

Fornication and Adultery – Moral Issues We Face

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Introduction

In the beginning God created mankind, made them “male and female,” and commanded them to “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth” (Gen. 1:27–28)¹. God further inspired Moses to state His intent in this regard: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (2:24). Moses recorded the beginning of their fulfillment of God’s first command to them in simple and straightforward terms: “And the man knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain” (4:1a; cf. v. 25). That Adam “knew” Eve is a reference to their sexual union, the means by which they began the perpetual process of fruitfulness and multiplication of humankind God had ordered.

The foregoing statements make it evident that God created us with sexual instinct and appetite and with the ability to fulfill it. It is no less evident that He **expected** us to fulfill it. In fact, Adam and Eve could not have obeyed God’s command to reproduce and populate the earth apart from their acting upon this instinct and appetite. God made this instinct extremely strong, surpassed only by that of self-preservation, involving the desire/need for food and drink. In His infinite wisdom, He knew that the sexual appetite must be regulated and controlled for it to be a blessing rather than a curse. God thus ordained the fulfillment of the sexual instinct, **but only within His own clearly stated benevolent limitations**. Not only is sexual fulfillment therefore not innately sinful, evil, or shameful; when engaged in within God’s limitation for it, it is guiltless, pure, and honorable.

God’s Boundary for Sexual Fulfillment

The terms, *fornication* and *adultery*, which we will later define more specifically, describe sexual activity **outside** the boundary God ordained for it. This boundary must therefore be included in any discussion of these terms. Were there no such limitation, there would be no such thing as fornication and adultery, for “...where there is no law, neither is there transgression” (Rom. 4:15). God **has** issued a dictum on this matter, and, as will become clear, those who ignore, reject, and disobey it become thereby guilty of fornication and/or adultery and subject to the wrath of a holy and just God.

The only sphere of innocent sexual intercourse involves three elements:

1. It must be between a man and a woman (Gen. 1:27–28; 2:24; Mat. 19:6–9; 1 Cor. 7:2; etc.)

2. It must be between a man and a woman who are married to each other (1 Cor. 7:2; Heb. 23:4; etc.).
3. It must be between a man and a woman whom God authorizes to be married (Mat. 5:32; 19:6; etc.).

Jesus stated that these limitations were God's Law "from the beginning" (Gen. 2:24), that they were still God's Law at the time in the first century, and by implication, that they would always be so.

And he answered and said, Have ye not read, that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh? So that they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder (Mat. 19:4-6).

Jesus employed both *fornication* **and** *adultery*, in another passage:

And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and he that marrieth her when she is put away committeth adultery (v. 9).

In a companion statement in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had previously used these same two terms in discussing marriage and divorce:

But I say unto you, that every one that putteth away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, maketh her an adulteress: and whosoever shall marry her when she is put away committeth adultery (Mat. 5:32).

The two dozen or so loopholes that various brethren have devised in an effort to evade New Testament teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage are largely traceable to attempts to justify relationships that involve fornication and/or adultery. Let us now explore the meaning of these terms.

Defining the Terms

Fornication

Our English word, *fornication*, derives from the Latin term, *fornix* or *fornicis*, meaning an archway or a "vaulted chamber." A building of such description in ancient Rome was a venue for prostitutes and became a euphemism for whoredom or a brothel (*Online Etymology*). The Greek word rendered "fornication" in the King James and American Standard versions (1901) is *porneia* (and four cognates). Of the forty-five times this word-family appears in the New Testament, *porneia* occurs most frequently (thirty-six times), only a few of which are metaphorical (i.e., describing idolatry as "spiritual fornication") (Rev. 14:8; 17:2; etc.).

Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich define *porneia* as "prostitution, unchastity, fornication, of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse" (699). Kittel defines *porneia* in the New Testament as

“all extra-marital and unnatural intercourse” (6:590). Thayer’s definition of *porneia* is “...illicit sexual intercourse in general” (532). Other Bible versions variously render this term as “sexual immorality” (NKJV), “unchastity” (RSV, TCNT), and “marital unfaithfulness” (NIV). *Porneia* is obviously a comprehensive term that embraces every sort of sexual union besides that which God has ordained within Scriptural marriage (i.e., sodomy, lesbianism, incest, bestiality, prostitution, adultery).

Adultery

Adultery in the English language traces back to the fourteenth century A.D., when it was brought over from the Latin term, *adulterare*, meaning to corrupt (*Dictionary.com*). *Adultery* translates the Greek noun, *moicheia*.³ Kittel defines this word simply as “adultery, illicit intercourse” (4:730). While Thayer defines *moicheia* as “adultery,” he defines the cognate verb, *moichao* as “to have unlawful intercourse with another’s wife” (417). It is telling that Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich do not define any of this family of Greek terms except by the words, *adultery*, *adulterer*, *adulteress*, *commit adultery*, and *adulterous* (527–28), omitting any description of that which constitutes adultery. Their doing so presumes that all English readers will be aware that these terms relate to physical sexual infidelity regarding one’s spouse. W.E. Vine defines the noun, *moichos*, as denoting one “who has unlawful intercourse with the spouse of another” (14).

The latter-day postulation that *adultery* refers only to “breaking the covenant” of marriage rather than to any sexual activity is merely a paltry, juvenile attempt to circumvent some of the most plain, literal, and explicit doctrine of the Son of God and His inspired writers regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In spite of this fact, some brethren (e.g., the late John Edwards, Olan Hicks, Truman Scott [instructor at Sunset International Bible Institute], etc.), have touted and/or continue to tout this demonic error. Such preposterous theorizing is born of sheer convenience and flies in the face of history and scholarship, both ancient and modern.

Fornication, then, is a broad term that embraces every form of sexual prohibition and deviance, whatever one’s marital status, while *adultery* relates particularly to sexual congress of a married person with another person besides one’s own spouse, thus representing a betrayal of one’s marriage vows. While all adultery constitutes fornication, not all fornication is adultery. Fornication **may** relate to marriage, but adultery particularly does so. Both terms are also used

sparingly in a metaphorical sense to describe unfaithfulness to the Christ (e.g., “fornication” [Rev. 2:14; 17:2; et al.]; “adultery” [Mat. 12:39; Jam. 4:4]).

The Corinthianized American Culture

When Paul walked into Corinth in about A.D. 51, he entered a city known throughout the civilized world for its moral corruption. A hint of this moral turpitude is evident in his statement in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11:

Or know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with men, ...And such were some of you....

This pagan metropolis was renowned for its temple to the goddess, Aphrodite, allegedly hosting a thousand or more temple prostitutes. From Paul’s description, it was obviously a center of sodomy, as well. Even in an amoral pagan world, Corinth was so distinguished for its debauchery and lewdness that men made a verb of its name. To “Corinthianize” meant to corrupt and debase.

Our great nation has become “Corinthianized” to a substantial degree since the 1960s. To identify the principal source of this moral declension, we must go back to the 19th century English naturalist, Charles Darwin. His *On the Origin of the Species* (1859) gave base men an excuse to deny the existence of a Creator to Whom they must give account for their behavior, including their sexual conduct. Darwin’s theories created a new religion whose devotees have prostrated themselves before a new trinity of nature, accident, and vast eons. They could now replicate the “morals” of animals, since, after all, that is all we are—mere advanced apes. The adoption of Darwin’s God-dismissive theories by the immense majority of the scientific community in our nation meant that this God-denying doctrine would find its way into the university curricula and then into public school textbooks at every level. The influence of evolutionary theory on sexual mores has been undeniably powerful and widespread.

Numerous and extensive factors coalesced in the 1960s, causing drastic changes in attitudes toward sexual behavior and producing a well-named “sexual revolution.” Perhaps we may profit by noting some of the more specific factors of this phenomenon.

The influence of Alfred Charles Kinsey can hardly be overemphasized. This biologist “researcher” at Indiana University is credited with being the “father of sexology” (i.e., the study of human sexual behavior). He published his first book on the subject, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, in 1948, and followed it in 1953 with *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. Both

books soared to the top of the best-seller lists. Only years later was it revealed that he got some of his statistics on sexual responses of little boys from a serial pedophile, whose identity he shielded, allowing him to continue his wicked and criminal activity. He derived his data from more than mere interviews, however. According to Wikipedia:

Kinsey's sex research went beyond theory and interview to include observation of and participation in sexual activity, including homosexual activity, with co-workers and others.... Kinsey filmed sexual acts which included co-workers in the attic of his home as part of his research...to ensure the film's secrecy, which would have caused a scandal had it become public knowledge (Wikipedia).

Kinsey has been unmasked in recent years as not only a fraud in his "research," but also as an obsessive pervert who hid behind an academic facade to live out his own sexual fantasies. Nevertheless, the influence of his books was major in moving sexual activity from the marital bed to the anywhere with anyone anytime. He gave our countrymen an excuse (if not actual encouragement) to experiment with "guiltless" sex as mere recreation. Perhaps, more than any other one person, he prepared the way for the "sexual revolution."

Decades before Kinsey's degeneracy, however, theological modernism and liberalism had been churning out an ever-increasing number of faithless graduates from their sectarian seminaries. By the middle part of the 20th century (post-World War II), the effects of these pulpiteers and professors began to take a major toll on the moral fiber of the nation. From its inception the vast majority of its citizens had accepted the Bible as God's standard of moral behavior. As more and more churchgoers heard their "pastors" from Sunday to Sunday cast doubt on the Bible's inspiration and infallibility, God's Word became less and less influential on national behavior in general, and on morality in particular.

Every day of my public-school years through 1953 began with a homeroom devotional period, including a Bible reading and prayer. These were outlawed by a Supreme Court ruling in 1962. Coincidentally (or perhaps, not), "values-neutral" "sexuality education" courses began finding their way into the public high schools in 1963, teaching the fundamentals of sexual performance, but allowing children to reach their own conclusions about sexual perimeters. The premise of these courses was that "teenagers are going to be sexually active anyway," so the main concern of the curriculum was to instruct in "safe sex." Even a dummy way down on the dummy scale can deduce that plugging in classes on sexual performance and unplugging prayer and Bible reading is a bad formula for strengthening and elevating moral standards in

young people. The tipping point of the moral decline of our nation can undeniably be dated from the **time** of these events, and I suspect they were a prime **cause** of the decline as well.

Millions of young post-World War II parents listened more to the radical leftist pediatrician, Dr. Benjamin Spock, and his anti-discipline, instant-gratification advice for the rearing of children than they did to inspired wisdom. The pampered children of those indulgent and permissive parents reached their late teens in the mid-1960s. Many of these were ripe for the radical anti-establishment agenda of such hard-core rascals as Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman, and Bill Ayers with their slogans of “If it feels good, do it,” and “Kill your parents.” Such influences produced the maelstrom of radical anti-war riots on dozens of college campuses and in many cities. (Ayers [mentioned above], close associate of President Obama in Chicago, was a notorious leader in such revolutionary activities.)

The general aim of these feckless punks was the fomenting of sufficient societal chaos and violence to overthrow former standards of civil democratic order, especially moral standards. In this same time frame, Hugh Hefner introduced his “playboy philosophy” and magazine, paving the way for public tolerance, if not glorification of pornography and its frequent offspring, fornication. While these civil and moral upheavals were occurring, social, theological, and political liberals were preaching their “gospel” of tolerance and non-judgmentalism regarding increasing sexual promiscuity.

Predictably, the entertainment industry began to relax notably its former standards (such as they were) in the 1960s. Scenes, words, and themes that formerly were not permitted on the big screen gradually began to appear, most of them involving sexual liberties. Lyrics in rock and roll songs picked up the same theme. Though they would seem mild compared with subsequent ones, they were risqué and shocking at the time. AM radio in those days still was mostly disc jockeys playing records between hourly news breaks. In the 1960s and 1970s I several times called radio stations and shamed them for playing songs with very suggestive lyrics.

Television was bound to follow Hollywood. With but few exceptions, its programming since the mid-1970s has been characterized by ever-increasing levels of indecency, much of which has been specifically aimed at sexual stimulation and titillation. The Internet has made pornography and even arranging rendezvous for fornicators available at the mere click of a computer mouse. The relaxing of heterosexual moral standards has given opportunity for

sodomites and lesbians to make great headway in their campaign to earn general acceptance for their abominations.

Atheists, Humanists, and Secularists, believing that physical life is all there is, are all in favor of the “free-love” attitude and are reveling in its acceptance. The odious American Civil Liberties Union has been a major force in defending the grossest forms of moral turpitude and in seeking to repress Biblical influence on every hand. The sexual permissiveness these and other factors have produced threatens to drown our nation in a flood of moral filth. America has been Corinthianized.

Some Consequences of the Sexual Revolution

No one can fully predict all of the consequences this decline of decency will eventually yield. It has the potential to bring our nation literally into bondage. The observable results already are many and damaging.

Sex has been degraded, devalued, and dirtied. The Hebrews writer expressed the Divine will when he stated: “Let marriage be had in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled” (Heb. 13:4a). This statement implies that to employ “the bed” (a literary figure for the sexual union) outside of marriage defiles it. Ungodly and undisciplined folk have dragged it out of the marital bedroom, the sphere of God’s honorable limitation for it.

They have reduced sex to the level of barnyard and alley cat behavior (with apologies to the animals in many ways). Rather than its being the God-ordained lovely and pure relationship between one woman and one man who become one flesh “as long as they both shall live,” to millions the sexual union has become merely another form of casual recreation with no more shame, mystery, or privacy attached to it than a game of “Trivial Pursuit” or “Monopoly.” It is something about which to make jokes and laugh.

The degradation of sex and the corresponding promotion of adultery and fornication by its illicit practice have dealt extensive damage to God-ordained marriage, home, and family. All of the foregoing elements of the sexual revolution have made it much easier (yea, given encouragement) for spouses to stray from their marital vows. “No-fault” divorce laws (that downplayed the seriousness of adultery) began appearing in the early 1960s. These laws made it far more convenient for husbands and wives to go their separate ways when they found that “certain other” one they just **must** have. Divorce ceased to carry the shame that had been connected with it for so long. Non-marital and extra-marital sexual encounters have now

become matters of little concern to the masses. It is common practice for a couple to “live together” openly, sometimes for years, and produce children before “going through the motions” of a marriage ceremony – if they even bother. They are even praised for being so “broadminded” and such is glorified by the entertainment industry. It is now all but impossible to get a divorce on the stated ground of adultery, a symptom of society’s moral corruption. Although unstated, fornication (including adultery) is the cause of thousands of divorces each year.

The widespread sin of fornication has caused sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) to reach alarming levels. According to one Website: “One in five people in the United States has an STD, two-thirds of which occur in people 25 years old or younger. One in four new STD infections occur in teenagers” (Livestrong). STDs are preventable diseases and are all but non-existent among those who remain chaste until marriage and those who are married and remain faithful to their wedding vows made to and with one spouse.

Can there be any doubt about the role the sexual revolution played in the shameful Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision in 1973 that made it “open season” on babies in the womb (and sometimes more out of the womb than in it)? Abortion is generally little more than a cruel and depraved means of birth control. It is the ultimate “safety net” for participants in “affairs” and “one-night stands.” The abortion advocates and the industry they have spawned are all too happy to help such mothers-to-be to dispose of that which to them is but an unwanted, inconvenient “it.” Were it not for the prevalence of adultery and fornication, the abortion mills would go out of business overnight. Adultery and fornication have precipitated tens of millions of murders since 1973.

The Ultimate Consequence of Fornication and Adultery

I earlier quoted the first part of Hebrews 13:4, to which I now call attention again: “Let marriage be had in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled.” Now let us notice the remainder of the verse: “For fornicators and adulterers God will judge.” This verse draws an unmistakable and indelible line between the Divinely ordained licit and the illicit fulfillment of the sexual appetite. It is licit and “undefiled” in marriages that God authorizes (Mat. 19:6). Such marriages are “honorable,” and the marriage bed pure within them. Just as clearly stated, fulfillment of the sexual instinct is illicit and “defiled,” constituting fornication and/or adultery, in all other circumstances – **including state-sanctioned marriages that are not sanctioned by God.** The word *judge* (Heb. 13:4) translates the Greek word, *krino*. Thayer cites Hebrews 13:4 as

one of many occurrences in which context indicates it is “...used specifically of the act of condemning and decreeing (or inflicting) penalty on one” (361). Those who continue in these sins will receive God’s just condemnation and penalty on the Last Day.

Truth be told, there are few acts of which men are capable that more frequently fall under Divine censure and prohibition. In both pre-Mosaic and Mosaic eras, doctrine concerning sexual unions outside the context of marriage or with one besides one’s spouse closely parallel that conveyed in the New Testament. The seventh commandment of Moses’ Law forbade adultery, and the tenth commandment forbade coveting the wife of one’s neighbor (Exo. 20:14, 17). Elsewhere, the Law forbade incest, homosexual acts, and bestiality with violators to be cut off from Israel (Lev. 18:6–23).

The Lord and the New Testament writers continue this theme of condemnation of both fornication and adultery. Besides the Lord’s aforementioned injunctions concerning overt sexual misconduct, He further expressed His attitude toward fornication in His letters to the churches, promising dire judgment upon them if they did not repent (Rev. 2:14, 20–21). Moreover, He struck at the true source of these sins – the lustful eye and heart (Mat. 5:28; 15:19; cf. Exo. 20:17)).

Paul refers to these sins more than any other New Testament writer. As earlier noted, Corinth was a hotbed of sexual perversion and liberty, and it found its way into the church. Paul ordered the Corinthian brethren to “have no company with” the fornicating brother in their midst lest the entire church be Corinthianized with his sin (1 Cor. 5:5–11). This action was also for the purpose of saving his spirit at the Last Day (v. 5). Paul listed ten sinful behaviors that will bar one from the heavenly kingdom, half of which are sexual sins, including fornication and adultery (6:9–10; cf. his even longer list in Gal. 5:19–21, which also closes with the declaration that practitioners of such “shall not inherit the kingdom of heaven”). Later in the same First Corinthians context he labeled fornication as a sin from which the Christian must flee (v. 18). He continued in chapter 7 by urging that each man and woman should have his or her own spouse in order to avoid fornication (v. 2). To the Ephesians he wrote plainly of God’s judgment upon fornicators:

For this ye know of a surety, that no fornicator, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no man deceive you with empty words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience (5:5–6).

Several additional passages with a similar emphasis flowed from his inspired pen (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:8; 2 Cor. 12:21; Col. 3:5; 1 The. 4:3).

A “great voice out of the throne” on high informed John that fornicators (among other reprobates) shall have their part “in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone; which is the second death” (Rev. 21:3–8). The “great voice” further told him that fornicators, along with assorted other impenitent sinners, would be shut outside the heavenly city (22:14–15). Adulterers will suffer the same fate, for their sin is included in *fornicators*.

Unmistakably, the ultimate consequence of fornication and adultery, if unrepented of, is being cast into eternal Hell, the lake of fire, the second death, and being shut outside the splendor, glory, and joy of Heaven.

Conclusion

We live in an exceedingly wicked world, saturated with encouragement on every hand to fulfill one’s sexual desires in ways and in settings that a righteous God cannot tolerate indefinitely. The destructive influence these constant stimuli have had and continue to have on young people is a special source of concern to all who value moral purity.

What can we do about it? Paul and his first century companions in the Gospel faced a sex-saturated world, though admittedly without the instant accessibility modern technology (print, film, TV, Internet) affords today. However, the way they responded to these corrupting influences was to preach the Word “in season, out of season” by every means at their disposal (2 Tim. 4:2). The Gospel is still God’s power to save (Rom. 1:16). The more we preach and teach by the media available to us, the more potential impact we may have as a purifying influence in a putrid world.

Further, we can vote for candidates at every level who we know stand for moral decency, and we can challenge, by means of phone calls and letters, those who have been elected thus to stand. Many people still read letters to editors of local newspapers, in which we can voice the need for moral purity.

We need to continue to pray for our families that our children and grandchildren may remain pure, all the while doing our best to provide Biblical moral guidance and instruction for them. We need to pray for the church of the Lord, so many members of which have succumbed to the call of compromise relating to adultery and fornication. We need to pray that men and women in positions of authority may be awakened to the reality of the moral pigpen in which

our nation now wallows and may exert leadership in reversing it. We need to pray to God that in His providence we may withstand the whirlpool of sexual immorality that surrounds us and undo the grave damage it has done to the church and to our nation the past few decades. If we are not able to do so, given the inspired history of God's dealing with nations and their impenitent moral corruption, one is made to wonder how much more longsuffering He has left for us.

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Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the ASV (1901) unless otherwise indicated.
2. This family of words occurs forty-five times in the New Testament. The noun, *porneia*, rendered "fornication," occurs twenty-six times (e.g., Mat. 5:31-32; 19:9; et al.). A handful of these occurrences are metaphorical, describing idolatry as "spiritual fornication" (Rev. 14:8; 17:2; et al.). The noun, *pornos*, variously rendered "fornicator" and "whoremonger," occurs ten times, and is always used literally. The verb, *porneuo*, rendered "commit fornication," occurs eight times (e.g., Mark 10:19; 1 Cor. 6:18; et al.). The verb, *ekporneuo*, occurs one time (Jude 7). It is an intensified usage of *porneuo*, referring to one who becomes the servant or slave of fornication.
3. This word group is comprised of five forms that appear thirty-five times in the New Testament. The noun, *moicheia*, rendered "adultery," occurs four times (e.g., Mat. 15:19). *Moichos*, another noun form, appears four times, also, and is rendered "adulterer" (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:9; et al.). *Moichalis*, yet another noun, occurs seven times, and is variously translated "adulteress," "adulterous," and "adultery" (e.g.,

2 Pet. 2:14; et al.). Jesus also used it metaphorically in reference to apostate Judaism (e.g., Mat. 12:39; 16:4; et al.). The verb, *moichao*, is rendered “commit(teth) adultery, and occurs six times (e.g., Mat. 5:32; 19:9; et al.). The most frequently appearing member of this word family is *moicheuo*, also translated “commit adultery,” occurring fourteen times (e.g., Mat. 19:18; Mark 10:19; et al.). One of these times it is used metaphorically (Rev. 2:22).

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