

Purity before Marriage

By Malcolm H. Watts

The Ten Commandments are no longer considered the undergirding structure of modern life. As a nation, we seem to have cut loose from our moorings and we are drifting into dangerous and troubled waters.

People speak of the "permissive society". As defined by John Robinson, one time Bishop of Woolwich, "permissiveness" is "freedom from interference or control, doing your own thing, love, laxity, licence, promiscuity — and, in terms of verbs, swinging, sliding, eroding, condoning." The permissive society simply means a society freed from moral restraints. Some may remember how, in the sixties, a prominent politician achieved notoriety by

welcoming the permissive society and equating it with the "liberated society".

It was during the sixties that permissiveness was helped by legislation. In 1966 Mr. George Thomas, then Parliamentary Secretary to the Home Office, wrote to the "Sunday Times", saying: "Unless a halt is called now, we will be on the way to decadence from which it will be very difficult to recover." Such warnings went unheeded. In a Disraeli Lecture, Norman Tebbit actually identified the permissiveness of the sixties as the main cause of subsequent rioting and lawlessness. "A breakdown in moral order", as Sir Frederick Catherwood observes, "leads to a breakdown in civil order".

There are, of course, other evils which

spring from permissiveness. Whenever chastity is reckoned an outmoded concept and "liberal" attitudes prevail, the result is immorality. At the present time, with the pressure brought to bear on us by press, books, magazines, television and cinema, this is becoming increasingly evident. Even Christian young people are being affected.

Just recently it was reported that in some schools in Southampton girls as young as 13 are being fitted with contraceptive implants without their parents' knowledge. It is now estimated that about 6% of girls aged 13-14, and 17% of girls aged 15,

It is high time for Church and Nation to hear the Word of God and take account of God's unchanging standards. The Bible unsparingly condemns the modern fashion for promiscuity. In particular, it declares premarital and extra-marital sex to be wrong, and always wrong.

Let us consider its teaching on the subject.

First of all, the book of Genesis describes the institution of marriage. In the creation ideal, marriage precedes physical union and is sealed by it. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and

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attend family planning clinics for the supply of contraceptives. The rate of unwanted teenage pregnancies in the UK is the highest in Western Europe, approximately half of them are sinfully and tragically terminated by abortion.

In the mid-1960s about 5% of single women lived with their future husbands. By the 1990s about 70% were cohabiting prior to marriage. Now the percentage will be considerably higher.

The proportion of children born outside of marriage leapt from 12% in 1980 to 42% in 2004.

shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen 2:24). Later revelation confirms this order, insisting that marriage is the only condition in which it is allowable for two people to cohabit. The author of Hebrews says: "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled" (Heb 13:4). If words mean anything, this verse states very clearly indeed that God insists that "marriage" comes before "the bed."

Secondly, the seventh Commandment, "Thou shall not commit adultery" (Ex 20:14), guards the sanctity of marriage by forbidding sexual relations outside of it.

Although this commandment speaks of a single violation of the law of purity, this particular offence includes all like offences, including sexual relations before marriage. Scripture contains express prohibitions of "fornication" (or unchastity), such as: "Abstain ... from fornication"; "the body is not for fornication ... flee fornication"; and "this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication" (Acts 15:20; 1 Cor 6:13,18; 1 Thess 4:3). Professor George Bush comments: "Sins against the laws of chastity are more frequently forbidden, more fearfully threatened, and marked by more decisive tokens of divine reprobation, than perhaps those of any other part of the Decalogue".

Thirdly, throughout the Bible, example reinforces precept. Early on in Scripture, a woman tried to seduce the patriarch Joseph, but he rejected her advances with abhorrence and on the grounds that it was "great wickedness" and "sin against God" (Gen 39:9; cf. 20:9). When Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities of the plain, were "giving themselves over to fornication", Lot refused to condone what he saw and heard. It stands written that he "vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds" (2 Pet 2:7; Jude 7). Noteworthy is the fact that, as Jude points out, it was the ungodly in these heathen cities that were given to immoral practice, not the people of God. Scripture identifies his people as "the

pure" and "clean", men and women with "clean hands and a pure heart", (Ps 18:18; 24:3,4; Jn 15:3) and declares that the strictest avoidance of fornication "becometh saints" (Eph 5:3).

Fourthly, God insists on proper marriage. He says it is immoral and altogether unacceptable for an unmarried couple to live together, no matter how sincere and faithful to each other they may be. Under the law, if a man fell in love with a woman and had a sexual relationship with her, he was commanded to "endow her to be his wife" i.e. marry her (Exod 22:16). The relationship was considered promiscuous. The couple had to get married.

Fifthly, according to ancient teaching, virginity at the time of marriage was to be expected (Deut 22:13ff). If there was sex before marriage, it was regarded as "folly" or "a disgraceful thing", equivalent to playing the "whore" or "prostitute" (Deut 22:21). Furthermore, premarital sex with a betrothed woman is a crime condemned by Moses' "Civil Law" to death by stoning, even if it takes place between two consenting adults (Deut 22:23-24).

Sixthly, our Lord confirmed this when he said to the Samaritan woman: "Thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband" (John 4:18). He set her present union in marked contrast with biblical and lawful marriage. The legitimacy of the former union was denied. The necessity of the latter was

affirmed.

Seventhly, and lastly, marriage is commended, not because it is a cherished tradition, nor because for some people it is the preferred alternative, but because it is opposed to unchastity and designed to prevent the evil of two people living together unlawfully. "To avoid fornication", says Paul, "let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband" (1 Cor 7:2). He continues, "if they cannot contain, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn." (1 Cor 7:9) What he is saying here is this: if two people "burn (with passion)", they should either "contain" i.e. exercise self-control or they should "marry". There is no third option of casual and illicit sex in the single state. Physical

intimacy outside marriage and physical intimacy inside marriage are definitely not equally valid possibilities. As Professor John Murray has said: "When the alternative is the peril, or tragedy, of fornication, there is no escape from the obligation to marry".

All sexual activity before marriage is great sin. If any have been guilty of it, they should remember that God is merciful and, upon real repentance, he is pleased to grant full and free pardon. "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy." (Micah 7:18)