Early Christianity’s Concept of Sexuality

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For much of history, it has not been uncommon for women to be viewed primarily in the context of their ability to perpetuate the human race. One result has been an explicit sexualization of women's purpose and existence. Sometimes this has led to men using women to satiate their desires, and other times it has led men to fear women because of these desires. Both reactions have dishonored the value that women bring to society. However, certain moments and movements have helped women redefine how sexuality contributes to their lives. While imperfect and even contradictory at times, the church of the first five centuries helped define women's sense of self, integrating their understanding of sexuality and marriage with the redemptive work of Christ in their own lives and communities, thus encouraging them to contribute to the work of the church.

Greco-Roman Culture

To develop an understanding of why the early church played an influential role in women's understanding of self in the context of sexuality, it is important to paint a picture of the surrounding society.1

Marriage was a legal transaction and furthered the status of the family. Roman women, particularly matronas (married women), enjoyed an unprecedented level of autonomy in the realm of the household in certain parts of the early Roman Empire.2 Women were allowed to own property, manage large estates, and inherit land.3 However, women were consistently viewed in their relationships to men, whether as a daughter, a sister, a wife, or a mother (of sons).4 Because their status and identity were tied to their relationships, marriage was a highly important event for Roman women. Women were married young, often to significantly older men. Both men and women often viewed marriage as relatively impermanent. Divorce, though not necessarily encouraged, was frequent. Additionally, the probability of losing a spouse to death was especially high. Since men were so much older than their wives, it was highly probable that the husband would die first. The main exception, of course, was the possibility of wives dying in childbirth—the greatest threat to a woman's life. Therefore, remarriage was common.5

It is not surprising, then, that infidelity was also common. When Christianity started to spread, secular society had a casual understanding of sexual behavior. Public baths, for example, were a convenient location for same-sex liaisons with mentors or friends.6 Additionally, according to John Chrysostom, a renowned Christian leader from the fourth and early fifth centuries, Roman laws allowed "dealers to enslave children and to train them in sexual specialties for sale as prostitutes."7

Another common practice was for a man to engage in sexual activity with his servants or slaves, both male and female. As Peter Brown explains:

Men owned the bodies of their male and female servants. Within the walls of a great rambling house, filled with young servants, over whom the master ruled supreme, fidelity to one's wife remained a personal option. Despite harsh laws punishing married women for adultery, infidelity by their husbands incurred no legal punishment and very little moral disapprobation.8

Brown touches on a blatant double standard within Roman society: men were allowed to be unfaithful without consequence (as long as the women involved were unmarried), but women faced harsh consequences if they were found to be unfaithful. Such laws protected the chastity of matronas while allowing men to do as they pleased.9

One reason for strict laws involving a wife's faithfulness was the importance of the family line. A child born out of wedlock was not a Roman citizen, and husbands wanted to make sure that any offspring were in their bloodline in order to carry on their legacy.10

Greco-Roman Religion

On the religious front, several traditions focused on one's sexual activity. While Roman citizens were ardently encouraged to marry, there was a longstanding tradition of having virgin women, known as Vestal Virgins, live within certain shrines to serve as guardians. However, these women did not serve by choice. Their service made them an anomaly, for many of them married after their commitment was over, around the age of thirty. As Brown states, “They are the exceptions that reinforced the rule.”11 Virginity was not understood as an ideal state of being. Rather, the virgin's unavailability for marriage in her youth punctuated the desire for early marriages.

On the opposite end of the spectrum were the rites of reverence to Bacchus, also called Dionysos—the god of wine, religious ecstasy, and the theatre. Bacchic rites initially restricted participation to women. The activities only took place during the day with matronas serving as priestesses. The Bacchic rituals provided opportunities for women temporarily to transcend their socially approved roles. Some mothers nursed wild animals. Others loosened their hair as a symbol of loosened societal constraints. Women associated with the Bacchus cult would dance wildly and hunt in the woods. In short, they acted as though they were possessed, and through this ecstatic overriding of their wills by Bacchus they were considered innocent of temporarily abandoning their ordinary lives. Bacchic rites degenerated into sexual orgies when a priestess named Paculla Annia initiated her two sons and simultaneously decided to hold the rites at night. The orgies included men participating in same-sex acts, and attendees who refused to partake might be sacrificed.12

Christianity emerged in cultures accustomed to Bacchic rituals and where marriage was an economic transaction that fostered a low view of marital fidelity. Further, Christianity was
born into cultures that viewed women, slaves, children, and non-Roman citizens as innately inferior. This is the context in which Jesus called his followers to serve and love one another (Luke 22:25–27), where Paul framed discipleship equally, whether one is a Jew or Greek, a slave or free, a man or a woman (Gal 3:27–29).

**Marriage and Family**

Paul makes powerful, even revolutionary, statements about sexuality in the context of marriage. Philip Payne points out that, in 1 Cor 7, “Paul specifies exactly the same conditions, opportunities, rights, and obligations for the woman as for the man. . . . His wording is symmetrically balanced to reinforce this equality.” Many readers view 1 Cor 7 as Paul’s anthem regarding the superiority of singleness since he explicitly says, “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am” (1 Cor 7:8 NRSV). However, Paul’s focus here is affirming that neither a man’s nor a woman’s spiritual status is dependent upon their marital status. This alone is revolutionary since women were often more highly regarded if they were married. In particular, marital status was a categorical factor for the religious activities in which Roman women were allowed to participate.

First Corinthians 7 indicates that Paul supported both singleness and equality in marriage. Corinthian society, in contrast, viewed marriage in terms of ownership, in which the husband possessed his wife and the wife would be obligated to please her husband sexually. In 1 Cor 7:2–3, Paul calls for monogamy from both spouses, in addition to providing for each other’s sexual needs, thereby acknowledging that men are not the only ones with sexual needs. But perhaps the most revolutionary statement Paul makes is 1 Cor 7:4. “For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” (NRSV). Chrysostom paints this verse with a different stroke, “So when you see a prostitute setting snares, plotting against you, desiring your body, say to her ‘This body is not mine. It belongs to my wife. I do not dare mistreat it nor to lend it to another woman.’ The wife should do the same.” To claim that a man belonged to a woman was unheard of in Greco-Roman society. Paul, however, calls for a level of respect not often seen in non-Christian circles.

Not only does Paul establish authority for both men and women in the context of marriage, he also encourages husbands and wives to embrace another concept that was not common at the time—love. Marriages were contracts and not often founded on love. In Titus 2 and Eph 5 Paul characterizes love as a daily decision to serve and respect one’s spouse. Titus 2:4 specifically encourages women to love their husbands, but Paul crafts a more eloquent argument in Eph 5:25–33:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband. (NRSV)

For Paul, husbands must serve their wives sacrificially, just like Christ. What is more, husbands must love their wives, just like Christ. Both are radical transformations of marriage in the ancient world. As Payne says, “If husbands love their wives, it transforms the relationship. True love for one’s wife is not compatible with a husband completely controlling her life. . . .”

Paul also references Gen 2 in Eph 5:31 when he says that a man will leave his parents to join his wife. This is contradictory to Roman family structures since, in Roman marriage, a woman legally leaves her father’s family and joins her husband’s.

Paul encourages an identity for Christian women that was extraordinary for his day. Not only did their marital status fail to restrict their spiritual worth, their worth as individuals was also affirmed by their husband’s love and sacrificial service. They were not merely advantageous acquisitions. As Christians, they were called to a higher standard than the society around them, and that carried into the marriage relationship as well.

**Early Christian Authors**

**On Marriage**

Early Christian authors spend considerable time discussing marriage. However, their main focus is the role of sex in marriage. When is it appropriate? How should Christians embrace it? There is tension between the necessity of sex in order to fulfill the Genesis command to “be fruitful and multiply” and the struggles of lust associated with sexual intercourse. Such authors often say that sexual intercourse is acceptable, but also that one should learn to refrain from it.

Augustine (354–430) strongly argues that sexual intercourse is acceptable in so far as it brings children into the world: “The result is the bonding of society in children, who are the one honorable fruit, not of the union of male and female, but of sexual intercourse. . . .” He also claims that if a husband and wife have sexual intercourse with the intention of conceiving, then the act is not sinful. However, if intercourse occurs because one or the other party is battling lust, it is forgivable because it at least occurred within the bounds of marriage.

Another concern for Augustine is the manner of sexual activity. He openly disapproves of a man “using the part of his wife’s body that has not been granted for this purpose [of procreation]. . . .” Augustine goes so far to say that the fault lies with the wife if she allows this to happen and that it would have
been less shameful had her husband committed lewd acts with another woman. For Augustine, this position shows that, while Christianity was trying to reframe and redefine the way men and women related to each other, it was difficult to separate themselves from the overarching mindsets of society. In Augustine’s case, he perpetuates a double standard where women carry the blame for various sexual acts while men are not considered at fault.

Ultimately, Augustine encourages married couples to refrain from sexual intercourse, as a spiritual discipline. He claims, “it is praiseworthy not to wish to do what they are able to do.” For Augustine, all people, whether single or married, should turn from the carnal desire for intercourse. He goes on to say that, by abstaining from intercourse, humanity will hasten Christ’s return.

An intriguing aspect of Augustine’s theology is his stance that sexual intercourse exists solely for the purpose of procreation. For Augustine, lust is inherently present in the act of intercourse and exists because of the sin of Adam and Eve. However, he also argues that intercourse and procreation would still exist even if sin had not entered the world. Augustine paints a picture in which, if lust did not exist, the sexual organs would obey “through an inclination of the will.” He claims that the sexual organs would have operated like any other part of the body, such as the hands or fingers, that move when we will them to do so. Because lust exists, we are slaves to our sexual desires and engage in sexual activity even without the intention of procreation.

Augustine’s interpretation of Gen 1–3 deeply shapes his theology. Augustine believes that “Adam’s sin not only caused our mortality but cost us our moral freedom, irreversibly corrupted our experience of sexuality (which Augustine tends to identify with original sin), and made us incapable of genuine political freedom.” Augustine’s interpretation of the fall shapes his belief in the universality of sin. Sin, according to Augustine, is passed through semen, shackling humanity to “the bond of death.” Therefore, any human conceived by semen is contaminated by sin. For Augustine, this explains why Jesus is exempt from this “original sin”—he was conceived through the Holy Spirit, without semen, and therefore without sin.

Some early fathers interpret the forbidden fruit of Gen 3 as a purely carnal knowledge. For example, Tatian the Syrian (ca. 120–180) believes that, once Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they became “sexually aware” because they suddenly realized they were naked. While others, such as Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215) and Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 140–202) do not hold this exact view, they describe sexual intercourse as “man’s first disobedience,” and thus the fall ultimately manifested itself in a sexual form. Irenaeus argues that Adam and Eve were underage: “For having been created just a short time before, they had no understanding of procreation of children. It was necessary that first they should come to adult age, and then ‘multiply’ from that time onwards.” Irenaeus further insists that Adam expressed his awareness of the sin incited by sexual desire by choosing scratchy fig leaves to cover himself and Eve rather than something more comfortable. Irenaeus claims this action was self-imposed punishment.

Augustine and Irenaeus are two early examples of a multitude of voices contributing to the conversation on marriage and sex in Christianity. These writers read much into the biblical text and, at the same time, perpetuate some of the ideals of non-Christian societies. For example, while Augustine encourages couples to abstain from intercourse, he also justifies the practice of polygamy: “subordinate things should be subject not only as individuals to individual rulers, but also (if the natural and social conditions allow it) as a group to a single ruler. That is why one servant does not have several masters, whereas several servants do have one master.” While he by no means encourages polygamy, he explains why it has been a logical development for some. These mixed messages may have created confusion regarding sex in marriage since on the one hand it is good, meaning children can come from it, but on the other hand it is better not to engage in sex.

On Celibacy

While many Christians did marry, the early church also provided opportunities for men and women alike to adopt an ascetic lifestyle, which involved a vow of celibacy. Celibacy allowed Christians to reject the structures, expectations, and entanglements of ordinary society to gain control over their own lives and sexual appetites. Ascetic Christians were revered as those who pursued Christian faith in a way that others only dreamed of. Most Christians viewed ascetics, particularly celibates, as closer to Christ than those who were married.

Many ascetics believed that Adam and Eve were both virgins “whose sin and consequent sexual awakening ended in their expulsion from the ‘Paradise of virginity’ into marriage and all its attendant sufferings, from labor pains to social domination and death.” Therefore, marriage was not something to strive toward, but should be avoided in order to grow closer to God. Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–395) said, “Marriage, then, is the last stage of our separation from the life that was led in Paradise; marriage therefore . . . is the first thing to be left behind; it is the first station, as it were, for our departure to Christ.” Virginity became a symbol of salvation and purity for the church. Gregory also said, “the practice of virginity is a certain art, a power of the more divine kind of life, instructing those who live in the flesh to become like the incorporeal nature.”

There were also those, such as John Chrysostom (ca. 349–407), who claimed that virginity was the pathway God originally intended—sexual intercourse exists because of sin, and God did not need man and woman to engage in intercourse in order to multiply the human race. After all, Adam and Eve were created without intercourse, as were the angels. He concludes that the only reason any other living beings were ever born was that it was the will of God. Therefore, one should not feel threatened by embracing virginity. Rather, it is better to embrace the simplicity of life that virginity offers, namely, a life without stress over one’s spouse or children.

Choosing a celibate, ascetic lifestyle was viewed as an act of rebellion toward society. It was expected that a man and woman
would acquiesce to their arranged marriage. To refuse, or even hesitate, was seen as insubordinate.43 Perhaps for this reason, some ascetics were actually married couples who decided to “renounce the world” together. One example is the story of Melania and Pinian, who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries. Melania, a wealthy young woman, was forced to marry Pinian. She attempted to bargain with Pinian, offering him her entire estate if he would allow her to remain celibate. Pinian struck a compromise with Melania: once they had two children to secure the family line, they would embrace a celibate, ascetic lifestyle. Unfortunately, neither of their two children survived to adulthood, but Pinian followed through and together they sold their possessions and traveled widely, serving where they felt led and establishing monasteries.44

The ascetic lifestyle was especially appealing to women because not only were they able to escape the confines of family life, but they were also able to extend their lives since they no longer worried about the danger of childbirth.45 For wealthy women, “renouncing the world” provided opportunities to use their wealth in ways not tolerated in secular society. Frequently, they were able to keep their wealth rather than turn it over to a male relative. Celibate women could often travel more freely, devote time to study, and even establish and direct spiritual institutions.46 It was an opportunity for women to showcase their intellect as well as their leadership skills. Asceticism cast off the weight of the traditional expectations of marriage and allowed women wholeheartedly to pursue their faith.

Jesus’s Ministry and Beyond

Not all women, of course, chose to embrace a celibate lifestyle. Many remained in society and contributed to the growing church movement by serving in a variety of leadership and service roles. Women’s contributions began even while Jesus was traveling around Israel preaching to the masses. Women served as financial patrons for Jesus’s ministry. Luke 8:2–3, for example, mentions Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, “and many others,” who served as patrons.

After Christ’s ascension, and as the church began to spread throughout the Roman Empire, Christians gathered in house churches. The house church structure meant that people were acknowledged for their spiritual gifting, thus allowing women to participate more fully.47 Examples abound of women who ran their own house churches in the beginning of the Christian movement. In Acts 12, we read about Mary, the mother of John Mark. Peter is freed from prison and goes to Mary’s house “where many had gathered and were praying” (NRSV). This story shows that Peter knew that Mary’s house was a center of activity for the local community of believers and that it was a safe place in a time of crisis.48 In Col 4:15, Paul mentions Nympha who hosted a church in her house. Women hosting such assemblies would have been present for all aspects of the meetings. The women would not have had to go to a separate room but would have sat or reclined alongside the men, which in some circles of Roman society was considered acceptable, and in other circles was not.49

But not all women stayed within the confines of the home. Paul acknowledges women who served, for example, as apostles or itinerant preachers. Andronicus and Junia are commended by name as apostles in Rom 16:7. Euodia and Syntyche are addressed as leaders in Phil 4:2–3. Consider the account of Priscilla and her husband Aquila in Acts 18:24–36, where Priscilla helped teach Apollos, a prominent leader, the way of God. Paul’s language in all three of these instances reminds the readers of the dangers involved with evangelizing. Of Euodia and Syntyche, for example, he says that they “have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel” (NRSV). Indeed, these women conducted their ministry without a male companion.50

Another significant leadership role women stepped into was deacon. Both male and female deacons carried out the same liturgical duties, such as baptism, administering the Eucharist, and ministering to the poor and the sick. Female deacons, however, focused primarily on ministering to women. They instructed new female members in the faith, and they took the Eucharist to pregnant women and women who were sick or unable to attend prayer gatherings.51 Paul specifically names Phoebe as a deacon in Rom 16:1–2, and it is widely accepted that she was the one Paul commissioned to deliver his letter to the church in Rome. Paul says she had been a benefactor to him, which implies that she had greatly helped Paul expand his own influence and his mission throughout the empire, hopefully culminating in a trip to Spain.52

Women also played a significant role in teaching theology. Marcella, who lived in Rome in the fourth century, participated in public theological debates. She also established a school for male and female ascetics, theologians, and clergy where they could come together, learn, and discuss theology. Other women who actively taught in the fourth century included Proba of Rome, who retold biblical stories using lines from Virgil; Melania the Elder, who set up monastic houses in Palestine; and Paula, who established a hostel for pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land.53

Finally, widows made a lasting impact on their communities. In the second century, a group of widows who did not need to be supported financially by the church gave of themselves to serve others. They were heavily involved in prayer and fasting, along with taking care of the sick, anointing women as they were baptized, and providing theological instruction.54

Conclusion

Christian women in the early church were valued. Whether married, celibate, or both, they defied the stigma of sex. Women participated in the spreading of the gospel on the basis of their faith in Christ, not because of their sex, marital status, or role in reproduction. They lived out the freedom of Gal 3:28: “. . . there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). Their femininity did not disqualify them from service; their qualification came from being drafted into Christ’s purposes for them in the world.

The marital status of some of the early Christian women mentioned in Scripture or history remains unknown. Yet
women traveled and shared the gospel, teaching others, overseeing monasteries, and taking care of the marginalized. These activities could be done whether married or single, sexually active or celibate.

Women in the early church were able to see themselves as more than their cultures allowed. They were more than wives, daughters, widows, or virgins; they were disciples of Christ. They were living into the fullness of a life in Christ. That fullness could be lived out in a myriad of ways. Women were able to understand the teachings of Paul and recognize that marriage could be more than turning a blind eye while your husband slept with your female slaves. Marriage could be filled with love, respect, and mutual submission, where the wife’s needs were considered alongside her husband’s. Women were able to interpret the teachings of the early church fathers and evaluate conflicting perspectives regarding sexual intimacy. In turn, women were able to accept that it was not shameful to pursue a different path—that of celibacy, one with potentially less distraction. They were not inferior if they chose not to marry or have children.

Paul, Augustine, John Chrysostom, and others contribute to a valuable conversation still going on today. The church’s teachings on sex and its role in our lives have been influenced by these very men. But the church is largely unaware of the history of this conversation. In settings where sexualization is prevalent, it is beneficial for the church to become informed. In cultures where divorce abounds, it would be wise to hear what Paul has to say about marriage. In cultures where a casual view of sex has once again gained prominence, believers should take a moment to consider what it is about following Christ that makes them stand apart. Women must again remind themselves that they are more than what society tells them. They are more than a pretty face on a billboard. They are more than a means to satisfy men. Women are redeemed by Christ and equally capable to make an impact in this world for Christ’s gospel.

Notes
2. Carolyn Osiek, Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet H. Tulloch, A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 144.
5. Osiek, et al., A Woman’s Place, 20.
9. Osiek, et al., A Woman’s Place, 22.
12. Kraemer, Her Share of the Blessings, 43, 47.
29. Pagels, Adam, Eve and the Serpent, xxvi.
32. Pagels, Adam, Eve and the Serpent, 28.
33. Pagels, Adam, Eve and the Serpent, 28.
35. Pagels, Adam, Eve and the Serpent, 78.
37. Pagels, Adam, Eve and the Serpent, 89.
38. Pagels, Adam, Eve and the Serpent, 79.
41. Clark, Women in the Early Church, 120.
42. Clark, Women in the Early Church, 124–25.
43. Pagels, Adam, Eve and the Serpent, 80.
44. Pagels, Adam, Eve and the Serpent, 87–88.
45. LaCelle-Peterson, 164.
46. Pagels, Adam, Eve and the Serpent, 88–89.
47. LaCelle-Peterson, Liberating Tradition, 154.
49. Osiek, et al., A Woman’s Place, 161.
51. LaCelle-Peterson, Liberating Tradition, 159.
53. LaCelle-Peterson, Liberating Tradition, 157.
54. LaCelle-Peterson, Liberating Tradition, 162