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Chastity: Preparation for a Lasting Marriage

By Mike McManus

Scripture is clear. "Flee fornication," Paul wrote to the Corinthians (I Cor. 6:18). Dr. Patrick Fagan, President of the Marriage and Religion Research Institute (MARRI) of the Family Research Council, puts the issue very bluntly, "On matters of marriage and family, Christians have stopped following Christ."

MARRI research proves the value of Christ's tough standard of chastity before marriage: "Of all who have gotten married who only had their spouse as their sexual partner, five years into their marriage 95% are still married," said Fagan. However, if the woman has had one extra sexual partner before marriage, only 62% are still together after five years. And if she had two extra partners, only 50% of marriages are intact.

One or two previous partners? The norm on college campuses is a "hook up culture" with many sexual partners. Research on the hookup generation reveals:

- Over half of students have had oral sex within the last 30 days.
- Three quarters of females have had "casual" intercourse in the last year.
- Every third male has had three or more sexual partners within the last year.
- 75% of the girls and 55% of the boys who've had sex privately regret it.

MARRI's research confirms a secular 1991 study that Marriage Savers has used to help prepare couples for marriage. (Disclosure: I am President of Marriage Savers.) Couples who married from 1980-1983 who were sexually active had a divorce rate of 24% by 1988. Those who married as virgins had a divorce rate of only 14%. So the sexually active were 71% more likely to divorce than those who played by God's rules. Regardless of whether couples married in the 1960s to 1980s – the sexually active were about two-thirds more likely to be divorced.

My wife and I, as Marriage Mentors, showed a chart comparing virgins with the sexually active to premarital couples. I then ask the man: "Do you want to take a step today that will increase your odds of a lifelong marriage? You can't become a virgin again, but you can remain chaste till the wedding. Consider signing this 'Optional Premarital Sexual Covenant,' to pledge to remain chaste until the wedding." We gave couples two weeks to consider it.

For some couples this was very difficult, such as "Hector" and "Teresa" who were living together. He laughed and asked, "Why do you think we moved in together?" Sex was clearly important to him. I asked them how they reconciled their faith, which prompted them to attend church weekly – with cohabitation. He replied that since sex was part of their relationship, he felt they were already married. But Teresa said, "It is a source of religious guilt for me."



We urged them to move apart, saying "Couples who marry after living together are 50% more likely to divorce." He refused.

I read from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians that couples should avoid "sexual immorality," and "each of you should learn to control his body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like heathen who do not know God" (I Thess. 4:3-5).

The Optional Premarital Sexual Covenant asked couples "to consider limiting your physical involvement, and to be accountable to your Mentors. The goal is to build a relationship on a foundation that can last for life." If they agreed to remain chaste, both couples signed the Covenant, as a solemn contract.

They refused, but we continued mentoring them. They argued over so many issues we wondered why they were marrying. Hector bought a new car without consulting her. When he came home, she did not cook dinner, saying, "I'm not your wife." Selfishness reigned.

We suggested they attend an Engaged Encounter weekend run by Mennonites in Pennsylvania. Men were put in one dorm, and women in another. They heard talks by married couples and then were asked to write letters to each other on such topics as "What doubts do I have in marrying you?"

They made such progress that Teresa once again asked Hector to sign the Covenant, and this time he agreed. He asserted, "I am in this for the long term. By not engaging in sexual activity, I am honoring you. You are worth the wait!"

Teresa "was the happiest person alive," he recalled this week, 14 years later. She told me, "It was a way to take sexual guilt out of the equation. I was definitely thrilled. He was taking the relationship seriously."

Of the 51 couples we mentored who were sexually active, 43 decided to become chaste! And of the 61 couples we prepared for marriage over 15 years, we know of only one divorce.

Chastity before marriage becomes the cement of a lifelong marriage.