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CELIBACY AS SOCIAL COUNTER-CONDUCT PRACTICE IN EARLY CHURCH

Perdian Tumanan
Ph.D. Student in Theology and Ethics, Villanova University, PA, USA
Email: ptumanan@villanova.edu

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Abstract
This paper argues that the concept of sexual abstinence in early Christianity was not based on biblical proof-texting, but rather resulted from constructive theological efforts in response to the socio-political reality of the time and the early Christians' aspirations towards women and the marginalized. By exploring the discourse surrounding marriage and sexuality in the Greco-Roman world and its impact on early Christianity, this paper highlights how the teaching on sexual abstinence challenged the imperial philosophy of desire and control. The paper posits that celibacy and sexual abstinence served as a social counter-conduct practice in response to the little appreciation for women's bodies and the marginalized. In short, the teaching of Christian chastity addressed the elitism that pervasive in Greco-Roman philosophy of marriage and sexuality. Ultimately, the debate about celibacy in early Christianity was about the nature of human solidarity.

Keywords: celibacy, marriage, sexuality, early church, counter-conduct practice

INTRODUCTION

There is little evidence to suggest that the idea of sexual abstinence in early Christianity is solely based on Jesus' teachings.[1] Being Jewish, Jesus would have been aware that marriage is considered the highest calling for every man in Judaism. This implies that a life of celibacy is not common among Jewish men.[2] Immanuel Jakobovits, in his entry on celibacy in Encyclopaedia Judaica, confirms this by stating, "The deliberate renunciation of marriage is all but completely alien to Judaism."[3]

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[1] Historian, Merry Wiesner-Hanks, explains that Jesus talked rarely about sex and that, "his recorded words are contradictory (Merry E. Wiesner, *Christianity and Sexuality in The Early Modern World: Regulating Desire, Reforming Practice*, 2nd ed., Christianity and Society in the Modern World [London: Routledge, 2010], 26).

[2] Michael Satlow highlights the contrasting views on sex and marriage between Palestinian Jews and Babylonian Jews. Babylonian rabbis viewed sex as inherently sinful, and marriage as a means to control sexual desire. This perspective may have contributed to the emphasis on celibacy. However, the first century Palestinian rabbis had a different perspective. Influenced by Hellenism and Roman culture, they saw marriage as the foundation for, ""creation of household (*oikos*), that would bring social respectability for man" (Michael Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* [Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001], xvi).

[3] Immanuel Jakobovits, "Celibacy," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), Gale eBooks, http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2587504094/GVRL?u=vill_main&sid=zotero&xid=806615cd.

Furthermore, Dale Martin challenges one of the most frequently cited reasons for supporting sexual abstinence—Jesus' singleness. While his conclusion on Jesus' sexuality is highly contested, his insightful analysis questions the assumption that Jesus was single, which is largely based on traditional Christian historical imagination. Martin argues that, while there is no text in the Gospels that proves Jesus was married, there is also no explicit statement that Jesus was single.[4] Even if Jesus was single, his singleness would have been very unusual even bizarre for someone of his time. The practice of sexual abstinence that was observed by some small sectarian groups at that time usually went hand in hand with other forms of obedience, such as "their concern about purity and temple, fasting, strict Sabbath observance, and obedience to a strictly interpreted Torah."[5] However, these were not necessarily followed by early Jesus' disciples. Another group that practiced sexual abstinence also avoided wine and grape products. In contrast, the Gospels clearly state that Jesus did not refuse them (Matt. 9:11; Luke 5:29-30; 7:34).[6] He even turned water into wine! (John 2:1-11). In short, Jesus did not conform to any form or norm of celibacy that existed at that time. Martin concludes that even if Jesus practiced sexual abstinence, "he was a queer one."[7]

This paper aims to argue that the teachings on celibacy and sexual abstinence in the early Church were not based on simple biblical proof-texting. Instead, they were a result of constructive theological efforts that responded to the socio-political reality of the time and the early Christians' aspirations towards love, hope, and humanity. The excitement of future glorification through Jesus' resurrection, the expectation of Jesus' immediate *parousia*, and the trauma, persecution, and torture that they faced, all played a significant role in shaping their understanding of the body, sexuality, and marriage.[8]

Kiddushin 29b (Talmud) states, "If one is twenty years old and has not yet married a woman, all of his days will be in a state of sin concerning sexual matters. One who does not marry in his youth will become accustomed to thoughts of sexual matters, and the habit will remain with him the rest of his life" ("Kiddushin 29b," accessed September 25, 2020, https://www.sefaria.org/Kiddushin.29b).

[4] Dale Martin, *Sex and Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 96–97.

[5] Martin, 97.

[6] Martin, 97.

[7] Martin, 97.

[8] As Elizabeth Castelli aptly stated, "This unfolding ideology of virginity is highly complex, intertwining theological arguments, current philosophical ideas, and a collection of contemporary rhetorical themes to produce a tightly woven image of virginity as the ideal of Christian life" (Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 1 [Spring 1986]: 67–68).

This paper is divided into three main sections. In the first section, I will explore the discourse surrounding marriage and sexuality in the Greco-Roman world. In the second section, I will analyze the impact of the socio-political context of the Graeco-Roman empire and its discourse on sexuality and marriage on Christian teaching. Lastly, in the third section, I will discuss the occurrence of the teaching on sexual abstinence that challenged the imperial philosophy of desire and control.

DISCUSSION

Marriage, Sexual Regulation, and Continuity of Population in Greco-Roman World

There are at least two similarities between the early Church's view on sexuality and that of Greco-Roman culture. First, Greco-Roman culture and Church did not perceived sexuality as something inherently bad. Second, sexuality was considered important, particularly in relation to procreation.[9] David G. Hunter corroborates this paradigm by stating that in Greco-Roman culture, marriage was seen as a "civic duty."[10] In this regard, sexuality was a matter of public discourse rather than a personal issue.

Historian Peter Brown provides a compelling explanation for why sexuality and marriage were such critical topics in public discourse during this time. Due to the high mortality rate in ancient civilizations, including the Greco-Roman world, citizens had a real and pressing need to procreate in order to ensure the continuation of the population. Brown emphasizes this urgency by stating that "Citizens of the Roman Empire at its height, in the second century A. D., were born into the world with an average life expectancy of less than twenty-five years. Death fell savagely the young. Those who survived childhood remained at risk."[11] Therefore, it is not surprising that the discussion of sexuality is primarily linked to the topics of marriage and procreation. The threat to the continuity of the population was a significant problem in ancient times. Brown highlights the urgency of the situation by stating, "Unexacting in so many ways in sexual matters, the ancient city expected its citizens to expend a requisite

[9] In Greek classic texts, marriage and sexual acts were inseparable and the intention is for procreation (Michel Foucault and Robert Hurley, *The Care of The Self*, vol. 3, The History of Sexuality [New York: Pantheon Books, 1986], 166–67).

[10] David G. Hunter, ed., *Marriage and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, Ad Fontes: Early Christian Sources (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 11.

[11] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Lectures on The History of Religions; (Columbia University Press, 1988), 6.

proportion of their energy begetting and rearing legitimate children to replace the dead."[12]

At its most extreme point, the human body could be considered the property of the empire for the purpose of reproducing new human beings. According to Hunter, those who neglected these laws could be subject to financial penalties. He explains that men between the ages of twenty-five and sixty who did not marry, and women between the ages of twenty and fifty who did not marry, were subject to these penalties. In addition, widows were required to remarry within two to three years, and divorcees within eighteen months. Finally, inheritance restrictions were imposed on married couples who were childless.[13] It is possible that the great population census decreed by Augustus in Luke 2:2 was not only for economic purposes, but also to assess the effectiveness of these laws, which had been passed several years earlier.

Given the arduous reality of low life expectancy, it is difficult to view sexual abstinence or celibacy as legal and desirable. In fact, sexual continence was sometimes viewed as an anti-imperial decision that could put one's life in danger.[14] Additionally, the concept of chastity was rooted in a sexist paradigm. During that time, medical science held that only males possessed the "vital spirit" or heat necessary for the production of life, while women were considered "failed males."[15] It is therefore not surprising that the practice of virginity was limited to a select few women due to religious duty and responsibility. However, it is essential to note that the decision to live a chaste life was not made out of self-autonomy, and often lacked consciousness and personal willingness. Brown says, "The chastity of many virgin priestesses was not a matter of free choice for them. No heroic freedom of the individual will be made plain by their decision not to marry."[16]

Early Christian Teachings on Marriage and Sexuality

Similar to Greco-Roman culture, early Christian teachings also did not consider sex as something inherently wrong. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul bluntly rejects the

[12] Brown, 6.

[13] Hunter mentions three laws that bind Roman citizens to marriage and reproduction, *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* (18 BCE), *lex Iulia de adulteriis* (18 BCE), and *lex Papia-Poppaea* (9 BCE) (Hunter, *Marriage and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 10).

[14] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 6.

[15] Brown, 9–10.

[16] Brown, 8.

extreme ascetic group among the Corinthian Church whose motto was written in verse 1: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." Although Paul personally seemed to prefer a chaste life and endorsed it, he never prohibited church members from marrying and having their own partners. He even forbade those who were already married from abandoning their partners in favor of celibacy. Hunter writes, "Abstention from sex should occur only by mutual consent for the sake of prayer and only for a limited time."[17] Paul's main reason for choosing a life of celibacy was not because it was godlier than married life, but rather because of his understanding of the imminent *parousia* and how married life could bring an unnecessary burden.[18] This means that his reason was more practical than theological, and I agree with Hunter on this point.

Considering this earliest writing about marriage and sexuality in the early Christianity by Paul—believed to have been written in 53-54 CE—it is difficult to conclude that the practice of celibacy is simply derived from Scripture, Jesus, or Paul. The New Testament does not reject marriage and sexual relationships. This is why Elisabeth A. Clark, in her book on Asceticism in Early Christianity, boldly concludes that supporters of ascetic life faced a dilemma when attempting to base their teachings on Scripture, as Scripture appears to be more supportive of married life. She states:

> Reading Renunciation explores the exegetical problem confronting early Christian ascetic writers who wished to ground their renunciatory program in the Bible. Their "problem" arose because the Bible only sporadically supported their agenda; many verses appeared rather to assume that marriage and reproduction were the norms for godly living. To read the Bible as wholeheartedly endorsing their ascetic program challenged the Fathers' interpretive ingenuity as well as their comprehensive knowledge of Scripture.[19]

Hunter also provides crucial insights into how Greco-Roman moralists and philosophers influenced Christian ideas about marriage in the second century.[20] Prior to this period, marriage was mostly viewed as a civil obligation. However, in the second century, marriage became more individualized, with concepts such as "responsibility," "respect," "marriage as friendship," "companionship," "mutual affection," and "harmony"

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[17] Hunter, *Marriage and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 6.

[18] Hunter, 6–7.

[19] Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

[20] Hunter, *Marriage and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 12–13.

being introduced as integral components of a good marriage.[21] Christian writers and leaders of that time did not view these teachings as contradictory to Scripture; in fact, they found them to be in line with it. The delay of the *parousia* may have been the primary reason for Christian leaders to contemplate the meaning and values of Christian marriage as a foundation for building a sustainable Christian family.

Later on, this emphasis on marital and sexual ethics became a crucial point that Christian apologists such as Aristides, Justin Martyr, and Athenagoras used to defend Christianity against persecution. As many Roman households converted to Christianity, these apologists argued that Christian marital and familial values were compatible with Greco-Roman culture.[22] They attempted to convince the Roman authorities that Christianity was not an enemy of the Roman Empire but "had positive intellectual and moral benefits to offer."[23] In this regard, marriage—and not the life of celibacy—became a crucial bridge to connect two separate worldviews and ways of life. Hunter summarizes this well when he says:

> Most of the later New Testament writings continued Paul's resistance to the demands of ascetic Christians for sexual renunciation. They also developed further his desire to preserve the established structures of society, marriage among them. Written in an ageless anxious about the end of time and more concerned to present a good appearance to non- Christian society, documents from the later years of the first century tended to construct a bridge between the teachings of Jesus and Paul, on the one side, and the structures and values of Greco-Roman society, on the other.[24]

Given the hostile environment in which Christianity emerged, promoting sexual abstinence as a way of life would have been counterproductive and even harmful to the survival of the religion. Thus, it can be concluded that even in the second century, teaching on virginity and celibacy was not the dominant principle in Christian discourse on sexuality.[25]

As discussed earlier, the body and sexuality, particularly women's bodies, were highly politicized in Greco-Roman times. The Roman Empire's urgent need to address

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[21] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 12.

[22] Hunter, *Marriage and Sexuality in Early Christianity*, 14.

[23] Hunter, 13.

[24] Hunter, 7.

[25] In his article, Richard Price mentions the attack on marriage from an extreme pro-celibacy teaching among Christians called *Encratism*, which has its roots and history traced back to the Corinthian church. Their main teaching was that "all Christians, even if they were married, should renounce sex at baptism." However, this teaching was generally rejected by the Church in the second century (Richard Price, "Celibacy and Free Love in Early Christianity," *Theology & Sexuality* 12, no. 2 [2006]: 122–24).

the population decline led to the endorsement of marriage for reproduction, with legal consequences that penalized male bachelors and highly rewarded marriage.[26] The main aim is to maintain the stability of the empire's population.[27]

Given this political context, it would have been almost impossible for the early Church—a small and controversial sect of Judaism—to promote celibacy. According to New Testament scholar Sheila McGinn, the first Christians, up to the second generation, lived relatively peaceful and secure lives.[28] While there were sporadic persecutions, they were not systemic or intentional.[29] Another scholar, Candida Moss, doubts that the Roman emperors were specifically targeting Christians. She quotes G. E. M. De Ste. Croix who notes that there was no general persecution by the Roman government until the Decian persecution in 250 CE, and that between 64 and 250 CE there were only isolated and local persecutions. Even if the total number of victims may have been considerable, most individual outbreaks were likely brief.[30] In light of this reality, I believe that Paul's positive impression of the Roman Empire in Romans 13 and his endorsement that the Church should subject themselves to the government cannot be separated from the political context of the time. Suggesting celibacy would have contradicted the Apostle's own approval and put Christians in a dangerous position.

However, the question remains: if the discourse surrounding sexual abstinence and a life of celibacy did not originate directly from Scripture or the first two centuries of Christianity, where did it come from? What is the primary motivation behind this teaching? And why did it eventually become a long-standing perception, particularly within the Catholic Church, that marriage is inferior to celibacy?[31] To answer these questions, we must identify a crucial feature that distinguishes Christian views on sexuality from those of the Greco-Roman world: the concept of *desire or pleasure*.

Desire, Power and the Origin of Christian Chastity

[26] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 6.

[27] Brown, 6.

[28] Sheila E. McGinn, *The Jesus Movement and the World of the Early Church* (Winona, Minnesota: Anselm Academic, 2014), 186.

[29] Bryan M. Litfin, *Early Christian Martyr Stories: An Evangelical Introduction with New Translations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 3.

[30] Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 9.

[31] Price, "Celibacy and Free Love in Early Christianity," 122.

In his later works on the genealogy of sexuality, specifically books 2, 3, and 4, Michel Foucault attempts to investigate human subjectivity and the experience of sexuality.[32] Inevitably, this exploration leads him to the topic of desire. In Volume 2 of his book series, The Use of Pleasure, Foucault discovers that desire is constitutive and central to discussions of sexuality, whether in traditional cultures or within the Christian tradition, after studying individuals as sexual subjects and their experiences.[33] To me, Foucault's research also provides a crucial perspective to understand the Church's emphasis on celibacy.

Foucault describes the Greco-Roman conception of sexual desire or pleasure using the term *aphrodisia*, which encompasses various meanings, including "pleasures of love," "sexual relations," "carnal acts," and "sensual pleasures."[34] However, this concept of *aphrodisia* is challenging to translate accurately. Foucault then identifies three approaches that Greco-Roman philosophers use to address sexual ethics or issues of *aphrodisia*: the notion of use (*chrēsis*), mastery (*enkrateia*), and moderation (*sōphrosynē*).[35] For the purpose of this discussion, I will focus on the concept of mastery, or *enkrateia*.

According to Foucault, Greek philosophers often used *enkrateia* and *sōphrosynē* interchangeably.[36] However, Aristotle later distinguished between them, defining *sōphrosynē* as the ability to choose and apply true principles, while *enkrateia* refers to an "active form of self-mastery," particularly in the "area of desires and pleasures."[37] It can be said, then, that *sōphrosynē* is the character produced by *enkrateia*. *Enkrateia* itself has several sub-meanings, including struggle, resistance, and combat.[38] The consequence of *enkrateia* is that one can only become ethical if one has a "combative attitude toward pleasures."[39] In this regard, pleasure is not necessarily an enemy but something that should be controlled or mastered.[40] This is due to Platonic dualism,

[32] Daniele Lorenzini, "The Emergence of Desire; Notes Toward a Political History of the Will," *The University of Chicago Press Journals* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 449.

[33] Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 2, The History of Sexuality (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 5.

[34] Foucault, 2:35.

[35] Foucault, 2:36.

[36] Foucault, 2:63–64.

[37] Foucault, 2:64–65.

[38] Foucault, 2:65.

[39] Foucault, 2:66.

[40] Foucault, 2:70.

which posits that an individual can have both "stronger" and "weaker" selves.[41] Greek philosophy cannot rid itself of desire since it is an integral part of the self. Foucault quotes an important statement from Socrates, which reinforces this view: "It is not abstinence from pleasures that is best, but mastery over them without ever being worsted."[42] Unlike Christian celibacy ethics, which emphasizes "elucidation-renunciation," Greek ethics focuses on "domination-submission."[43]

Interestingly, Foucault also mentions that it is common for Plato to associate the human body's challenge with pleasure with the reality of the political structure. Plato suggests that "If the individual is like the city, the same structure must prevail in him." He argues that a person will become self-indulgent when they lack the power structure, the *arche*, that would allow them to defeat and rule over (*kratein*) the inferior powers. In the absence of such a structure, "his soul must be full of servitude and lack freedom," and the soul's "best parts" will be enslaved while "a small part, the most wicked and mad, is master."[44]

To overcome this, one needs to engage in a specific set of training called *askēsis*. Later on, this principle became essential for those who wanted to engage in politics.[45] In this regard, the body and society are inseparable and tightly entangled. The victory over sexual desire also means a conquest over the city, making desire constitutive in the formation of power and political structure.[46]

However, Brown provides additional critical information on this notion of body, control, and politics. The high mortality rate at the time meant that only the elite families had the privilege and opportunity to practice *askēsis* and become the leaders of

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[41] Foucault, 2:68.
[42] Foucault, 2:70.
[43] Foucault, 2:70.
[44] Foucault, 2:71.
[45] Foucault, 2:73.
[46] This statement clearly reminds us of the connection that Foucault made between sexuality and power in his first book on the history of sexuality. His rejection of the repressive hypothesis of the eighteenth-century discourse on sexuality is precisely because of this reason. For Foucault, sexuality becomes the domain of power not because of its innate nature, which we falsely describe as a "stubborn drive, by nature alien and of necessity disobedient to a power which exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely" (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 [New York: Vintage Books, 1978], 103). This understanding of power becomes possible because of the notion of desire. In his analysis of the relationship between power and sex, Foucault mentions that power and desire are two things that cannot be separated. He argues that "Where there is desire, the power relation is already present" (Foucault, 1:81).

the cities.[47] Control over the body thus denoted elitism, making it impossible for marginalized groups to even have control over their bodies.

Despite many theories attempting to explain the origins of Christian chastity, I believe the reaction to the socio-political reality of the time is the most compelling explanation. According to Brown, Christian leaders followed the philosophers in condemning the elites' (slave owners) habit of showing off the "the anomaly of the Roman 'double standard,' that punished the wife for the adultery while accepting unfaithfulness in a husband."[48] This cannot be separated from the little appreciation for women's bodies as mere reproduction machines for the empire.

In this regard, Christian virginity spoke loudly to the Roman people. As Peter Brown notes, "It was left to Christian treatises on virginity to speak in public on the physical state of the married woman—on their danger in childbirth, on the pain in their breasts during suckling, on their exposure to children's infections, on the terrible shame of infertility, and on the humiliation of being replaced by servants in their husbands' affections."[49] Brown argues that "the debate about virginity [in early Christianity] . . . was in large part a debate about the nature of human solidarity."[50] Daniele Lorenzini agrees with Brown's approach, arguing that virginity is not a simple dogmatic product but is born out of the real struggle of life and death. According to Lorenzini, "Indeed, by the fourth century, to uphold virginity 'was to commit oneself, by implication, to a different image of the grounds of cohesion of society,' a society that was founded on marriage and procreation."[51] Lorenzini calls the endorsement of virginity a social counter-conduct that seeks to "demystify or denaturalize the vision of society."[52]

This is why Christian leaders were pessimistic about the understanding of "mastery of desire" taught by philosophers and moralists. Brown describes the figures favored by the moralists as follows:

> What might appear at first sight as tolerance reveals, in fact, the comprehensiveness of the code adopted by the elites. They lay across the whole body of the public man. Wealthy, perpetually in the public gaze, exercising the power of life and limb over others, and close to figures who could exercise such

[47] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 9.
[48] Brown, 23.
[49] Brown, 25.
[50] Lorenzini, "The Emergence of Desire; Notes Toward a Political History of the Will," 458.

[51] Lorenzini, 458.
[52] Lorenzini, 458.

> control over themselves, the civic notable anger, irrational cruelty, the exuberant and menacing physicality of the greedy eater, and the erratic savagery of the tippler subjects far more worthy of concern than was the soft passion of desire.[53]

It is not surprising that Church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, rejected the notion of controlling desire and declared that it only contributes to society's suffering. In short, the Christian ideal is not to experience desire at all.[54] Brown adds that sexual renunciation is the only way for Christians to transform the body and break it with the discreet discipline of the ancient city.[55]

While Greco-Roman culture declares that victory over their bodies and cities can be gained by controlling sexual desire and pleasure, for Christians, liberation of the body is achieved by renouncing all sexual activity and joining in Christ's victory.[56] By renouncing marriage and sex, Christians hope for an "end to the huge fabric of organized society" that produces the suffering of the marginalized.[57] These constructive theological efforts are later reflected in the writings of Gregory Nyssa's "On Virginity," where he critiques the ongoing life, death, and suffering involved in marriage and argues that virginity is the original condition of the human being.[58]

CONCLUSION

Although sexual abstinence is a common practice in many religions, it's important to differentiate between their underlying motivations and cultural objectives. Our discussion highlights the Christian concept of celibacy, which was not simply a product of biblical study, but a complex theological construction born out of a specific socio-political context. It's worth noting that the significant shift in Church teaching around sexuality, moving from a focus on marriage to an emphasis on sexual abstinence, aligns with Foucault's understanding of power and sexuality. According to Foucault, power operates through an ongoing process of struggle and confrontation that transforms, strengthens, or even reverses prevailing norms and values. Therefore, we can conclude that the development of celibacy teaching in Christianity must have undergone a similar internal process of transformation and negotiation.

[53] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 30–31.
[54] Brown, 31.
[55] Brown, 31.
[56] Brown, 32.
[57] Brown, 32.
[58] Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Liturgical Press, 2017), 57.

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