

PAUL IN DIALOGUE: ON PROSTITUTES

-MESSY (BUT BEAUTIFUL) CHRISTIANITY, WEEK 21-

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 (NET)

Corinthians: ¹² "All things are lawful for me"

Paul: – but not everything is beneficial.

Corinthians: "All things are lawful for me"

Paul: – but I will not be controlled by anything.

Corinthians: ¹³ "Food is for the stomach
and the stomach is for food,
but God will do away with both."

Paul: The body is not for sexual immorality,
but for the Lord,
and the Lord for the body.

¹⁴ Now God indeed raised the Lord
and he will raise us by his power.

¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?

Should I take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?

Never!

¹⁶ Or do you not know that anyone who is united with a prostitute is one body with her?

For it is said, "The two will become one flesh."

¹⁷ But the one united with the Lord is one spirit with him.

¹⁸ Flee sexual immorality!

Corinthians: "Every sin a person commits is outside of the body"

Paul: – but the immoral person sins against his own body.

¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you,
whom you have from God,
and you are not your own?

²⁰ For you were bought at a price.

Therefore glorify God with your body.

THE BOTTOM LINE

_____ with _____.

... by _____ on the many _____ Paul gives _____.

... by _____ to God and seeking _____ any _____.

... by taking _____ against _____.

“A Closer Look: Sex in the Cities” (Craig Keener, *1 Corinthians*, 58-61)

Old Corinth had a reputation for sexual immorality; an Athenian comic used “Corinthian lady” as a sexually significant remark (Aristophanes *Lys.* 91). Some even believed that old Corinth’s temple of Aphrodite boasted a thousand cult prostitutes. Although some may have applied the saying, “Not every man dare go to Corinth,” to cutthroat competition, others plainly applied it to prostitution there. As a city with two major ports, New Corinth would have harboured the same sorts of problems as its predecessor. By Jewish standards, Greek males were nearly always immoral; that Paul must address sexual improprieties among his converts (cf. 1 Cor 5-7) is therefore not surprising.

Sexual behavior that Paul, his Scripture, and most Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the world today would consider immoral was rife in Greco-Roman cities. Aristocratic Roman men could not sleep with women of rank, but they could sleep with those of lower station. If, as is often argued, Greeks abandoned more girl than boy babies, the consequent shortage of marriageable women explains why Greek men typically married women a decade their junior. Until age thirty, Greek men had access to intercourse primarily with slaves, prostitutes, and each other. As in virtually all slave cultures, female household slaves were often subject to abuse. Many abandoned girl babies rescued from death were raised as slave prostitutes, many of whom worked in inns and taverns, which doubled as brothels. Dio Chrysostom denounced the activities in brothels as humiliating “intercourse without love and passion without affection for gain” (*Or.* 7.133). A more expensive option was higher-status free prostitutes, traditionally called, somewhat euphemistically, *herairai*, “friends.” Prostitution was legal (and a useful source of tax revenue), but if a prostitute married she had to retire from her trade. Perhaps even more than today, sexually explicit comedy was also publicly accepted.

Although the focus here is on the use of prostitutes, the principles Paul articulates (and some examples in his vice-list) prohibit all kinds of *porneia*, sexual immorality. Like other Jews, Paul defined as immoral any sexual intercourse apart from marriage (a union that in his day Jews and nearly all Gentiles assumed was heterosexual). Although many scholars question whether Paul refers to homosexual intercourse in 6:9, many of both his supporters and detractors think that he does. What is striking is that in this context Paul, unlike some of his modern followers, spends more space criticizing sexual misbehavior in general (5:11; 6:9, 13-18), presumably more often heterosexual than homosexual. [...]

Yet even regarding heterosexual intercourse, modern Western society is no more comfortable with biblical sexual ethics than Paul’s contemporaries were (although perhaps more tolerant of Paul for the sake of many of his other insights more widely accepted, such as spiritual unity across ethnic and class lines). Before modern readers dismiss him too readily, however, we should hear him (and his biblical and early Jewish tradition) clearly. Some modern readers hear the biblical tradition’s emphasis on sexual restraint as if it were designed to inhibit pleasure, rather than to establish wholeness in relationships. This was certainly the case among some ascetics of late antiquity, including among some philosophers and Christian monks; but it is not the point of Paul or most other first-century Jews (at least on our reading of 1 Cor 7). Much of Western culture, overreacting against late antiquity’s tradition repressing sexuality, has come to value casual sex as a form of recreation.

Yet by rejecting any restraints (and practical judgments formed by many societies throughout human history), our world underestimates how deeply sexuality inheres in our humanity. As with other animals, our sexual drives serve a procreative function for the species as a whole; but for humans sexuality is also distinctly relational. For example, most female mammals are “in heat” only rarely, and females in few other species experience orgasm. Unlike most other animals, humans are able to mate face-to-face, and perhaps most significantly, romantically in the context of a relationship. Sexual intimacy is difficult to separate from emotional intimacy, and such intimacy flourishes in the context of vulnerability and trust, hence commitment. Counselors today must address the lives broken by betrayal and exploitation, where intercourse is often a self-gratifying act isolated from a person or a relationship.

Israelites, like most other societies, sought to protect their children’s innocence against sexual predators. They also took sexual acts (and the possibility of consequent pregnancy) more seriously than modern Western society does. In a society in which men controlled most wealth, they demanded that a man who risked getting a woman pregnant be committed to and provide for her; in this perspective, a prostitute sold herself cheaply, but casual sex was cheaper still. By contrast, valuing one’s neighbor as oneself demanded reserving one’s deepest gift of intimacy for a partner who would ideally offer one nothing less than their own life. Paul himself would have been dissatisfied with how far Israelite law took this: polygamy; a gender-based double standard for sexuality (challenged in Gen 38-39 and in 1 Cor 6-7); and other factors severely limited the fulfillment of this deal. Nevertheless, permanent, mutual commitment remained the ideal to which God’s plan pointed (Gen 1:27-28; 2:24). To use another person’s sexuality for one’s own pleasure without genuinely committing oneself to that person was exploitive.

Today, as in antiquity, many people (most often men) exploit others’ sexuality. Deceived by promises of education or legitimate jobs, thousands of girls from Bangladesh and Thailand are lured annually into an involuntary sex trade, a modern form of slave prostitution. In the West, tens of thousands of runaway teenagers end up as prostitutes to find places to sleep at night. My wife recounts horrifying accounts of men, often relatives and neighbors, raping young girls in her native Central Africa, a tragedy exacerbated further by recent wars there she witnessed. One of humanity’s most precious gifts is also most easily abused by others who value momentary gratification over another human being’s personhood.

Is it possible that, while thinking we are merely pursuing pleasures, modern people allow them to “dominate” our behavior (6:12) at the expense of our common sense and the common good? Christians must grapple especially with Paul’s demand for spiritual fidelity: Members of Christ dare not defile Jesus’ body by behavior inappropriate for his participation, or the sanctity of his temple with behavior inappropriate there. Dominated instead by the Spirit whose temple they are, Christians must live in ways that benefit others.