

Sex in the City

An exposition of 1 Corinthians 6

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The story is told of a missionary who was trying to convert a senior African tribal chief.

'Let me get it straight,' said the chief. 'If I become a Christian, I may not raid my neighbour's village to steal his cattle?'

'That's right,' replied the missionary, somewhat gratified.

'And if I become a Christian,' continued the chief, 'I may not kidnap his wives and rape them?'

'Absolutely not!' replied the missionary, somewhat shocked.

'And one more thing. If I become a Christian I cannot ambush my enemy in the forest, kill and eat him?'

The missionary was aghast. 'Under no circumstances whatsoever!' he replied.

'Ah well,' sighed the chief. 'I can't do any of these things anyway – I'm too old. So to be old and to be a Christian – they are the same thing?'

To listen to the way some Christians talk you could be forgiven for thinking so. Their God is a boring old spoilsport. Like a mother who, on hearing laughter from the nursery, shouts to her husband, 'George, find out what the children are doing and make them stop!'

In no area of human activity is this negative killjoy attitude more obvious than that of sex. The idea got around very early in history of the Church that sexual pleasure was morally dubious. Indeed, to be really holy you had to become a monk and commit yourself to complete sexual self-denial. If you couldn't cope with such a vow of celibacy, then you should at least aim to participate in sex only with a view to procreation. On no account must you enjoy it! That would be an open invitation to the Devil and all his works!

The subject of sex is one which conservative Christians today still treat with immense seriousness. They define 'sexual immorality' as any form of sexual intercourse which takes place outside of the sole permitted domain of monogamy. For many this is the key reason homosexuality must be outlawed; by definition it belongs to the category of 'immorality' because it is 'sex outside marriage'.

This essay challenges that account of the matter as a simplistic distortion of what the Bible actually says on the subject. It is an exposition of a biblical passage which, for many conservative Christians, is a proof-text for their case: 1 Corinthians 6:9–20. Paul here is giving his Corinthian readers a number of reasons for not surrendering to the general pattern of sexual behaviour that surrounded them in their city. I want to outline what those reasons are and suggest what they might mean for those of us who are gay Christians today.

1. No abusive sex

Paul's first directive is that Christians should not engage in any kind of exploitative sexual behaviour, because those who like to exploit other people will not go to heaven.

9 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither pornoi nor idolaters nor adulterers nor malakoi nor arsenokoitai 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor

drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

If you cast eye back to the beginning of chapter 6 you will see there is a thread of logical connection to these verses. Paul complains in vv. 1–8 about the litigious behaviour of some in the church, who were suing other church members for damages in the civil courts. That's a shameful way for Christians to act, says the apostle. Why, if your priorities were right you would rather accept whatever loss you think you have sustained rather than harm the public reputation and the internal fellowship of the church in that way. At the very least you should ask the church to sort out the problem, not the secular courts.

But, says Paul in v. 8, the sad truth about you Corinthians is, Christian brothers though you are supposed to be, you make a habit of cheating and exploiting one another. If anybody does business with you they'd better read the small-print, because sharp practice is your middle name.

8 You yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers.

Well, he says, still pursuing the same subject in v.9, take note of this: people who cheat and exploit other people in that kind of way are not going to heaven. It is as simple, and as serious, as that!

The close connection between v.8 and v.9 is quite unmistakable in the original. For a start, Paul repeats almost the same word in both verses, though unfortunately most translations have obscured the fact. In v.8 he says 'you do wrong' – using the Greek verb 'adikeo'. In v.9 he talks about 'the wicked' – using the adjective derived from that same verb – 'adikoi'. More than that, he talks in verse 8 about those who 'defraud' – using a verb which often means simply to steal. And, you'll notice, in v.9, prominent in his list of 'wicked' or 'unjust' people are 'thieves' and 'swindlers'.

So the people he's talking about in v.9 belong to the same category as the greedy plaintiffs and crafty rogues he's complaining about in those earlier verses.

This a vital observation when it comes to interpreting the list of wrongdoers that we find in v.9. Many of the words Paul uses have to do with sexual behaviour, but they are being used as examples of social injustice which fall in the general category of 'cheating and exploitation'.

Take the first word in his list, for instance: 'the sexually immoral' as the NIV rather loosely renders it. The original word is 'pornoí' and it means quite simply either prostitutes (the masculine plural can embrace both males and females) or those who go with prostitutes. They say prostitution is the oldest profession in the world. It was certainly around in the days of the New Testament, and then as now it was almost always to be found in the protective anonymity of big cities. In the ancient city of Corinth, for instance, prostitution was so prolific that the town had become a byword for it – they had even coined the verb 'to corinthianise', meaning to indulge in a lifestyle of wild sexual abandon.

It was inevitable that the young church in Corinth was going to face a struggle with this prevailing culture of sexual licence. In fact, Paul has already addressed the issue back in chapter 5. We learn there that he had written an earlier letter to the Corinthians advising them not to associate with 'pornoí', i.e. prostitutes and their clients. Unfortunately, some of them had mistaken his intention, so in 5:9 Paul clarifies his meaning. I didn't mean don't socialise with prostitutes or their clients at all, he says. Why, in a city like Corinth that would mean never talking to anybody! No, I simply meant that as a church you were not to continue in communicant fellowship with those who called themselves Christians, but who were prostitutes or their clients.

Here in chapter 6, Paul is simply reiterating that instruction with a different slant. He observes that just because someone has been baptised and calls themselves a Christian, it doesn't automatically follow that that are going to heaven. Certain kinds of behaviour mark a person out as spiritually un-

renewed, whatever they may claim with their lips. The whole business of prostitution, in particular, is incompatible with Christian assurance. Don't let anyone deceive you on this score with clever theological arguments – 'pornoï' will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Why? The clue is the connection with the condemnation of injustice in v.8. Prostitution commercialises sex in a way that is invariably exploitative. Sometimes it is the financial desperation of the prostitute that is being exploited by rich clients. Sometimes it is the sexual desperation of the client that is being exploited by unscrupulous prostitutes. Either way it is a form of abusive sex; people who want to use other people in that way will not be happy in heaven. Indeed, as matter of divine policy they will not be given the key of the door.

As we read on we discover that Paul's warnings about abusive sex go beyond the 'pornoï' of Corinth. He goes on to include adulterers in his list too. It is important to understand that, in the ancient world, the word 'adultery', like prostitution, carried a connotation of social injustice. Even today we talk about someone 'cheating' on their partner, don't we? Well, adultery was seen as 'cheating' someone in Paul's day too. The only difference was that, in that sexist first-century world, the only marital partner who could be thus unfairly deprived was the husband. Marital rights were not reciprocal. Adultery was always seen as a breach of the property rights which a husband had in his wife, never vice versa. So the word here means 'men who sleep with other men's wives and/or wives who sleep with other men'. Once again, though, the connection with the idea of defrauding somebody in v.8 is apparent. The reason this behaviour is incompatible with a profession of Christian faith is that it is so plainly hurtful to another human being. Adultery is a form of abusive sex – abusive this time to the cheated husband.

It is far from impossible, in my view, that this theme of abusive sex runs through Paul's entire list in vv. 9–10.

The word 'greedy', for instance, carries with it the thought of unscrupulously grabbing what doesn't belong to you, and Paul uses it in 1 Thessalonians 4:6 to describe the man who, in the heat of sexual lust, defrauds his brother in some way. There is considerable dispute about what exactly Paul means in that text, but it seems to me that one strong possibility is that the greedy men he is denouncing, both in 1 Thessalonians 4 and here in 1 Corinthians 6, may well be those who force themselves on young girls, with the result that the girls are then unable to offer themselves as virgins to a future husband. Indeed, the idea of rape may not be too far from Paul's mind when talks here in such sombre terms about the 'greedy' – perhaps 'rapacious' would be a better translation. He has to have something in mind more than an excessive appetite for cream cake after all – because these 'greedy' types, like the pornoï and adulterers, will be excluded from heaven.

Even the words 'idolaters', 'drunkards', 'slanderers' and 'swindlers' may have overtones of exploitative behaviour in this context too – for many of the nefarious deals by which crooks and con-men feathered their nests in ancient Corinth would have taken place in pagan temples, where a hedonistic atmosphere of wine, women and song softened up their clients and made them easier to dupe or blackmail.

But of course, for us the words of greatest interest in this list are those rendered in the NIV 'male prostitutes and homosexual offenders'.

As many of you probably know, the two Greek words that lie behind that translation have been the subject of an immense amount of scholarly investigation and controversy – the first 'malakoi' because it is so ambiguous and the second 'arsenokoitai' because it is so rare.

There isn't space here to give a full account of the debate about these words, but suffice it to say the NIV translation is highly misleading. Once again, the key thing to remember in sifting through the range of behaviours Paul could be referring to is that he is compiling a list of activities which were common in ancient Corinth, which were all exploitative or abusive in nature, and which were

so obviously incompatible with Christianity that it was impossible to imagine a saved person engaging in them.

With that in mind, what could 'malakoi' refer to? Well, it doesn't mean male prostitutes in the common sense of the word, that's for sure, because Paul has already used the word for that, namely 'pornoí'. Literally 'malakoi' means 'softies' or 'weaklings'. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with sexual behaviour at all – it can simply mean 'invalids'. But clearly Paul cannot possibly be referring here simply to limp-wristed wimps. He's thinking about wrongdoers who exploit or abuse other people. So there must have been some category of people in ancient Corinth who did this and who were popularly called 'malakoi'. Who could they have been? The truth is we don't really know. My own guess is that he is talking about a particular class of male prostitute who aped feminine behaviour and perhaps even cross-dressed in order to seduce their clients.

As for the 'arsenokoitai', we are reduced to being even more speculative in our attempts to interpret this word, because it is unknown outside the New Testament in the literature of the period, and is only used twice in the New Testament itself – here and in 1 Timothy 1:10. Once again, the vital control if we are not to fall into the trap of reading things into the text is to remember that Paul is talking about crimes of exploitation. Interestingly, in the parallel reference in 1 Timothy this association of ideas is also apparent. The 'arsenokoitai' are listed there, along with murderers and slave traders, as lawbreakers who commit crimes of gross wickedness and injustice.

The word is actually a compound made from two Greek words meaning 'male' and 'bed'. Some suggest it may have been invented by the Jewish rabbis to refer to those guilty of the crime mentioned in Leviticus 18:22 – 'do not bed a man as a woman'. If they are right about that it may help us to guess who in ancient Corinth would have had this label pinned to them. In the ancient Greek and Roman world, you see, although homosexual love was common, and had even been praised by the great philosopher Plato, opinions were much more mixed about the practice of anal penetration. In that macho world, many men felt that to be penetrated by another man was humiliating; it was to be treated like a woman, and as such involved a shameful loss of masculine dignity. For that reason, the males who got penetrated by other men in those days were usually either slaves or young boys, or both. Anal penetration was in most cases not an act of genuine homophile intimacy, but of brutalised and contemptuous male dominance.

Perhaps there were in first-century Corinth, as in 21st-century London, well-endowed male prostitutes who specialised in playing the active penetrative role in sex-acts with passive homosexual men. Maybe these so-called 'escorts' are the 'arsenokoitai' Paul has in mind. Alternatively, he may be referring to those who preyed on vulnerable younger males – what we would call today paedophiles. He may even be referring to those who committed rape on other males. But whatever he precisely means by the word, 'arsenokoitai' has a very nasty edge to it. It doesn't describe a homosexual orientation, but a homosexual crime – it doesn't describe an act of tenderness and love, but of violence and abuse – it doesn't describe an expression of mutual and reciprocated passion, but of tyrannous sexual abuse.

And the over-riding message throughout these much discussed verses is that such abusive sex has no place in any Christian's life. Indeed, people who engage in exploitative sexual behaviour will not go to heaven. Some of you used to do it, he says in v.11. Some of you used to be immersed in the squalid Corinthian scene: you went with prostitutes, slept with other men's wives and took advantage of young girls; you made money out of the sex industry as pimps and blackmailers, rent boys and escorts – in short you used to be not only Corinthian by name but by nature too.

But 'used to' is the operative word – for the moral filth of that sordid past is washed away by Christ and his Spirit. To be a Christian is to be different and in a city like Corinth, where the sex trade was doing its best to saturate the market, that moral difference ought to be glaringly conspicuous by your refusal to get involved in any kind of abusive sex!

It's a message of relevance for Christians today. Some of us who are gay have spent so much energy trying to convince the conservative rump in the church that we are not to be labelled as 'malakoi' or 'arsenokoitai' that we have failed to apply Paul's words to ourselves in anyway whatsoever. We need to ask ourselves, just as heterosexuals do, whether there is any element of exploitation or abuse in our patterns of sexual behaviour. A partner does not have to be paid money to be treated like a prostitute. A sex act does not have to be indictable as rape in order to be humiliating. Perhaps Jesus's golden rule is a helpful guide at this point – treat others the way you would want them to treat you.

But Paul hasn't exhausted what he wants to say on this subject. There is another, deeper reason why Christians needed to eschew the Corinthian lifestyle.

2. No casual sex

All sex is a serious business; it should never be treated as a mere recreational activity that is indulged in for fun, because what we do with our bodies can injure us and our relationship to our risen Master.

12 'Everything is permissible for me' – but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible for me' – but I will not be mastered by anything. 13 'Food for the stomach and the stomach for food' – but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for porneia, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.

There is an obvious response to what Paul has said so far. I can imagine someone in Corinth saying:

'Sure, Paul, I quite agree with what you've just said – as Christians we are committed to an ethic based on loving our neighbour, so it would be completely inconsistent for us to exploit or abuse other people sexually or indeed in any other way. But you surely have no objection to our participating in a bit of, shall we call it, 'recreational' sex?

'You know here in Corinth we like to have a good time – Saturday night is sex orgy night. Now what's wrong with that? Provided the only participants are consenting adults, provided no humiliating practices are involved, provided there is no commercial exploitation, provided safe-sex is conscientiously practised – where's the harm in a bit of fun?

'Think about it Paul; you yourself said when you were with us, that Christians are not under the law. Well, if we aren't under the law, then presumably everything is permissible for us, provided of course we don't harm anyone else in the process. Sex is a natural physical drive after all. If God has designed us with a sexual appetite, it can't be wrong to want to have it satisfied, can it?'

We aren't guessing when we speculate that some at Corinth would have reacted this way, for the fact is they had written to Paul voicing precisely such sentiments. The evidence for the existence of this earlier letter can be found in the opening verse of chapter 7, and most commentators agree that here in 6:12–13 Paul is alluding to that same correspondence. The phrases 'everything is permissible' and 'food for the stomach' are not Paul's words, then, but are quotations from the letter he had received, which is why in the NIV they appear in inverted commas.

What is Paul's response to this line of argument?

Well, the first thing I want you to notice is what he doesn't say. He doesn't dismiss it out of hand as complete nonsense. Instead, he gives it a qualified endorsement, simply adding a 'but' to the Corinthian's sweepingly permissive generalisation.

Everything is permissible for me – but ...

Everything is permissible for me – but ...

Food for the stomach and the stomach for food – but ...

In other words, he seems to be saying: 'OK, up to a point you're right. We Christians should not think of ourselves as tied hand and foot to a boring list of "thou shalt nots". Christ has liberated us from bondage to a legalistic straitjacket.'

This is in itself quite a remarkable observation and one some Christians would do well to ponder on, for as we said right at the beginning of this essay, an enormous number of people do perceive Christianity, like the old African chief, as a list of killjoy prohibitions. Paul, perhaps all too personally aware of that danger, refuses to take the easy path of just flatly contradicting the Corinthian argument for sexual permissiveness. On the contrary, he agrees that Christians are to think of themselves as free of the cramping restrictions of pharisaical morality, and that sex is a God-given physical appetite which can be rightly enjoyed. All this is true. But ... not everything that is technically 'permitted' is 'helpful'. In other words, even though an action may not be legally or morally wrong in the sense that it hurts anyone else, it may still be unwise because in some way it hurts you, yourself.

If exploitative sex is out for the Christian because it abuses my neighbour, then casual sex is out for the Christian too, because it is an abuse of my own body. Why exactly?

Well for two reasons, says Paul – first, an argument from expediency, and then an argument from theology.

Let's take the argument from expediency for a start:

'Everything is permissible for me' – but I will not be mastered by anything.

One of the problems with casual sex is that it can become a habit, and no Christian should surrender to addictive patterns of behaviour. As Paul puts it, 'I will not be mastered by anything' – not even permitted things. For addiction, by definition, is the absence of freedom not its affirmation. And, make no mistake about it, sex can be just as destructively addictive as alcohol or cocaine.

Haven't you seen that guy in the bar? He's there almost every night – looking for yet another sexual fix. When he was young he got it for nothing. Now he more often than not has to pay for it. But he won't sleep tonight unless he gets it. He's hooked on sex just as surely as that poor wretch in the doorway over there is hooked on drugs.

No Christian can afford to allow themselves to get into such a helpless condition. Even legitimate pleasures become spiritually dangerous when you get addicted to them. Paul insists Christians should treat their bodies with more respect.

That brings him to his second line of argument in this section – not only expediency says so, but also Christian theology.

13 'Food for the stomach and the stomach for food' – but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for porneia, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. 15 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a porne? Never!

There was tendency in Greek thought to disparage the human body. Philosophers like Plato had taken the view that it was the invisible mind or soul of a human being that was really valuable. The body was just a dispensable outer casing, and for that reason it didn't really matter too much what you did with it.

Paul is pointing out here that no Christian can subscribe to that line of logic and for a very simple reason: Christ rose from the dead. The tomb was empty. He didn't just take his invisible mind and soul to heaven, he took a glorified physical body there too.

This was always a problematic idea for Greeks. You may recall it was Paul's preaching of 'Jesus and the Resurrection' that bewildered the stoic and epicurean philosophers in the Athenian marketplace. For the very idea of a bodily resurrection was highly counter-intuitive in their culture. But as we see here, Paul was not prepared to make any concessions in his exposition of this particular aspect of Christian theology.

A day was coming when God would destroy the present physical order of things, including our sexual appetites. There will be no sexual intercourse in heaven – as Jesus himself once observed – but, says Paul, that doesn't mean that we shall float around as disembodied spirits. No, we shall be given a new kind of bodily existence, constructed out of the bodies we have now. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead, so God will also raise us. In fact, because the Spirit of the risen Jesus lives inside us as Christians, we already participate in that new creation. Our bodies are here and now like limbs or organs of his risen body – they are 'members of Christ'.

So Paul asks, his voice rising with indignation:

Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a porne? Never!

Paul has returned to the subject which bothers him most about Corinth – the permissive attitude which some of the Christians in Corinth were taking toward prostitution. All right, he seems to be saying here. Let's leave aside for a moment the question of the exploitative and abusive nature of prostitution. Let's just think instead of what it does to you as a person. You Corinthians want to talk about 'casual sex' – that is sex engaged in for fun between consenting adults. But sex can never be 'casual' – sex is by definition a serious business, and I'll tell you why:

16 Do you not know that he who unites himself with a porne is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh.' 17 But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

Paul is quoting here a verse from the book of Genesis that describes the mystical power of sex to bond two people together. Anyone who has had sex has experienced it. It is the reason you always remember so vividly your first sexual encounter. That person is part of your life forever afterwards. If you meet them again forty years later, there is still chemistry between you! It's the reason too why sexual infidelity makes people so angry and so hurt. God has invested sex with a kind of 1:1 adhesive property that creates an exclusive inter-personal bond of unique intimacy and passion – 'the two become one flesh'. When the 'one-ness' that has been cemented by sex is threatened – why, sparks fly!

And the slightly frightening thing is, these adhesive properties of sex are brought into play, even by so-called 'casual' sex. A man has a one-night fling with a prostitute; he thinks he can walk away unchanged – but he can't. For the forces with which God the creator has endowed sex have been unleashed: 'he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one with her in body'. And that psychic conjunction is irrevocable and irreversible. He has given something of himself away which he can never reclaim. An experience is now burnt into his memory which will haunt him for the rest of his life.

And if a person makes a habit of such encounters, why in the end, like a piece of sellotape that has been used too often, sex may lose its special powers for him. The magic and mystery will have been permanently forfeited and he will be left with nothing but mechanical performance, invidious comparisons and a tantalising quest for a deep and satisfying union with another human being, a union which now must permanently elude his grasp.

That, says Paul, is why my advice is to shun casual sex!

18 Flee from porneia. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but the porneion sins against his own body.

The word 'porneia', rendered rather unhelpfully 'sexual immorality' by the NIV, comes from the same root as 'pornoia'. In this context it clearly means 'prostitution' primarily, and 'porneion' means the person who goes with a prostitute. But Paul's logic suggests that other forms of sexual encounter which have the same goal of short-term physical satisfaction may be included in his ban too.

He observes that there is something unique about irresponsible sexual behaviour. Almost any other 'sin' can be committed in cold blood: it is 'outside the body'. In other words, you can maintain a psychological and emotional distance between yourself and the act. But when you have casual sex with someone, you are binding yourself to that person, whether you intend to do so or not, and if that bonding is not honoured and fulfilled in a lasting covenant of love and mutual fidelity in the way God designed it to be, then you will suffer consequences.

Simply as a human being you will suffer a sense of physical loss and emotional pain; you will find you have 'sinned against your own body'. But if you are a Christian, your suffering will be enhanced by a sense of profound spiritual betrayal as well. For as we've already said, God has long-term plans for your body. Indeed it doesn't belong to you anymore; it is already wedded to the risen Christ by his indwelling Spirit. Can you imagine how he, your heavenly Master, feels to have part of his body used for casual sex?

No, I say again, there is no such thing as 'casual' sex. Not for anyone, Christian or non-Christian. All sex is serious because God has invested it with such deep and lasting power. Enjoy sex by all means, but if you are wise you will enjoy it only within the boundaries of responsible behaviour. And that means remembering that when you share sex with someone you are using an interpersonal cement which God your creator has specifically designed to form a permanent and exclusive bond. There is no way you can escape the adhesive properties of that divine super-glue. Treat sex casually and not only are you potentially using another human being in a cruel and selfish way – you are also likely to be damaging yourself – psychologically and spiritually.

19 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; 20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.

Once again, those of us who are gay need to take this stern apostolic warning on board.

One of the reasons it is not easy to convince conservative Christians that it is possible for a gay relationship to be God-honouring is that they have been scandalised by the more sordid aspects of the gay sex scene. No doubt the straight sex scene is just as sordid in its own way, but its impact is offset for Christians by their experience of married couples who demonstrate by their fidelity that a straight sexual relationship can be honourable and holy. Sadly, the many committed gay couples that exist are, to a large extent, invisible to the church. So it is easy for minds that are already inclined towards homophobia to be persuaded that all gays are sexually promiscuous libertines.

If Christian gays are to disabuse their conservative brothers and sisters in the church of that fallacy, it is imperative that we demonstrate a high level of moral responsibility in our sex lives. We do not agree with them that the Bible requires us to be celibate; but we do agree that it requires us to eschew casual sex. Our aim then must be to silence their moral censure by the self-evident holiness of our relationships.

It isn't easy, of course, to practise such sexual self-control, especially when the secular gay community lives by very different principles in the main. It is important, therefore, to remember that

Paul is not just being a spoilsport. Where casual sex is concerned, it is our mental and spiritual welfare that he is concerned about.

Perhaps the comment of Peter from a rather different context would perhaps also fit our situation as Christian gays:

‘... those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.’

(1 Peter 3:16)