

FAITH & VALUES

Faiths have wide divide on sex

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Depending on the religious creed, having sex with your valentine might be a sin, or it might be a holy act that reflects God's love.

Religion has a lot to say about sex, and some faiths are more permissive than others when it comes to what's OK and what's not.

Conservative denominations teach that sex is reserved for marriage. To them, that means one man and one woman, ideally for the purpose of creating children.

Other believers say that as long as sex is between two consenting adults who show each other respect and love, it is pleasing to God. Their genders or legal status don't matter.

This diversity means that churchgoing people hear very different messages about sex.

Last week, hundreds of high-school students heard a chastity talk at Bishop Watterson High School that encouraged them to wait for their wedding night to have sex.

Jason Evert, who speaks internationally about chastity, told the students they should stay chaste for their future spouses. Teens who have had sex already could start over, he said, and he outlined what he said were medical dangers to birth control.

A week earlier, at a Columbus church with much more liberal theology, a group of lesbians was permitted to hold a sex-toy party because the pastor wanted them to have a safe place to talk about sexual pleasure. The church is not being named because the women are concerned about their safety.

Traditionally, religion is seen as sacred and sex as profane, said Kathryn Lofton, a Yale University



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Sex and Religion

Dispatch reporter Meredith Heagney talks with Kathryn Lofton, a Yale University professor who studies the intersection of sex and religion.

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But "religion and sex are not so different as we want to make them," she said. Both involve codes of behavior and constant negotiations about right and wrong.

"A lot can be attached to both that have to do with the development of self, the right ways of being in the world," she said.

Conservative denominations tend to believe in a direct link between sexual behavior on earth and the consequences or rewards received in the afterlife, Lofton said. For example, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that the family you have on earth stays with you for all eternity.

Liberal churches have fewer universal principles of "right behavior" when it comes to sex, she said. They focus on interactions here on earth, how we speak to and relate with one another.

And liberal churches are less likely to use Scripture as the main rationale for their sexual ethics.

The Bible is clear on the goodness of sex, said the Rev. Steve Benninger, pastor of New Life Church in Gahanna, an evangelical congregation with weekend attendance of 1,400.

The Song of Songs in the Old Testament describes sex as a beautiful thing within the confines of marriage, he said.

In it, a bride and bridegroom exchange sweet nothings. The bride says, "Your love is more fragrant than wine," and the groom, "Your breasts are like two fawns, twin fawns of a gazelle."

Leviticus is full of sexual prohibitions, such as "no man shall approach a blood relation for intercourse" and "you shall not lie with a man as with a woman; that is an abomination." The latter is the oft-quoted verse used by those who oppose homosexuality.

Other pastors, such as Bishop Thomas E. Breidenthal of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio, view the passage in its historical context and don't see it as dogma for rejecting homosexuality.

The diocese, which includes Columbus, plans to start blessing same-sex unions in April.

Same-sex relationships can be just as faithful and holy as heterosexual ones, Breidenthal said.

They are "worthy to be blessed by the church and supported and held accountable by the church," he said.

Leviticus also says a man should not have sex with his wife during menstruation. Because of that and other scriptural prohibitions, Orthodox Jewish couples don't have sex during a woman's period and for a time after, often totaling about two weeks.

During that time, they cannot touch even casually because the woman is considered *niddah*, or in a state of ritual impurity.

Buddhism has historically taught that sex can hold people back from spiritual development, said Lama Kathy Wesley, resident teacher at Columbus Karma Thegsum Choling, a Tibetan Buddhist center in Franklinton.

Sex, like other pleasures, causes suffering when it is taken away, she said. The historical Buddha and his first followers chose a life of celibacy with the idea that "by leaving behind all worldly entanglements one would leave behind suffering."

Monks and nuns still live in chastity, but Buddhist laypeople do not.

The Bible also references purity in the New Testament, in the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians: "You must abstain from fornication; each one of you must learn to gain mastery over his body, to hallow and honor it, not giving way to lust like the pagans who are ignorant of God "

Nationally, pastors have taken to the Internet to talk about sex.

The Rev. Chris Roberts of Panama City, Fla., wrote on his blog about saving his first kiss with his wife, Sandra, for their wedding day. Roberts, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church, dated Sandra for about a year before marrying her in 2003.

"I believe God calls his people to reserve sexual activity for marriage," Roberts said. He was 25 on his wedding day and had kissed previous girlfriends, but Sandra, 21 at the time of their marriage, had never been kissed.

"It was a way of ensuring we didn't move in a direction God called us not to move, a safety thing to avoid the temptation entirely."

In Las Vegas, the Rev. Craig Gross sees temptation as a way to evangelize. He founded xxxchurch.com, a Web ministry that helps men overcome pornography habits and addiction.

Gross and his colleagues go to porn-industry shows and hand out Bibles that say "Jesus loves porn stars."

Women who work for the ministry take coffee and cupcakes into strip clubs and brothels to show the women that somebody loves them.

"You read the message of Jesus, and this guy was all about meeting people where they're at," Gross said. "He wasn't afraid to meet people where they are."

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