Can We...? **[1]**

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Ever since the sexual revolution in the 60s, a question which has been asked (and will be asked, until Kingdom come, I'm sure) by Christian teenagers and young adults are "Can we...?". It is a question about what for Christians is permissible (and what is not) about sex.

In a book [2] which has recently been published1, Mark Driscoll and his wife Grace confront such questions which they found (urbanised) young Christians have. I have not read the book, nor am I planning on reading it any time soon. As such, I cannot comment on the contents of the book, although I honestly believe that it was written with sincere intentions. I also do not know what scope the book covers. But what I want to address in this article, are questions of the nature indicated by the title which (young) unmarried Christians have. What I aim to do is to provide a simple and practical litmus test for answering such questions. However, before I am going to do that, I am going to address the issue from a more "theoretical" position. This I am going to do in the following section, with the next section dealing with the "practical test". I encourage you to read the entire article, but the hurried reader can skip the next section (and hopefully return to it after they have read the next one).

Transgressions

From personal experience, I can say that when you reach the point where you are asking "Can I/we...?", then the warning lights should already be going off for you. Your conscience is trying to warn you about something. This is true in general and not just for issues of a sexual nature. Sometimes it can be that something is permissible, but if your conscience is raising a flag, rather take a step back and rethink the situation carefully. Seek council if necessary. However often we find ourselves in a situation which we know is wrong, but we want to try and get by on some technicality. If I may be permitted an example: "It's only fondling, not really sexual interaction."

In the Bible, one of the words which indicate sin is translated into English as *transgressions*. What is interesting about this word, is its literal meaning in both the Hebrew and the Greek. The literal meaning is "to overstep a bound". If I cordoned off the areas next to the pathway outside my house because I have planted some saplings there in the hope of one day having a tree-lined pathway, but the person walking up to my front door insists on crossing the cordon and walking beside the pathway, thus trampling my saplings, that person has transgressed against me on my property. A little more abstractly: if I have made it explicitly clear that smoking is not permitted in my house, but my guest decides to have a smoke while in the bathroom, then that guest has transgressed against me, because they did not respect my rules which govern my house. It is in the sense in which the word is used in the Bible.

So now, think about what you are doing in trying to justify your actions. God has set out rules for a holy life: boundaries, if you will. God is justified in doing this, because He created you, as well as the

world in which you live. On the other side of those boundaries is sin. By trying to justify yourself or finding loopholes in the wording of the rules (that is, being *legalistic*), you want to see how close you can get to sin without crossing the line. You find that sin so alluring that, even though you know you can't touch, you want to stare and admire it as best as you can.

Is this a holy attitude to have? It is not: trying to get as close as possible to sin is, in fact, unholy. We must rather seek what God desires. And that means finding sin repulsive and wishing to steer clear of it. There is much to be said in this regard; however I won't be able to go into the details. This was one of the reasons for the growth of the monastic movement: people wanted to avoid any and all temptations, so they locked themselves up in monasteries to separate themselves from a sinful world. But this also is not a holy attitude, because just like Jesus came down to earth, we are to be amongst sinners and face sin in order to spread the life-giving Gospel. Our attitude must rather be that we are in this world, but not of this world (1 John 2:15–17). What this means for us facing sexual temptations, is that we must realise that the satisfaction of the self and the flesh is not an ultimate goal for us. We need to think about sex in the way in which it was intended.

An Aside: Is Marriage Legalism?

So if we do not want to be legalistic about matters such as these, why the insistence on marriage before sex? Why can a couple which is engaged or otherwise sure that they will one day marry not have sex? The answer is that marriage is much more than a ceremony (or a "big party", as I have learned the popular conception in certain first world countries nowadays is): it is the public officiation of a promise made between two people. Before God, and with people as witnesses, the groom and the bride make vows and promises to each other. This may not sound like a big deal, especially in our culture where divorce is so prevalent. But the idea is that someone's promise is a big deal. Our lives are to be marked by integrity (Matthew 5:33–37).

Honesty and faithfulness are vital characteristics of a Christian, because they are important attributes of God. If God was not honest and did not fulfill His promises to us, then we would be in serious trouble: even if we had the revelation of His word, how would we be able to trust it? How would we be able to believe that our sins have really been forgiven? No, honesty and integrity are critical in enduring love. Rather than marriage being a license to have sex, sex has traditionally been the consummation (that is, the sealing or finalisation of) a special promise made between a man and a woman to which they will be held for the rest of their lives. Marriage is the act of making these vows. Anything else (like an engagement) is only the vow to make a vow—this is not the same as publicly committing to another person for the rest of your lives.

A Simple Litmus Test

Regarding issues of a sexual behaviour, someone once challenged me with something which I remember to this day. It might be that you are in an exciting new relationship, or that the relationship which you are in has matured rapidly over a short period of time. If both of you are committed Christians, there is a chance that you will hold each other accountable for your actions. However temptation can be great, and in a moment you might have to make a decision for which there is not time to make a comprehensive Biblical assessment or seek council[2]. A quick test to apply in such a situation is as follows: "*If I do what I want to do in this situation with a minor, and I am caught, will I be convicted of child molestation or statutory rape?*".

This may seem rather harsh. Good! Because while you are not married, Christian men are to treat theirs sisters in Christ *as sisters*, and women are to threat the men as *their brothers*. Only once the commitment of marriage has been made does God grant that "the two shall be one" (Genesis 2:24). This is a blessing, a wonderful mystery (Ephesians 5:31—32).

Note, however, that I am not saying you should be more legalistic about the situation than before. You should not go study up exactly what constitutes molestation and statutory rape under the law which governs you. Rather, I am appealing to that fact that you know that to do certain things to children (or confused teenagers who can be exploited) are inherently *wrong*, just as doing those

same things to your brother or sister is wrong. But it is also not my goal to turn sex into a repulsive taboo for you. I do want to do that for sex which takes place outside of the sanctions which God put in place, but not across the board. Indeed, I hope that when you find a spouse who is in Christ, that the two of you will happily share and enjoy this privilege which God has set aside for you!

Pray that you will not come into temptation (Matthew 26:41). If you do, I hope that you will continue in prayer, and that I have now given you a tool to help you handle the situation. And if you have failed before, remember that no sin cannot be washed away by the blood of our Saviour Jesus the Messiah.

In all that you do, seek the glory of God. Soli Deo gloria!

- 1. The title of this article was taken from a particularly notorious chapter in that book.
- 2. Of course the very best action to take in such a situation is to just back off completely; distance yourself from the situation. As my pastor during my student years always reminded us: "*Flee* sexual immorality!" (1 Corinthians 6:18).

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