

It May Be Lawful, But Is It Beneficial?

Sexual Ethics in the 21st Century

1 Corinthians 6:12-20 1 Kings 11:1-4, 9-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I suspect that most preachers did everything they could to avoid today's lectionary Epistle Reading, filled with warnings about fornication and prostitution. But I figured, why not? So, let's take a daring leap into this passage from the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Christians. Paul had previously founded a new Christian community of faith in Corinth, located in southern Greece, which was a large metropolitan city with a culturally and religiously diverse population.

A proper interpretation of this passage, at least for progressives, requires that we remember that **Paul wrote within the specific cultural context of that time and in that place**. Paul wrote this letter to that community of faith as his response to a letter sent from them, which asked him specific questions about belief and practice. Their letter, unfortunately, no longer exists. Therefore, it's like hearing just one side of a conversation. But we can infer some of the questions the Corinthians asked of Paul by his responses in this letter. For instance, in other parts of the letter Paul addresses their question if it is okay for Christians to eat meat previously sacrificed in pagan rituals? Others include, should women keep their heads covered? Should the rich wait for the poor before they eat their community meals?

There, of course, must have been a question or two about sexual behavior. It's understandable, because in the surrounding pagan Greek culture promiscuity and temple prostitution and some form of pedophilia was socially acceptable. So then, **how is a Christian to understand the holy demands of sexual behavior?**

Underlying all these questions is the bigger question concerning freedom. Specifically, **freedom in Christ**. Though our questions in the 21st century are mostly different, they still deal with this overall issue of freedom. It appears that some believed that freedom from the Jewish laws of the Torah (especially those found in Leviticus) meant freedom to do as they pleased. In response, Paul states what was probably a mantra in his day, **'All things are lawful for me'** (take notice that this phrase is in quotes in the Bible), but he adds, **'not all things are beneficial.'** Then Paul repeats the phrase, "'All things are lawful for me,' but **I will not be dominated by anything.**"

We can apply that same mantra today. **Before we take any particular action, Paul would have us answer the questions: Is it beneficial? Is it dominating my life?** These can apply to a large range of issues. Paul lifts up and emphasizes that there is a moral dimension that is the foundation of Christian freedom. As Christians, we are free *in* God, and *for* God, and *through* God. But we are not free *from* God. Hence, **although some things may technically be lawful, not all behaviors are beneficial or freeing in helping us to be who God has created us to be and act in the kingdom of God.**

That, in part, is behind another often-heard mantra, **"Do all things in moderation."** This guideline applies to most all legal behaviors, at least for Presbyterians, including: how much we eat, drink, dance, play cards, gamble, watch TV, spend time

on a smartphone or computer, even how much we work. **Finding a proper balance seems to be the best guide to living a healthy and beneficial life – for you, for your loved ones, and for the community.**

Yet, also note **not all things, even when done in moderation, empower and honor others, or build up the community, let alone one's own spirit, mind, body, and soul.** In this case, there are some things that should be avoided all together. So, let's talk about sex. Our Presbyterian denomination, as well as many others, spent about 40 years hotly debating human sexual activity before discerning that God was *not* against the ordination of sexually active LGBTQ+ persons of faith in committed, monogamous relationships, or the marriage of same-sex couples. Among the greatest points of contention in the debate about sexual ethics had, and continues to have, to do with **the role of scripture.** That is usually the basis of most all of our disagreements within our denomination, which have become engulfed by the larger cultural wars in our society.

Specifically, however, how do the sexual ethics in the Near Middle East and Mesopotamia two to three thousand years ago apply to us today? Or, are some passages of scripture meant to be universally applied to all people, in all places, throughout all time? Well, and here's the shocker to some, **the Bible does not present one clear sexual ethic throughout all its pages.** Case in point, in our Old Testament passage from 1 Kings, we learned that God became angry with King Solomon (David's son) on account of his 700 wives and his 300 concubines. The source of God's anger, however, was *not* because Solomon was having sexual relations with 1000 women (evidently all at the same time), but rather because Solomon allowed them to convince him to worship other gods besides the God of Israel. Yet another unfortunate patriarchal biblical case of: let's blame women.

It seems clear to many biblical scholars today, therefore, that perhaps the culture of a particular time and place does play a role, to some extent, in determining appropriate sexual ethics – again, as opposed to one universal standard that should apply to all people, in all places, for all time. That former position is basically the approach taken by conservative traditionalists.

When it comes to sexual ethics in the New Testament, no one has more to say about it than the apostle Paul. Narrowly interpreted, it seems that Paul takes on a "just say no" attitude when it comes to sex. But that would be a misinterpretation. To help me explain this I want to turn to some wise words in a sermon preached back in 2004 (when we were neck deep in this debate) at the national Presbyterian Covenant Network gathering, an organization (not unlike the More Light Presbyterian Network of which College Hill has been a member for over 20 years) that advocates for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons in church leadership. The sermon, entitled "**Eros and Ethics,**" was preached by the **Rev. Susan Andrews**, the former Moderator of the 2003 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). In that sermon, she reveals **Paul's theological position on the matter of sexual ethics** with these words:

Paul proclaims that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit - that **sexuality is a sacred gift** to be used to glorify and enjoy God. And, Paul makes clear that erotic love becomes destructive if it is not shaped by moral and spiritual love.

The apostle is directly confronting the **dualism of his day - the thinking that the body and the soul are somehow separate and that therefore, what one does with one's body simply doesn't matter when it comes to the sanctity of the soul.**

Yes, **erotic love can be sacred, but only when paired with an ethical imperative.** A sacred sexual ethic must include the question of whether it “**heals and enlarges the life of the other**” person, a phrase coined by Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. For **the other person's body is also a temple of God's Sacred Presence.** In that sermon, Susan Andrews continues:

What such a reciprocal and mutual covenant ethic suggests is that **asymmetrical - unbalanced - sexual relationships are simply not part of God's vision.** Sexual behavior that exhibits power over the other, sexual behavior that focuses just selfishly on me instead of thee, sexual behavior that hides in the shadows of shame instead of unfolding in the sunshine of God's delight - such behavior does not “heal and enlarge the life of the other.

Sexual harassment, unwanted and un-welcomed sexual advances, verbal as well as physical, and predatory behavior is wrong. Period. Sex must never be about power and control over another. That's abuse.

Misconduct, in any form, has become an important issue on the national level of our denomination. In fact, our Presbyterian **Book of Order** was just amended to include the following:

All councils [that includes every Session in every congregation] *shall* adopt and implement the following policies: **a sexual misconduct policy, a harassment policy, a child and youth protection policy, and an antiracism policy.**

Each council's policy shall include requirements for boundary training which includes the topic of sexual misconduct, and child sexual abuse prevention training for its members at least every thirty-six months.

Yes, that now includes not only pastors but also all ruling elders, every three years. I have been asked, and am currently on an Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery task group to write recommendations to all our congregations concerning all these required policies.

As spiritual people, as sexual people, as ethical people, as beloved people – we must come to a deeper understanding that **even though Christ has set us free, not all things are beneficial for us; not all things are freeing or enrich the lives of others or our community of faith.** Let us remember that our bodies are a gift from God, to be cherished, cared for, respected, and honored as the grounding of God's Sacred Presence within you and me, and within all others.

Finally, these words may help. They come from author on spirituality **Richard Rohr**, posted on his website “Center for Action and Contemplation”, of which many of us subscribe to.

We are not so much human beings trying to become spiritual. We're already inherently spiritual beings and our job is learning how to be good humans!

Sexuality is never just about the physical, it also involves the spiritual.

Amen.