THE QUESTION

Did early Christians oppose married sex for pleasure or to ease lustful thoughts?

Asked by a THF member on August 14, 2026 · published November 9, 2026 · 13 numbered quotations · the 28 early Christian passages and 126 Bible verses we kept are listed at the back, each with a link.

Read it online: thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/did-early-christians-oppose-married-sex-for-pleasure-or-to-ease-lustful

The short answer *Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words*

Largely yes on pleasure alone. Writers like Clement, Athenagoras and Lactantius tied married union to having children and warned against letting pleasure rule. Yet with Paul they let couples come together so temptation would not lead them into sin, and they called desire for one's spouse lawful. Lustful thoughts themselves were to be resisted, not fed.

LIBRARY ONLY	This study was written only from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible, never from the web. Every passage we kept from what the library gave is listed at the back, with a link to read it.
HOW IT WAS MADE	Compiled by machine learning from The Historic Faith's library of early-Christian writings and the Bible only. Every quotation was matched word for word against our stored text. Not yet reviewed by The Historic Faith.
SHARING WITH AN AI?	Every quotation here comes from The Historic Faith's library. If you paste this study into an AI, anything it adds beyond these pages comes from that AI, not from us.

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POINT 1 OF 7

Desire for one's spouse is not itself sin

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Lactantius says strong desire is without fault when it stays with its lawful object. He tells the married man to be content with his wife alone. So the early writers did not treat married desire as evil in itself.

1 "For sensual desire, if it does not wander from its lawful object, is without fault, even if it is strong."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Divine Institutes* 16 (c. 290–320 AD) **Source 27, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

2 "Let the man who has a wife seek nothing more. Instead, being content with her alone, let him keep the secrets of the marriage bed pure and undefiled."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Epitome of the Divine Institutes* 66 (c. 290–320 AD) **Source 24, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 2 OF 7

They tied marriage to having children

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Clement defines marriage as a union for having children. Athenagoras tells the emperors that Christians marry for that purpose and treat children as the measure of their appetite. These writers saw children as the main goal of married union.

3 "Marriage is the first union of a man and a woman for the having of legitimate children."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Stromata* 2.23 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 11, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

4 "For as the farmer, after throwing seed into the ground, waits for the harvest and does not sow more on it, so for us the producing of children is the measure of our indulgence in appetite."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Athenagoras,** *A Plea for the Christians* 33 (c. 170–190 AD) **Source 5, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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POINT 3 OF 7

Pleasure must never rule the person

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Lactantius warns that self-control and virtue cannot live where pleasure reigns. He wants desire kept within the marriage bed and warns that too much eagerness for pleasure is dangerous. Seeking pleasure for its own sake is what he opposes.

5 “For when lust rules, there is no room for self-control, nor can virtue exist when pleasure reigns supreme.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Divine Institutes* 20 (c. 290–320 AD) **Source 26, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

6 “Let lust not go beyond the marriage bed, but be subject to the begetting of children. For too great an eagerness for pleasure both brings danger and produces disgrace, and, what must especially be avoided, leads to eternal death.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Lactantius,** *Epitome of the Divine Institutes* 62 (c. 290–320 AD) **Source 23, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 4 OF 7

Clement warned against constant indulgence

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Clement asks how married people can treat constant intercourse as a necessity, as though it were like daily food. He calls Christians to fill life with good and honorable work instead of pleasure.

7 “But if this very question comes up for consideration, namely, whether a wife should be taken, how can it be freely allowed to make constant use, not only of food, but also of intercourse, as if it were a necessary thing?”

later in the same passage

“Therefore, through our whole life, there should be sown in us much occupation that is good and honorable.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** *Instructor* 2.10 (c. 190–215 AD) **Source 9, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

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POINT 5 OF 7

Paul's allowance guards the weak from temptation

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Clement explains Paul's words "lest Satan tempt you" as meant for spouses who struggle beyond the goal of children. Married union then protects them, so that one who cannot keep strict self-control does not end up desiring someone else.

8 “He says it to those who want to go beyond the goal of having children, lest, when our adversary is given too much room, he stir up desire for other pleasures.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** **Source 10, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
Stromata 3 (c. 190–215 AD)
THF's updated English

9 “And he added “for a time,” in 1 Corinthians 7:5, so that a man who has taken a wife, if he practices self-control by necessity, may not slip into sin, and while sparing his own marriage, may desire another’s.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** **Source 8, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
Stromata 3 (c. 190–215 AD)
THF's updated English

POINT 6 OF 7

Spouses should not refuse each other

Our note · compiled by machine learning · From the text: says what the passages say

Clement says husband and wife owe each other married union and should not deprive one another. Origen says a couple may abstain for prayer only by agreement, so one spouse does not force strictness on the other.

10 “This is so that the husband may give what is owed to the wife, and the wife to the husband, and so that they may not deprive one another of this divine help given for the generation of children.”

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Clement of Alexandria,** **Source 10, page 6** **Read it in the library ›**
Stromata 3 (c. 190–215 AD)
THF's updated English

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11 "He says that by the two whom the Word wants to agree on earth, we should understand the husband and wife, who by agreement deprive each other of bodily relations so that they may devote themselves to prayer, as in"

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Origen,** *Commentary on Matthew* 14 (c. 215–254 AD) **Source 18, page 7** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

POINT 7 OF 7

Lustful thoughts are to be resisted

Our note · compiled by machine learning · Interpretation: our reading of the passages, not their words

Athenagoras says Christians may not even indulge a lustful look and must answer for their thoughts. Hermas counsels a man to keep his own wife in mind so that he does not sin. The cure for lustful thoughts is a guarded heart and faithfulness, not indulgence.

12 "But we are so far from practicing promiscuous intercourse that among us it is not even lawful to indulge in a lustful look."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Athenagoras,** *A Plea for the Christians* 32 (c. 170–190 AD) **Source 7, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

13 "But if you always remember your own wife, you will never sin."

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITER **Hermas,** *Shepherd* (c. 90–150 AD) **Source 1, page 6** Read it in the library ›
THF's updated English

THE LIMITS

What these passages don't tell us

- These passages do not say exactly how often married couples may come together.
- They reflect the strict views of certain writers; they do not settle whether every act of married union must aim at children.
- A word-for-word match shows that a quotation really is in our text. It does not show that our reading of it is right, or who wrote each work.

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WHERE EVERY QUOTE CAME FROM

The Sources

The 28 early Christian passages and 126 Bible verses we kept for this question (repeats and weak or off-topic search hits were left out): early Christian passages first (sources 1–28, grouped by writer, earliest first), then Bible verses in The Faith Once Delivered Bible (sources 29–46, in Bible order), then 108 more verses THF links to these passages, by reference. **Quote 1, page 2** beside a source shows where the study quotes it. Passages are in THF's updated English unless marked "1885 English" (the Roberts–Donaldson translation, public domain). "… [continues online]" marks a passage the library gave only in part. **On paper?** At **thehistoricfaith.com**, Bible verses are in the **Audio Bible** and early Christian writings in the **Library** (search for the title).

EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS *28 passages from 12 writers*

Hermas, *c. 90–150 AD · sources 1–2*

1 *Shepherd* (1885 English) **Quote 13, page 5** charge you, said he, to guard your chastity, and let no thought enter your heart of another man's wife, or of fornication, or of similar iniquities; for by doing… [continues online] **read ›**

2 *Shepherd* (1885 English; on point 7) desire of wickedness arose within your heart. Is it not your opinion that a righteous man commits sin when an evil desire arises in his heart? There is sin in… [continues online] **read ›**

Ignatius of Antioch, *c. 98–117 AD · source 3*

3 *Epistle to the Philadelphians* (1885 English) "be ye subject to your husbands in the fear of God… [continues online] **read ›**

Theophilus of Antioch, *c. 169–183 AD · source 4*

4 *To Autolycus* 13 (1885 English; on point 7) "concerning chastity, the holy word teaches us not only not to sin in act, but not even in thought, not even in the heart to think of any evil, nor… [continues online] **read ›**

Athenagoras, *c. 170–190 AD · sources 5–7*

5 *A Plea for the Christians* 33 (1885 English) **Quote 4, page 2** "if the remaining in virginity and in the state of an eunuch brings nearer to God, while the indulgence of carnal thought and desire leads away from Him, in those… [continues online] **read ›**

6 *Resurrection of the Dead* 23 between male and female does not exist in souls. Nor do they have any ability for sexual relations, or any desire for them. And where there is no desire, there… [continues online] **read ›**

7 *A Plea for the Christians* 32 **Quote 12, page 5** "far from practicing promiscuous intercourse that among us it is not even lawful to indulge in a lustful look. For He says, "He who looks on a woman to lust… [continues online] **read ›**

Clement of Alexandria, *c. 190–215 AD · sources 8–12*

8 *Stromata* 3 **Quote 9, page 4** "divine providence through the Lord does not now command that the one who rises from the marriage bed should be washed again, as in former times. For the Lord, who… [continues online] **read ›**

9 *Instructor* 2.10 **Quote 7, page 3** unsettles the frame of the body. So that man spoke well who, when asked how he still felt toward sexual matters, answered, "Speak good words. As for me, I have… [continues online] **read ›**

10 *Stromata* 3 (1885 English) **Quotes 8, 10, page 4** "autem quoniam iis, qui juste vivunt, resistit propter æmulationem, et adversus eos contendit, volens eos ad suos ordines traducere, per laboriosam continentiam eis vult præbere occasionera… [continues online] **read ›**

11 *Stromata* 2.23 (1885 English) **Quote 3, page 2** "pleasure and lust seem to fall under marriage, it must also be treated of… [continues online] **read ›**

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12 *Instructor* 3.12 (1885 English) “it is the greatest bond of chastity, breathing forth pure pleasure. Very admirably the tragedy says… [continues online] **read ›**

Tertullian, *c. 196–220 AD · sources 13–15*

13 *On Modesty* 16 (1885 English; on point 5) “it is preferable to marry than to burn… [continues online] **read ›**

14 *Against Marcion* 8 (on point 1) “Thessalonians 4:5. Concupiscence, however, is not ascribed to marriage even among the Gentiles, but to… [continues online] **read ›**

15 *On the Veiling of Virgins* 10 (on point 7) “continence, by virtue. For great is the struggle to overcome concupiscence when you have become accustomed to such concupiscence… [continues online] **read ›**

Hippolytus, *c. 200–236 AD · sources 16–17*

16 *Refutation of All Heresies* 18 (1885 English) forbid marriage, the procreation of children, (and) the abstaining from meats which God has created for participation by the faithful, and those that know the truth… [continues online] **read ›**

17 *Refutation of All Heresies* 1 (1885 English) “to this account of theirs, the intercourse of woman with man is demonstrated, in conformity with such teaching, to be an exceedingly wicked and filthy (practice… [continues online] **read ›**

Origen, *c. 215–254 AD · sources 18–19*

18 *Commentary on Matthew* 14 (1885 English) **Quote 11, page 5** “by the two, he says, whom the Word desires to agree on earth, we must understand the husband and wife, who by agreement defraud each other of bodily intercourse that… [continues online] **read ›**

19 *Commentary on Matthew* 14 (1885 English) “19:11 Then seeing that some make a sophistical attack on the saying… [continues online] **read ›**

Apostolic Constitutions, *c. 250–380 AD · sources 20–21*

20 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 5) “this cause endeavour, at the time when they are of an age fit for marriage, to join them in wedlock, and settle them together, lest in the heat and fervour… [continues online] **read ›**

21 *Apostolic Constitutions* (1885 English; on point 7) now I say unto you myself, Whosoever shall look on his neighbour's wife to lust… [continues online] **read ›**

Methodius, *c. 270–311 AD · source 22*

22 *From the Discourse on the Resurrection* (on point 7) “the law of the mind. Another law comes from the attack of evil, and it often draws the soul into lustful thoughts. He says this law wars against the law… [continues online] **read ›**

Lactantius, *c. 290–320 AD · sources 23–27*

23 *Epitome of the Divine Institutes* 62 (1885 English) **Quote 6, page 3** “lust not go beyond the marriage-bed, but be subservient to the procreation of children… [continues online] **read ›**

24 *Epitome of the Divine Institutes* 66 **Quote 2, page 2** let this be kept in all the duties of life, and let it also be kept in marriage. For it is not enough if you keep away from another man… [continues online] **read ›**

25 *Divine Institutes* 23 (on point 1) of chastity. God limits this not only within private walls, but also to the lawful bounds of the marriage bed, so that when a man has a wife, he should… [continues online] **read ›**

26 *Divine Institutes* 20 **Quote 5, page 3** remains for me to speak against the pleasures of the five senses, and to do so briefly, because the length of the book itself now calls for restraint. Since all… [continues online] **read ›**

27 *Divine Institutes* 16 **Quote 1, page 2** “sensual desire, if it does not wander from… [continues online] **read ›**

Peter of Alexandria, *c. 300–311 AD · source 28*

28 *Genuine Acts of Peter* (on point 7) “mind. Another is the law that comes from the attack of evil, and it often pulls the soul toward lustful thoughts. This, he says, wars against the law of the… [continues online] **read ›**

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THE BIBLE *18 verses, The Faith Once Delivered Bible (Old Testament from the Septuagint), in Bible order*

29 **Matthew 5:28** but I tell you that everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. **read ›**

30 **John 2:16** To those who sold the doves, he said, “Take these things out of here! Do not make my Father’s house a marketplace!” **read ›**

31 **1 Corinthians 6:18** Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man commits is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. **read ›**

32 **1 Corinthians 7:1** Now concerning the things you wrote to me: it is good for a man not to touch a woman. **read ›**

33 **1 Corinthians 7:2** But because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. **read ›**

34 **1 Corinthians 7:3** Let the husband give his wife the affection owed to her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. **read ›**

35 **1 Corinthians 7:4** The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. **read ›**

36 **1 Corinthians 7:5** Do not deprive one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to fasting and prayer, and come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. **read ›**

37 **1 Corinthians 7:9** But if they do not exercise self-control, let them marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. **read ›**

38 **1 Corinthians 7:28** But even if you marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Yet such people will have trouble in the flesh, and I want to spare you. **read ›**

39 **1 Corinthians 7:33** but the married man cares for the things of the world, how he may please his wife. **read ›**

40 **1 Corinthians 7:36** But if anyone thinks that he is acting improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the prime of youth and it must be so, let him do what he wishes; he does not sin; let them marry. **read ›**

41 **1 Corinthians 7:37** But he who stands firm in his heart, who is under no necessity but has authority over his own will, and who has decided in his heart to keep his own virgin, does well. **read ›**

42 **1 Corinthians 7:38** So he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better. **read ›**

43 **Colossians 3:5** Put to death therefore your members which are on the earth: sexual immorality, uncleanness, depraved passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. **read ›**

44 **1 Thessalonians 4:3** For this is the will of God: your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality, **read ›**

45 **1 Timothy 4:3** forbidding marriage and requiring abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by the faithful who know the truth. **read ›**

46 **Hebrews 13:4** Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled; but God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers. **read ›**

ALSO LINKED BY THF TO THESE PASSAGES *108 verses, by reference*

Partly machine-linked: related to the passages, not always quoted in them. Each reference links to the verse in our audio Bible.

Genesis 4:25

Leviticus 15:18

Deuteronomy 8:18 · 20:5 · 20:19

Job 1:6

Psalms 24:4

Proverbs 4:25 · 6:27 · 9:17

Isaiah 50:9

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Jeremiah 23:24
Ezekiel 1:28
Amos 9:6
Zechariah 3:1
Matthew 5:8 · 5:31 · 5:32 · 6:19 · 6:24 · 7:7 · 7:21 · 18:3 · 18:20 · 19:3 · 19:5 · 19:6 · 19:9 · 19:12 · 22:39 · 23:9
Mark 10:11 · 11:24
Luke 6:46 · 11:8 · 14:26 · 16:18 · 20:25 · 20:27 · 20:34
John 1:14 · 2:19 · 3:6 · 6:27 · 6:67 · 13:33 · 14:6 · 19:36
Acts 12:13 · 17:24
Romans 1:20 · 7:4 · 7:12 · 7:22 · 7:23 · 7:25 · 8:2 · 14:19 · 14:21
1 Corinthians 3:11 · 3:16 · 4:15 · 6:9 · 6:12 · 6:14 · 6:15 · 6:19 · 7:8 · 7:10 · 7:11 · 7:14 · 7:32 · 7:39 · 14:15
2 Corinthians 3:6 · 7:1 · 11:3
Galatians 3:28 · 4:19 · 4:26 · 5:13 · 5:17
Ephesians 1:4 · 2:12 · 3:9 · 5:3
Philippians 4:3
Colossians 2:20 · 3:2
1 Thessalonians 2:15 · 4:5 · 4:14 · 4:15 · 5:19 · 5:20 · 5:23
2 Thessalonians 3:14
1 Timothy 3:2 · 4:1 · 5:9 · 5:14
Hebrews 13:5
1 Peter 1:19
2 Peter 2:22
1 John 3:1
Revelation 4:1 · 17:3 · 21:10

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Searched: Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes 1–9 and the Bible, including the Septuagint.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

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How to cite this study. The Historic Faith, “Did early Christians oppose married sex for pleasure or to ease lustful thoughts?” Early Church Questions, published November 9, 2026, https://thehistoricfaith.com/early-church-questions/did-early-christians-oppose-married-sex-for-pleasure-or-to-ease-lustful. To cite one quotation, add its number and source, for example “quote 1, source 27.”

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THE END OF THIS STUDY