

RAW MATERIAL

Studies in Biblical Sexuality

By

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Chapter 17

What a Relief!

Paul on Sexual Needs

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Paul on Sexual Needs

To read Paul, you would think every Christian wedding ceremony is a public declaration of sexual incontinence for those about to be wed. Paul's comments on sexuality in 1 Corinthians 7 are well known and are the subject of nervous jest as often as devout reflection in the church. Also these comments form a foundation stone of Protestant sexual ethics. In harmony with the rest of the New Testament Paul manages to write about sexuality without taking any interest in procreation. Offspring are not the goal, or even a significant byproduct of sexuality in the New Testament. Yes, biological children do occur as a result of sex, but New Testament writers are not interested in this connection.

Paul's comments on sexuality begin with 1 Corinthians 6:15-20. In verse 9 Paul listed adulterers and pederasts¹ among other offenders, but the theme is not yet developed. Paul then moves to sins against the body beginning with food. Food!? Yes, food. Paul points out that the body can be defiled through immoral behavior, and the topic begins with food.

And the next topic is sex. The second half of verse 13 is the pivot between defilement through food and defilement through prostitutes. "The body is not meant for *porneia*" (fornication). What does that have to do with food? Only that either food or fornication can defile the body. Though we quickly move on to prostitution, the context begins with food.

Verses 15-16 begin the sexual discussion with prostitution. To patronize a prostitute is to become one with her, and how can someone joined to Christ also be joined to a prostitute? Genesis 2:24 is invoked as in Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:8. In Matthew and Mark the citation is against polygamy, therefore establishing life-long monogamy as the Biblical norm. In 1 Corinthians 6 the citation is against prostitution. "One flesh" (σάρκα μίαν, *sarka mian*) is not something to be spread around, or "one body" (ἐν σωμα, *hen soma*) as Paul puts it.²

Paul may be referencing the sayings of Jesus on this matter. The normal way of referencing Scripture is "it is written" (γεγραπται, *gegraptai*; 1 Cor 1:19; 2:9; 4:6; 9:9), and Paul is referencing a Scripture text, Genesis 2:24. But instead Paul writes in 6:16, "He says" (φησιν, *phesin*), and at this time the gospels were not yet written down and the sayings of Jesus were mostly oral. Most commentaries assume that *phesin* references Genesis directly. But if Paul required the authority of

¹ Ἀρσενοκοιται. See the next two chapters. In Jewish polemics against gentiles, adultery and pederasty tended to be listed together, a theme carried on in the Church Fathers.

² LXX has *sarx* (flesh), but Paul clearly prefers using *soma* (body). In Paul's writings *sarx* is used for the sinful nature – the opposite of *pneuma* (spirit), but *soma* is a neutral term for the physical body. Paul quotes the LXX faithfully with *sarx*, but uses his own preferred term for the rest of the passage.

Jesus to make this application of Genesis 2:24, he could appeal to the sayings of Jesus known to him and his audience, and so his authority would be, “he says,” instead of, “it is written.”

Paul also speaks of being "members of Christ" (μελη Χριστου, *mele Christou*) and "members of a prostitute" (πορνιης μελη, *pornes mele*). The image of members of Christ and the body of Christ will be developed a few chapters later (12:12-31, etc.). Apparently the Corinthians had already heard this image from Paul, and would understand the image here before reading chapter 12. We must read this passage as if entering a conversation already in progress.

Eating together produces a certain unity through a physical bodily function, an act intensified in the Lord’s Supper. This function of our physical bodies is also a function of the body of Christ, the church community. Likewise sexual activity is a bodily function which connects individuals to each other, like the connection to the body of Christ. Paul counsels his readers to beware how they are joining themselves to others, for they are joining their sexual partners to the church. That sexual partner should be a proper husband or wife – even if the spouse should happen to be someone outside the church (7:12-16).

The unity of the husband and wife takes an interesting quality in 1 Corinthians 7:3-5. "One body" seems to include mutual ownership of each other’s persons, including sexual rights. In verse 3 both the wife and husband owe each other sexual "duty" (οφειλην, *opheilen*), because neither owns their own body. Rather each owns the body of the other (verse 4), so they should not refuse each other sexual activity (verse 5).

These verses take an interesting turn in the writings of Ambrose of Milan. Ambrose, in *Concerning Widows* 11, argues that the "duty" refers to more than sex. According to Ambrose, if these verses were only about sex they would speak only of the duty the wife owes her husband. Ambrose assumes that since the wife can also demand duty from her husband, this duty must be something other than sex. What wife would ever demand sex from her husband? Paul might have included other marital duties in the ownership which the wife and husband have of each other, but certainly he understands that either might demand sex from the other. We learn something about Ambrose and his 4th century culture when we find him unaware that a wife might want sex from her husband.

Paul begins chapter 7 by replying to a question sent to him from the Corinthian congregation. Paul wants everyone to be celibate, but some people (most people actually) are weak of will and liable to fornication. Therefore these weak-willed people need to be properly married, and those who are married should not withhold sex from each other, so to reduce the sexual temptations which the other may have to face — and to reduce one’s own sexual temptations. Paul would prefer that the single and widowed remain single, but not if they find celibacy difficult.

It is better to marry than to burn. (Fill in your own commentary here.) At no point does Paul mention procreation. Pregnancy is not a part of Paul's sexual theology. Paul points out repeatedly that marriage involves distractions and cares of this world. (Is "the cares of this world," 1 Cor 7:32-34, a euphemism for children as well as spouses?) Because of these distractions he argues that it is better to be unmarried than married. He seems to realize that he is not being persuasive, so he tries the same argument again. And again. He also seems to recognize that NOT being married is also distracting. Someone who is not married apparently can burn with distraction.

A less developed form of Paul's thought may be found in the earlier letter of 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4. Paul warns the Thessalonians to keep themselves from fornication (*πορνείας* , *porneias*) and advises each (man) to acquire for himself a "container" (*σκευός* , *skeuos*). "*Skeuos*" is usually translated "wife" and tends to be understood as a euphemism. This reading of 1 Thessalonians has Paul's message that marriage is better than fornication. However it lacks the reciprocity of both husband and wife having ownership of each other's body. Also Paul does not try to sell celibacy to the Thessalonians like he does to the Corinthians. In 1 Thessalonians Paul simply assumes that most men would need marriage to avoid fornication. After much reflection, and possibly a certain amount of experience, Paul's thought developed the detail and nuance found in 1 Corinthians 6-7.

Who is available for marriage? Remember that Abraham married his half-sister and made sure his son Isaac married a cousin, not one of the local Canaanite women. He wanted marriage to stay within the family. Isaac and Rebekah followed suit, disapproving of Esau's pagan wives and sending Jacob off to relatives to find himself a wife. In a way Paul does the same. He touches on it lightly in 1 Corinthians 7:39 — the widow is free to remarry anyone "in the Lord." Most commentators take that to mean "within the church," and the church is family, brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul shares with Abraham and Isaac the ideal of keeping separate from the pagan culture surrounding God's people, and he restricts marriage to those who share at least some of the same divine ideals. Paul goes into some detail about marrying within the church in the next letter, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

Of course, when Paul says a widow can marry anyone in the church, he doesn't really mean *anyone*. All kinds of pre-emptive restrictions remain. Literal incest, for instance. In 1 Corinthians 5:1 he mentions a completely unacceptable incestuous relationship between a step-mother and a step-son. Apparently freedom in Christ does not include marriage to a close relative. Also, Paul probably would frown on polygamy in which the widow marries a man who already has at least one wife. The Pastoral Epistles restrict church office from those with more than one wife (1 Tim 3:2,12; Titus 1:6). This might refer to overt polygamy, which was practiced in a few parts of the Roman Empire. However, most scholars assume the Pastoral texts are about men who divorce and remarry (Knight 223). It is in the eyes of the church that such a man is considered a polygamist — and is

allowed to remain in the church but not to hold a leadership position. Paul probably is not including an improperly divorced husband as a potential mate for the widow of 1 Corinthians 7:39.

The Pastoral Epistles restrict church office to those who are husband of one wife. "Husband of one wife" in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 may be translated, "husband of a first wife," and may also exclude from church office a bereaved husband who remarries. Further in the epistle widows worthy of church charity were required to be wives of one husband (1 Tim 5:9), which refers to a former (deceased) husband (Quinn & Wacker 437). The Greek phrasing is quite similar. 1 Timothy 3:2 reads *μιας γυναικος ανδρα* (*mias gynaikos andra*)³ and 5:9 reads *ενοσ ανδρος γυνη* (*henos andros gyne*). The terms *μιας* and *ενοσ* are equivalent forms of *εις*, the difference being one of gender. So, it is possible to read 1 Timothy 3:2,12 as excluding remarried widowers. As early as Athenagoras (*Embassy* 33) some Church Fathers excluded from the church all who remarry, including widows and widowers.

However, 1 Timothy is not here forbidding the remarriage of widows and widowers. Remarried widowers may be barred from church office, and remarried widows are barred from the church's roll of widows, presumably even if their second husband also has died. Yet, younger widows are actually encouraged to remarry (5:14), even though such marriage would disqualify them for the widow's roll should the second husband also die. This epistle seems to be a response to a specific situation and is not carefully constructed as a long-term policy statement.

The Synoptic Gospels state that those men who divorce and remarry are thus adulterers (Mt 19:9; Mk 10:11; Lk 16:18). In Matthew and Mark Jesus does this by denying the reality of divorce and defining remarriage as polygamy. Polygamy is then shown to fall short of the monogamy standard of Genesis 1 and 2. If we read the Pastoral Epistles in the light of the Synoptic Gospels, men who are adulterers through remarriage apparently can hold membership in the church, though they are barred from church office.

Ephesians 5:31 also invokes Genesis 2:24, but the primary marriage described here is between Christ and the church. Human marriages are held up to this divine ideal of Christ and his church. Genesis 2:24 receives significant play in the New Testament as the standard for marriage. Genesis 1:27 does not receive as much play, and 1:28 is not mentioned at all. Notably, Genesis 2:24 does not mention reproduction and 1:28 does. In the New Testament marriage — and its sexuality — have no specific connection to reproduction as either a blessing or a duty. In the New Testament marriage is about the relationship between the two individuals, and their burning need for a sex partner.

³ Notably, in Matthew 28:1 and Luke 24:1 *μυαν* is used for "first" ("first day of the week").