

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Good Christian Sex

Why Chastity Isn't the Only Option— And Other Things the Bible Says About Sex

by

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INTRODUCTION ON SEX AND CHRISTIANS

1. Reading about and discussing sex can bring about many emotions, such as discomfort, excitement, fear, and others. Where are you starting from? What about your group? Start by addressing the sensitive nature of the topic, and set the stage for safe, respectful, and fruitful conversations.
2. Bromleigh McCleneghan describes her early sexual education from her parents as the “take and read”

approach (pp. 5–6) in which they allowed her to read a wide variety of material. What approach did your own family take toward your sex education, if any? Looking back, what do you see as the benefits and drawbacks of that approach?

3. If you grew up in a church community, what approach did your church take toward speaking about sex? What message was communicated?
4. McCleneghan's critique of both conservative churches (preaching the "absolute abstinence outside of marriage" message) and mainline churches (often teaching nothing on sexual ethics) is that they run the risk of "disconnecting their sex lives from their lives of faith" (p. 8). In what ways do you see this disconnect in your own experiences in or observations of Christian churches? In your own upbringing—religious or otherwise—what was missing that you wish you could have had to help you navigate relationships and sexuality?

CHAPTER ONE

"MY FAVORITE FEEL": *PLEASURE AS A GIFT FROM GOD*

1. What kind of messages did you internalize as a young person about sexual pleasure? About bodies in general? As an adult, how has that changed?
2. "Why are we so ambivalent about our bodies? Why do people work so hard to pass that ambivalence on to their children?" (p. 23). How would you answer these

questions? What concerns or perplexes you most about explaining bodily functions and sex to children?

3. McCleneghan quotes theologian and ethicist Christine Gudorf: “We *need* pleasure; we need *body* pleasure” (p. 27). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? Does your answer change if we are talking about *sexual* pleasure in particular? If so, what puts sexual pleasure in a different category than pleasure in general?

CHAPTER TWO

FIRSTS: *ON THE WHYS AND WHEREFORES OF DESIRE*

1. When you think about desire, what immediately comes to mind? Does it have a positive or negative connotation, or is it a mix?
2. Sexual desire can be a means of grace, which can “open us to love and acceptance by daring us to risk knowing another and being known” (p. 50). How do your own experiences of sexual desire support or challenge this view?
3. Instead of “protecting ourselves and striving for security and certainty” (p. 64), McCleneghan encourages readers by telling them that “the work ahead lies in learning to recognize our desires and examining how they fit (or fail to fit) into a vision of the abundant life” (pp. 65–66). Why do we value self-protection and certainty over pursuing our desires? What might happen, do you think, if we “dared to desire”?

CHAPTER THREE

PLAYING FAIR: *THE ETHICS OF GOOD SEX*

1. Before reading this chapter, what would have been your definition of “fair sex”? Do you feel you had a strong grasp on what this looked like in theory and in practice? Has this understanding changed at all after reading this chapter?
2. Think about and share your definition of sexual sin. Then, read McCleneghan’s description of sin and its opposite on pages 70 to 72. In this understanding, how is sexual sin different from simply “any sexual thought or contact outside of marriage”? How is this ethic more permissive? How is it more challenging?
3. McCleneghan sums up her ethic for fair and just sex as “Love the Lord your God, and your neighbor as yourself” (p. 78) and also recommends Margaret Farley’s four principles for just love (pp. 82–83). What would this ethic look like, from a day-to-day standpoint, in your romantic and sexual relationships? Are you comfortable adopting this sexual ethic in your own life, for your children, or in your congregation? Why or why not?

CHAPTER FOUR
SINGLENES, SEX, AND WAITING:
THEOLOGY FOR THE SEARCH

1. Instead of a matchmaker god who has “the one” already picked out for us, McCleneghan proposes that God might work in more indirect ways, inviting us to be cocreators and agents who can choose our paths and partners based on God’s creative energy within each of us (pp. 96–97). How does this characterization of how God works affirm or challenge your own perspective and personal experience?
2. How do you feel singleness is viewed and treated in our society, both inside and outside of the church? If you are single, how do you feel in these communities? How does Jesus’s example of singleness in the Bible speak to your experience, or how should it?
3. “The world and its possibilities for goodness are nearly infinite; far bigger than we can imagine” (p. 100). Can you think of any people in your own life (yourself included!) whose lives bear witness to this truth despite the fact that they don’t follow the married, heterosexual with children ideal so prominent in our society? What have you learned from these people?
4. McCleneghan proposes a new definition of chastity for singles: “we refrain from having sex that isn’t mutually pleasurable and affirming, that doesn’t respect the autonomy and sacred worth of ourselves and our partners” (p. 103). What are your thoughts

about this definition, and the chapter as a whole? Can a single adult be both righteous and sexually active? Why or why not?

CHAPTER FIVE NAKED: A *THEOLOGY OF VULNERABILITY*

1. Spend some time reflecting on your unique areas of vulnerability and confidence (p. 111). In what situations have you felt dangerously vulnerable? In what situations have you felt vulnerable, but safe? How do you think these experiences affect your own assessment of what is appropriate vulnerability in sexual relationships?
2. Oftentimes the sharing of our thoughts, desires, and emotions can render us just as—or even more—vulnerable as simply unclothing ourselves (p. 123). What might emotional vulnerability teach us about just, fair sex beyond what we can learn from physical vulnerability?
3. The author places the assessment of “appropriate vulnerability” in the hands of individuals, noting that what is appropriate in sexual relationships will look different depending on the person’s values and context (p. 127). What concerns, if any, do you have about this move? What level of maturity do you think an individual has to have in order to make the call about what is appropriate vulnerability for their situation?

CHAPTER SIX

WE MIGHT BE STRANGERS: A *THEOLOGY OF INTIMACY*

1. What does the idea of being “one flesh” mean to you? What does intimacy mean to you? How does your idea of intimacy compare with McCleneghan’s definition that intimacy requires mutuality, and mutuality requires two distinct selves that can give and take in a relationship (p. 141)?
2. McCleneghan argues that setting apart sex for marriage divorces our sexuality from the rest of our lives and withholds from us chances to grow in the practices of “attention, invitation, hospitality, and the means of grace” that can happen in sexually intimate relationships (p. 150). Do you think sex provides opportunities to practice intimacy and grace that we wouldn’t have in any other context? What might we lose by setting apart sex for marriage? What might we gain?
3. “The call of the gospel is not to protect ourselves at all costs, but to risk ourselves in love” (p. 151). How do you see this general ethic applying to our sex lives in particular? McCleneghan says this call to risk ourselves in love doesn’t mean we should sleep with anybody and everybody, but how are we to know where to draw the line?

CHAPTER SEVEN
HISTORY: A *THEOLOGY OF EXES AND THE THINGS THAT ONCE WERE*

1. Comparing one partner to another or using past relationships as measuring sticks, McCleneghan says, is “poor behavior and bad habits more than the necessary consequence of having had more than one relationship” (p. 161). Do you agree? Why or why not? How much should consideration of one’s future spouse figure into one’s sex life (or lack thereof) at present?
2. Unequal power dynamics are often at play in the cases of rape and sexual assault so prevalent in public conversations today (pp. 163–166). How might the consideration of power dynamics change the way we think about the meaning of consent? How might it change our definition of good, fair sex?
3. There is a tendency, McCleneghan writes, “to divide time into before and after God was present in our lives, before and after our conversion” (p. 168). However, the challenge is not to write off everything in the past as sinful and irredeemable but rather accept that God’s grace can help us heal from and even reinterpret our pasts. How have you experienced *kairos* time—the realization that God has been there all along—as you reflect on the events of your past?

CHAPTER EIGHT

BE FAITHFUL: A *THEOLOGY OF FIDELITY*

1. McCleneghan suggests that intimacy, which involves sharing a lot, might lead to a decline in the erotic, which “asks for concealment, negotiating, back-and-forth” (p. 188). What do you think? Do we have to sacrifice erotic feelings for the commitment and security of a long-term relationship? Does the erotic require some level of uncertainty and distance? Is it possible to have both committed intimacy and erotic attraction at the same time in a relationship? If so, how?
2. Does this chapter present a compelling definition of faithfulness to you? Explain why or why not. What remaining questions do you have, if any?

CHAPTER NINE

THE AVOIDABLE AND THE INEVITABLE: *THEOLOGY AROUND LEAVING AND STAYING*

1. In your past romantic relationships, what factors clued you into the fact that the relationship would have to end eventually? If you are currently in a relationship that you think will last, what do you think makes it so durable?
2. “Theologian Stanley Hauerwas once wrote that sex should rightly happen only in relationships in which one can imagine a future, but it is so hard to know what the future will hold” (p. 202). Should sex be reserved

for relationships with a future? Is it possible for sex to be good (in a theological sense) and fair even in a relationship where one cannot imagine a future?

3. For extended monogamy to be a success, McCleneghan says both couples have to be “all in” (p. 212). Does simply staying in the relationship because divorce is not an option count as being “all in”? What exactly does full commitment entail? Does the idea of being “all in” scare you, invigorate you, or something in between? What do you think is behind your reaction?

AFTERWORD THE NATURE OF LOVE

1. Do you think McCleneghan accomplished her goal “to offer a more fulsome [generous] account of ... human sexuality” (p. 220) than what has been offered before? How has reading this book changed the way you think about sex? Or has it?
2. McCleneghan concludes by hinting at the similarities between God and sex, “wrestling, dancing, weaving in and out, grappling and grabbing, moving and repositioning” (p. 222). How would you describe, in your own words, how sexuality relates to God? How does reflecting on one illuminate the other?