

# Theologians' Views on Dating and Marriage (2) - Augustine on Sex and Marriage

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Of all the early church fathers, perhaps none has had more influence on Reformed thought than Augustine. Particularly, his refutations of Pelagius' heretical views on free will formed a sure foundation on which the Reformed doctrine of salvation was built. Yet in his teaching on sex and marriage Augustine made serious errors—or more correctly only understood part of the truth—and these errors have had important consequences as they form the basis of the erroneous teachings of the Roman Catholic Church on sex and marriage. While we should admire much of Augustine's teachings, we must reject some of his teachings on sex and marriage and in doing so we must understand how our views differ from the Roman Catholics.

Augustine understood that sex in marriage was not sinful. In this teaching he broke from one of his mentors, Jerome, who taught that all sexual relations were sinful and thus celibacy was the preferred state to which all Christians should aspire. Augustine followed the Bible too closely to agree with such a position. He knew that the Bible esteemed the state of marriage and child-rearing too highly for such a position to be correct. Therefore, Augustine argued, "The union, then, of male and female for the purpose of procreation is the natural good of marriage." He believed that sex within marriage was good as long as the purpose of sex was bringing forth a child, and he further knew that it was not simply enough to want to have a child, but the married couple must desire to bring forth a child that will be a child of God and serve God. With this thrust of his teaching we must heartily agree. In our marriages we must desire to bring forth covenant children that will serve and honor God.

But from this point on Augustine stumbles. Augustine sees bringing forth children as the only acceptable purpose that allows husband and wife to have sexual relations. This belief led Augustine to teach that when a husband and wife have sex and do not intend to have a child they commit a sin, what Augustine called a venial sin. Further, if a husband and wife have sexual relations in marriage and try to prevent having a child such as when a couple uses birth control then they commit what Augustine called a mortal sin.

Now it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the Roman Catholic churches' current teachings on mortal and venial sins, but what Augustine meant by this distinction is far different in any event. What Augustine meant is similar to the distinction that is made in our Lord's Supper form. Some sins are such a break from covenant fellowship with God that the church must implement discipline and the member who commits such sins must be barred from the Lord's Table—this is what Augustine meant by mortal sins. On the other hand, we also commit sins that "remaineth against our wills in us," to use the words of our Lord's Supper form; these sins we must repent from, but they do not bar us from the Table of the Lord—this is what Augustine meant by venial sins.

Thus, Augustine's belief was that if a husband and wife have sex without trying to conceive a child then they sin. If they have sex simply without thinking of conceiving a child this is a sin that they must repent from but it is not a violation of the seventh commandment. However, if a husband and wife have sex and intend not to bring forth a child then in Augustine's view they commit adultery. This teaching is still fundamentally the position of the Roman Catholics (although a significant change was made in the 1950's when it was proclaimed by the Pope that the rhythm method of birth control was not a mortal sin; Augustine would have seen this as adultery as well.)

The reason for Augustine's error is that he failed to appreciate a second purpose for sexual relations that God has given married couples. God has given husband and wife sex as a wonderful gift not only to bring forth covenant children, although this is surely another important reason that God has included sex in the marital relationship, but also to express the unity that exists between the husband

and wife. God gives sex to married couples so that they can express that they are one flesh. This union between husband and wife serves to glorify God in that in binding together as one flesh this union testifies to the unity between Christ and his bride the church.

This important teaching about sex and marriage Augustine was unable to see, and with only part of the truth he was led astray and adopted an unbiblical position. He did not correctly understand the teaching of Hebrew 13:4 where we read, "Marriage in honorable in all, and the bed undefiled." And he misinterpreted I Corinthians chapter 7 that we explained in the last installment in this series. This chapter teaches that sexual relations between a man and a woman are acceptable in the eyes of God. Augustine however, believed that because this passage teaches that sex is only permitted and not commanded that sexual relations might very well be sinful. Thus, in his rush to sweep away the important implications of this text he failed to appreciate that sexual relations can glorify God in that they bring man and wife together as one flesh.

In practice, Augustine's position leads to absurdities. If a couple is incapable of having children from Augustine's point of view then they should try to remain celibate. When couples pass the age of child bearing then they should try to remain chaste. Any sexual relations by these couples would constitute sin. This the Bible does not teach. Married couples can and should have sexual relations as long as these sexual relations glorify God. Now in most marriages sexual relations can glorify God by bring forth children and all who can glorify God in this way should seek to do so. But for those who cannot have children their sexual relations can still glorify God by expressing that they are one flesh and God has made them such.

In a similar way, we must not believe as the Roman Catholics do that any use of birth control is wrong. No Christian husband and wife should use birth control without searching their heart to be certain that they are not using it for the wrong purposes. They must realize that one of the ways that their sexual relations can glorify God is through bringing forth children. Thus, they will want to have as many children as they can. On the other hand, they may realize that for a season, perhaps for the health of the wife or to make it possible to raise the existing children, they may try not to have children. Still their sexual relations can glorify God, because their relations can still express the oneness of flesh in their marriage.

Let us thank God for the wonderful gift of marriage which he gives to many of us, and may we glorify God in our marriages and specifically in our sexual relations in marriage by bringing forth children and by expressing the unity of husband and wife that God has established. ❖

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Originally Published in:  
Vol. 55 No. 12 December 1996