

Pre-Marital Sexual Relations: What is the Moral Obligation When Repeated Incidents are Confessed?

By Greg L. Bahnsen

Sex Only In Marriage

Sexual relations are declared to be immoral when they are not enjoyed within the condition of marriage. “Let marriage be kept in honor among all, and the bed is undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers” (Hebrews 13:4). The only answer for sexual urges, if one is to avoid fornication, is marriage: “Because of fornications, let each man have his own wife” (I Corinthians 7:2).

God severely punishes sexual relations outside of marriage, both in eternity and in history now. We are deceived to think that fornicators or adulterers will inherit the kingdom of God (I Corinthians 6:9-10). “But for . . . fornicators . . . their part shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8). In society, adultery calls for capital punishment (Deuteronomy 22:22). Likewise, pre-marital unchastity was so abhorrent that if a bride was found not to be a virgin, the death penalty was called for (Deuteronomy 22:20-21). By engaging in sex outside of marriage she had “played the harlot.”

Therefore, it should be obvious that fornication is dishonorable and inappropriate for the Christian, being directly contrary to his sanctification: “You know what charge we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you abstain from fornication; that each of you know how to possess himself of his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in the passion of lust, even as the Gentiles who know not God . . . The Lord is an avenger in all these things, as also we told you plainly . . . For God called us not for uncleanness, but in sanctification” (I Thessalonians 4:2-7). Fornication is a sin against God’s saving work in our lives: “He who commits fornication sins against his own body. Or don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which you have from God? And you are not your own, for you were bought with a price. Therefore, *glorify God in your body!*” (I Corinthians 6:18-20).

“Flee fornication” is thus the Bible’s blunt and clear order (I Corinthians 6:18). Look at the context. The reason why Paul says a believer is not to have sexual intercourse with a loose woman (harlot) is that this establishes a “one-flesh” relationship (vv. 15-17) with her. But this sexual relationship of “one-flesh” has been ordained

by God exclusively for the condition of marriage, as Jesus taught, adding that the marriage relation is not to be put asunder by men (Matthew 19:4-6).

What then? If God forbids pre-marital sexual gratification, and if God forbids sexual gratification with harlots, what does God require someone who does not have sexual self-control to do? Following along in the above passage from I Corinthians, we read: “because of fornications, let each man have his own wife If they do not have self-control, they must marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion” (7:2, 9).

Correcting the Sin of Fornication

If a Christian has committed fornication, he must repent. And if he genuinely repents, he will follow it up by doing whatever is necessary to make the situation right. When God’s holy word lays down moral requirements and we transgress them, our repentance calls for us to go back and rectify the sinful situation – doing everything we can to achieve the conditions which were violated. For example, Scripture requires us to work and earn our money for spending; if someone has resorted to stealing, he must not only confess the sinfulness of theft, but show appropriate fruit of repentance (cf. Luke 3:8) by bringing about what Scripture originally required – namely, working for his money. “Let him who stole steal no more, but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing that is good” (Ephesians 4:28).

What Biblical requirement has been violated when a believer engages in pre-marital sexual intercourse or fornication? *The requirement of being married to the one with whom he enters into the one-flesh union.* What was wrong with his behavior was not the act of sex, but the sex act outside of a covenanted life-time commitment of marriage. Therefore, the fruit appropriate for repentance when one has committed fornication with a woman is to go back and fulfill the required condition, to “make things right” (make “restitution”), *to marry the woman whom he drew into fornication with him.* (This is likewise her moral responsibility toward him since she too was guilty of fornication.) If the fornicator is unwilling to do this, he shows that he does not truly grieve over his sin with godly sorrow, dedicating himself to correcting the situation and striving after renewed obedience to the Lord (cf. Westminster Larger Catechism #76). He wants the benefits of forgiveness as long as it is convenient, not calling for a correction of his behavior.

Especially When the Sexual Relation has been Repeated

One act of sexual intercourse with a woman outside of marriage is fornication and puts one under moral obligation to marry that woman. If the fornicator has repented of that one act, he recognizes that the act was wrong – and wrong because it calls for a lifetime marriage commitment. *If after repenting of this act of fornication* he enters into sexual relations with the woman again, he (if truly sorrowful for the first indiscretion) communicates his intention to continue in this relationship which must (morally) be sanctioned by a marriage vow. Knowing what is at stake and the significance of his act, his behavior signifies that he is not retreating from the relationship but rather committing himself to it. He says, in effect, “let us live as a married couple.” If that is not his intention while engaging in the privilege of marriage, then he flaunts his previous repentance and defies the moral demands of God. He knows better. But he wants the privilege of sex without the responsibility of sex.

Continuing to go to bed with a woman creates a kind of “common law marriage,” without civil or religious ceremony. We recall that when Isaac took Rebekah into his tent, that was indication enough of his marriage commitment (Gen. 24:67; cf. “he went in to her” in Gen. 29:23, 30). When Jesus spoke to the loose woman at the Samaritan well, He indicated^{1[1]} that because she “had” five men previously, she has “had five husbands” (John 4:18).^{2[2]} One recalls Paul’s line of thinking: “he who is joined to a harlot is one body, for He said ‘The two shall become one flesh’” (1 Corinthians 6:16). Continuing to go to bed with a woman is itself a declaration to her (and to others, if the relationship is public) that one is committed to living as her husband, even if without the legal ceremony.

Obviously, the one who has once committed fornication with a woman and repents of it, but then continues to commit fornication with her, has not simply fallen into a momentary, single indiscretion. He burns with passion and does not have sexual self-control. The problem is not an isolated *act*, but now clearly a personal *condition*. What does God’s word say about that condition? “If they do not have self-control, let them marry” (1 Cor. 7:9).

This Obligation Made Explicit in the Law

The line of thought pursued above has argued for one’s moral obligation to marry a woman with whom he has engaged in sexual relations (especially repeated ones). That same conclusion is confirmed by looking at the direct commands of God’s law.

This obligation is stipulated in Deuteronomy 22:28-29: “If a man finds a girl who is an unbetrothed virgin, an he *lays hold of her* and lies with her, and they are found, then the man lying down with her shall give to the girl’s father fifty pieces of silver, and she shall be his wife because he has *humbled* her; he may not put her away all his days.”

This is the literal translation of the Hebrew. Unfortunately, some commentators and Bible translations (Driver, Craige, Rushdoony, New International Version) make the mistake of *interpreting* these words as referring to the use of force and thus to raping a virgin. Such a view is quite unacceptable, for a number of reasons. (1) This would lay a burden and penalty on the woman who had no part or consent in the act, which is as unfair and senseless as punishing the victim of attempted murder.

(2) The Hebrew word *tapas* (“lay hold of her,” emphasized above) simply means to take hold of something, grasp it in hand, and (by application) to capture or seize something. It is the verb used for “handling” the harp and flute (Gen. 4:21), the sword (Ezek. 21:11; 30:21), the sickle (Jer. 50:16), the shield (Jer. 46:9), the oars (Ezek. 27:29), and the bow (Amos 2:15). It is likewise used for “taking” God’s name (Prov. 30:9) or “dealing”

^{1[1]} Unless she had availed herself liberally of divorce provisions, which is historically unlikely: cf. Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, N.I.C. Series, p. 264; *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, p. 115.

^{2[2]} To top things off, the man she now “has” is married to another, so “not your husband” – even while living like a husband with her.

with the law of God (Jer. 2:8). Joseph's garment was "grasped" (Gen. 39:12; cf. I Kings 11:30), even as Moses "took" the two tablets of the law (Deut. 9:17). People are "caught" (I Kings 20:18), even as cities are "captured" (Deut. 20:19; Isa. 36:1). An adulterous wife may not have been "caught" in the act (Num. 5:13). In all of these instances it is clear that, while force may come into the picture from further description, the Hebrew verb "to handle, grasp, capture" does not *in itself* indicate anything about the use of force.

This verb used in Deuteronomy 22:28 is different from the verb used in verse 25 (*chazak*, from the root meaning "to be strong, firm") which can mean "to seize" a bear and kill it (I Sam. 17:35; cf. 2 Sam. 2:16; Zech. 14:13), "to prevail" (2 Sam. 24:4; Dan. 11:7), "to be strong" (Deut. 31:6; 2 Sam. 2:7), etc. Deuteronomy 22:25 thus speaks of a man finding a woman and "forcing her." Just three verses later (Deut. 25:28), the verb is changed to simply "take hold of" her – indicating an action less intense and violent than the action dealt with in verse 25 (viz., rape).

(3) The Hebrew word *anah* ("humble, afflict," emphasized above) used in Deuteronomy 22:29 can sometimes be used for forcing a woman (Gen. 34:2; Jud. 20:5; 2 Sam. 13:12, 14, 22, 32; Lam. 5:11) but *need not* indicate a forcible rape, which is clear from the Deuteronomy passage itself at verse 24. It can simply mean to dishonor, mistreat, or afflict (e.g., Ex. 1:11; Gen. 16:6; Ex. 22:22; Deut. 8:2; Ps. 119:67), and in sexual settings can denote other kinds of sin than rape (Ezek. 22:10, 11).

We can agree with the reasoning of James Jordan: "At first sight, this seems to allow for rape of an unbetrothed girl. In Hebrew, however, the verb 'seize' is a weaker verb than the verb for 'force' used in the same passage (v. 25) to describe rape. This stronger verb is also used for the rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13:11). Implied here is a notion of catching the girl, but not a notion that she fought back with anything more than a token resistance. Modern random rape would not be excusable under this law, and would have to come under the death penalty of Deuteronomy 22:25-27" (*The Law of the Covenant*, p. 149).

Accordingly, one will find that many competent authorities in Biblical interpretation understand Deuteronomy 22:28-29 to apply to cases of seduction, not forcible rape. For instance:

Meredith Kline: "The seducer of an unbetrothed virgin was obliged to take her as wife, paying the customary bride price and forfeiting the right of divorce" (*Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy*, p. 111).

Matthew Henry: ". . . if he and the damsel did consent, he should be bound to marry her, and never to divorce her, how much soever she was below him and how displeasing soever she might afterwards be to him" (*Commentary on the Whole Bible*, ad loc.).

J. A. Thompson: "Seduction of a young girl. Where the girl was not betrothed and no legal obligations had been entered into, the man was forced to pay the normal bride-price and marry the girl. He was not allowed, subsequently, to send her away (*Deuteronomy: Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Series, p. 237).

In *Israel's Laws and legal Precedents* (1907), Charles Foster Kent (professor of Biblical Literature at Yale University) clearly distinguished between the law pertaining to rape in Dt. 22:25-27 and the law pertaining to seduction in Dt. 22:28-29 (pp. 117-118).

Keil and Delitzsch classify Deuteronomy 22:28-29 under the category of "Seduction of a virgin," comment that the crime involved was "their deed" – implying consent of the part of both parties – and liken this law to that found in Exodus 22:16-17 (*Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 3, p. 412).

Even if one has some question about the applicability of Deuteronomy 22:28-29, *the clear and decisive command from God when a man has seduced a virgin is found in Exodus 22:16-17*: "If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall surely pay her dowry to make her his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he shall weigh out money according to the dowry for virgins."

In this text there is no question whatsoever of forcible rape. The Hebrew verb used to describe the sin (italicized in the quotation above) is *patah*, used elsewhere for "coaxing" (Jud. 14:15), "luring" (Jud. 16:5; Hos. 2:14), and "enticing" (Prov. 1:10; 16:29). When a man gets a virgin to consent to have sexual relations with him, he is morally obligated to marry her – as the following commentators indicate:

John Calvin: "The remedy is, that he who has corrupted the girl should be compelled to marry her, and also to give her a dowry from his own property, lest, if he should afterwards cast her off, she should go away from her bed penniless" (*Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, vol. 3, pp. 83-84).

J. C. Connell: "Although she consented, it was still his responsibility to protect her from lifelong shame resulting from the sin of the moment by marrying her, not without payment of the regular dowry" ("Exodus," *New bible Commentary*, ed. F. Davidson, p. 122).

Adam Clarke: "This was an exceedingly wise and humane law, and must have operated powerfully against seduction and fornication; because the person who might feel inclined to take advantage of a young woman knew that he must marry her, and give her a dowry, if her parents consented" (*The Holy Bible . . . with a Commentary and Critical Notes*, vol. 1, p. 414).

Alan Cole: "If a man seduces a virgin: . . . he must acknowledge her as his wife, unless her father refuses" (*Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Series, p. 173).

James Jordan: "the punishment for the seducer is that he must marry the girl, unless her father objects, and that he may never divorce her (according to Dt. 22:29)" (*The Law of the Covenant*, p. 148).

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.: "Exodus 22:16-17 takes up the problem of the seduction of a maiden who was not engaged . . . Here the seducer must pay the 'bride-price' and agree to marry her" (*Toward Old Testament Ethics*, p. 107).

The Only Exception

If one has engaged in pre-marital fornication with a woman, he is under strict moral obligation to marry that woman and never divorce her. The one and only exception allowed by Scripture (Ex. 22:17) is when the woman's father "utterly refuses to give her unto him."

This refusal (or the decision not to exercise such veto authority) has the character of a vow, either intervening to nullify the woman's implied vow of a marriage commitment (or the promise of giving his daughter in marriage). The father's decision must, then, be made with due caution and reflection. There is no going back on his word: "He that swears to his own hurt and changes not" (Psalm 15:4). "Let your yes be yes, and no be no" (James 5:12). Cf. Ecclesiastes 5:5; Deuteronomy 23:21-23.

The intervention into the woman's life to prevent the (expected) marriage is not something which may go back and forth. A firm decision is to be made, and then that settles the matter. The law of God, for instance, speaks of a father or husband's authority to establish or nullify the vow taken by the daughter or wife (Numbers 30:5, 8, 12-13). Significantly, the law of God specifies that in such cases the nullifying of the woman's vow must be made on the day in which the father hears of it. Otherwise, the vow continues to have binding authority.

One final word about vows, promises, and commitments. Our Lord condemns the attitude and practice of seizing upon technicalities and loopholes in order to avoid one's obligations (e.g., Matthew 23:16-22; cf. 5:33-37).
