

Reflection

AN EPISTLE OF ST. PAUL ON SEX

A Pauline Response to Issues of Sex in Contemporary Society

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Greetings

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God and to be a light to the nations two thousand years ago and considered by many as an inspiration even today, to all the members of God's family on earth. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanksgiving

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in the entire world. I am glad to know that many among you have been very faithful to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ which I had proclaimed. My exhortations have become like guiding lights in your paths. My reflections on Christ and Christ-event have become the cornerstone of your theology, worship, and ethics. My ethical admonitions and pastoral guidelines are continued to be practised in your communities and congregations. I do not know how to express my feelings of Joy. It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.

Some Clarifications

I am fully aware of the fact that I continue to remain a controversial figure and, to many, my teachings constitute a bone of contention. Many condemn me as a thorough conservative and orthodox especially in matters related to human behaviour and morals, especially *human* sexuality. There is a prevailing criticism among many scholars that I was necessarily unaware of all the findings of modern psychology and sociology. Many split hairs on my observations and views on sexuality, marriage, virginity, etc. For them, I am unaware of the new sexual truths and identities that are produced by science of sexuality and medicines. They also point out the

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lack of systematic approach in my presentation of human sexuality. Many are worried about the nature of my own sexual experience because little is known about it from my writings and the book of Acts. Some are still pondering over an uncertainty whether Romans 7:7-25 should be viewed as my own story; in particular an uncertainty prevails as to whether the “coveting” of verses 7-8 has a sexual force.

What shall I say now? Shall I justify myself against those who are judging me taking my teachings out of context? What I want to say is that sociological factors should not be interpreted as theological factors and vice versa. Above all, what I want to say is that all are people of their age to some extent. But I am sure that many of you will agree with me that what I shared with my brethren during the first century CE are still relevant and meaningful for the modern times, since human nature has not changed, although times have changed.

Anyway, here I am not intending to write any apologetic letter. On the contrary, I would like to persuade you to reflect upon an alarming situation in the contemporary society in matters of sex and sexuality.

Retrospection on My Own Writings

The greater frequency of references to sexual issues in my writings than in the gospels reflects the laxer sexual mores of Hellenistic society. The then Christian communities were marked by two groups of people – the ‘over-converted’ ones and the group which had a very loose concept of sexual morality. As you know, this situation was more evident in the Corinthian community, where these over-converted were influenced by the Gnostic thinking. Some of the Christians at Corinth, were *pornoi*, adulterers and homosexually active. I have included the idolaters among these different sexual offenders just to indicate the gravity of their sinfulness. I considered foremost among “the acts of the sinful nature,” *porneia* (sexual immorality), impurity, and debauchery (Gal. 5:19; see also 1 Cor. 10:8). I was deeply concerned that the Christian congregations be kept free of such corruptions (Eph. 5:3). I was shocked to know that the Corinthian church was tolerating rather than disciplining persons who were involved in these unbecoming practices (1 Cor. 5: 1-2).

You may well be aware of the fact that I wrote my letters to those communities where men constituted the powerful end of the sex spectrum, and women were relegated to the status of the ‘weaker sex’. The promiscuous exploitation of young teenagers and boys by the wealthy and powerful was common. Homosexual relationships were prevalent in the

Greco-Roman world to the extent that it was considerably criticized by some of their philosophers and Jewish writers. This is the background against which I wrote those instructions.

Porneia is used to head the lists of vices in my letters (1 Cor. 5:10, 11; 6:9, Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3,5; Col. 3:5; 1 Tim. 1:10). I have placed it as the opposite heading to ‘agape’ which introduces the list of virtues (Gal. 5:22). My focus in naming *porneia* as one of the principal evils of my age is not in the context of marital relationships or other violations of some deep purity taboos. But when it comes to the abuse of sexuality, I have fearlessly confronted the ways in which it affects the wider social networks of church and society (1 Cor. 5-7). For me, *porneia* is sexual idolatry, which is manifested in abusive, promiscuous, exploitative, and obsessive sexual behaviour, reaching the state of worshipping a creature rather than the creator (Rom. 1:24-32). The consequences of this idolatrous behaviour included all excesses widely known to occur at orgies and dinner parties amongst the rich and famous in the first century: the exploitation of slave girls and boys for the gratification of guests and lewd entertainments of dancing girls, boys, and animals. Some of our brethren had been caught up in this abusive behaviour (1 Cor. 6:11). I tried to articulate very strongly about the corporate nature of our bodily existence as the temple of the Holy Spirit and, thus, their responsibility of keeping away from such vices.

Contemporary Situation

In my second letter to the Corinthians, I had expressed my persisting fear that on returning to Corinth, I would find the sexually licentious still impenitent (2 Cor. 12:21). Today, after almost 2000 years, I am compelled to make some serious observations and comments on an alarming situation in the realm of sexuality in the contemporary society. The world has undergone tremendous change. I am taken aback and amazed to look at the world as a whole and the Christian society in particular. New ideas and concepts like globalization, liberalization, and free market have changed the face of the world. The information revolution has re-formed the human beings. It has become a global village. Now, I am happy that I can address it as a village as I did in my days to some of the early Christian communities. This modern village, however, is polluted and corrupted with so many dehumanizing tendencies and values. Many want to enjoy life and make merry. In their pursuit of pleasure, sex has become a chief

method attaining this pleasure; moreover, sexuality has been almost completely identified with its physiological and psychological aspects. Contemporary moral attitudes to extra-marital sexual explorations have become far more tolerant today.

Sex: An Idol

I am afraid to see that sex has again become an idol for many in our age. For some it has become the mark of their identity. Modernity is a world populated by people who define themselves as gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, bi-curious, exhibitionists, submissive, dominatrix, swingers, switchers, traders, born-again virgins, acrotomophiliacs, furverts, or feeders. In short, we define ourselves in part through our sexuality and sexual orientations. Sexual imagery is used to sell almost every product of our daily life. Still, sexuality is identified with body and you expend enormous amount of energy disciplining and taming your bodies; when you fail, you tend to be ashamed. You may live in a permissive age, but still exhibit almost neurotic uneasiness with the status of being considered as mere bodies. I understand that the laxer sexual mores of the early century is present in all the cultures of the contemporary society. It stems from the greatest poverty of the last half a century: lust and sexual desire have become conflated!

The popular media and images of contemporary culture perpetuate the assumption that in order for some one to have 'good sex', it must be 'naughty', i.e., in a context outside of an exclusive, permanent commitment; thus, the modern day sexual revolution fails to provide the society with a viable vision for responsible and reverent relationships. As a result, sexuality becomes a 'bodily' business and body, especially the body of a woman, becomes a commodity. Thus, sexuality is increasingly reduced to sheer genital behaviour.

Degradation of Sexuality

In the contemporary society, the greatest challenge to sexuality is nothing but the degradation of sexuality. People fail to see it as a divine gift. To be human is to be either a male or a female, to be a sexual being with certain kinds of structural, functional, and behavioural characteristics as essential components of one's nature. Sexuality is, therefore, a fundamental aspect of one's personal identity, not merely an anatomical or biological designation. One is sexual in all one's relationships and forms of self-expression and activity.

As a result of the degradation of sexuality, there are many disorders and issues in the society. People continue to be haunted by a quiet, pervasive ambivalence toward sexuality and human loving. ‘Commodification’ of persons and ‘consumerization’ of love are the results of these degradations. There is an increasing number of interpersonal and social conflicts as well as of actions that violate the rights of others such as rape, incest, voyeurism, and other forms of sexual abuse. Family, which is supposed to be the cradle of love, has become the crypt of love. Frequent breakdown of marriages, the rising number of children born to unmarried mothers, violence against women, and the abuse of children are alarmingly increasing. Pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, paedophilia, homosexuality, gay and lesbian marriages, etc., are still major issues and people try to make these sexual perversions institutionalized through state legislations. The access to more reliable methods of contraception, the legalization of abortion, and relaxation of moral controls on sexuality triggered by sexual revolution detached sexuality from its traditional association with sin and disease. The sexually transmitted disease like HIV/AIDS from the early 1980’s have added new and dangerous and a demeaning look to the crisis of sexuality. We have also witnessed the politicization of sexuality in the last century. Within the context of this politicization of sexuality, it was intensely discussed and problematized by the feminists and others. Gender identity and discrimination based on gender have assumed bigger proportions in the contemporary political discourse.

I would like to draw your attention to the different attitudes with which people view sex today. For some it is essential, namely, a natural instinct or need. They fear that suppressing sexual needs would end up in physical and psychological damages. Those people who are interested in accumulating as much experiences as possible consider it as yet an experience and try to take themselves into different levels of sexual experience with different people. Another group is worried about sexual compatibility. They are no longer satisfied with emotional, spiritual, and intellectual compatibility. They view sex as an occasion for experiment. There is a group which considers that any type of true love is to be expressed in the form of sexual relation. Sex for them is an opportunity for expression. “It is free, it’s fun – let’s do it!” is the attitude of many who consider sex as sheer entertainment.

Though some may find one or another of these dimensions needs to be taken into serious consideration, the real human sexuality as the fundamental aspect of one's personal identity, marked by one's relationships is not to be exclusively evaluated by them. Sexuality as an integral and essential aspect of human personal identity and selfhood aims at the wellbeing and wholeness of a person.

Sexuality is the God-given "relational rootedness," which is a gift and a task at the same time. Many of you have confused sexuality with genitality. Human sexuality has several dimensions, while animal sexuality has only two dimensions, body and instinct. Human sexuality has corporeal, psychological, emotional, ethical, spiritual, personal, social, and cultural aspects. Understood and exercised correctly and in a healthy manner, sexuality can have enriching dimensions, whereas every unhealthy approach would only create distracting, disturbing, and destructive impact on human personality, family, and society.

You may recall well the background of my extensive exhortations on sexuality to the Corinthian community. It was the less flagrant sexual problems at Corinth than incest evoked my most extended discussions of sexuality. Their distorted eschatology led some to be libertine, wielding the slogan "everything is permissible for me" (1 Cor. 6:12) and others to be ascetic, under the banner "it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman" (1 Cor. 7:1). In meeting these challenges, I laid the groundwork for a holistic and flexible understanding of Christian sexuality.

To deal with the blatantly intolerable perversion of Christian freedom, I have applied the rich concept of body (*soma*), which may mean a person's physical nature (1 Cor. 6:13) and the whole human self (1 Cor. 6:15; 1 Cor. 6:19). To my mind, the body is not a mere external expression of the true person. It is truer to say that a human being is a body rather than has a body. Hence, when I declared *porneia* to be uniquely a sin against one's own body (1 Cor. 6:18), I was not referring merely to the misuse of our sexual organs. As sexual activity embodies the whole person, sinful union with a prostitute – adultery or other extra-marital intercourse – desecrates a Christian's bodily union with Christ. I want you to understand the association between Christ and the believer as close as and as physical as that between two partners in the sexual act.

False Gospels on Sexuality

I am sure that my letters have provided plentiful inspiration for advocates of sexual renunciation. What I intended in 1 Cor. 7 was to moderate rather than encourage sexual renunciation. In the course of history, Christian ideals promoted virginity and sexual abstinence for men as well as women because they thought that sexual desires prevented them from concentrating on spirituality in the furtherance of the coming of the kingdom of heaven, and in preparation for the after life.

Those in the second century who embraced my stress on bodily holiness and its link to union with Christ soon developed a notion that the risen Christ offered each human being a mystical union that excluded as bigamous a simultaneous union to a human spouse. I doubt whether some of the Fathers of the Church developed a gloomy attitude towards sexual matters. For some devout disciples, like St. Augustine, sex was produced by concupiscence – sinful desire – and he considered human beings’ fall from grace as expressing the victory of the corruptions of the flesh over moral will power. So, it is true that gradually there developed a notable hostility towards sex.

I understand that the attitude of some Christians towards marriage was also not very encouraging in the early centuries. Early Christians saw family as an obstacle to religious devotion and marriage as a dangerous temptation of the flesh. Some people took fight against spiritual pollution from lustful desires by resorting to the extreme acts of castrating themselves or retreating into the deserts.

Though in the late centuries, the Church has developed a more positive, healthy and integral approach towards sexuality, I feel that the telling influence of Christian tradition over the centuries has made sex something to be despised. The idealization of sexual abstinence has compelled the modern Christians to feel that traditional Christianity attached undue importance to sexual morality and made it too restrictive. I feel that such a disintegrating and unhealthy attitude continues to work as a catalyst behind the contemporary degrading challenges of sex.

Sexuality: A Gift

At this juncture, let me reiterate some of my own understanding on sexuality. God created human beings as male and female and saw that it was good. Sexuality, then, in its fullness, is a good gift of God. Since God gives the gift, He also makes the ground rules for the gift’s use. In one of

the early churches (Ephesus) there was a problem with false teachers (1 Tim. 4.1-5). Amongst their diabolical heresies, they “forbid people to marry.” In order to correct this false teaching, I reiterated the biblical view that whatever God created is good and should not be rejected but received with thanksgiving.

Intra-Trinitarian Love in Sex

Sexuality is an aspect of creation which reflects something of the essence of God. Human sexual relationships are reflective of the intra-Trinitarian love of God – a love that reaches out specifically to the others, rather than to the self. This love is particularly symbolized in the differentiation of male-female relationships. The polarity of the male-female marriage relationship (Eph. 5:25-33) is, thus, able to be seen as a special sign of the essential nature of the love of God. If love is the only determinant of a relationship, then those who indulge in all kinds of sexual pleasures in spite of gender difference may argue that he or she “loves them all.” The Christian ethic of sexuality is not rooted in any culture to be manipulated as desired, but is to be firmly grounded in this Trinitarian theology. There should be mutual sharing, self-giving love, and deep and lasting commitment in any sexual relationship. The specific sexual union between a man and a woman which I have mentioned in Eph. 5:31 excludes the idea of homosexual marriages as much as the notion that human sexuality is either a playground to be used without obligations, or some piece of machinery whose use and perfection must be learned from technical experts and methods and tools prescribed by them.

Sexuality as a God-given Relational Rootedness

I urge you to understand sexuality as a God-given relational rootedness, which is a gift and a task, at the same time. If we understand the real meaning of this relatedness, then I think many of the current issues will be solved. In my early writings, what I have stressed is this relatedness of human sexuality in the areas of marriage, family, and virginity. I think that the ability to accept and care for oneself, as well as to accept and care for the other, requires the acceptance and healthy integration of one’s own sexuality and the sexuality of the other. This is what I have discussed in my early exhortation in the letters to the Ephesians and the Corinthians. For me, there is no acceptable context for physical expression of sex except within marriage. The implication of 1 Cor. 7:12 is clear enough: the satisfying of sexual desires within marriage is not wrong. Moreover, sex is

not a dispensable dimension of marriage, like responsible love and respect. The underlying assumption of 1 Cor. 7:2-4 is that by divine appointment marriage and sexual relations go together, as do singleness and abstinence from sex. I consider sexual relations as expressions of selfless mutuality between married partners, of their belonging to each other in the Lord, and not to himself or herself.

In 1 Cor. 7:29-35, my preference is for the unmarried and widowed to remain so, like myself. But I recommend marriage for those who lack charisma of sex to face singleness. But I am not ranking celibacy or virginity above marriage on some absolute scale.

Among the questions the Corinthian letter had posed about “virgins” was the wisdom of the engaged couples proceeding to get married. You should note the implication of the description of the fiancée as “his virgin” (7:36-38); it is assumed that an engaged woman is a virgin until married. Listen, all the proponents of pre-marital sex!

Note that pre-marital sex is not a mini-marriage, but it encroaches upon the holy ground of marriage in an unacceptable way. Physical union should not take place outside of a “one flesh” (i.e., marriage) union. The point is that to be united with someone other than one’s spouse is to tear oneself away from Christ with whom one is spiritually united as a Christian.

Bodies Are Temples, Not Idols

My sexual ethic may be seen almost utopian to this sex-besotted age, in which it appears at times that one’s identity is made to reside in one’s genitality. I had preached a strong doctrine of the holiness of the body, as the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is destined to enjoy resurrection, while sexual misconduct severed the body from Christ. In 1 Cor. 6:13, I have mentioned that casual sex is definitely not as trivial as satisfying a physical hunger. Sex cannot be mere casual or promiscuous, simply because it is an act uniquely expressive of one’s whole being. But a cavalier freedom in sexual behaviour can be bought only at the cost of trivializing the human person. Any kind of sex outside marriage – be it gay or straight, prostitution, incest, or bestiality – will destroy the sacredness of human body. I have clearly mentioned in my letters that body (*soma*) is not merely the carnal body, but the immediate medium of our sharing in the material creation. It is the medium for us to share the creative love of God. This creative love demands mutual self-giving and sharing. In that

sense sexuality involves more than our genitals. More fundamentally, it is the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion. So, remember my exhortation: "... the body is not meant for immorality" (1 Cor. 6:13), "Flee sexual immorality (*porneia*) and pursue self-control" (1 Thess. 4:1-8), etc., constitute the straightforward message to Christians in a sex-crazy world.

I propose mutuality, including sexual mutuality, within marriage as a response to the challenges of increasing sexual violence and exaggerated insistence on individual sexual rights. Sex is "meaningful" in the context of a relationship, unless it is a one-night-stand or infidelity, in which case it ought to be *meaningless*! These limits are widely accepted in society. That there must be limits on sexual activity is not at issue; what people object to is more specifically the limit (or context) which God sets for sex: the whole hue and cry is only against a heterosexual, monogamous, lifelong marriage. Indeed, we might say that it is God's wedding present to husband and wife that is being blown with the winds.

Mind of Jesus

My dear brothers and sisters, what I want to exhort you today is to have the mind of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus deliberately wished to disassociate his proclamation of the kingdom of God from the standard attitude toward human existence that one finds in other contemporary religions, where sex consistently played a large, if not a central, part. Jesus was fully a human being, with sexual desires and with an understanding of sexual struggle. He, however, subordinated the genital expression of that sexuality in order to leave himself completely free for the fulfilment of his mission. This sublimation represents a change in the goal as well as the object of the powerful sexual drive, putting its enormous energies at the service of some other higher value. He also warned against any kind of 'commodification' of women even in thoughts. He stressed the need of mutuality in marriage. He himself made love the core of his message and ministry. Nowhere does he, even in his teachings of self-denial, condemn sexual pleasure. His concern always seems to be the wholeness, the spiritual wellbeing, and loving relationship of persons. Jesus, the perfect human being, was a sexually integrated human being. Let this attitude be yours while living in the contemporary society.

Sexuality as a Blessing

My honest wish and prayer at this juncture is that you must understand sexuality as a blessing and a gift. The interest in or appreciation for the interpersonal mutual aspects of human relationship is to be encouraged among you for a healthy sexual culture. Sexuality is, in the first place, energy – energy for relationships. Sexuality can be best understood when it is rooted in the communion-making energy that is close to the heart of creation. It should concern affectivity and the aptitude for forming bounds of communing will provide a context in which human relationship can be celebrated in their diversity, complexity and beauty that would encompass the love of spouses, the warmth of friendship, the bonds of family, colleagues, soul mates, and every generous service. If we create an attitude of belongingness instead of possessiveness, we will be living out sexuality as a blessing.

Final Greetings

Finally, I recall my words to the Romans, which is a key to understand my ethics: “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). In a sex-dominated world, where people struggle to face the challenges of sexuality, may your lives become living sacrifices to God, who is love!

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit!

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