

**The Thrill of the Chaste: finding fulfillment while keeping your clothes on** by Dawn Eden.  
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The narrative of Dawn Eden's *The Thrill of the Chaste* is not one the readers would expect from the perspective of a young woman living in the internet age, who is a rock historian turned news editor and columnist for the *Daily News* of New York City. Eden wrote for "marriage-minded single women who had enough of Sex and the City lifestyle." Although she makes a new and candid contribution to singleness for women, some of the issues she writes about have been touched upon by other Christian writers. One of the finest older works is Margaret Clarkson's *So You're Single*. Another book still worthwhile reading is *Let Me Be a Woman* by Elizabeth Elliott.

With great openness, Eden writes of her experiences with premarital sex. She describes it as addictive and selfish. It left her empty and "bereft." Her experiences with premarital sex make for a depressing story. Years of casual flings and dead-end relationships left her disappointed, cynical, jaded, burned out. Her parents were not the greatest role models. She declares that if your parents are like mine, you've already received a legacy that is no way welcome. It is the legacy of divorce. And she notes that many studies show that women whose parents are divorced are more likely to become divorced themselves.

But *The Thrill of the Chaste* also tells of her change of heart when it comes to sex and relationships, and her emergence from its darkness into the light of chaste living. She testifies that after being an agnostic Jew her entire adult life, her understanding of love – along with the rest of her life – changed dramatically at age thirty-one in October 1999. She was jarred into consciousness of sin, and had a "born-again" experience. She says that, at once, she was healed of her bitter loneliness, and she saw what her freewheeling lifestyle was doing to her spirit. She now defines herself by what she has: a relationship with God. She no longer defines herself by what she lacks – a relationship with a man.

### **Biblical View of Marriage**

Eden's message for both female and male singles is that Christians have a radically different sexual ethic and lifestyle, one which holds that sex between an unmarried man and woman is sinful and contrary to God's law (Ex. 20:14). In other words and plainly stated – sex before marriage is wrong. If you violate His restrictions on premarital sex, you will be hurt. There is no way to prevent this emotional and spiritual damage (1 Thess. 4:3-8). In fact, sex outside marriage truly becomes a blind alley. Sex is a gift from God reserved only for marriage. Marriage, instituted by God when Adam and Eve were brought together, is a sacred institution (Eph. 5:25-32). With this view of marriage and sex, Christians brings honour and dignity to it. They take seriously the message of Hebrews 13:4 – "Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."

But doesn't the Christian view stifle freedom? Are we not free to decide for ourselves what to do and not to do? Freedom knows how to limit itself or else it is not freedom. It

does not mean "release from responsibility." Absolute freedom is impossible; it is anarchy. Authentic freedom is in Christ. It comes through willed and loving obedience. We are free to do the will of God. From a Biblical perspective, then, we say with all humility and prudence that Christians are the only bearers of authentic freedom. But it must be stressed that this implies neither privilege nor superiority.

## **Our Culture**

Why is it so difficult to follow God's will for sex and marriage? Today we see underway feverish efforts to bring back the sexual debauchery of ancient paganism. Our culture – both in the media and in everyday interactions – relentlessly puts forth the idea that lust is a way station on the road to love. There is a relaxation of morality, influenced by relativism, and exaltation of sex. Sexual morals are up for grabs because few people take moral absolutes seriously anymore. In the Victorian age, talk about death was normal, while sex was a taboo subject. Today, death is a taboo subject, but talking and joking about sex is normal. Sex is now the great taboo that must be shattered. This shows the ignorance of the actual situation today. People are looking for sex without love, for love without marriage, for marriage without responsibility. In a secular classroom culture that discourages public expressions of faith, teenagers are instead taught – in sex-ed curricula developed by organizations such as Planned Parenthood – that hormones are destiny. Impressionable children are told they have the "freedom to choose" bisexuality, asexuality, homosexuality, or heterosexuality. Abstinence and chastity are viewed as an old-fashioned restraint, an injunction against our bodies, a denial of our sexuality. It is as though we never heard of Freud.

Our secular-relativist media claim that no form of sexual behaviour between consenting adults should be prohibited, nor should "the many varieties of sexual explorations" be considered evil. Furthermore, the widespread use of contraception, which promoted freedom of choice as well as the disassociation of the sex act and procreation, has led to easy promiscuity. Consequently, the profound relation to love is lost when the sex act becomes no more than satisfying a biological need. The pressure caused by the change in moral standards is so strong that it is generally agreed that premarital sex for both boys and girls is now natural.

Much of our popular culture, particularly magazines directed at single women, hold up "having sex like a man" as a goal toward which all intelligent women should strive. Many TV shows from Oprah on down, as well as films, books, pop songs urge single women to take the sexual pleasure due to them. Eden aptly remarks: "According to TV, you can never be attractive enough or rich enough. You can never have enough sex. Most important, in TV's eyes, you can never have enough *things*." Women, who refuse to hold to that ideal of purity before marriage, are derided as provincial, hopelessly backward prudes.

Eden argues that the Biblical message of chastity is a bold challenge to modern culture. Its message is that human beings are created in the image God. They have a free will, able to control who and what they are. They are accountable to Him. This counter-

cultural message inspires women to trust in how God made them when they are otherwise pressured by society and by organizations like Planned Parenthood to trade in their virginity and integrity for the so-called freedom and protection of contraception. Eden points out that by establishing freedom in the sphere of sex by breaking taboos, by following instincts, by seeking pleasure, by removing all the moral barriers, alleged freedom amounts to a little more than obedience to the demands of our postmodern culture. Those who succumb become slaves, instead of free individuals. And instead of gaining acceptance and being loved, it is evident that there is no concern about the sufferings, expectations, hopes or needs of the other for those who are only concerned about satisfying their own needs and wants. Has the new sexual "morality" helped singles? The answer is, "Not at all." Since the start of the sexual revolution in the 1960s, the singles industry has flourished. The consumer tools that our culture claims will empower single women actually keeps them single – by encouraging women and men to view each other as commodities rather than human beings. Eden notes that sex before marriage relies on faith that a man who has not shown faith in you – that is, not enough faith to commit himself to you for life – will come around through the persuasive force of your physical affection. But her message is not popular. She observes that biblically minded Christians, who oppose the currently growing sexual immoralities, such as sex outside of marriage and homosexuality, are negatively referred to as "the religious right" or as "bigots." But there is another newsworthy story. Chastity has made a comeback. Eden argues: "Today, as the fruits of the sexual revolution prove to be loneliness, divorce, and disease, chastity's not only back – it's the new revolution. So out, it's in."

### **Chastity: the New Revolution**

Eden's *The Thrill of the Chaste* is not a lesson in postmodern self-actualization and finding oneself. It is about uncovering a joy in chastity. But what is chastity? What is the difference between chastity and abstinence? Abstinence is making a promise before God to say "no" to premarital sex. In other words, abstinence means nothing unless one understands *exactly* what it is. Therefore, I would add that to understand it, one must also understand the Biblical teaching on sex and marriage. If abstinence is forced, strained, and legalistic, it does not reflect Christian obedience. But it is freedom when abstinence is derived from faith and obedience. When an abstinence vow is broken, it not only draws the wrath of God, it hurts people deeply, because promises give hope and broken promises crush hope. Singles should, therefore, not be quick to make a solemn promise (Eccl.5:4-6) .

Chastity means more than to "just say no." The truth is that it's far more nuanced. It is self-moderation and self-regulation in sexual life. Augustine says it belongs to the order of love. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit and a task of self-discipline; a moral virtue that moderates and regulates sexual appetite. Eden's commitment to chastity is motivated by the natural desire to marry and make a total pure gift of herself to her spouse. They are virtues inherently right and good. Chastity, whether practised in forms appropriate in marriage or in those required by single life, always maintains the character as virtue. Christians are motivated by the love of Christ their Lord, whose words tell them: "If you

love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). The Heidelberg Catechism L.D. 41:108 states: Q. What is God's will for us in the seventh commandment? A. God condemns all unchastity. We should therefore thoroughly detest it and, married or single, live decent and chaste lives."

For Eden, chastity is, first and foremost, a mental discipline. She says that you can try to push yourself by displaying self-control when your heart isn't in it, but keeping it up over the long haul requires dedication. It's a "lifelong discipline." It relies on faith that God, as one pursues a closer walk with God, will lead one to a loving husband. Eden states: "Chastity opens up your world, enabling you to achieve your creative and spiritual potential without the pressure of having to play the dating game. Your husband will love you for yourself – your heart, mind, body, and soul."

Eden notes that the immediate advantage of chastity is a sense of control. Another clearer advantage, she says, is the realization that all the sex she ever had – in and out of relationships – never brought her any closer to marriage or even to sustain a committed relationship. Chastity brings many blessings, but if it's a thrill one is after, the greatest thrill of the chaste is "the gift of wonder." Eden's happiest moments are when she wonders at the blessings God has given her, from the smallest to the largest. She is truly thankful for them because, as she testifies, "I don't deserve them; they're gifts." This wonder is an essential part of what it means to be human – something that should permeate everyday life, including the way one acts and dresses. When Eden became chaste, she quickly discovered that a chaste woman plus unchaste clothing equals instant hypocrisy. She became convinced that her old ways of dressing were a recipe for disaster.

Eden is thrilled about the Biblical teaching of chastity. "When you put on chastity, you'll discover a more hope-filled, more vibrant, more real than anything you might have experienced when having sex outside of marriage. That is the thrill of the chaste." She now describes herself as a "singular" who values marriage enough to hold out for it. "To be singular is to understand the meaning of chastity, and chastity by its very nature goes against the popular culture's beliefs regarding sex and choice."

Eden believes that the Lord has already chosen a man for her to marry, and she "hadn't met him yet." She calls God a matchmaker – and she believes that His dossier on your possible list of candidates for a future husband is extremely thin. "I believe it contains only one name." She rightly insists that a Christian should marry only another Christian. A man and woman's commitments to love, honour, and cherish each other as long as they both shall live, take on a new meaning and power when they both long with all their hearts for eternal life with God. The gift of self that they give to each other becomes a gift to the Lord.

## **Being Single**

There isn't a single person alive who has not suffered from being single. Loneliness is a great problem for the young single adult. The single woman may have to live with the

shattering knowledge that no one has ever desired her. Eden, therefore, devotes an entire chapter to tips for meeting one's future mate. She devotes an entire chapter to promoting ways to meet like-minded people; for example, joining a book club or a Bible study. She outlines what to look for when using matchmaking services or personal adds. She encourages readers to develop through prayer and service "inner qualities – like empathy, patience, humility, and faith in spite of hardship." And she points to the apostle Paul's command to put on the whole armour of God (Eph. 6:10). This spiritual armour is a set of real inner qualities that are recognized for their power to shield one from spiritual harm – such as truth, righteousness, preparedness, faith, salvation, and prayer.

I don't want to quibble about Eden's goal for chastity. But it seems to me she comes close to the suggestion that marriage is the only goal of chastity. She unabashedly and repeatedly declares that she hopes to get married – and that hope is no doubt worthy, healthy and Biblical. But notice how her description of chastity presupposes a "future husband." "Chastity," she believes, "...relies on faith that God, as you pursue a closer walk with him, will lead you to a loving husband."

What should single young people do with this book? Read it! But they should be aware that Eden draws on some graphic content from past relationships to make her points about chastity. In our sex- obsessed morally relativistic age she is to be commended for her honesty, for clearly pointing the readers to God's standards for singleness and marriage, and to the "wonder" of chastity.

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