

CHRISTIAN PROSTITUTION

1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20

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OPPOSING THEIR SLOGANS (6:12-14)

Paul found himself facing some situations in the early church that leave us a bit puzzled. One of those is found in this passage. The apostle began his treatment of prostitution by responding to two slogans that were floating around in the church. The origins of these sayings are unclear. They may have been words which Paul himself taught in Corinth, but with different meanings. They may have been summations of pagan viewpoints taught by local philosophers. In any event, Paul directly opposed those who involved themselves with prostitutes by quoting their words back to them.

6:12. The first slogan was, “**everything is permissible for me.**” Paul quoted these words four times in this epistle (6:12; 10:23). Apparently, this saying was used to justify a variety of illegitimate activities. Here it supported sexual immorality, while in 10:23 it referred to eating meat devoted to idols. Admittedly, there is a measure of truth in these words. Followers of Christ have been set free from the pedantic legalism of the world. Spirituality must not be confused with long lists of rules regulating what Christians may eat, drink, and touch (Col. 2:20-23). In these matters, believers have liberty of conscience. Even so, this was not the sense in which the Corinthians meant these words. They used this slogan to support immoral practices, and Paul would not stand for that.

In this passage Paul countered the slogan with two responses. On the one hand, he asserted that **not everything is beneficial** (6:12). Whatever liberties believers have, choices must be carefully evaluated as to their spiritual benefit. Many practices, though lawful for Christians, will have detrimental effects on believers’ own walks with Christ, on the lives of others, or on the church. This consideration must be brought to bear any time Christians contemplate a course of action.

On the other hand, Paul also insisted that he would **not be mastered by anything**. Sexual appetites are good and wholesome in the context of marriage. Yet, the Corinthians had become victims of their own desires. They had lost perspective and control over their own bodies as they gave themselves to sexual immorality. Their

sexual desires had **mastered** them. Followers of Christ are to be free from the mastery of all earthly desires so that they may serve Christ faithfully.

Paul generally used the word translated “**is beneficial**” (*sumphero*) with regard to a group rather than to an individual (see 1 Cor. 10:23; 12:7; 2 Cor. 8:10; 12:1). For example, in 1 Corinthians 10:23 where Paul again quoted the slogan and offered the same counter, *sumphero* clearly refers to a benefit for the church, not for the individual — even though the slogan seems to be placed in the mouth of an individual and to be directed toward an individual. Quite possibly, the first slogan and its counter refer back to the lawsuits of 6:1-11, which may have been lawful for Christians to bring, but which did not build up the church. In that case, the two occurrences of the slogan in 6:12 may segue between two topics, the first referring to the preceding material, and the second to the material following. Such a reading helps demonstrate the structural unity between 5:1-13; 6:1-11; and 6:12-20 which all deal with the damage the Corinthians’ poor judgment caused the church. Interestingly, Paul only used this word in his Corinthian correspondence.

6:13a. The second slogan used in support of sexual immorality was, “**Food for the stomach and the stomach for food.**” From Paul’s response to this slogan, it appears the Corinthians employed these words to mean that sexual pleasure was meant to be enjoyed just as food was meant to be eaten. In this line of reasoning, they defended sexual immorality as something natural, something simply following the natural course of biology. God created man as a sexual creature; therefore sex is appropriate and good. To be sure, there is a measure of truth in this slogan. The enjoyment of sexuality is as natural as eating, but this truth does not legitimize every form of sexual pleasure.

Paul countered the universal application of this naturalistic slogan by reminding the Corinthians that God has the authority to limit and guide the ways we live. He asserted that, despite the natural order of food for the stomach, **God would destroy them both.** In other words, the fact that God will one day destroy the natural order as it is now known proves that biological observations do not ultimately determine man’s moral obligations. God is the ultimate authority for determining how humans must behave. He is the master over all nature, and his Word must regulate how humans live.

That God will destroy both food and the stomach does not necessarily imply that food and stomachs will not exist in the new heavens and the new earth. Paul defended the resurrection of the body in the very next verse, and the stomach is part of the body. Further, Jesus ate a piece of fish with his resurrected body (Luke 24:42-43). Probably, Paul meant that God would destroy stomachs and food as they are now recognized and experienced. He left unanswered at this point the question of the nature of the spiritual bodies believers will receive in the resurrection (see 1 Cor. 15:35-53).

6:13b-14. To make his point more explicit, Paul replied with a proverb resembling the Corinthians’ slogan. Sexual immorality cannot be justified as a natural biological practice because the human **body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the**

Lord, and the Lord for the body. The revelation of God in Christ makes it clear that the truly natural order of things is very different from what is evident from mere biological observation. A singular relationship exists between our bodies and Christ. We are to serve him with our bodies (Rom. 12:1; 1 Cor. 6:20), and Christ redeems our bodies. To explain this fundamental connection, Paul reminded his readers of Christ's own resurrection. God did not simply raise the spirit of Christ from the dead. Through the **power** of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 1:4; 8:11; compare 1 Cor. 2:4; Eph. 3:16) God raised Christ's body. In the same way, on the final day of judgment **he will raise** the bodies of all believers from the dead, as well. Believers' hope of future bodily resurrection from the dead demonstrates beyond doubt that the true natural order of things is that Christians' bodies belong to Christ and must be used only in his service.

THE NATURE OF SEXUAL UNION (6:15-17)

In these verses the apostle appealed to two truths which he expected his readers to have known already because of his earlier teachings ("**Do you not know . . . ?**" [6:15,16; see also 6:2,3,9]). He focused on the union of believers' bodies with Christ and with prostitutes.

6:15. First, he reminded them that their **bodies** were **members of Christ himself**. Paul's words make it clear that believers are not merely spiritually joined with Christ. Believers are so intimately joined to Christ on every level of their being that even their physical bodies are united to him, being parts of his body on earth. The Corinthians dismissed the importance of sexual immorality on the basis that God would destroy the body (6:13). They thought that bodies, which would be destroyed, could not possibly have any sort of eternal value. Paul argued, however, that believers' bodies are valuable because they are already part of Christ. Their significance is not just eternal, but immediate and temporal. In fact, because believers' bodies are joined to Christ, believers involve Christ himself in their relationships with prostitutes. This physical union with Christ makes it inconceivable that union with a prostitute is legitimate. **Members of Christ** must not **unite** themselves **with prostitutes**.

6:16. Second, Paul anticipated an objection by referring to another teaching his readers should have known already. Everyone who joins himself to a prostitute becomes **one with her in body**. Relationships with prostitutes are not as casual as they may seem, but are similar to those sexual unions that occur between marriage partners. For this reason, Paul supported his claim by referring to the Old Testament. Genesis 2:24 describes Adam and Eve in sexual union as being **one flesh**. From a biblical perspective, even sexual relations outside the bonds of marriage create a union of flesh between the participants. Because a believer's flesh is united to Christ, when a believer becomes one flesh with a prostitute, he sexually joins Christ to that prostitute. This does not compromise Christ's holiness, just as Christ's union with sinful believers

does not compromise his holiness. Still, it highlights the impropriety of believers living like unbelievers. Such mistreatment of Christ is unthinkable, and must be avoided.

6:17. Having already said that believers **bodies are members of Christ himself** (6:15), Paul added that their union **with the Lord** makes them **one with him in spirit**. By asserting this oneness of spirit, Paul did not contradict his previous statement that believers are physically united to Christ. Rather, he distinguished qualitatively between unions with prostitutes “**in body**,” and union with the Lord “**in spirit**.” This distinction is essentially the same as the distinction between being “one flesh” (in body) and the mystical union between believers and Christ (in spirit).

UNIQUENESS OF SEXUAL SIN (6:18-20)

Sexual sin is unlike other sins in that in it a Christian sins against his or her own body, violating the truth that his or her body belongs to and is united to Christ.

6:18. Paul began his conclusion to this section with an abrupt command: “**Flee immorality**.” It is likely that the apostle had in mind Joseph’s example of fleeing Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39:12). Paul instructed the young pastor Timothy in a similar way (2 Tim. 2:22). Rather than moderate resistance to immorality, Paul insisted on radical separation.

Paul’s radical advice rested on the uniqueness of sexual sin. In contrast with **all other sins**, immorality is **against one’s own body**. The meaning of these words is difficult to determine. Many sins, such as substance abuse, gluttony, suicide, etc., have detrimental effects on the body. Paul’s words do not refer to disease and or other damage caused by sin. Instead, his words are linked to the preceding discussion of 6:12-17. There Paul established that Christians’ bodies are joined with Christ so that they become **members of Christ** himself (6:15). Sexual union with a prostitute violates one’s body by bringing it into a wrongful “one flesh” union, and by treating of no account the mystical union with Christ (6:15). It is in this sense that sexual immorality is a unique sin against the body. It violates the most significant fact about believers’ physical existence: the fact that their bodies are joined to and belong to Christ.

6:19. For this reason, the apostle appealed once again to a teaching that he had already given the Corinthians (**Do you not know?** [see also 3:16; 5:6; 6:2,3,9,15,16; 9:13,24]). The Christian’s **body is a temple of the Holy Spirit**. The Holy Spirit takes up residence in believers, making their bodies a holy place for the dwelling of God’s special presence (John 14:17; Rom. 8:9,11). That the Holy Spirit resides in believers points to the new nature of believers’ bodies. Believers’ bodies are sanctified and holy, being in union with Christ. When one in Christ engages in sexual immorality, that immorality runs completely contrary to the new nature and new identity of his body. The Christian has been redeemed for good works (Eph. 2:10), so he ought to use his body for good deeds and righteousness, not for sin.

Paul also reminded the Corinthians that they did not have rights to their own bodies. They were not free to use their bodies any way they wished. He insisted that Christ **bought them at a price** — the price of his own blood (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 7:23). As a slave was bought in the ancient world, Christ bought his followers, body and soul, through the price of his own death. Because they belong to him, believers do not have the right to rebel against him by using their bodies in ways the Lord has prohibited. Further, because this purchase results in redemption and salvation, it ought to inspire grateful obedience, not rebellion. In this reminder, Paul both chastised the Corinthians and pleads with them to obey Christ eagerly and thankfully.

6:20. In conclusion (**therefore**), Paul insisted, **“Honor God with your body.”** Having already given the negative warning to flee immorality, Paul here gave positive guidance through the gospel. Rather than merely resist sin, believers must see themselves as temples of God purchased by Christ. Of course, this purchase refers to Christ’s atonement. Because Christ died for and purchased believers, believers owe him obedience and honor. They should thankfully and obediently search for ways to bring glory to God by using their bodies in the ways that God has commanded, and by refraining from using their bodies in ways God has prohibited. They should remember that their bodies have been united to Christ, and they must honor Christ by not dragging his members into union with prostitutes.

DIGGING DEEPER

A. Body (6:13,15,16,18,19,20)

In Greek thought, with which the Corinthians seemed to identify, man was composed of a body and a soul. His soul was his higher, immortal self, while his body was simply a shell he wore until death freed him of its burden. Because the Corinthians seemed to adopt this attitude toward their bodies, they concluded that bodily matters such as sexual immorality were insignificant — matters that did not involve their souls would perish with their bodies. Paul, however, saw the body not just as a temporary shell, but as an essential, permanent part of man’s being, a part of him that Jesus is redeeming (Rom. 8:23) and which man would carry into eternity (1 Cor. 15:35-36,44; compare John 5:29). In union with Christ, believers’ bodies are joined to the Lord in this life and in the life to come, just as their souls are. Therefore, their bodily actions are immediately significant and impacting.

The exact nature of believers’ bodily and spiritual mystical union with Christ is elusive (thus the qualification “mystical”). Similarly, the nature of the “one flesh” relationship established by sexual intercourse presents a difficulty for many modern thinkers. The biblical truth is that sexual intercourse unites the bodies of the participants so that they become “one flesh,” joining them in such a way that the distinctive individual identities of their bodies become blurred. If we cannot easily conceive of this, it does not change the fact that it was Paul’s view, or that it influenced

his theology and morals. In any case, Paul's goal in teaching this doctrine was to change behavior. His theological arguments were designed to refute faulty world views which led to sinful actions, in order that he might offer sound presuppositions to his readers and thereby encourage righteous lifestyles.

B. Temple (6:19)

The New Testament uses two different words for temple, *naos* and *hieron*. The latter term usually refers to the temple and its courts rather generally. *Naos*, in turn, most frequently designates those inner portions into which only the priests entered. In his letters, Paul employed *naos* almost exclusively, and in all but one instance used it as a metaphor for the church (1 Cor. 3:16,17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21; contrast 2 Thess. 2:4). He said that Christians are the temple both collectively (1 Cor. 3:16,17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21) and individually (1 Cor. 6:19). Given the frequency with which Paul spoke of the church as the temple, and his doctrine of the church as a whole, his statement in 1 Corinthians 6:19 that each believer is a temple of God probably derived from the idea that each believer makes up a part of the temple of all believers. Paul's single use of *hieron* does not identify believers, but the physical building of an unidentified temple (1 Cor. 9:13). Historically, the believing community had tended to prefer *naos* to *hieron* when naming things associated with God because pagans primarily used *hieron*. By the time of the New Testament, however, this distinction had begun to fade. Still, it is worth noting that Paul chose to identify believers with the preferred term for the most holy places in the temple.

In the Old Testament, the temple's significance, and the tabernacle's before it, was that it was the dwelling place of God (Exod. 25:8; 1 Kgs. 8:13). Jesus, God incarnate (John 1:1,14), also metaphorically called his body the temple (John 2:21) because in his body the fullness of deity dwells (Col. 2:9). In Exodus 25-40, God outlined instructions for the care that had to be taken in the building of the tabernacle, and Moses followed them devoutly, so that it would be a fitting and sanctified dwelling for God. Jesus' humanity was similarly sacred. By calling the church the temple, Paul meant that the church is also sanctified and holy, set apart for God's particular use, and that God himself dwells in it. In the Old Testament, God's presence in the tabernacle was so terrible that it prevented men from entering the building (Exod. 40:35). In the church, therefore, Paul understood that God's presence was equally terrible, and thus that great care needed to be taken in the way people treated the temple of the church. Just as God slew Nadab and Abihu for desecrating the temple (Lev. 10:1-2), he also slew some of the Corinthians for abusing their brethren (1 Cor. 11:30). Therefore, Christians need to take seriously the implications of being the *naos* of God.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is it true that everything is permissible for believers? Why would Paul tell us not to do things that are perfectly legitimate just because they are not beneficial? Does God allow us only to do things that are beneficial, or does he grant us

more leeway than that? Should we understand Paul's statements as universal absolutes, or as instructions specific to a particular situation?

2. What does it mean to be "mastered"? Did Paul intend this to refer only to things that master the body, or also to things that master us in other ways? Is there anything in your life that masters you?
3. Why did Paul need to say that the body is not made for sexual immorality — shouldn't that have been obvious? What did Paul mean when he said that the body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body?
4. How do you understand the bodily and spiritual union believers have with Christ? How do you understand the bodily union people share through sexual intercourse? How does a person sin against his own body through wrongful sexual union? What sort of damage have you seen done by sexual immorality?
5. How would you define sexual immorality? Why do you suppose Paul advocated fleeing sexual immorality instead of simply resisting it? Have you found sexual immorality easy to avoid in your own life? Do you think others find sexual immorality easy to avoid?
6. What are the implications of saying that a believer's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit? What does this indicate about the nature and purpose of our bodies?
7. How can we honor God with our bodies?