

Sexual Immorality, the Human Body, and Community Holiness

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Paul's first address to the church in Corinth articulates a unique theology of the human body and its purposes in God's inaugurated kingdom on earth. In examining 1st Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul addresses boundaries and abuses of freedom in the Christian life (6:12-13), God's purpose for the human body in Christ (VS 14-20), the sinful practice of sexual immorality against both the body and the Lord (VS 14-18), and communal holiness for the collective church as Christ's body (15-20). This paper will endeavor to explain and support the position that Paul's theology of the human body, explicitly expressed and supported in this passage, was unique in Paul's day and is coherent and consistent within greater Pauline literature. It will begin by addressing the wider issue at stake in Paul's entire letter to the Corinthians.

Tolerating Sexual Immorality

Most scholars agree that the overarching message in Paul's letter to the Corinthians is his concern with the church's toleration of sin. Paul insists that making allowance for sin in the name of wisdom and freedom, especially sexual sin within the church, goes against God's standard for holiness among the people of God, the Church.¹ How Paul qualifies this argument fills the contents of the passage to be examined. While Paul provides explicit, theological meaning to the sanctity of the human body and sexual activity, he is clearly concerned with a practical issue within the church that must be stopped regarding incest (5:1-7), prostitution (6:12-20), and adultery (7:2-9). Paul understands the solution for shutting down such immoral behavior goes beyond simply condemning it in his letter, and unravels in detail his reasoning that such behavior

¹ Scott M. Manetsch, *1 Corinthians: Reformation Commentary on Scripture, The New Testament*. IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL, 2017. 281.

cannot remain in a collective gathering of holy saints.² Paul directly correlates the human body with holiness in three specific ways: The body belongs to the Lord, (1) the bodies of believers are members of Christ's body, (2) and the body is the indwelling temple of God's Spirit. (3)³ Both Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews believed the life within the body was identified by its breath, or spirit. Paul's audience believed the human body is alive because there is breath, or spirit, within the body, which sets it apart from the dead.⁴ The presence of God, which Paul refers to as God's "Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19) now resides within the person who belongs to Christ, making God's Spirit or breath the significant sign of life for a believer.⁵ As the presence of God Himself now dwells within the believer both individually within the human body and collectively among the communal body of believers who congregate together, these bodies cannot consist of sexual behavior any longer now that they belong to Christ and share space with Him (1 Cor 6:20). In order to expound on Paul's reasoning in this command, what constitutes as sexual immorality and why it is unique concerning Paul's theology of the body must be investigated.

Sexual Immorality in the Body

The terms of immorality take a unique and direct route in Paul's address to the Corinthian church. Immorality with the body means sinning *against* one's own body. Among the first

² Timothy Radcliffe, "Glorify God in Your Bodies: 1 Corinthians 6, 12—20 as a Sexual Ethic." *New Blackfriars* 67, no. 793/794 (1986).. 308.

³ Paul D. Gardner, *1 Corinthians*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, ePub ed., 2018. 276.

⁴ Jill E. Marshall "Community is a Body: Sex, Marriage, and Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:7 and Ephesians 5:21-33." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 4 (2015). 840.

⁵ James P Ware. *Paul's Theology in Context*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI: ePub Ed., 2019. 113.

century church, several religious views attributed sin to actions outside the body. Some sects of Gnostics believed that all material substance was the result of evil, and true holiness is achieved when one escapes human flesh in death.⁶ Some Stoics held that the body is infinitely apart from a true cosmic system of divinity, causing the body to be a commodity independent of moral values.⁷ Paul undermines every one of these religious assumptions by qualifying the value of purity within the actions of the corporeal human body. Immoral behavior of a sexual nature explicitly goes against the body's intended purpose in Paul's thought, that the body is designed to be a vessel belonging to the Lord directly, free from sin and immorality.⁸ Paul treats sexual behavior in the body uniquely, separating it from other beliefs indifferent to some believers. The Corinthians may have considered food preparation and dietary law as something they prided themselves on being able to leave up to individual liberty, "Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food," but Paul establishes a completely different relationship with the body and the Lord (1 Cor. 6:13). If the body is for the Lord, the body *cannot* also be for sexual immorality. It becomes apparent the Corinthians do not understand the unique value and responsibly placed on the human body. Just as the stomach has been created to have a close relationship to food consumption, so the human body has been created for a unique role in being the abiding temple for God's Spirit.⁹ The worldview within which Paul writes assumes the body has lasting importance, because he correlates Christ's risen body with the purpose and ownership God has on believer's bodies (6:14). As noted earlier, within Greco-Roman culture, many religions

⁶ Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: Systematic Theology*. HarperCollins Publishers inc, New York, NY, ePub ed., 2009. 141.

⁷ James P. Ware, *Paul's Theology in Context*. Wm . B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI: 2019. 21.

⁸ Gardner. 274.

⁹ Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK: 2005. 224.

devalued the body and any significance it played in spiritual affairs, most notably those Christians associated with Gnosticism, Epicureans, and Stoics.¹⁰ Many Hellenists and first and second century Christians struggled with attributing divine attributes to the body as well because divinity was so far removed from physicality in their philosophy.¹¹ This made Paul's theology unique within Greek society, and especially the culture within Corinth. Paul elevated the human body to a status where each individual body held intrinsic value as the Creator God's divine dwelling place, and as a vessel devoted to God which was purchased in Christ, "You were bought with a price, so glorify God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:20 ESV). This understanding has led some commentators to question whether Paul is contradictory in his letter to the Corinthians regarding the nature and consequence of sin in general: Does Paul view sin inside the body apart from sin outside the body, and if so, what are the implications of this view?

Concerning Sins Within and Part From the Body

Paul uses a phrase that puzzles some commentators and translators regarding sin and the body. In verse 18, Paul claims that every sin a person commits is "outside" the body, but sexual sin, when committed, is a sin against the sinner's "own body" (6:18b). In Greek, the phrase is "every sin." The question is whether or not Paul is claiming that every sin, including sexual sins, is outside the body, and that sexual sin is *also* uniquely against the body, and a categorical sin of its own. This would seem incoherent to some, and it has been postulated that Paul instead is

¹⁰ Radcliffe. 310.

¹¹ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL: 1999. 202.

referencing a saying from the Corinthians that all sins committed are outside the body.¹² This would make sense considering Paul's previous use of a Corinthian saying in the same passage in 6:12, "Everything is permissible." Paul continues to battle the arrogance of the Corinthians in numerous places in his letter, revealing the emptiness of their supposed wisdom (1 Cor. 1:25; 3:19; 5:2; 6:12; 8:1; 10:23). In either view, the conclusion that bodily sin is uniquely highlighted is sound. Paul is breaking down a misconception in the Corinthian church that sexual sin can be treated with indifference rather than discipline, (1 Cor 5:1-6). Paul's theology expresses a three-form conception of sin: Those who commit sin commit it against God Himself (Rom. 3:23), those who sin against one another also sin against God (1 Cor 8:12), and those who sin against their own body sin against God (1 Cor 6:16-20). In Paul's thought, sin within the body is sin *against* the body, both personally and communally, and is therefore sin against God Himself by desecrating His sacred space, where we are in union with Him.¹³ Paul builds on another theological truth in this argument that is the crux of his reasoning for purity within the body of Christ: The doctrinal concept of community holiness.

Community Holiness and the Physical Body

The Community is a body, and the body is a temple (1 Cor 6:19). Christian bodies are God's temple for the Holy Spirit, and communities of Christians are Christ's body, the Church, where God dwells uniquely among believers as a people group (Col. 1:24). Paul begins to address the sexual impurity in his Corinthian letter by identifying a man who "has his father's

¹² Andrew David Naselli, "Is Every Sin Outside the Body except Immoral Sex? Weighing Whether 1 Corinthians 6:18b Is Paul's Statement or a Corinthian Slogan." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 4. (2017). 969.

¹³ Marshall. 839.

wife” (5:1 ESV). In Paul’s accusation of sexual immorality, he does not identify the individuals at fault, nor does he frame the sin in an individual context. Instead he accuses the church collectively of allowing sin within the entire spiritual body.¹⁴ This reinforces Paul’s theological view in 1st Corinthians that no individual Christian’s body belongs to them alone: They belong first to the Lord (6:20), and through the Lord, to each other (12:12-13). Paul’s use of the term “body” in his letters denotes physical, individual bodies, Christ’s resurrected body, and collective people groups.¹⁵ Paul entreats the Corinthians to understand the role the body *does* play in God’s plan for humanity. The body isn’t simply *not* designed for immorality; it is *specifically* designed to be united with Christ, both in the inaugurated kingdom of God now and in the imminent kingdom to come.¹⁶ Human beings are joined with Christ within their physical body, causing the body to belong to God exclusively, as God cannot be joined to anything unholy. Some commentators such as Rudolf Bultmann have suggested that Paul’s use of the word “body” can at times take on an existential meaning, referring to the self or person as a whole.¹⁷ Bultmann argues that Paul’s use of “body” swings back and forth between meanings, sometimes physical, sometimes metaphysical. But this interpretation would contradict the other numerous passages where Paul’s theology richly explains the value and purpose of the physical body both in this life and in the life to come, especially in regard to the hope seen in Christ’s resurrected body.¹⁸

Among Paul’s concerns to the specific situations he’s referencing in Corinth, the Corinthian

¹⁴ Hans Conzelmann, James W. Leitch, and James W. Dunkly. *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. MacRae W. George Publishing, Philadelphia, PA: 1517 Media. 1975. 176.

¹⁵ Gardner. 278.

¹⁶ Ibid. 277.

¹⁷ Ibid. 279.

¹⁸ Radcliffe. 311.

believers are uniting, physically, their bodies with prostitutes in sexual intercourse (6:15-16). There appears to be no separation in Paul's rebuke concerning the human body and the human mind. A Person is an entire entity (body, mind, spirit), and these are inseparable¹⁹. They are inseparable with the body having full condemnation from the consequences of actions performed with the mind and conscious thought.²⁰ In the same way, the communal body of Christ is made up of individual members, and one member cannot claim holiness while ignoring sin within the same communal body.²¹ The church is an established dwelling place where the Spirit of God resides among the people of God collectively as a whole (Eph. 3:16-18) and where each part of the entire communal body works together in unity toward Christlikeness and holiness (1 Cor 12:25-27). Paul believes that sexual immorality is truly sin, and a person cannot submit to the Lordship of Christ if their body cannot abstain from sexual immorality, both individually and collectively. Paul needed to address this issue in the first place because the church in Corinth was dealing with another issue related to holy living: The issue of abusing their freedom in Christ.

Individual Freedom

Paul first elevates the need for community holiness within the Corinthian church in the context of individual choices. His words, "All things are permissible, but not all things are beneficial," reveal the importance Paul places on building up the church over and above individual liberty: Each individual's actions must prioritize edifying the community in holiness

¹⁹ Naselli 987.

²⁰ Jay E. Smith, "The Roots of a Libertine Slogan in 1 Corinthians 6:18." *The Journal of Theological Studies*. New Series, 59, no.1 (2008). 82.

²¹ Marshall. 835.

before God above the individual's freedom. This coincides with Paul's instruction to the believers in Rome who argued over the common meal and calendar days (Rom. 14:1-21). Paul instructs the Roman believers to make allowance and grace for those who disagree over the importance and value of dietary laws and calendar observance in order that believers may encourage each other toward holiness, rather than preserve their own individual freedom (Rom 14:19). This line of thinking is apparent in Paul's address to the Corinthians by highlighting the need for beneficial behavior, not simply tolerable behavior (1 Cor. 6:12). While Paul will not tolerate sexual sin in the church for several reasons, his first argument stands on the foundation that community holiness cannot be compromised in order to preserve freedom of conviction²². Christians are to spur one another on toward holiness and godliness in their standards and actions. Paul's phrase "everything is permissible" may have been a common mantra used by the believers in Corinth, or a mishandling of Paul's teaching on freedom in Christ, where Paul would have encouraged believers to be free of judging one another based on Jewish law observance (Gal 2:15-16). Either way, the point Paul makes is that individual freedom can lead into slavery, "I will not be mastered by anything" (1 Corinthians 6:12 NIV). Such thinking will work against the believer's role in edifying, not tainting, the body of Christ in community holiness. To be clear, Paul is not advocating against freedom in Christ regarding actions and lifestyle. He spends numerous passages defending the importance of understanding the Mosaic Law's place in Christianity and the beauty of being free from sin and guilt (Rom. 3, 1 Cor. 9, Gal 3-5). Rather, Paul is summing up the emphasis of love being the defining factor in how believers behave and

²² Gardner. 280.

treat one another, which spurs them on to build each other up.²³ Individual rights are to be sacrificed if they can become an impediment to the gospel in any way: Freedom is found in obeying Christ, both individually and collectively, not in preserving options within one's lifestyle. Uniquely then in christianity, according to Paul, individual freedom can lead to collective slavery, which is no freedom at all. Within popular beliefs like Stoicism in Paul's day, freedom was seen as a matter of indifference, for the body is just a thing.²⁴ This sort of popular wisdom, which the Corinthians apparently prided themselves on (1 Cor 1:18; 23; 8:1), is being dismantled in Paul's theology. Paul sees the body as much more than just a thing: The body is uniquely built and dedicated to Christ. Therefore, believers are free to abstain and rid themselves of the sinful practices of the world, rather than being free to operate within and enslave themselves to those practices.²⁵ Key to Paul's discussion regarding sexual purity is his condemnation of the situation involving temple prostitutes, which must be explored.

Temple Prostitution in Corinth

In Paul's rebuke to the Corinthians, he discusses the significance of the body uniquely in his condemnation of being united "with a prostitute" (1 Corinthians 6:15 ESV). Paul has been expressing the ramifications of sexual sin in multiple forms thus far, beginning with the situation of incest (5:1-7), and moving to sexual sins committed in the body in general (6:13-19). Paul is certainly addressing specific issues he knows are taking place within the church at Corinth, and turns to address some congregants having sex with prostitutes. Important to notice is that Paul

²³ Ibid. 282.

²⁴ Conzelmann. 110.

²⁵ Ibid. 111.

continues to address a specific sin in light of the whole community, “Shall I then take the members (plural) of Christ and unite them with a prostitute?” (6:15 ESV). The Corinthians are not simply succumbing to temptation, but are making excuses and allowances for sexual sin with prostitutes.²⁶ Some scholars, such as Robertson and Plummer, claim Paul is once again only addressing sexual sin in general throughout these passages. But Traugott Holtz contends against this view, noting that Paul, “Was dealing very concretely with a situation in the church.”²⁷ Some Corinthian men were making trips to temple prostitutes, or were openly considering making trips to do so, and were defending their right to do it.²⁸ This fits Paul’s earlier rebuke that some Corinthian believers were making excuses for all behavior in the body being free from condemnation, including ancient dietary laws and sabbath rest, which were controversial issues among other churches in Paul’s missionary journey.²⁹ In defending their freedom to eat meat prepared in pagan temples and the right to observe holy days in their own manner, the Corinthians considered their wisdom to discern freely what is right for themselves an excuse for sexual immorality.³⁰ Many offerings were made to pagan gods in Greco-Roman culture, including food, materials, acts of service, and services of a sexual nature, namely prostitution.³¹ In considering themselves free from guilt in other forms of offering in paganism, the Corinthians have taken things too far and made allowance for temple prostitution as well. Paul’s theological

²⁶ Brian S. Rosner, "Temple Prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20." *Novum Testamentum* 40, no. 4 (1998). 347.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 341.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 342.

²⁹ Jonathan Rivett Robinson. "The Argument against Attributing Slogans in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20." *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 8, no. 1-2 (2018). 155..

³⁰ *Ibid.* 156.

³¹ Rosner. 343.

treatise on the body is his defense against this sinful abuse of freedom. Paul articulates a strong polemic against Temple prostitution, which cannot have allowances made for it as meat prepared in pagan temples might, because while “food is for the stomach and the stomach for food” (6:13a), the body uniquely belongs to the Lord, is the Lord’s vessel for use, and is the temple of the Lord united in Christ with God and with others (6:13b ESV).³² Paul’s sacred view of the body creates a standard unique to sexual behavior, that the human body must only be used in service to the Lord in every way, including a biblical ethic of sexual holiness.³³ The Ancient Near Eastern view traditionally held among Jewish believers had a very high view of the material world in that it was created by YHWH, and created good (Gen 1:1-2:3). Against many leading conceptions in Greek and pagan society concerning the body, Jews held the highest view of the body’s worth and place in the tangible world.³⁴ Where one Hellenistic citizen might regard paganism as superstitious and follow Greek philosophies above polytheism, another might truly believe in dedicating their practices to the power and blessing of lesser gods, and in both cases, the body is either a tool for the god’s use or a piece of matter irrelevant to eternal and divine purposes.³⁵ Temple prostitution may have found acceptance among believers because of these previously accepted conceptions of the body. Amid Paul’s liberation from legal restrictions on how one uses the body concerning food and rest, Paul completely separates sex and covenant relationship in his theology by citing monogamy in devotion to Christ (1 Cor 6:16-20), similar to how monogamous worship is expressed to Jews in covenant with THWH in the Torah, “The

³² Ware. 108.

³³ Conzelmann. 113.

³⁴ Matthew R. Malcolm, *The World of 1 Corinthians: An Annotated Visual and Literary Source-Commentary*. Milton Keynes Authentic Media, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central. 99.

³⁵ Gardner. 374.

LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NIV).³⁶ Paul’s theology on monogamous covenant with God against temple prostitution is better understood when set beside his theology on covenant marriage and supernatural union.

Marriage and bodily Union in Paul’s theology

Ephesians 5:21-33, which is the most comprehensive New Testament passage regarding marriage and union, is preceded by Paul’s command for believers to be void of “sexual immorality,” and to be “filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:1; 18 ESV). Paul assumes that in order for two people to come together in covenant marriage, they must already abstain from sexual immorality (sin within the body), and must be filled with God’s indwelling Spirit, with their bodies as His temple. Paul’s theology for marriage is the base for how believers should be sexually pure as a community that lives and worships together.³⁷ Sexual purity and the indwelling of God’s Spirit sets up two believers for a life of mutual submission to each other (Eph. 5:21). Paul uses the same form of argument in 1st Corinthians 6 to establish the need for three things among any community of believers: Sexual purity, (1) the union of believers with God’s Spirit, (2) and mutual submission out of love (3) which establishes a community fit to present before God in holiness (2 Cor 11:2).³⁸ In order to live as a collective body for God’s presence to dwell within, believers must accept and live by these principles, for their “bodies are members of Christ

³⁶ Rosner. 342

³⁷ Clinton, E. Arnold, *Ephesians*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI: ePub ed., 2016. 516.

³⁸ Ibid. 514.

(6:15a). The entire premise of humans existing together in union with God rests on their ability to be in union with one another, abstaining from sin and encouraging each other towards holiness in Christ.³⁹

Conclusion

By addressing the requirement to abstain from sexual sin In 1st Corinthians 6:12-20, Paul reveals the operation of freedom in the Christian life, God's purpose for the human body, which belongs to Christ, the sinful practice of sexual immorality against both the body and the Lord, and communal holiness for the collective church as Christ's body. Believers in Christ must abstain from uniting their bodies in sexual activity of any kind outside of covenant with God in marriage and monogamous love. Individual believers cannot claim holiness while ignoring the sinful condition of their fellow believers within their church community. All believers are set apart as holy in Christ when they become united with Christ. God's Holy Spirit dwells within them, their body becoming His holy temple, and their bodies uniting in community as God's holy dwelling place among the church. Believers are called to present themselves, united together, as holy and blameless before God in Christ Jesus, especially in consideration of the actions of the human body.

³⁹ Gardner. 290.

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