

# Abstinence or Chastity?

## Ten essential differences

### Abstinence

### Chastity

#### 1. A pragmatic choice

Abstinence is a pragmatic choice to refrain from certain sexual activities for an unspecified period. There are two types of approach. 'Abstinence-only, where the focus is wholly on encouraging teenagers not to have sex, providing a rationale for this lifestyle choice, and equipping them with skills such as assertiveness and self-esteem to fulfil this goal. Abstinence-plus programmes present the same message that abstinence is the safest form of protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections but also provides information and advice on contraception.'<sup>11</sup> According to the sex education programme *Love for Life*, 'abstinence is a reasonable and healthy strategy to adopt during certain periods of one's lifetime...'<sup>12</sup>

#### 2. Encourages informed choice

Abstinence encourages a teenager to make an informed decision with regard to sexual behaviour. *Love for Life* explains that their website 'is here for you to use, enjoy and help you make informed and mature sexual health choices – choices that will affect you now and in the future. Take time to browse through the site and discover the facts about STIs and contraception...'<sup>13</sup> Teenagers are presented with a range of sexual facts, details of STDs and HIV, and the advantages and disadvantages of different contraceptives. They are then invited to weigh up the options in order to make an informed choice whether or not to abstain from sex. CARE's guidelines for teachers and school governors, *Your School and Sex Education*, teaches that abstinence must be presented in a favourable light, and young people 'need to be equipped with the skills required to make informed choices...'<sup>14</sup>

#### 1. A Christian virtue

Chastity is a way of life that seeks after God's holiness. 'Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false...' (Psalm 24:3,4). A chaste mind strives for purity in every aspect of life: 'Create in me a pure heart, O God... (Psalm 51:10). Chastity, as a biblical virtue, encompasses the way we think, the way we speak, the way we act, both before and during marriage. With regard to sexual behaviour, a chaste mind understands and rejoices in God's purpose that a sexual relationship is meant only for the marriage union between husband and wife. Chastity is a moral choice based on obedience to God's will in the realm of sexual conduct.

#### 2. Condemns sexual immorality

The Bible teaches that we should abstain, not from sex, but from sexual immorality. The Apostles commanded the early church to abstain from sexual immorality (Acts 15:29). Paul wrote: 'The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord... Flee from sexual immorality' (1 Corinthians 6:13,18). 'But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people' (Ephesians 5:3). Inviting teenagers to make an informed choice about sexual conduct, based on the 'facts', without teaching God's law, without warning that sexual immorality is wrong, that promiscuity has consequences, is to lead them into the path of temptation. Teaching teenagers that the decision to 'have sex' or to 'abstain' is an informed choice demoralises sexual conduct.

#### 9. Meaning is ambiguous

The meaning of abstinence is unclear. According to *Love for Life*, 'abstinence may be defined in a variety of different ways. It can mean no sexual touching at all, some sexual touching, or everything except penetrative sexual intercourse. This can be very confusing as you try to make choices for yourself regarding the decision to be abstinent or not...'<sup>16</sup> According to the University Health Center: 'Abstinence can mean different things to different people at different times...'<sup>17</sup> What does abstinence teach about sex talk, discussions around condoms, oral sex, pornography, foul language, heavy petting?

#### 10. Fundamentally amoral

The abstinence message is fundamentally amoral. Indeed many abstinence programmes go out of their way to state that they are not motivated by moral considerations, but are purely health orientated. 'Abstinence-until-marriage education is about making healthy choices to be free from the risks of STDs, unplanned pregnancy and negative emotional consequences. It is about being free to pursue future dreams and goals, regardless of religious preference or conviction.'<sup>19</sup> Abstinence programmes do not, as a rule, condemn any type of sexual activity as wrong. Most claim to be non-judgemental, and do not use the term 'sexual immorality'. Therefore, promiscuity and homosexuality are not condemned.

#### 9. Meaning is crystal clear

The meaning of chastity is clear and easy to understand. Because chastity is based on an inner desire for a pure life, all unbecoming, indecent, impure, immoral conduct, in thought, word, or deed, is recognised as wrong, unacceptable, sinful. We are urged 'to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul' (1 Peter 2:11). According to the Heidelberg Catechism: 'Since both our body and soul are temples of the Holy Ghost, it is His will that we keep both pure and holy; therefore, He forbids all unchaste actions, gestures, words, thoughts, desires and whatever many entice thereto.'<sup>18</sup>

#### 10. Based on biblical morality

Chastity is a moral choice to obey God's commandments. The Bible teaches that it is God's will that human procreation should take place within the family structure created by marriage. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh' (Genesis 2:24). The marriage bed is to be undefiled (Hebrews 13:4). To protect marriage and the family God condemns all forms of sexual immorality, which includes fornication, adultery, and homosexuality. The seventh commandment teaches us that 'all unchastity is accursed of God, and that we should therefore loathe it with our whole heart, and live chastely and modestly, whether in holy wedlock or single life'.<sup>20</sup>

#### Endnotes

- 1 Dr TG Stammers, Abstinence under fire, *Post Medical Journal*, PMI, 2003, 79: 365-6
- 2 Love for Life website, Health Info/abstinence
- 3 Love for Life; Icebergsandbabies website
- 4 *Your School and Sex Education*, CARE, 1996, p26
- 5 University Health Center website, Sexual Health, Abstinence, [www.uhs.uga.edu/sexualhealth](http://www.uhs.uga.edu/sexualhealth)
- 6 *Sex and Relationship Education Guidance*, Dep. for Education and Employment, July 2000, pp4, 9,10
- 7 Love for Life website, What is abstinence?
- 8 SIECUS website, For teens, Abstinence – what's right for me?
- 9 Abstinence Clearinghouse website, resource library, 'Abstinence talks; too little?', Matt Leingang
- 10 SIECUS website, For teens, Abstinence – what 's right for me?

- 11 Teenage parenthood consultation, submission from CARE, November 1998, p7
- 12 Ibid. p9
- 13 *Parents First*, leader's manual, CARE, 1995, p35
- 14 Teenage parenthood consultation, p16
- 15 Oxford Concise Dictionary 9th edition
- 16 Love for Life website, What is abstinence?
- 17 University Health Center website, Sexual Health, Abstinence, [www.uhs.uga.edu/sexualhealth](http://www.uhs.uga.edu/sexualhealth)
- 18 Heidelberg Catechism, answer 109
- 19 Choosing the Best website, choosingthebest.
- 20 Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 41, answer 108.

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### 3. Develops self-esteem

Many abstinence programmes use an appeal to self-esteem to encourage young people to make 'positive' sexual choices. According to the University Health Center: 'Self-esteem is the way you feel about yourself. If you have high self-esteem, you are more confident in yourself to make good decisions, and you expect others to respect your decisions. Your self-esteem is lower if you often need others' approval and acceptance to feel good about yourself. Having high self-esteem – trusting yourself and the way you feel – can help you make decisions based on what's right for you, not on what others think or do.'<sup>5</sup> Sex education guidance from the Government emphasises the importance of building self-esteem in schoolchildren, claiming that it helps them 'understand the reasons for delaying sexual activity'.<sup>6</sup> *Love for Life* invites young people to make 'informed and mature sexual health choices' on the basis of information and positive self-esteem.<sup>7</sup>

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### 4. Teaches about sex, not marriage

Abstinence programmes are based on the presupposition that children need to be taught about sex. Most, however, have little or nothing to say about marriage, and certainly do not teach a biblical view of marriage. Some abstinence programmes do not distinguish between marriage and committed sexual relationships (cohabitation). The abstinence message has little relevance to marriage; it has nothing to say to a married couple.

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### 5. What's best for me

The motivation behind the abstinence message is 'what's best for me'. Young people are invited to abstain in order to avoid the unpleasant side effects of 'having sex'. It's promoted as a good way to prevent teenage pregnancies and STDs. According to SIECUS (an organisation based on the ideology of the sexual revolutionary, Alfred Kinsey) 'Abstinence from sexual relations has benefits for teenagers. It is the best way to prevent pregnancy and to prevent becoming infected with HIV and other STDs...'<sup>8</sup> So the motivation is selfish; it has nothing to do with what is right, it does not recognise God's law.

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### 3. Teaches obedience to God's word

Chastity is based on obedience to God's word. 'How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word... I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you' (Psalm 119:9,11). The Bible teaches that older women should train younger women to be discreet, chaste; young men should be encouraged to be self-controlled. (Titus 2:4-6). The idea that we should look within for empowerment to make 'healthy' sexual decisions is to deny that the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9). The Bible warns: 'Do not lean on your own understanding... be not wise in your own eyes... There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death' (Proverbs 3:5,7; 14:12). The Lord says: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength...' (Jeremiah 17:5). To use human feelings as the basis for moral decisions is to deny God's law.

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### 4. Teaches about marriage, not sex

Chastity flows from the belief that children should be taught the moral law of God as a basis for sexual conduct. Chastity finds its fulfilment as husband and wife express their love in the 'one flesh', indissoluble, marriage union ordained by God. Chastity rejoices in sexual purity before, and within, marriage. It secures the family, protects husband and wife, and guards the children, the fruit of the marriage union.

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### 5. What's right in God's eyes

The motivation behind chastity is to do what's right in God's eyes. 'The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul... The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever' (Psalm 19:7,8,9). From the inner self comes a desire to live according to God's word; this means guarding our hearts and minds against everything that is impure, unclean, defiled. The chaste mind focuses on 'whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure...' (Philippians 4:8). Chastity, by definition, has no fear of teenage pregnancies and STDs.

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### 6. Promoted by sex educators

Abstinence is promoted by a variety of organisations, including CARE, Love for Life, SIECUS. The president of Planned Parenthood said: 'Our position has always been that sex education should be abstinence based, but not abstinence only.'<sup>9</sup> SIECUS states: 'Remember, for many young persons the choice to be abstinent is the best choice.'<sup>10</sup> Abstinence (taught by secular sex educators, who claim an expert knowledge of sex, and those who prefer not to use God's word) is based on the wisdom of this world, the spirit of the age, a mindset that does not acknowledge the law of God.

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### 7. Undermines modesty and chivalry

The vast majority of abstinence programmes simply ignore the virtues of modesty and chivalry. CARE's abstinence approach to sex education urges that young people should be given accurate factual information 'about sex, unplanned pregnancy, STIs, contraception, abortion and its effects, both physical and emotional'.<sup>11</sup> CARE also recommends that 'appropriate sex education can take place from age 5... very young children should learn about naming body parts... older children can learn more explicit details about sex in the context of loving relationships.'<sup>12</sup> CARE's abstinence programme encourages parents to learn rude, offensive sex words so that 'they feel comfortable dealing with sexual language' when they discuss sex with their children.<sup>13</sup> With regard to contraception, CARE believes that 'young people's advice centres and specifically dedicated family planning facilities can be effective especially if young people are given an opportunity to discuss their situation and decision-making as well as being provided with contraception, if appropriate.'<sup>14</sup>

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### 8. The word abstain

The word 'abstain' is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary: 'restrain oneself; refrain from indulging in (abstained from cakes and sweets; abstained from mentioning it)'.<sup>15</sup> Within a sexual context, it means refraining from sexual intercourse for an unspecified time. Abstaining has no moral connotation.

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### 6. Taught by the Christian Church

Chastity, an essential doctrine of the Christian Church, is at the centre of the Christian life. Our Lord said: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' And with regard to sexual conduct: 'But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:8, 28). 'Even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right' (Proverbs 20:11). Chastity (taught by parents to children) is based on 'the wisdom that comes from heaven which is first of all pure...' (James 3:17).

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### 7. Encourages modesty and chivalry

Chastity is linked to the virtues of modesty and chivalry. The apostle Paul wrote: 'I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety' (1 Timothy 2:9). 'And our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty' (1 Corinthians 12:23). Modesty understands that sexual activity is an intimate, private expression of love between husband and wife. It discourages lust and encourages faithful love. Chivalry flows from Peter's instruction that wives should be treated with respect 'as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life' (1 Peter 3:7). It is a male virtue based in respect that men have towards women. Men have an innate potential for defending, serving and honouring women. Sex talk undermines chivalry and encourages the lustful exploitation of women. Without the virtues of modesty and chivalry, love loses its meaning, men become sex predators, women sex objects. Sexual facts are harmful because they undermine the virtues of modesty and chivalry, arousing 'the passions of the flesh which wage war against your soul' (1 Peter 2:11).

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### 8. The word chaste

The word 'chaste' is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary: '(of behaviour, speech, etc.) pure, virtuous, decent.'<sup>15</sup> The biblical word 'chastity' is translated from the Greek word *hagnos*. It means 'pure from every fault', 'undefiled', and is derived from the word *hagios*, which means 'holy', 'free from evil'.