



## **Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity**

*Lauren F. Winner*

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Sex Splashed across magazine covers, billboards, and computer screens—sex is casual, aggressive, and absolutely everywhere. And everybody's doing it, right? In *Real Sex*, heralded young author Lauren F. Winner speaks candidly to Christians about the difficulty—and the importance—of sexual chastity. With honesty and wit, she talks about her struggle to live a celibate life. Never dodging tough terms like "confession" and "sin," Winner grounds her discussion of chastity first and foremost in Scripture. She confronts cultural lies about sex and challenges how we talk about sex in church. Her biblically grounded observations and suggestions will be especially valuable to unmarried Christians struggling with the sexual mania of today's culture. *Real Sex* is essential reading for Christians grappling with chastity and a valuable tool for pastors.

## **Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity Details**

Date : Published July 1st 2006 by Brazos Press (first published April 1st 2005)

ISBN : 9781587431975

Author : Lauren F. Winner

Format : Paperback 183 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Christian, Religion, Christianity, Theology, Sexuality, Faith

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# From Reader Review *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* for online ebook

**Tristan Marks says**

In Lauren Winner's book *Real Sex*, she claims that chastity is a discipline. The problem?

## CHASTITY IS NOT A DISCIPLINE

This idea is self-evidently wrong, as are many of the other things she writes about Christianity, the Bible and sex. While the language she uses to talk about sex is very academic, what she writes is just not logically or textually supported.

At the outset the author seems set to challenge the American evangelical church's entire "True Love Waits" approach to single sexuality. She is going to be bold and different and find out what the Bible really says! Actually, the relevant texts are given a very thin gloss and then she winds up saying pretty much the same things the church has been saying for years without any meaningful critique.

Let's drill into her contention that chastity is a spiritual discipline a little more, because it is revealing.

Prayer is a discipline. You learn to pray in small doses. You start simply with mealtime prayers and bedtime prayers. You learn different forms of prayer. You study how people prayed in the Bible. You learn how to meditate on a passage of scripture. Over time you might work up to fasting and prayer or all night prayer vigils.

But crucially, you don't start with these things. You work up to them, gradually.

Chastity, the way single Christians are asked to practice it by the church, does not work like that.

What Lauren Winner and the mainstream church advocates is not "sex is a sometimes thing" but total abstinence outside of marriage. She and the church are asking people just learning to walk to run a marathon.

It is widely known that in America people are getting married later and later. This was true when Winner's book was first published in 2006, and after the long recession and the dire economic straits of an entire generation it is doubly true. The average age of marriage has climbed past thirty and is rapidly heading towards forty. For some ethnicities and classes, studies show that marriage is increasingly unlikely to occur at all.

This is sobering, all by itself, but consider its implications for a young Christian trying to stay chaste. Assuming that that person, without any restrictions, would start having sex around the age of 15 and that they do not get married until the age of 35, they are facing twenty years of trying for total abstinence.

And we're shocked that most people fail?

Two decades of abstinence sounds less like chastity and more like a vow of celibacy. Does the teen girl who signs a purity pledge know that that is essentially what she is making? And if not, when she realizes it, will she stick to her pledge? That seems pretty unlikely.

Winner refers to the writings of the Apostle Paul a lot when she is doubling down on the church's party line. This is important because the Old Testament is packed with polygamy, adultery and premarital sex, so it's difficult to base an argument there. Winner devotes a few pages to attempting to show that Paul specifically forbade premarital sex. Her argument is not especially thorough or convincing, though. It is clear that Winner thinks that this is basically self-evident. Once again, it is not.

In Paul's day, a person's window for having premarital sex would have been quite brief. Women especially could expect to be married off in their mid teens. Men might hold off until the ripe old age of their early twenties, but that late by the standards of the time. The fact is that in Paul's world, right around the time people reached sexual maturity they were 'given in marriage' by their parents. The opportunities for sex before marriage were rare, and would not have been a great concern for Paul or anyone else in his day.

Paul's concern wasn't with Christians engaging in pre-marital sex, but extra-marital sex or post-marital sex (as in the case where a spouse died young and their partner was a widow or widower for a time). There was also the case of 'people like Paul' who were intentionally celibate. Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 7 are specific - don't make a vow of celibacy if you can't keep it; if you are widowed and don't think you can stay chaste, get married. Paul's instructions are narrowly tailored, and widening them will take some convincing arguments.

Again, when Paul was writing people married young. The idea that someone, especially a woman, would wait until her thirties or forties until her first marriage would have been virtually inconceivable to Paul.

Are we to believe that Paul was offhandedly instructing people who 'burn with passion', who are not 'called to singleness', to abstain from sex for one or two decades or more?

In Matthew 23:4, Jesus says of the Pharisees, "They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger."

I wonder: when the church asks single Christians for decades of abstinence is it placing a heavy burden on them and doing nothing to help? Have we become the Pharisees of sexuality?

I don't have answers, nor do I suggest that single Christians should throw caution to the wind and start having premarital sex with everyone they meet. But I feel that there is a strong case that Christians need to reexamine what it means to be a single, sexual being in a time where marriage may not take place until mid life. For all her posturing that her approach will be different or 'real', the author is disappointingly uncritical of the standard narrative.

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## **Kristen says**

I hadn't even finished the preface to *Real Sex* before I breathed a sigh of relief and thanksgiving that someone had finally written this book. *Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity* is a book that has been needed for quite some time, and Lauren Winner was up to the task. I read and thoroughly enjoyed her first two books (*Girl Meets God* and *Mudhouse Sabbath*) and am glad that she used her gifts at bringing the theological, historical, sociological and personal together in a compelling way on the subject of chastity.

Books about chastity have been written before. I was an older teenager when *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* hit

the market in the midst of the True Love Waits craze. Both the book and movement served a purpose in their time and were particularly encouraging to teens, but failed at addressing the issues of singleness and chastity beyond the high school years. Real Sex is an intelligent and honest look beyond the surface at the issues of chastity. Winner comes to the conclusions that Scripture clearly provides, but with thoughtfulness, evidence, anecdotes and research that go beyond the proof-texting that has plagued the genre.

Real Sex is brutally honest about sexuality. Winner speaks about the communal aspect of sex, how it goes beyond the two involved partners and why the church should be in the business of talking about sex. As many of my friends are still single and others are in serious relationships, I was particularly convicted about my responsibility to talk frankly about sex with them, as awkward as it feels in our culture. I loved the section of the book where Winner exposes lies that the world and the church tell about sex. Lies such as the falsehood that sex can be separated from procreation, that premarital sex will always make you feel bad, and that lingering gnostic belief that the sexual desires our bodies feel are wrong. She also addresses at length how chastity is a spiritual discipline that all Christians are called to practice.

Though the book is well grounded theologically and philosophically, Winner weaves in pastoral and personal narratives that show her understanding of the struggles readers face and provides for areas of application. She tackles the proverbial question Christians ask about physical intimacy ("how far is too far?") in the most satisfactory way I have encountered. She also addresses hot button issues such as lifelong celibacy, modesty, pornography\* and masturbation.

I was most surprised and encouraged by how much of Real Sex was relevant to me personally as a married woman. Real sex is sex within the union of marriage, and Winner is right to follow the example of the Apostle Paul in framing her thoughts on chastity around this central notion. She argues that real sex is the sex that happens in the midst of the routines and rhythms of everyday life, when dinner is cooking, bills are being paid or while you can hear the footsteps of your children going to the bathroom. Real sex is possible because of the shared life we have together, the way that we laugh and talk and cry and debate.

Real Sex by Lauren Winner is a must read for college students and singles in their twenties and beyond, but also encouraging and profitable to those who are thinking about the purpose of sex within marriage or about issues regarding chastity as parents. The book is 175 pages, an appropriate length to get readers thinking without trying to be a systematic ethic of chastity (which have been written before.) The bibliography and notes also provide a good backbone for further reading on the material Winner addresses for those who are interested in pursuing these issues further. I can't recommend Real Sex for young teens, but for those with some exposure to the issues of sexuality, I can't think of another book I'd recommend more highly.

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## **Niki says**

An interesting book on chastity and why it's important in a Christian context. She makes some excellent points about community and the fallacy that we are as autonomous as we think we are. However, she fails to critique marriage as an institution at all (and I am positive her academic background would have allowed her to do so). Because her stance is so firmly "wait until marriage" this also excludes any discussion of on-heterosexual relationships. She never explicitly states that this is her hard and fast reading of Christianity, so if you are a more liberal Christian then you will likely be disappointed with Winner's analysis. I will give her credit for critiquing the general Church's lack of nuance around sexuality and their bland abstinence-only rhetoric.

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### **Chris Crane says**

This is probably the best book on sexuality I have read thus far (if not, it's at least top 5). I appreciate how Winner frames the conversation and her thoughts on several issues (especially modesty) I thought were refreshing.

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### **Kyle Potter says**

Lauren Winner's book on the Christian understanding of chastity is radical and different because it explores and expounds Christian sexual ethics on the basis of the Christian gospel and casts it as a practice to be lived out in the life of the Church.

Sex is a community concern because sex is an integral part of an individual's formation both as a person and a community member. Winner shuns a shallow ethos of "saving oneself" to make sex "more special" but rather understands it as a way of being faithful to a holistic commitment to Christian discipleship in a community. Sex already is special, and a communal Christian commitment teaches us to be faithful stewards of sexual desire.

Her final chapters on "what singleness teaches the church" and "the practicalities of repentance" are amazing and deeply needful words for a Christian culture that is deeply confused as to the ground of its thinking about sex.

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### **Lindsay Allen says**

Winner does a fantastic job of talking very honestly about hard issues and speaks with loving parity about the holiness of both singleness and marriage. A much needed read!

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### **Rachel B says**

2.5 stars

Winner seemed a little confused about her end goal. On the one hand, she spends a lot of time talking about the spirituality of sex (intuitive, abstract concepts) and on the other hand, she tries to address some very practical, lines-in-the-sand guidelines for sexual purity; she winds up failing on both accounts, as she often is contradictory.

My major concern is that her arguments are often not rooted in Biblical text, but rather on her or another person's opinion and reasoning. For instance, when she speaks of masturbation, she comes to the conclusion that occasional masturbation is acceptable, but it shouldn't be a regular thing. Her support? One pastor's opinion. In another instance, she tells of a mentor who advised her and her now-husband to refrain (while dating) from doing "anything sexual that you wouldn't be comfortable doing on the steps of [a public

building]." (p. 106) Though it seems like good advice on the surface, it overlooks the fact that comfort levels vary, and the more we do something, the more comfortable we become with it. God's standards, on the other hand, are not relative or subject to changing comfort levels. She also fails to really explore the fact that sexual sin, at its core, is a matter of the heart. (She concludes by saying that she and her boyfriend kissed to their hearts' content and stopped just short of taking their clothes off. There are a whole lot of things you can do with your clothes on, so that's not reassuring!)

Since this is a book on chastity, I was expecting a little more attention to be paid to singleness and celibacy. (Even though chastity isn't a synonym for celibacy, most people associate the two terms.) Actually, most of the book is focused on marriage. Even in the one chapter specifically designated to celibacy, Winner still ends up addressing marriage. (Since she wasn't a virgin before marriage, and she began dating/became engaged to/married her husband all while writing this book, it stands to reason that she had little experience with singleness and celibacy, and I can see why she had a difficult time focusing on the topic. That doesn't really help those of us who are single and celibate, though.)

If you're single and looking for a book that focuses a bit more on that lifestyle, I would highly recommend *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today's Church*.

Having said all that, here are a few quotes that I did appreciate:

"For the point of chastity is not that you turn your attention away from other people to make you more attractive to them but that you turn your attention away from sexual and romantic entanglements with other people and orient yourself toward God." (p.131)

"The unmarried Christian who practices chastity refrains from sex in order to remember that God desires your person, your body, more than any man or woman ever will." (p. 128)

On confronting others' sexual sin: "I was once asked what I would say to a friend whom I knew was having premarital sex... I [replied] that the first step in speaking to my friends about sex was making sure that we enjoyed relationships built on top of hundreds of ordinary shared experiences – plays attended together and pumpkins carved together and accompanying one another on doctors appointments and changing the oil together... Community doesn't come about simply by having hard, intimate conversations. Having hard, intimate conversations is part of what is possible when people are already opening up their day-to-day lives to one another." (p.59)

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## **Carl says**

If you're curious about what an articulate student of religious history who entered the Christian church as an adult has to say about Christian sexuality, this is a great place to start.

One of the most candid, clear and fun books on Christian sexuality that I have read. While Winner has clearly done her theological homework, her writing is full of illustrative anecdotes and personal confession, rather than being heavy on quotation. Where she does reference a theologian (Chrysostom and Augustine come to mind, she's a religious history student, after all), she chooses her quotes well, doesn't break voice, and demonstrates why the Christian church cares what someone a thousand years ago has to say about when, where, and why we have sex today.

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## **Jeremy says**

This book is beautiful in every sense of the word. This book is honest, insightful and sprinkled with humor! Even as a married man, I found this book deep and impacting. The reason I found it so profound is that Winner did not approach sexuality as a postmodern "anything goes" writer or as a gnostic anti-body Christian. I found that she took a careful middle ground that was loyal to morality and also affirmed our bodies. I found it especially insightful that Winner made the connection about chastity with the necessity of affirming the human body.

Overall, the book's candor and frankness will engage the thoughts of Christians who struggle with the concept of Christianity and sexuality. My only regret about this book is that I did not read it when I was still single. My recommendation? Go out and buy this book now. Trust me, you won't regret it!

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## **Kristen says**

Perhaps the most embarrassing book I've ever pulled out on the subway or in an audition line...the cover not only has a large white flower but the blaring "real sex" title with only the tiny subtitle that makes it all okay. That being said, it's a great read and one I would recommend for anyone in the church. I had the delight of meeting Lauren Winner and attending a women's retreat where she spoke on this topic among others. She is a smart, smart woman and I especially love reading her books now that I can hear the funny way she says "rather" and picture her vintage wing-tip glasses. The whole premise of the book is that sex is an issue that is central to the life of the church and that it should be done (or not done) in the context of community. One point that really had me thinking was the church's present idolatry of marriage and how we are divided into "singles" and "marrieds" when our real identity should just be as Christian brothers and sisters. Read the book but maybe spend 5 minutes to put a cover on it if you don't want disapproving stares on the subway.

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## **Ellison says**

The author shares that her first physical encounter was at the age of...fifteen! She eventually self-identifies as a Christian and aspires to figure out the definition of the word 'fornication' despite being a college student. Whatever your location on your journey you will be educated, entertained, and encouraged as she shares experiences, Bible verses, and data. Insightful.

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## **Ramón says**

I'd actually give this book 2.5 stars if I could. I normally enjoy Winner's writing, but this book felt like it began wandering early on and never found its rhythm or a final resting place. The tone also seemed a little forced, like several ideas were mashed rather than woven together.

In particular, there seemed to be a fair amount of dissonance between the deeper paradigms dealing with the



spirituality of chastity in a holistic, communal way and the seemingly arbitrary assertions about sexuality with which she peppered the discussion. She discloses early on that in the midst of writing the book she ended up meeting and marrying a guy, so I imagine the confused tone might be echoing the confusing transition for her into married life. I can respect the difficulty of communicating clearly from both sides of the fence.

Nonetheless, I am glad that she brought voices like Richard Hays and Wendell Berry into the conversation for a younger generation that might not otherwise engage with the deeper theological underpinnings of sexuality. Having said that, those perspectives were introduced so briefly here that they struggled to rise above the clutter of pop culture analysis and anecdotal evidence. All told, my favorite part was probably the list of lies the church tells about sex and my least favorite part was probably the part on modesty.

It's hard to give a mediocre rating to a book on a topic that takes a lot of bravery to engage. I especially appreciated Winner's humility and generosity in speaking about the subject matter in a way that everyone could engage with at some level, even in disagreement. I think if more Christians approached conversations about sexuality with a similarly generous tone, there could be more open and productive dialogue in church communities. But, in the end, I think this book falls short of engaging a paradigm shifting conversation about chastity.

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## **Eddie says**

I appreciate the Hauerwasian influence that frames sex as an semi-public act done in community, but Hauerwas has a winsome personality and can sell that vision as exciting. Winner, on the other hand, is lecturing me about dressing up for church ("It's God.. that the people are coming for, and helping them dress appropriately may be part of preparing them to meet Him") and claiming that frat houses have swapped porn for the Victoria's Secret catalog ("a rag that actually leaves quite little a secret"). How weirdly out of touch, how weirdly reminiscent of Peggy Noonan. If you've got the itch to have some sex, Winner advises you to go ahead and get married ASAP, which sounds like the recipe for a nightmare marriage as well as a shamefully legalistic construction of Christian sexual ethics. Her personality on the page does not make me rush to follow her, and her vision of a richer life feels theoretical and bloodless.

Winner wants to work up a statement that is both realistic about human nature and faithful to Christian tradition, but she winds up with predictable preoccupations. She says much of the same stuff you'd hear from a Southern Baptist youth pastor (don't touch your boyfriend in any way that you wouldn't do in a public space!) even as she realizes that it needs to be oriented toward a higher goal than personal piety.

My guess is that this book will be satisfying for ex-youth group kids who walk the straight and narrow with ease. To them, it might feel like encouragement. If you need bold engagement with the trickier aspects of sexual ethics, however, skip this one.

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## **Rachel says**

Lauren Winner started writing this book before she was engaged but by the time she finished it, she was married. She also confesses that she did have premarital sex with several boyfriends. Her background (and an adult conversion to Christianity from Judaism) lends itself tremendously to keeping this book from being

just another preachy text on sex aimed at single people. I particularly enjoyed the author's treatment of the subject: she doesn't take the hard core black & white, right & wrong stance that I've heard from so many churches and other Christians. Rather, she approaches an understanding of sex and chastity and what is ok or not from the standpoint of, "does this experience teach me something true or false about God." I particularly appreciated her thoughts on what married people and single people have to teach the church, and also what she had to say about the falsehoods that pornography and masturbation teach - yet at the same time she gave me the impression that we were in a dialogue and travelling a similar journey; I left this book feeling thoughtful and hopeful and not condemned.

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## **Victoria says**

I've wanted to write a review of this book for a while, but I've struggled with what to say about it. Before I read it, I had heard this book strongly criticized by several youth ministers in my family and acquaintance. Their criticisms are valid. This book does not present a hardline position on anything other than the fact that sex is acceptable only within the confines of marriage. It takes a much less hardline stance on topics such as masturbation, or the use of birth control inside or outside marriage. Although it discusses these topics and shows how a spirit of chastity would approach these topics, it leaves it to the reader to decide. That makes this book frankly unteachable for many youth pastors, because in most churches taking anything other than a hardline stance with high school or below is unacceptable, even if the minister agrees, because parents would not be okay with it.

When I personally read the book, though, I thought simply because it was willing to discuss this issues and the fact that answers are hard and confusing on some topics related to sex, it was a much more honest and therefore also impacting book than what was available to me as a Christian teenager. Winner really gets at the reasons why chastity is important throughout our lives as Christians (not just before marriage; she also discusses lifelong chastity, widowhood, and moments of chastity within marriage) and makes it clear what a spirit of chastity is like. Because of this, I think she does a much better job of explaining why sexual matters are important in Christianity, and equips readers with the toolkit to make their own decisions regarding the aforementioned sexual activities that aren't overtly discussed in the Bible. She also paints an excellent picture of where sexuality fits within the church as a whole, in a transformative process, and not just how sex relates to young people. It also helps, of course, that it is written in Lauren Winner's characteristic intelligent and winning writing style.

As a married, albeit young (23), Christian woman, I still found this book insightful and it has helped me to clarify my position on many sexual matters, simply because it is moreso a book of theology, even if it is very easy to understand. That said, I do wish this book had been around when I was younger to help me understand why the church said what it did back when I needed these answers to these questions more fervently. While I understand the reticence of youth pastors, I think parents of mature teens could certainly recommend this book, particularly if they'd like to discuss it with them. As for teens going off to college of any type, I think it is a book that is of utmost importance in navigating college cultures. I will likely give it away as a going-to-college gift in the future. Still, I think anyone of any age who still struggles to understand the church's basic stance on sexuality would do well to read this.

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