

Paul and Human Sexuality

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PAUL AND HUMAN SEXUALITY

O God, By your Holy Spirit you give to some the word of wisdom, to others the word of knowledge, and to others the word of faith: We praise your Name for the gifts of grace manifested in your servant, Paul, and we pray that your Church may never be destitute of such gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God for ever and ever. *Amen.*

GRECO-ROMAN RELIGION

Greco-Roman religion was polytheistic, and the gods involved themselves in human affairs, often acting in jealous, cruel, and unpredictable ways. They had to be mollified for humans to prosper. Paul's new Christo-Jewish tradition offered a view of one "consistently just and merciful God unlike any of the deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon;" a God who with compassion offered us reconciliation, the promise of an abiding presence that would guide us through life, and an assurance of eternal life.

PAUL'S VISION

In the face of a corrupt Greco-Roman culture, Paul's vision of Christian community was worked out through dealing with the practical problems that arose in the young churches from community to community. His letters to the churches dealt with specific issues he attempted to resolve and were used by other communities only when relevant to their needs.

Galatians 5:16-21 (NRSV)

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God

***Sarki* – Meaning Flesh**

Colossians, 2:5 - Paul said he was absent in the flesh, meaning he was not physically present;

Philippians 1:22 - Flesh referred to the bodily, physical life he lived;

2 Corinthians 11:18 - Paul asked the church to care for the material (physical) needs of the poor.

Sarki

1 Corinthians 3:3 - Paul used the same word to describe living a sub-Christian life;

2 Corinthians 11:18 - Paul chided those who gloried after the flesh, meaning they were staking their claims of honor and authority on purely human achievements;

Galatians 5 - Paul viewed the flesh as standing opposed to spirit listing a multiplicity of sins of the flesh.

THE BODY

Paul did not despise the body: he did not see flesh as evil. When he argued that the desires of the flesh opposed the desires of the spirit, he meant something more than mere sexual urges and behaviors. In fact sexual sins were a small part of Paul's concept of sins of the flesh.

MARITAL SEX

Sex within marriage was normative for Paul, and he urged married partners not to deny each other their conjugal rights, because the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does (1 Corinthians 7:3-4).

FORNICATION & LICENTIOUSNESS

Fornication (porneia) - literally to buy or purchase; connoted paying for sex without any further obligation. It did not mean to Paul's Roman readers all consensual extramarital sex.

Licentiousness referred to irresponsibility, sexual and otherwise. While Augustine and others referred to licentiousness as uncontrolled sexual desire and treated it as a moral defect, Paul simply urged Christians to channel their lust by marrying.

ADULTERY

Adultery broke up households, and the main victims were the children who would now be classified as illegitimate, unable to inherit, and no longer citizens. Since men were supposed to be better at self-restraint than women, they were heavily sanctioned for choosing to destroy the future of blameless children by having sex with other men's wives. The adulterer was in the moral position of a pedophile today.

Romans 1:24-27 *NRSV*

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

DAVID HALPERIN

The erotic experience was one in which sexual partners came in two kinds – not male and female but active and passive, dominant and submissive. Adult males chose their sexual partners only among their inferiors in social and political status including boys and slaves.

VICTOR PAUL FURNISH

Three basic beliefs about homosexual behavior:

- (1) no conception of homosexuality as an orientation but considered same-sex acts to be simply another avenue of lust that was open to any man;
- (2) associated such physical acts with 'insatiable lust and avarice' and considered them 'a rich man's sport';
- (3) homosexual behavior around them during this period necessarily involved one person's exploitation of another."

PAUL'S CONDEMNATION

Unlike some of the Greek and Roman critics, Paul did not blame the passive victims, but instead condemned the whole transaction “clearly implying that they were all morally degraded and that they all became physically debilitated from the sex act with each other.” Everyone was responsible for what pederasty had made of society: especially those who, egging one another on in an insolent, boastful clique, damaged others with active sodomy and then blamed them.”

CONCLUSION

Paul's moral guidance to the Christian churches in 1st century Greco-Roman culture was both humane and liberating, but we must be very careful how we apply Paul's solutions to moral problems of his day to circumstances of 21st century western ethical issues around human sexuality.