

Unsafe sex: Still watching 'Sex and the City'

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [November 1, 2005](#) issue

My husband and I have acquired the somewhat embarrassing habit of settling down on the couch to watch reruns of *Sex and the City*. Despite having aired its final episode on HBO a few years ago, *SATC* continues to intrigue Americans, who are buying the series on DVD and watching episodes on cable TV. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the way the show trades deftly on contemporary anxieties about being single, looking perfect and growing older.

The four women who star in the show disdain men who want to date models, yet are themselves obsessed with physical perfection and set their own impossible standard of beauty—not to mention an impossible standard of wealth and fashion. The show is famous for popularizing a shoe called the Manolo, which sells for \$700 a pair; its stilettos are so high that wearing them is a form of foot-binding.

The show's treatment of sexuality is often offensively blasé. Early on, the women decide to have sex "like men." Partners are treated as accessories, much like those pricey shoes—and if the accessories aren't fashionable enough, they are hidden away. One date is referred to as a "cute little fixer-upper." The women are always looking for someone better.

What makes the series interesting, though, is the way the characters grow over time and lose some of the plastic perfection. We see lives portrayed in a way which just might help us think about God's intentions for sex and for bodies.

Charlotte is a WASP princess, fixed on having the perfect wedding in the perfect dress, marrying a wealthy doctor and acquiring a stunning apartment. But the marriage itself turns out to be a perfect sham. Her second husband, Harry, is bald, sweaty and hairy, and they have a completely imperfect wedding—wine is spilled on the beautiful dress and a series of mishaps leaves Charlotte in tears. But as the couple deal with infertility and open their home to adoption, the relationship is characterized by warmth and kindness—even though Harry strews used teabags

about and sits naked on Charlotte's perfect white couch.

Samantha, priding herself on her promiscuity, flees anything that smacks of intimacy or vulnerability. She experiments with lesbianism, but gives it up because the other woman wants an actual relationship. But at the end of the show we find her with a young man who won't let her escape without really knowing him. Samantha wants to role-play fantasies. He insists on the "hottest" fantasy of all: "I'm me, you're you." When Samantha gets cancer, her young lover sticks by her side.

Brittle, ultracompetent Miranda won't let a friend take her home after surgery lest she depend on someone else. Her defenses are broken down by the birth of her son, and she moves away from her fashionable Manhattan life to affordable space in Brooklyn. She invites her mother-in-law, who is suffering from dementia and personifies the dependency Miranda has been intent on avoiding, to live with her. In a beautifully drawn scene, Miranda ends the series by finding her mother-in-law eating out of a garbage can on the street; she takes her home and bathes her like a child.

Carrie, the chief protagonist, is the one character who seems unchanged through it all. While her friends turn improbably outward, to children, spouses and embodied love, she remains focused on herself. "The most exciting, challenging and significant relationship of all," she counsels, "is the one you have with yourself." Carrie's life is relentlessly about *her*.

Carrie, Charlotte, Miranda and Samantha are right to reject the alternative life that is most obviously on the table for them—the facade of a perfect, upwardly mobile marriage in the suburbs, a life every bit as inwardly directed as theirs are at first, with home decorations and babies replacing stilettos and men as the neat accessories. But is that the only option?

"Is sex," Carrie asks, "ever safe?" It's not, of course, and therein rests both the danger and the gift. If by "safe" we mean that sex might leave us untouched, without fetters, and free in the immature way the characters are free at the beginning of the show, then such safety should be avoided. That is part of the graciousness of sex.

And that is why the end of the series is so well worth watching. Here we glimpse possibilities for sexual relationships that embrace the messiness of loving embodied human beings who are anything but perfect. There are real questions to be

discussed here: Do Christians have ways of embodying singleness that stand as persuasive alternatives to *SATC*? Are single people excluded from the way we as Christians imagine the full life, the good life? And how do we embody marriage?

The Christian versions of faithful marriage and chaste singleness aren't found in the world of *SATC*, but the show can help remind us of the church's alternatives to selfish, inwardly directed promiscuity and selfish inwardly directed marriage (with someone to complete me, to meet my needs). The body, whether married or single, is meant to be directed outward, toward the other, as a gift by which we are allowed to care for God's loved ones.