



Why Won't Paul Just Say No? Purity and Sex in 1 Corinthians 6

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THE TOPIC IS SEX. "ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL FOR ME," SAYS PAUL IN 1 COR 6:12, "but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything." Some readers hold that "All things are lawful for me" is a slogan that Paul is quoting from his Corinthian opponents, or at least an objection that Paul imagines his opponents would make. Others insist that the phrase is Paul's own declaration.¹ In either case, Paul qualifies or limits its effect by the words that follow. Clearly, however, Paul does not believe that in the sexual arena absolutely anything goes. The immediate context of 6:12 proves otherwise: in chapter 5 Paul says a clear no to one form of incest, and in 6:9-10 he expands that no to cover adultery, male-with-male sex, and sexual misconduct in general (πορνεία). After such clear denunciations, how can Paul now say, or

¹For a recent argument that the words are Paul's own, cf. Brian J. Dodd, "Paul's Paradigmatic 'I' and 1 Corinthians 6.12," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 59 (1995) 39-58.

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After clearly saying no to several sexual aberrations, Paul even so refuses to say no to the slogan, "All things are lawful for me." Paul's new way of doing sexual ethics under the impact of the law-cursed Messiah opens the door to conclusions very different from those of Leviticus...or of Paul.

quote with approval, “All things are lawful for me”? If he is convinced that certain behaviors are inappropriate, why doesn’t he “just say no”?

The question involves the old Paul and the new Paul, the law of God and the law-cursed Messiah. It involves freedom and servanthood, Galatians and Corinthians. The question also involves clean and unclean, and that biblical book which for the rabbis was so central that they simply called it “The Book”: Leviticus. Our journey, then, will take us back into Leviticus and sexual purity, and forward again to the Paul who now sets aside the book that was once his manual for living.

I. LEVITICUS 18: PURITY AND SEX

Paul lives in two worlds. As a Hellenistic Jew, Paul breathes the common air of the Greco-Roman world. Important as this milieu is for his thinking, however, Paul’s native soil for considering sexual matters is Leviticus. In Galatians, he carries on an explicit dialogue with Leviticus (see below). In Corinthians, his vocabulary itself suggests the connection: in the case of incest in 1 Cor 5:1, Paul refers to the woman as the offender’s “father’s wife,” the term given in Lev 18:8, instead of the ordinary Greek word for “stepmother” (μητροιῶ). Similarly, the embattled term ἀρσενοκοίτης (“one who lies with a male”) in 6:9 appears crafted from two words in the Septuagint of Lev 20:13.² If indeed Paul’s thinking is so rooted in Leviticus, an examination of levitical sexuality and purity is in order.

Leviticus 18 contains the chief sexual matters of the levitical code, drawn as issues of purity. The chapter consists of two sets of prohibitions (vv. 6-18 and 19-23) framed by introductory and concluding exhortations (vv. 1-5 and 24-30). The first set of commands (6-18) forbids incest within a four-generation patriarchal family.³ The second set (19-23), an assortment of five commands dealing with the proper giving and preservation of “seed,”⁴ injects the language of purity with the terms “menstrual uncleanness” (הַחֲטָאתָה, v. 19), “defilement” (הַחֲטָאתָה, 20 and 23), and “abomination” (הַחֲטָאתָה, 22).⁵ The concluding exhortation (vv. 24-30) goes on to classify all the offenses of chapter 18 as “abominations” (vv. 26, 27, 29, 30) and as violations of purity (24, 25, 27, 28, 30).

So what is purity? What does it mean to be clean? Our focus here is a block of material in chapters 11-20,⁶ though we include also the relevant purity material in

²See details below. Cf. Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality: Contextual Background for Contemporary Debate* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 83, 106-108.

³Karl Elliger, “Das Gesetz Leviticus 18,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 67 (1955) 8.

⁴The Hebrew word for “seed” or “semen” or “offspring” – עֵצֶב – offers the verbal clue to link v. 21, the Molech verse, with the other four which deal with “lying for seed.”

⁵The verb “to profane” (לְלַקֵּחַ, v. 21) is not itself a purity term, but the pair “holy-profane” (or “holy-common”) often occurs in the same contexts as the pair “clean-unclean.”

⁶An unexpected reference to clean and unclean animals in Lev 20:25-26 forges a bracketing or *inclusio* with chapter 11, all of which, in a narrative analysis, responds to the disaster of 10:1-2 and God’s charge to the priests in 10:8-11 to teach Israel the differences between clean and unclean, holy and profane. To work with a ten-chapter *inclusio* here is, of course, to work with the final form of the text and to disregard source-critical issues such as the question of the “Holiness Code” in chapters 17-26.

the rest of Leviticus and in Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers. This field includes such purity domains as clean and unclean animals, leprosy,⁷ childbirth, genital emissions, the proper handling of blood, contact with dead bodies, and the cultic purity of sacred times and places, persons and actions. This field also includes proper sexual expression. An examination of the shape of all these laws in Genesis through Numbers, with close attention to verbal, structural, and thematic clues, yields three main themes, with the third as the most comprehensive.⁸

1. Purity as Creation and Order vs. Chaos and Mixture

The verses which bracket chapters 11-20 (see note 6) use the key verb “to divide, distinguish, or separate” (הִבְדִּיל) in 10:10, 11:47, and four times in 20:24-26: the priests are called to teach Israel to “make distinctions,” because God has “distinguished” Israel from the nations. This key verb echoes Genesis 1, where God’s own creative work partly consists of acts of separation or distinguishing (Gen 1:4, 6-7, [9], 14, 18), and where all the varied forms of life reproduce “according to their kinds.” Purity calls human beings to imitate God, who draws lines of separation so that life can flourish. For this theme, Lev 19:19 serves as a hallmark: Israel is forbidden to cross-breed animals, to sow a field with two kinds of seed, or to wear clothing of mixed fabrics. In line with this theme, Lev 18:23 brands bestial sex as הִבְדִּיל, (NRSV “perversion”), which properly means “mixture.” In this thinking, God has established order to carve out a place for created life to thrive; when creatures violate that order, the chaos of Gen 1:2 is invited back in, just as the great flood came gushing in after such major boundary-crossings as in Gen 6:1-4.

We can see the order vs. mixture theme in several features of purity law, including the classification of clean and unclean animals (and perhaps the abhorrence of such boundary-violators as the pig [Lev 11:7] and the “swarmers”⁹ [vv. 29-38]), the mottled skin of the leper (cf. Lev 13:12-13!), and leprosy’s horrible juxtaposition of death and birth (Num 12:12). In sexual matters, bestiality is the most obvious “mixture,” but incest also mixes the roles of family and outsider and erases the line between them, male-with-male sex mixes the gender roles (a man “lies the lyings of a woman,” as the Hebrew puts it), and adultery mixes the “seed” of two men so that issues of inheritance become unclear.

2. Purity as Wholeness

A second theme in the purity laws lifts up wholeness of life as the proper intent of creation. The clearest demonstration of this theme comes in Lev 21:16-24, where those priests whose bodies are marked by disease, dismemberment, impair-

⁷More accurately, “scale diseases”? Cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 774-76, 817.

⁸We are concerned here not with the historical origin of the purity laws, but with the way in which purity functions in the text of the Pentateuch as it now stands. What follows I explore in detail in a dissertation currently in process (“Leviticus 18 as Christian Scripture”).

⁹Michael Carroll sees these as abhorred because they cross the line between nature and culture, cf. “One More Time: Leviticus Revisited,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament*, ed. Bernhard Lang (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 121.

ment, or disability are prohibited from offering sacrifice to YHWH. In the same way, only animals whose bodies are whole may be offered as sacrifice (22:17-25).¹⁰ The theme of wholeness appears in the domain of leprosy as well, since the person whose skin has become completely leprous is deemed *clean*, not unclean (Lev 13:13)!

3. Purity as Life vs. Death

The most pervasive feature of Israel's purity system, as it stands out in the texts' specific verbal clues, is life vs. death: life is to be treasured and preserved, and death is to be abhorred. YHWH is Lord of life, not death. This theme appears first in God's first command, the prime directive to the human race: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). The "Noah laws," given when God recreates the world after the flood, reckon with the increased violence of the world and set limits to that violence, banning bloodshed and blood-consumption (Gen 9:1-6; cf. 4:10-11, 4:23-24, and Num 35:33-34). Within Leviticus, life vs. death is reflected in the extreme pollution of contact with corpses and carcasses (11:24-38; 21:1-11; cf. Num 19:11-20), in blood-consumption (chap. 17), in the special attention to childbirth (chap. 12), and in the fact that the only bodily emissions that defile are the fluids of life: blood and sexual fluids (chaps. 12, 15, 17, and 18).¹¹ In the realm of sex, this theme appears especially in the prohibiting of sex during menstruation, in the banning of offering one's "seed" to Molech,¹² and in the "waste of seed" involved in menstrual sex, offerings to Molech, male-with-male sex, and bestial sex. In this light, the exhortation to life that heads up the sexual chapter takes on new contours: "By observing these statutes, one shall live" (Lev 18:5)!

Of the three dominant themes of Israel's purity code, this third is the most comprehensive and the most explicit in the texts. The theme of wholeness aims at wholeness of life. The theme of order vs. chaos aims at securing a safely bounded zone within which life can flourish. Purity in Israel finally seeks as its chief goal to treasure, promote, and preserve life, to signal zones of death, and to mark Israel as a people whom God has set apart to treasure life.

In sum, then, what God is doing in Leviticus 18's laws of sexual purity is to set societal boundaries within which the gift of sexuality and of reproductive life can be channeled, human family and society healthily preserved, the

¹⁰These paragraphs of Leviticus use not the language of purity, but the related language of holiness and defilement. The surrounding paragraphs do use purity language.

¹¹It also appears to me that, where we can discern any logic to the classification of clean and unclean animals (Lev 11), life vs. death and blood consumption are high among the concerns. Cf. the exclusion of quadrupeds with pads, which are carnivores (vv. 27-28), the preference for ruminants over carnivores among larger animals (2b-8), and the exclusion of raptors and carrion-eaters among the birds (13-19). Carroll's article (cf. note 9) is helpful here.

¹²I read the Molech sacrifice along with George C. Heider as an actual offering (slaying) of children in a cult of the dead, a chthonic practice in Judah taken over from the Canaanites. Cf. Heider, "Molech," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* IV:897.

vulnerable protected, and the precious and fragile gift of life in the “seed” used productively.¹³

II. PAUL, THE BOOK, AND THE CURSED MESSIAH

The world of purity we have just described is Paul’s heritage, a heritage which he treasured and in which he excelled (Phil 3:4-6). This purity world, however, is also a part of that heritage which Paul was forced to set aside, once the law-cursed Messiah captured him.

Paul’s letters do not handle every domain of purity. We do see him setting aside circumcision (Gal 5:2-6, 11-12; 6:12-15), the sabbath and the festivals (Col 2:16-17; Gal 4:10; Rom 14:5-6), the food laws (Rom 14:13-23), and strictures against eating idol-meat (1 Cor 8; 10:23-33). Paul may choose to practice any or all of these, but he regards none of them now as essential.

In sexual matters, purity still plays a significant role for Paul: (1) In what is likely his earliest statement about sexual expression, 1 Thess 4:1-8, Paul sets holiness and impurity (ἀκαθαρσία) as antithetical, virtually as opposites (v. 7). Behavior that pleases God includes abstinence from unlawful sexual expression (πορνεία).¹⁴ Christians are to conduct themselves sexually in ways of holiness and honor,¹⁵ not in uncontrolled passion. Sexual purity precludes “the incontinent exploitation of one another.”¹⁶

(2) Paul frequently includes “impurity,” undefined, in his vice-lists. In several instances, this term appears in conjunction with other terms which are more clearly sexual : Rom 1:24, 2 Cor 12:21, Gal 5:19, [Eph 5:3, 5], Col 3:5?, and 1 Thess 4:7.¹⁷ The most commonly associated term, πορνεία, notoriously difficult to define, I translate as “illicit sexual expression.”¹⁸ Paul’s own use of the term shows that he understands it to include incest with one’s father’s wife (1 Cor 5:1), prostitution (6:15-16), nonmarital sexual behavior (7:2), intercourse with foreigners (10:8; cf.

¹³The fact that the four-generation family envisioned in Lev 18 is structured patriarchally will occasion problems both for later Jews and for Christians. Some of this struggle can be seen within the New Testament, which also reflects patriarchal structures but also shows instances where the dynamic gospel of Jesus is beginning to reshape or even to crack those structures.

¹⁴For the meaning of this key term, see note 18 below.

¹⁵If “vessel” in this verse (4) signifies “wife,” then Paul is also reaffirming marriage as the appropriate channel for full sexual expression, as is the case in 1 Cor 7.

¹⁶τὸ μὴ ὑπερβαίνειν καὶ πλεονεκτεῖν ἐν τῷ πραγματι τοῦ ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ (v. 6), reading πραγματι as “this matter” rather than “business.”

¹⁷The meaning of ἀκαθαρσία is less certain in Rom 6:19; 1 Cor 7:14; 2 Cor 6:17 (in the context of the “mixtures” of 6:14-7:1); [Eph 4:19]; and 1 Thess 2:3.

¹⁸Originally signifying sex for sale, the term had expanded its domain to cover all sorts of illicit sexual intercourse. Hellenistic Jewish writings show that πορνεία could denote prostitution, incest, adultery, sex with someone else’s servant girl or with one’s father’s concubine, intercourse or marriage with foreigners, the “promiscuity of the Sodomites,” the mingling of the “Watchers” with human daughters in Noah’s time, or simply a total lack of sexual boundaries. Cf. Sir 9:6; 19:2; 23:16-27; 26:9; 41:22-23; Wis 14:12, 24, 26; Tobit 4:12, 14; TLev 14:5-6; TRub 1:6; 4:8; TJos 3:8; TBen 9:1; TJud 12:2; *Psalms of Solomon* 2:11; Sib. Or. 5:388; Apoc. Enoch gr. 10.9. Very often the term is used without definition. To render πορνεία as “illicit sexual expression” begs the question, By what law or norm is a given action deemed illicit? This is one of the key problems for Paul’s sexual ethic.

Num 25:1), and incontinent exploitation (cf. 1 Thess 4:1-8 above), but he often refers to πορνεία without definition. Some of these sexual connections, but not all, are expressly prohibited in Leviticus 18-19.

(3) Paul's illustration of same-sex behavior in Rom 1 classes it as "impurity" (v. 24), and his arguments about "nature" suggests that the purity theme of creation-and-order vs. chaos-and-mixture stands behind his thinking.

Granted, then, that in several ways the domain of sexual purity proves to be operative in Paul's thought, what happens to it under the impact of the Cursed Messiah?

The battleground is Galatians. In that letter, Paul struggles against those who would twist and subvert the gospel (Gal 1:6-9) by adhering to certain elements of law. The νόμος under consideration is the law of Sinai and of Leviticus.¹⁹ After four chapters of tight argumentation, the net result is that, in Christ, the law has been dismissed as guardian and keeper. Christians are now under the Spirit, not the law. "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1). The new shape of life for Christians is free servanthood: "Through love become servants to one another" (5:13).

In one of the tightest and most crucial passages of Galatians (3:10-14), Paul effectively topples Lev 18:5, the key verse for the sexual chapter, from its prime position. Here Paul weaves four Old Testament passages together in a midrashic argument.²⁰ The argument opposes Lev 18:5 ("The one who does the statutes shall live by means of them") and Hab 2:4 ("The one who is justified by faith shall live") as an apparent contradiction in scripture. The solution for this scriptural puzzle involves seeing that, since no one obeys the whole law, all are under a curse (cf. Deut 27:26). Now the Messiah has come, but has been hanged on a tree, and so he is cursed by the law itself (Deut 21:23)—and his curse redeems us all from the curse of Deut 27:26, so that those who are justified by faith in this crucified Messiah may receive what God promised to Abraham. Under the impact of this Cursed Messiah, then, one is forced to make a choice: If one continues to live on the basis of law and its promise of life in Lev 18:5, one will remain under the curse which the law pronounces for incomplete obedience, the same law which curses the Messiah. If one approaches life by faith in Christ, however, the curse is removed, and the law is removed as guardian and director for life. In its place, Paul selects another passage, also from Leviticus, to embody the shape of the new life: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal 5:14; Lev 19:18). The new principles of life are the fruits of the Spirit (5:22-23), and the new "law of Christ" is to bear one another's

¹⁹This point is the focus of much controversy. My reading is based on the focus in chaps. 1-2 on Jerusalem, the prominence of circumcision throughout the letter, and all the arguments based on Old Testament scriptures. For fuller argumentation of this position, see Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 105-140.

²⁰For the details of this argument, cf. Nils Alstrup Dahl, "Contradictions in Scripture," chapter in *Studies in Paul*, assisted by Paul Donahue (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 169-74. For other approaches, cf. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989) 43, 105-21; and Alain Gignac, "Citation de Lévitique 18,5 en Romains 10,5 et Galates 3,12: Deux lectures différentes des rapports Christ-Torah?" *Église et Théologie* 25 (1994) 367-403.

burdens (6:2) and to love and serve one another (5:13-14). No other law has any bearing for directing the life of this Pauline community (5:18, 23).²¹

There still remain behaviors which are unacceptable for Paul's Galatian community. These appear to need no law or code for their naming, for "the works of the flesh are obvious" (5:19). A list of vices follows, with πορνεία (illicit sexual expression) and ἀκαθαρσία (uncleanness) at the head of the list. Here in Galatians, as in other letters, Paul seems to expect that everyone will simply know "what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2), what is "true and honorable and just and pure and commendable" (Phil 4:8-9).

In sum, once Paul has finished his argument in Galatians, the levitical law can no longer function as authoritative for Christian behavior. This, however, leaves Paul with a sticky problem: If πορνεία is still one of the works of the flesh, but there is no longer an authoritative law which can name a particular act as illicit, by what criteria shall Christians shape their sexual lives?

The Corinthian church exhibits a different ailment. This congregation *knows* that they are free. Behind several of the questions and abuses that Paul addresses, one can discern common attitudes: some of these folks feel that they have achieved spiritual wisdom (1:18-3:4) and are spiritually rich (4:8-13). Some are complacent ("puffed up," actually) about sexual immorality in their midst (5:1-2) and feel free from norms that constrain others (6:12; 10:23), while others take an ascetic stance toward sexuality (7:1-6). By and large, this is a congregation that seems to have heard gladly Paul's message of freedom and Spirit, but has somehow missed his correlative message of servanthood.

Together, Galatians and 1 Corinthians hold freedom and servanthood in tension. (Actually, each letter upholds both poles, but they emphasize different sides.) We need both messages, held in creative tension: Without Galatians, our servanthood is liable to lapse into sick or co-dependent obligation. Without Corinthians, we are liable to spend our freedom on self-preoccupation or self-indulgence.

These tensions lie at the heart of the problem in 1 Cor 6:12: "All things are lawful for me"? Even incest? Why won't Paul just say no?

III. 1 CORINTHIANS 6

The central section of 1 Corinthians addresses sexual immorality (chaps. 5-6), marriage matters (chap. 7), and "disputed matters" (chaps. 8-10). We will take them in reverse order, so as to show connections and build toward chapter 6.

Disputed Matters (chaps. 8-10): We are in the realm of what is often called *adiaphora*, "indifferent matters," yet these matters were *not* indifferent for the levitical law. The question has to do with whether believers may eat meat which has been sacrificed to a pagan deity and resold in the market. The Jerusalem

²¹Paul also depicts the contrast between the two ways of life as bondage to the στοιχεῖα (the "elements" or "elemental spirits" which he links with calendric observance in 4:9-10) vs. στοιχεῖν by the Spirit (5:25): The fruits of the Spirit are the new στοιχεῖα.

conference (Acts 15:29) said no (cf. also Rev 2:14, 20), but Paul's response is more nuanced. Instead of any clear yes or no, Paul lays down four criteria: (1) Is the conscience free in this matter (8:4-6; 9:1-2a; 10:25-31)? (Paul says yes.) (2) Will this action harm members of the community who have scruples different from mine (8:7-13; 10:23-24; 10:28-11:1)?²² (3) Will the action endanger me or my faith (10:1-13)? (4) What course of action will best further the proclamation of the gospel (9:12b-23)? In this context, after weighing such criteria, Paul affirms that, indeed, "all things are lawful" (10:23), but he qualifies this assertion with issues of mutual servanthood: "but not all things are beneficial," "but not all things build up."

Marriage Matters (chap. 7): In the face of Corinthian ascetic tendencies, Paul reaffirms God's good gift of sexuality and marriage. At the same time, with a radical stance shaped by a gospel which makes all other values penultimate (7:29-31), Paul raises up the status of singleness as a gift on equal footing with (or even better than) marriage. Four outstanding features of Paul's marriage ethic deserve our attention: (1) When Paul insists that "it is well for [the unmarried] to remain unmarried as I am" (7:8-9; cf. vv. 32-35), this is a shock for traditional Jewish society, a revolutionary departure from the Bible's prime directive to "be fruitful and multiply."²³ By abandoning this commandment, Paul departs from one of the central aims of purity law, for the sake of a higher purpose. (2) While Paul addresses the men throughout this chapter, the guidance he offers in the chapter applies equally to male and female. This undercuts the patriarchal structure in which Paul himself participates. (3) Paul receives "from the Lord (Jesus)" the word against divorce (vv. 10-11), yet he is willing, on his own authority, to relax this word of Christ in situations where an unbelieving spouse leaves the believer (vv. 12-16). (4) Paul radically subordinates all other matters, even the marriage-and-family issues so crucial for the purity code, to the central matter of following Jesus and his coming kingdom (vv. 29-35).

Porneia (chaps. 5-6): This section revolves around a case of incest, a clear violation of Lev 18:8 that endangers both the individuals and their faith-community. Paul's instruction is clear: Those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (6:9-10). In Jesus, we have been washed, justified, and set apart from such things (6:11). The offender is to be removed from the Christian community (5:3-13). It is this issue that occasions Paul's citation of the vice-list in 6:9-11, his refusal to say a simple no in 6:12, and the argument that follows in 6:13-20.

The vice-list begins, "Do you not realize...?" This is the fourth of seven instances of this formula within chaps. 5-6, seven of a total of twelve in Paul's letters. The formula carries the sense of knowledge presumed: they are the sort of thing that Paul's readers ought to have known, or ought to have been able to figure

²²This second question is the one Paul most strongly emphasizes in this setting, as a check to runaway Corinthian freedom.

²³The Mishnah (Yeb. 6.6), for example, says, "No man may abstain from keeping the law *Be fruitful and multiply*, unless he already has children: according to the School of Shammai, two sons; according to the School of Hillel, a son and a daughter."

out from what they have known.²⁴ “Do you not realize that X will not inherit the kingdom of God?” — the final phrase also echoes tradition: of the five occurrences of the phrase in Pauline letters, four mark lists of vices.²⁵ The similarity of language in these verses, and in no other Pauline settings, suggests a traditional formula that Paul is using when speaking of moral norms. Here Paul recalls the Corinthians to commonly-held ethical standards, standards that Paul himself endorses.

Four of the ten members of our list are sexual in nature: πόρνοι, μοιχοί, μαλακοί, and ἀρσενοκοίται. The first is the general term for those who engage in illicit sexual conduct. The second names adulterers. Μαλακοί and ἀρσενοκοίται are more troublesome and have figured at the heart of much controversy in recent years.²⁶ I have become convinced, through working with Leviticus 18 and 20, that ἀρσενοκοίται was coined by joining the words for “male” and “lying” in the LXX of Lev 18:22 or 20:13. The latter reads: Καὶ ὃς ἂν κοιμηθῆ μετὰ ἄρσενος κοίτην γυναικὸς... (“And whoever lies with a male the lying of a woman...”). This observation suggests that anyone using the term ἀρσενοκοίτης with awareness of its biblical setting would likely understand it as referring to a person who does what Lev 18:22 and 20:13 prohibit. The remaining sexual term, μαλακοί (“soft ones”), is less clear. One helpful angle comes from Philo, who believed that pederasty inhibits the development of proper manly qualities and changes a male into a quasi-female. Pederasty, says Philo, thus promotes “effeminacy,” which he refers to interchangeably as μαλακία and as θήλεια (female-ness).²⁷ While these terms are less precise than one might wish, I read Paul as classifying both male-with-male intercourse in general (as in Leviticus 18) and the specific cultural manifestation represented by μαλακία as vices inappropriate to the life of a Christian. The three aorists of v. 11 reinforce this evaluation: “Instead you were washed, instead you were consecrated, instead you were justified.” With this vice-list, Paul has rather clearly said no.

Immediately after taking such an unequivocal stance, however, in 6:12 Paul

²⁴Not all of these are of the same nature. Some simply appeal to common sense and challenge the readers to draw out the implication of what they already know (5:6; cf. Rom 6:16; 1 Cor 9:24). A second type appeals to scripture, again sometimes challenging readers to draw out the implications for the situation (6:16; cf. Rom 11:2; 1 Cor 9:13). A third group seems to appeal to common Christian teaching, such as Paul may have imparted to the Corinthians when he was founding the church (6:2; 6:3; 6:9; 6:15; 6:19; cf. 3:16).

²⁵Here in vv. 9 and 10, plus Gal 5:21, Eph 5:5, and the fifth: 1 Cor 15:50 (“flesh and blood cannot inherit”).

²⁶Among the dozens of books and articles of the last fifteen years, cf. especially John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980) 91-117; Letha Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? Another Christian View* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1980); Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality*; Richard B. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 14 (1986) 184-215; L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); and Allen D. Verhey, “The Holy Bible and Sanctified Sexuality: An Evangelical Approach to Scripture and Sexual Ethics,” *Interpretation* 49 (January 1995) 31-45.

²⁷Philo, *Spec. Leg.* II.50; III.39, 40; *Vit. Cont.* 60.

refuses to lay down a rule or a law for Christian sexual behavior. He begins to take a different tack in guiding the Corinthians in sexual matters. He begins with the slogan (whether his own or his opponents'), "All things are lawful for me" (πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν). The verb refers to what is "permitted," "permissible," "allowed," "possible" within a sphere of official pronouncement or agreed convention. As in 10:23, Paul poses this phrase twice, each time limiting or qualifying the claim with another phrase: "but not all things are beneficial," "but I will not be mastered by anything." He does not invalidate the first phrase, but seeks only to limit it.

Paul is in a tricky spot. He must somehow counter sexual license without re-introducing the guardianship or mastery of the law over Christian living. His solution is to introduce new criteria for ethical decision-making. The effect of the qualifying phrases is to say, "Yes, we are free. No law binds us. But in Christ and under his cross, another norm applies: Is this action helpful, beneficial to anyone? Will this action or behavior become a new slave-master over me or over others? In Christ different criteria apply, and different goals are in view."²⁸ The dynamic tension of freedom and freely-offered servanthood is at play here!

In the verses that follow, Paul marshals several arguments against sexual misconduct: He rebuts a false analogy between sex and eating (13-14). He applies the one-flesh union of Gen 2:24 to casual sexual encounters, and argues the absurdity of attaching such a liaison to the spiritual union we have with Christ (15-17). Finally, he depicts the bodies of believers²⁹ as temples of the Holy Spirit, temples meant to honor God (19-20).

In the midst of these arguments comes the focal imperative of the whole section: Flee πορνεία! (v. 18). Why? Because sexual misuse is different from all other sinful acts, says Paul: all other acts of sin are "outside the body" (ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος), but sexual sin directly affects one's own *soma*. Here I balk: How about drunkenness? addiction? self-mutilation? But Paul's use of *σῶμα*, it seems, has in view the whole created person, not simply the physical body. Sexuality is a dimension which involves and affects the whole person. Sexual offenses wound a person at every level of his or her being. Perhaps to read Paul in this way is to import twentieth-century ideas into Paul's reasoning, yet his use of "body" seems to support it.³⁰

The overall effect of this passage (vv. 12-20) is to say, "I cannot just say no: We are free in Christ and no longer subject to this rule or that one. I will impose no new law upon you, for that would defeat the gospel's purpose. But freedom is not for self-indulgence. Freedom has a purpose. The questions have shifted. In Christ, the new questions are, 'What course of action will best benefit the community and the people I deal with?' and 'What course of action will best maintain our freedom

²⁸Cf. Roy A. Harrisville, *1 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) 97-98.

²⁹I read this image as individual, where 3:16-17 is a corporate image. Harrisville, *1 Corinthians*, 103, reads 6:19-20 as also corporate.

³⁰Cf. Robert Jewett, "Paul's Dialogue with the Corinthians...and Us," *Quarterly Review* (Methodist) 13 (Winter 1993) 96.

from new forms of bondage?’ So I’ll not just say no. Instead, here are several arguments for why I would urge you not to misuse your freedom sexually. The weightiest of these arguments are, on the one hand, the profoundly ill effects of sexual misuse and, on the other, the new role you have as temples of Christ’s Spirit.”

Paul’s non-legal approach in Corinthians is profoundly in harmony with purity’s central purpose in Leviticus. Paul does uphold Leviticus 18 in his rejection of incest, adultery, male-with-male intercourse, and πορνεία in general. But more deeply, Paul’s call to mutual servanthood, to pursuing what is beneficial and will not enslave, echoes purity in its treasuring and preserving of the gift of life, seeking to make life healthy and whole. Because of the impact of the Cursed Messiah and his gospel, Paul has taken the crucial step of leaving the law behind as code for Christian living. Yet Paul’s pursuit of wholeness for neighbor and community and for oneself is, at bottom, deeply in harmony with the life vs. death vision of purity.³¹

One crucial question remains: Could Paul be invoked against Paul? *If* Paul can set side-by-side (1) a very clear no to certain behaviors and (2) a refusal to impose any law or command, basing his appeal instead on different criteria, *then* is it conceivable for Paul that (1) and (2) might ever conflict? Might Paul’s decision-making criteria ever drive a Christian to take a position contrary to the commands of *torah* or of law? The answer must be yes. Within Paul’s writings we have the clear examples of foods and of circumcision. We have seen him in chapter 7 set aside the prime directive to be fruitful and multiply, and make an exception to a pronouncement of Jesus.

Another passage in 1 Corinthians, the question of the veil in 11:2-16, gives us a modest test case. Here Paul launches at least five different arguments urging women to keep the veil. At the end of this series, he says, “Judge for yourselves” (v. 13), though he seems to expect that the Corinthians will come to the same conclusion he has reached (v. 16). But right in the middle of these arguments and appeals, Paul drops a startling “nevertheless” (πλήν) which changes everything: now in Jesus Christ the relationship of male and female has radically shifted, from hierarchy and subordination to mutuality and full interdependence (vv. 11-12). What is startling about this bombshell is that, as he expands on his claim about male and female “in the Lord,” Paul goes on to speak not of matters of *redemption* but of matters of *creation*. “For just as the woman [came] out of the man, so also the man [comes] through the woman, and all things [come] out of God.” Male and female equality and interdependence “in the Lord [Jesus]” is rooted finally in creation itself, in creation as intended by God and fashioned in Christ, in creation as

³¹It is noteworthy that, when Paul is directly addressing sexual decision-making, he invokes something akin to the life vs. death theme, the most comprehensive theme of the purity code. In Romans 1, on the other hand, where Paul alludes to same-sex behavior as a part of his strategy to catch the reader in a rhetorical trap, he depends on the secondary order vs. chaos theme. This observation suggests to me that, while the creation-order argument is important, the appeal to what is beneficial, constructive, and non-enslaving is the more fundamental to Paul’s ethical reasoning.

restored and made new in Christ. With the “nevertheless” of 11:11, all the other arguments of 11:2-16 are qualified, even silenced, and Paul knows it. He is left pleading finally for action for one another’s sake, for the common good, based in mutual servanthood.

Could Paul’s new criteria in 6:12-20 be used against the no that Paul speaks so clearly in 6:9-11? Yes. Paul himself does *not* do so; he adheres to the sexual prohibitions which stand in Leviticus 18. But he adheres to them not because they are the law, but because he believes that those boundaries will still offer the best way to be “beneficial,” to build up both the individual and the community, and to protect against new forms of bondage. As Christ’s church struggles together in these days over matters of sex, as we seek to discern what “seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28), we will need to take seriously all of scripture, including the gifts God gave in the purity code. And, if Paul is to be our guide, those gifts will focus in a question that is both old and new – What structures will best enhance life for all? Who can predict where that question will lead? ⊕