

What Does the Bible Say About Intimacy?

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WE MUST TALK ABOUT WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT INTIMACY.

We live in The Age of Fluidity.

The word "fluid" implies liquid and water; things that are fluid flow easily.

Our culture has a fluid view of sexual norms; the boundary between appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior changes easily, almost at will.

Our culture has a fluid view of sexual attraction and gender.

How can we think and behave biblically in the middle of this chaos?

As we talk about what the Bible says about intimacy, I recognize that I am walking on a tightrope.

Intimacy touches on some of our most important hopes and dreams in life.

Our culture is so hypersexualized that portrayals of human intimacy are splashed everywhere.

At the same time, intimacy is personal and private for each of us.

We all have our opinions, and those opinions are deeply held. Battle lines are drawn.

Imagine my joy at speaking about a topic that is uncomfortable, personal, highly conflicted.

I feel like a tightrope walker.

You probably think I'm walking around on a stable, flat surface. I am free to say many different things today; in fact, you're hoping I will say some things. As long as I stay inside the bounds of what you expect me to say, we're going to be fine. However, there is a cliff on the edge of your opinion. If I cross that edge, then I will fall off the cliff and plummet to a painful death.

Understand that everyone else is thinking the exact same thing: don't go near the cliff.

The problem comes when you realize that the stable, flat surface is different for every person in the room. One person's stable flat surface is to the right. Another person's stable flat surface is to the left. That doesn't leave much ground for me to stand on. In fact, it leaves a tightrope.

As I said earlier, I feel like a tightrope walker.

Let's ask some better questions today.

Let's set aside the questions "What do I think?" and "What do I want?"

Instead, let's ask, "What does God want?" What is God's plan for human intimacy?

To find out, let's turn to the Bible. It's a true and reliable guide to what God wants. Let's see what the Bible says about human intimacy in the age of fluidity.

As we study Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, we will discover what the Bible says about the culture around us, the choices we make, and the consequences of our choices.

We will come away with a compelling portrait of God's plan for human intimacy.

THE CULTURE BREAKS WITH GOD'S PLAN FOR INTIMACY.

In Genesis 16:1-2, we discover that Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar's culture broke with God's plan:

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

God has a plan for human intimacy.

In Genesis chapter 2, God created the man and then made the woman from the man. Therefore, God says that men are to leave their parents, cling to their wives, and that the two are to become one flesh.

That one-flesh-ness refers to the complementary nature of their union, to their physical intimacy, and to their inseparable natures.

You have the basis for God's plan for human intimacy: one man and one woman are to join for a lifetime.

In that union, God has purposes for sex.

Union: The man was alone, and God saw that it was not good for the man to be alone. Sex is designed to bring man and woman together and strengthen their bonds with one another.

Procreation: In Genesis 1:28 we are commanded to multiply and fill the earth. Sex is part of God's plan to make sure that there are more babies and more humans.

Pleasure: Sex is something we naturally enjoy, so we seek it out. In 1 Corinthians 7:1-5, Paul commands husbands and wives to meet each other's' needs sexually.

Growth: In Ephesians 5:15-33, Paul indicates that through meeting each other's needs, we learn about one another and about the way Christ loves the Church.

These are the basics of God's plan for human intimacy.

Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar's culture broke with that plan.

What we read in Genesis 16 simply shows us the family, marriage, and sexual practices that were common in the time of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. We see their culture.

The culture of that day is reflected in the family arrangement and in Sarah's proposal.

Abraham and Sarah were married.

Sarah had a servant, Hagar, who was from Egypt.

Abraham and Sarah received a promise from God that they would have many children.

However, Abraham and Sarah's marriage had not produced any children. Sarah had reached an age when childbearing was no longer likely.

So, Sarah proposed that Abraham father children by Hagar. Abraham would have intercourse with Hagar, Hagar would become pregnant and give birth to one or more children. Those children would count as Sarah's since Hagar was Sarah's servant.

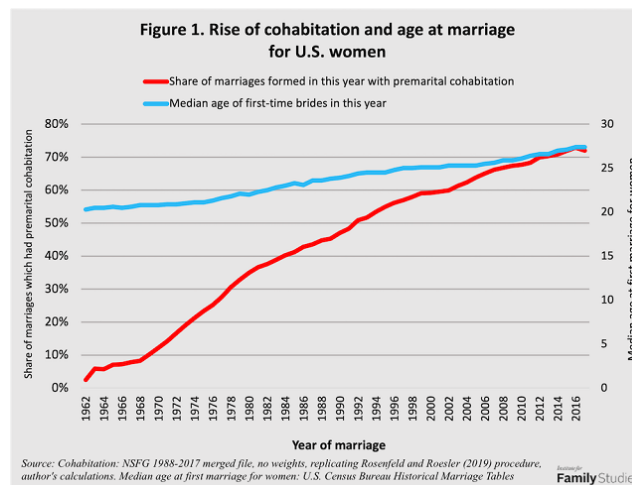
This practice was common in the Ancient Near East. There is a Neo-Assyrian text that attests to this phenomenon along with many other ancient texts. It says: "If Subetu does not conceive and does not give birth, she may take a maidservant and as a substitute in her position she may place her. She [Subetu] will thereby bring sons into being and the sons will be her [Subetu's] sons. If she loves the maidservant she may keep her. IF she hates her she may sell her."¹ This was the custom in the culture surrounding Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar.

This custom was not in keeping with God's plan for human intimacy. This custom was sin.

Our culture has also broken with God's plan for intimacy and has become hypersexualized.

Attitudes toward sex and gender began changing dramatically roughly a century ago. Those changes accelerated during the sexual revolution of the 1960s.² Behaviors began to change.

The Institute for Family Studies has harnessed data from the Census Bureau and the multi-decade study called the National Survey of Family Growth to discover that we have seen two dramatic changes in the past 50 years. First, the percentage of couples living together before getting married has risen from 5% in the 1960s to well over 70% in the 2010s.³



At the same time, the average age of first marriage has risen dramatically. What's happening? People are beginning sexual exploration earlier, delaying marriage longer, and accumulating more experiences and more partners.

A 2014 study by The National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia discovered that, "... the average respondent reported having five sexual partners before marriage."⁴

That same study asserts what we know has happened in our culture: "In the past, especially for women, the relationship sequence that most aimed to follow went like this: courtship led to marriage, which led to sex, cohabitation, and children. Today, marriage comes near the end of the line ... This relationship

¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), p. 444.

² <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-and-sexual-revolution/>

³ <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-religious-marriage-paradox-younger-marriage-less-divorce>

⁴ Galena K. Rhoades and Scott M. Stanley, *Before "I Do": What Do Premarital Experiences Have to Do with Marital Quality Among Today's Young Adults?* (Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project, The University of Virginia), p. 6.

sequence—with sex cohabitation, and sometimes children preceding marriage—has become the norm in our society.”⁵

The culture breaks with God’s plan for intimacy.

THE CHOICES WE MAKE MAY VIOLATE GOD’S PLAN FOR INTIMACY.

In Genesis 16:3-4, Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar all made choices:

So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

Abraham’s, Sarah’s, and Hagar’s choices all violated God’s plan for intimacy.

Sarah violated God’s plan back in verses one and two. Anxious that God’s plan for her family would fail if she did not have children, Sarah took matters into her own hands. She offered her servant as her husband’s sexual partner. Sarah’s offering Hagar up to Abraham is dark and sinful.

Abraham sinned and violated God’s plan for intimacy as well. He had intercourse with Hagar. Hagar conceived easily.

Hagar likely had little to no choice in this situation. She did not have a choice about being a servant. She did not have a choice about being assigned to serve Abraham. She did not have choice when it came to the act itself or the pregnancy that resulted. (If you have been forced into a situation in which you did not have a choice, please hear no judgement. Please know that your Savior and your church are both here for you to help you heal.) Hagar’s only choice was in how to behave as part of the family unit going forward. In treating Sarah with contempt, Hagar made a bad situation worse.

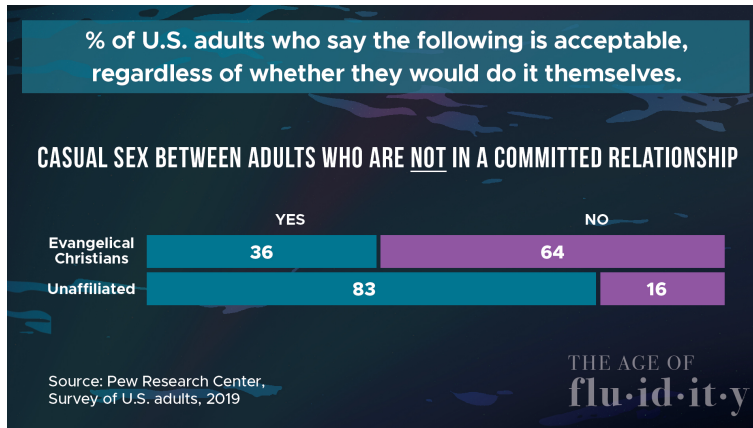
Everyone here chose to violate God’s plan for human intimacy.

Increasing numbers of Christians are making choices that violate God’s plan for intimacy.

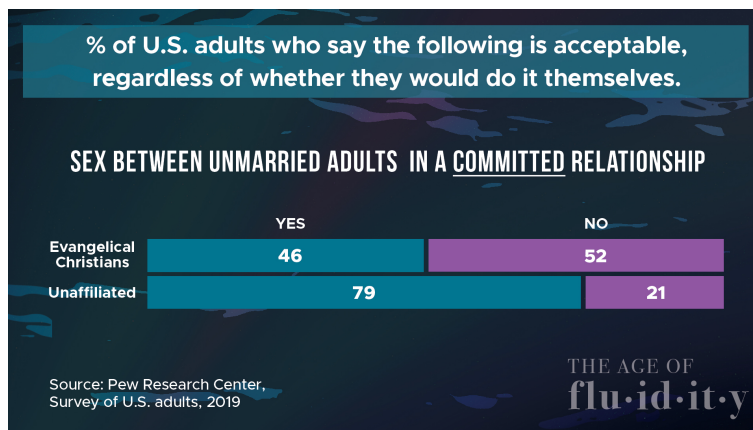
A recent study by the Pew Center for Research reported that, among religiously unaffiliated individuals, near 80% agree that sex between unmarried adults is appropriate in the context of a committed relationship. 84% of the same audience agrees that casual sex between consenting adults is always or sometimes appropriate. Those numbers are not surprising.

In the same study, 36% of Evangelical, church-attending Christians believe that casual sex between two consenting adults is always or sometimes appropriate.

⁵ Ibid, p. 4.



46% of Evangelical, church-attending Christians believe that sex between committed adults is always or sometimes appropriate.⁶



Christians increasingly believe that sex between unmarried people is sometimes or always a good thing, and they are acting on that belief. Christians (even Evangelical Christians) are engaging in premarital sex, extramarital sex, and living together.

Increasing numbers of Christians are choosing to violate God’s plan for intimacy.

We must remember that we are broken and that we cannot trust our hearts.

The society is making two arguments. Let me oversimplify the first: sex is fun; do it. This is an experience-based argument. Sex outside marriage must be right because it’s pleasurable.

The second argument comes from reason: Before making a big decision like marriage, it’s a good idea to try things out first. After experimenting sexually and assessing chemistry, moving in together will demonstrate long-term compatibility. It only makes sense.

Christians are tacitly saying, “I know what the Bible says about marriage, but I think the Bible is wrong. I trust the culture. I trust this reasoning. I trust my experiences.” But can we?

God’s Story from Creation to Conclusion reminds us of some critically important lessons.

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/31/half-of-u-s-christi...ual-sex-between-consenting-adults-is-sometimes-or-always-acceptable/>

The first chapter of God's Story is Creation. In that chapter, we hear that God made us and gave us the gifts of sex and the capacity to reason.

However, chapter 2 is Brokenness. We sinned, disobeyed God, and broke everything in the process. Now we are broken. Our reasoning is broken. We have experiences in a broken world with other broken people. When we trust that our reason and experience will guide us to truth, we are trusting a broken instrument to guide us rightly.

We are making choices, but those choices come from our brokenness, not God's plan.

THE CONSEQUENCES FOR BREAKING GOD'S PLAN FOR INTIMACY ARE REAL.

In Genesis 16:5-6, Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar begin to experience consequences from their choices:

And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar faced profound consequences for their choices.

Sarah was deeply wounded by Hagar's insolence. Sarah's unique position in the family was threatened, of course. She exercised the right she had in that culture to petition Abraham to push Hagar out of the family.⁷

Abraham passively allowed events to unfold. He failed to protect Hagar and his unborn child.

Sarah made life miserable for Hagar, and Hagar fled into the wilderness by herself. An angel of the Lord instructed Hagar to return, but years later she was right back out in the wilderness.

Brokenness. Conflict. Disrupted family life. Pain. Fear. There were generational consequences to the choices Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar made to break God's plan for intimacy.

Breaking God's plan for intimacy leads to profound relational consequences.

Their study mentions the "Vegas Fallacy." People engaging in extramarital sex live with the mistaken belief that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. The sexual experiences they have outside of marriage do not influence their marriage. The opposite is true.⁸

Living together and sex outside of marriage give us extra points of comparison, reasons to be dissatisfied, relational baggage, and experience in ending relationships.

When we learn how to break up when a committed relationship doesn't work out, it turns out we remember how to break up! That contributes to higher rates of divorce later.⁹

Breaking God's plan for intimacy leads to profound relational consequences.

Breaking God's plan for intimacy leads to profound spiritual consequences.

⁷ Hamilton, p. 444-448.

⁸ Rhoades and Stanley, p. 5.

⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

When we break God's plan for intimacy, we're asserting our right and ability to make our own decisions, create our own truths, and follow our own hearts.

Isaiah 50:11 describes the process as being like lighting our own fire:

*Behold, all you who kindle a fire,
who equip yourselves with burning torches!
Walk by the light of your fire,
and by the torches that you have kindled!
This you have from my hand:
you shall lie down in torment.*

If we create our own truths, make our own rules, and follow our hearts, Isaiah says that God will let us do it. However, we will lie down in torment.

There will be a chink in our spiritual armor that makes us vulnerable to other attacks. We will be in the wrong posture with God, walking in wrong directions. We will become spiritually blind and deaf.

As I have reflected on this concept, I have been inundated with articles noting the catastrophic rise in suicide rates and mental-health problems. These trends are decades long.

I'm not drawing a causal link. I'm simply pointing out a correlation. Increasing sexual sin correlates with increasing suicide and mental health problems. It's a correlation. I am also pointing out that the correlation is predicted in Scripture.

When we break God's plan for human intimacy, we suffer. The consequences are real.

WE CHRISTIANS MUST SET AN EXAMPLE IN INTIMACY.

We must set an example IN SINGLENES.

The Bible honors singleness.

While it is not good for a human being to be alone, God has saved us from our loneliness into a very large family when we become followers of Jesus.

In that context, singleness gives us the ability to focus on God and on his mission.

Paul wished that every Christ follower might be single like him. In **1 Corinthians 7:32** he writes:

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord.

We need to value singleness, and when we are single, our closeness with God and our sense of purpose need to drive our lives.

We must set an example IN MARRIAGE.

Marriage is a place for us to learn how to love like Christ and to model Christ's love for our spouses and for others.

We must build strong, thriving marriages that serve as beacons of light and hope to the world.

We must set an example THROUGH CONVERSATIONS.

Silence on the topic of sex is not working; we must start talking about it.

We must talk with our children and teenagers about sex and intimacy. That conversation must start early, it must be open, and it must be often.

We must talk with young married couples. Any two people can get married; it takes heroes to build a marriage that thrives over the long haul. We must help.

We must set an example FOR NON-CHRISTIANS.

Jeremiah 4:1-2 reminds us that our example will pull people toward God or push them away:

"If you return, O Israel, declares the LORD, to me you should return. If you remove your detestable things from my presence, and do not waver, and if you swear, 'As the LORD lives,' in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory."

This verse states boldly that when we do what is right, it's magnetic.

When we are grounded in truth and live justly and righteously, people notice.

When we are guided in life by God's plan as we find it in the Bible, when we love God rightly, and when we love one another in the right kinds of ways, then the world takes notice. People see. People will be drawn to God, to truth, to righteousness, and to justice.

We must set an example for non-Christians.

THE GOSPEL IS AVAILABLE TO US TODAY.

God was not done with Abraham, Sarah, or Hagar.

Hagar went back to the family. Ishmael was born and grew up knowing his father.

In Genesis 17, the very next chapter, God again appeared to Abraham.

He promised to make him the father of many nations.

God made a covenant with him and told him to walk blamelessly before him.

God promised to give Abraham an heir through Sarah, his beloved wife. God promised to give Sarah a child. Isaac was born a year later. Nothing is impossible with God.

God promised to bless Hagar's son, Ishmael, as well with many descendants.

In **Genesis 22:18**, the angel of the Lord said about Abraham:

"and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

Breaking God's plan for intimacy wasn't the end for Abraham, Sarah, or Hagar. It wasn't even the defining act in their lives. Despite their sin, God blessed and used all three of them.

That's the nature of the Gospel.

How do we accept grace when we are broken?

Brokenness is not the last chapter in The Gospel.

Chapter 3 in God's Story is Jesus. Jesus took the full weight of our sin on himself and then died to pay the price for it. Our sexual sin is not a special category of sin that Jesus can't handle. He offers us forgiveness. If we repent and accept that forgiveness, then we can be reconciled with God, made new, and adopted into God's family.

Chapter 4 in God's Story is the Church. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit into the world and to us. Now God the Holy Spirit is with us always, giving us everything we need to live new, fresh lives for God's glory every day.

Chapter 5 is Return. Jesus is coming again someday. When he does, he will make this broken world new and right again. We will be resurrected. We will be made new and right. And we will live with him, free from our sin and free from our brokenness, forever.

The Gospel is available to us today.

Can we walk away from the lies and mistakes of our sinful culture?

Can we repent of our own sinful choices?

Can we let go of the guilt and shame we carry around as the consequences of our sin?

Let's give it all to Jesus and accept his forgiveness.

New life is possible in Jesus, and Jesus is available to you right now.

Discussion Questions for Groups

1. What makes a conversation about sexual norms difficult for you in our cultural context today?
2. Why do we see a growing number of evangelical, church attending Christians accepting of society's standards for sexuality?
3. What kind of consequences result from brokenness in our sexual behavior?
4. If silence on the subject of sexual morality is not working, what can we do to reverse course and begin talking about it in a redemptive way?
5. What reason(s), apart from biblical authority, might we give in defense of God's design for sexual intimacy?
6. How can we balance both truth and grace in practical ways while dealing with these issues? What biblical references would you cite to support your answers?