup>63</sup> The following verse confirms this point: Paul offers our young man a binary choice: (1) assuming he can control his sexual desire, he may halt the progress of the relationship with his girl and keep her a virgin or, (2) if he cannot control his sexual desire, he must marry. As in verses 8–9, there is no *tertium quid* of fulfilling sexual desire before and apart from marriage (which, in view of the context, Paul surely would have suggested were it a viable option). As such, we have no choice but to conclude a young man or woman who engages in premarital sex *is sinning*.

## CONCLUSION

In a day when more extreme and *avant-garde* expressions of sexual impurity have taken center stage, it may seem a bit anticlimactic to address the comparatively trifling vice of premarital sex. Perhaps it is high time, some may say, to relax our tight stance and sweep this “sin” into the dustbin of Puritan legalism or Victorian prudishness. But as I have attempted to prove in this article, premarital sex *is* a sin, and one of no small import. Further, it is a sin far more likely to stain our conservative churches than the more outlandish sexual excesses making headlines today.

The case against premarital sex is, furthermore, not merely a matter of abstract theological deduction, but one with plain biblical support, accessible to all who have eyes to see. I can only hope that this study will prove useful for all those seeking and communicating biblical counsel on this topic.

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<sup>63</sup>Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 341, emphasis added.

