Passionless Sex in 1 Thessalonians 4:4-5

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That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God.... (1 Thess 4:4-5 KJV)

Interpreters of Paul have overburdened his statements about marriage with ideals foreign to his own purpose. Protestants are partly to blame. Dale Martin is correct when he writes, “Since the inception of Protestantism, there has been a broad, concerted attempt to package Paul as a promoter of sex and marriage, in spite of (and in reaction to) most of Christian history, which has taken Paul to be an advocate of sexual asceticism, allowing marriage only for those too weak for celibacy.”

Yet, if Protestants want Paul to be the chief advocate of heterosexual marriage, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and even some contemporary Lutheran theologians warm to the “Pauline” view of marriage, particularly the one falsely attributed to him in Eph 5. They do this because of the hierarchical ecclesiology derived from the “wife as an extension of the husband’s body” ideology found there. In short, Pauline statements about marriage have been made to bear the Protestant weight of “healthy sexuality” or the load placed on them by apologists of hierarchical ecclesiology, but the intelligibility of his arguments breaks down under this weight of

modern ideological concerns. This essay aims at a description of what first-century audiences might have made of Paul’s words about marriage. If this description is at all accurate, it will lift the load Paul has been forced to bear.

**WIFE AS VESSEL (σκεῦος)**

Recent interpreters have suggested that σκεῦος in 1 Thess 4:4 refers to the husband’s body or even his penis. Actually, Paul here reflects the common view in antiquity that the female is like a vessel or container. Medical science bolstered this association of women and jars by the way it imagined conception to take place. Aristotle, for example, believed that the uterus draws semen into itself “in the same way conical vessels” draw liquid when warmed. Many centuries later in Ps.-Lucian’s Affairs of the Heart, a staunch defender of masculinity demonstrates the hardiness of the vessel/woman connection: “But, since it was impossible for anything to be born from but a single source, she [Aphrodite] divided in each species two types. For she allowed males as their peculiar privilege to ejaculate semen, and made females to be a vessel as it were for the reception of the seed.” In a remarkably similar passage, Clement of Alexandria alludes to the way the divine has structured procreation to be a reflection of Adam’s masculinity: “By God’s decree, hairiness is one of man’s conspicuous qualities....Whatever smoothness or softness there was in him God took from him when he fashioned the delicate Eve from his side to be the receptacle of his seed, his helpmate both in procreation and in the management of the home.” As repugnant as this metaphor for women might be to us, its widespread use in ancient literature and artistic representations makes a strong case that Paul means “wife” in 1 Thess 4:4. Furthermore, by referring to the wife as a vessel, Paul touches on the way his audience would have construed sex in marriage as an ethical problem. Or, at least they may have been familiar with this construal from the traditions that we will explore below.

**THE ETHICS OF ACQUISITION**

The term “acquire” (κταναι) in 1 Thess 4:4 appears frequently in ancient literature in connection with sex (“possess” in the KJV; “control” in NRSV). Epictetus twice employs the phrase τὸ ἐρωμένος κταναι with the sense of a male ac-

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5Ps.-Lucian, *Affairs of the Heart* 19.

quiring a female for sexual purposes. An earlier period knows the wife to be the husband’s possession (κτήμα), even the best of his possessions. The metaphor is not limited to marriage. Aristippus is reported to have written a dialogue entitled “To Those Who Blame Him for Having Possessed (κέκτηται) Old Wine and Courtesans.” Less frequently, the term was used for a woman’s acquisition of a male lover. There are also examples of same-sex love expressed in terms of acquisition.

The ancient science of household management was the background for conceptualizing the wife as a possession of the husband. Acquisition (κτήσις) and use (χρήσις) of possessions are practical tasks for the head of any household. One ancient theorist aligns acquiring property with its preservation, improvement, and use. The most common division of the topic is, however, simply acquisition and use. The Pythagorean Callicratidas describes the system of the household and employs the distinction between “the man and what he possesses (ἐνθρωπος καὶ κτήσις).” The treatise goes on to include the wife, since she is ruled, under the category of possessions. The moral problem that this classification generated for the male is this: to possess and use his wife properly. As we will see below, proper possessing requires the husband to avoid passion. Thus, it appears that the overlap between Paul’s language about marriage and sex in 1 Thess 4:4-5 with ancient philosophical discourse is no accident. Paul gives the Thessalonian readers (at least the elite males among them) what they wanted to hear in terms that they were accustomed to hearing.

7 Epictetus, Diatribai 1.28.24; 2.24.22.
8 Stobaeus, Florilegium 4.22a.14, 66; Athenaeus, Deipnosophistae 13.559C. Plutarch’s protest (Coniugalia praecepta 142E) against this way of thinking about the wife may illustrate just how widespread it was.
9 Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers 2.84.
10 Longus, Daphnis and Chloe 3.15.
11 Xenophon, Symposium 8.2; Philostratus, Vita Apollonii 1.30.
13 Ps.-Aristotle, Economics 1.6.1.
14 Plato, Euthydemus 280E; Isocrates, Ad Demonicum 1.27-28; Clement of Alexandria, Christ the Educator 2.3.38.4; 3.8.41.3; Miscellanies 6.12.100.1; Iamblichus, Protrepticus 37; Stobaeus, Florilegium 2.7.14; Ps.-Plato, Definitions 412D. See Gustav Gerhard, Phoinix von Kolophon (Leipzig: Teubner, 1909) 113-115.
16 Ibid., 105.8-9. See also Plato, Republic 423E; 451C; 453D; 502D; Laws 746E; Stobaeus, Florilegium 4.23.65; Plutarch, Septem sapientium convivium 135C.
17 Philo, On the Virtues 30; Athenagorus, De resurrectione 21.4.
WHY AVOID PASSION? DISHONOR AND IMPURITY

Paul’s exhortation about the way the wife should be possessed in 1 Thess 4:5 implies the possibility of sex without passion, as the KJV hints: “Not in the lust of concupiscence” (μὴ ἐὰν πᾶσθει ἐπιθυμίαν τῆς ὀργῆς). As noted above, the very idea that Paul was against passionate sex in marriage flabbergasts the vast majority of modern, Protestant interpreters. Yet, his exhortation echoes the voices of numerous ancient moralists who advocated sex without passion as an ideal in marriage. Rather than an opportunity for passion, marriage was thought by these philosophers to be its cure, as Paul himself asserts in 1 Cor 7:9.

What is going on here? Why does this seem so foreign to us? Paul’s views on erotic desire need to be distinguished from the model of sublimation in either its Platonic or Stoic forms. Nor does Paul seem interested in another option eagerly appropriated by the many moralists who saw sexual pleasure as an enticement planned by Nature for the continuation of the human species. The attitude toward sex with which 1 Thess 4:5 seems to have most affinity is the anti-erotic discourse of many ancient writers, who sought to place passion in sex in the worst possible light because of its negative effects on the one who desires. These anti-erotic writers rejected the commonly held view that Eros is a god, or in its demythologized form, that erotic passion could not be refused but only surrendered to as one yields to a superior power. Paul’s phrase “not like the Gentiles who do not


20 Ocellus, *On the Nature of the Universe* 56; Testament of Reuben 2.8; Philo, *On the Special Laws* 3.9-10, 32-36, 113; Musonius Rufus, Fragment 12; Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator* 2.10.92.2; 2.10.94-97, 99.

21 For marriage as a way for the young, elite male to avoid a dissolute life, see Stobaeus, *Florilegium* 3.22.25; Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 2.23.143.1.

22 Plato, *Phaedrus* 256B-257A; Stobaeus, *Florilegium* 2.7.5(b9); 2.7.10(c); 2.7.11(s); 2.7.21; Stoicorum veterum fragmenta 1.58.36-59.3; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.129; Plutarch, *De communibus naturalibus* adversus Stoicos 1072F-1073D; Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4.72. See D. Babut, “Les stoïciens et l’amour,” *Revue des études grecques* 76 (1963) 55-63.


know God” may be a jab at the divinization of Eros and the claim often heard in erotic novels and love poetry that passion is irresistible and inevitable. An aphorism of Ps.-Phocylides sheds light on the influence of this anti-erotic tradition on Paul: “Do not deliver yourself wholly unto unbridled sensuality towards your wife, for ‘eros’ is not a god, but a passion destructive of all.”26 Paul expressed the unbridled character of love and the dishonorable loss of self-control that invariably followed with the key philosophical term: passion (πόθος).27

More needs to be said about this connection between loss of self-control and dishonor, because this was the point of 1 Thess 4:4-5 for first-century male readers. Like other ancient writers, Paul connects passionless sex with the concept of honor in 1 Thess 4:4.28 The husband’s moral task is to have sex without passion and thus preserve his own decorum.29 We see something similar happening in 1 Cor 7:35-36 where Paul works with the opposites “decorum” (εὐσκημοσύνη) and “indecorum” (ἄσκημοσύνη) in a context that concerns sexual passion. Paul echoes the common judgment in the philosophic literature that vices of excess bring shame upon those who commit them.30 Punishment comes inevitably from the connection between passion and dishonor. Paul again makes this point in 1 Cor 6:18 in the notion of sinning against oneself.31

Since Paul associates sexual passion with indecorum (ἄσκημοσύνη), closer attention to this term in the ancient conceptualization of appropriate sexual activity is warranted. The positive form, decorum (εὐσκημοσύνη), referred to a dignified appearance obtained through control or elimination of all the passions, but most significantly those having to do with drinking, consuming food, and having sex. The emphasis here falls upon appearance to others, as the root σκημ implies.32 Musonius brings out this visual aspect of moral virtue (unfortunately obscured by

28For the theme of sexual passion bringing dishonor, see N. R. E. Fisher, Hybris: A Study in the Values of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greece (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1992) 14; Lilja, The Roman Elegists’ Attitude to Women, 89–96; van der Horst, The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides, 158–159. See also Cicero, Tusculan Disputations 4.68; Philo, On Dreams 2.147–148; Clement of Alexandria, Christ the Educator 2.10.90.3; 2.10.100.1; Ps.-Lucian, Affairs of the Heart 20, 24.
30Musonius Rufus, Fragment 4. In Rom 1:24-27 we find three references to the concept of honor in conjunction with passion.
31As a general truth: Xenophon, Memorabilia 1.5.3; Plutarch, De Stoicorum repugnantissi 1041D; Epictetus, Diatribai 3.7.36; 3.18.5–6. With specific reference to sexual immorality: Epictetus, Diatribai 2.4.2–3; Musonius Rufus, Fragment 12; Stobaeus, Florilegium 3.11.77; Clement of Alexandria, Christ the Educator 2.10.90.4; 2.10.100.1; Theano, Epistle 5.3.
32The public aspect is stressed by Epictetus (Diatribai 3.22.2, 8, 15, 52); see M. Billerbeck, Epiktet: Vom Kynismus, Philosophia Antiqua 54 (Leiden: Brill, 1978) 47. See also Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers 3.39; Plutarch, De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos 1067E; Fragment 97; Marcus Aurelius, 7.60.
(the English translation) when he praises philosophy, which “teaches one to be above pleasure and greed, to admire thrift and to avoid extravagance; it trains one to have a sense of shame, and to control one’s tongue, and it produces discipline, order, and courtesy (εὐσκημοσύνη), and in general what is fitting in action and bearing.” While the εὐσκημοσύνη person is beautiful in the sense of displaying a well-proportioned inner self, the person lacking self-control is ugly and ὁσκημοσύνη. Decorum means an observable balance; indecorum is associated with imbalance. The ideal of decorum was applied to sex as readily as it was to eating and drinking. Overindulgence in pleasures that might otherwise be used with moderation produces ὁσκημοσύνη. This includes the pleasure of sex.

We have now seen that Paul follows the philosophic critique of Eros in its claim that passion brings dishonor to the desiring subject. Passion also brings impurity. What should we think about this shift between the category of honor to that of purity? Is it the case that Paul has suddenly abandoned the philosophic analysis of the dangers of sex and instead retrieved the world of Leviticus to help his readers organize their sexual behavior? No. Instead, Paul exhibits a way of thinking already assumed by many Greeks and Jews by the time of the first century of the Common Era: namely, the relocation of the concept of purity from the cultic to moral sphere. Purity language comes to express ideas about reason’s control of passion; impurity becomes a matter of passion’s mastery of reason. The association of impurity with passion was so strong for Plutarch, for example, that he actually reverses the relationship between original and transferred meanings. This idea of purity as absence of passion was extended to sex in marriage.

33Musonius Rufus, Fragment 8. Translation is by Cora Lutz, Musonius Rufus: “The Roman Socrates,” Yale Classical Studies 10 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947) 63. See also Ps.-Crates, Epistle 10.2; Epictetus, Diatribai 4.9.3-12; Clement of Alexandria, Christ the Educator 2.2.31.1-3; Galen, De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis 4.6.8.

34Galen, De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis 5.3.23.

35Plutarch, De virtute moral 445B; Stobaeus, Florilegium 3.10.66.

36For εὐσκημοσύνη as self-control in sexual contexts, see Ps.-Musonius, Epistle 1.4; Theano, Epistle 5.3; Ptolemaeus, Tetrabiblos 162, 173.

37Ps.-Crates, Epistle 10.2; Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers 1.103; Philo, On Giants 34-39.

38See Will Deming, Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7, SNTS 83 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995) 206-207. For the philosophic tradition, see Musonius Rufus, Fragment 12; Clement of Alexandria, Christ the Educator 2.10.97.2; Epictetus, Diatribai 4.9.5; Philo, Allegorical Interpretation 3.158; On the Decalogue 168-169; Ps.-Phocylides, Sentences 67; Plutarch, Amatorius 751E; Ps.-Lucian, Affairs of the Heart 28; Achilles Tatius, The Adventures of Leucippe and Cleitophon 1.9.1.


40For this development in Jewish sources, see van der Horst, The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides, 258-260. See further Testament of Joseph 4.6; Testament of Benjamin 6.5; 8.2; Testament of Reuben 6.1-2; Testament of Issachar 4.4; Epistle of Aristeus, 152.

41Plutarch, Fragment 47. See also Philo, Allegorical Interpretation 3.138-139, 141-142, 150; On the Cherubim 95; That the Worse Attacks the Better 102-103; On the Special Laws 1.148-150, 258-261; 3.208-209; Epictetus, Diatribai 2.8.14; 3.22.19; 93; 4.11.3-5.

42Philo, That the Worse Attacks the Better 167-174; Musonius Rufus, Fragment 3, 12; Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies 2.23.145.1; Christ the Educator 2.10.100.4; Ptolemaeus, Tetrabiblos 67, 187.
WHAT’S SO BAD ABOUT DESIRE?

Desire is unnatural. Like Paul in 1 Thess 4:5, a number of ancient writers condemned desire (ἐπιθυμία) in sex, even in the context of marriage. Clement of Alexandria’s opinion was typical: “A man who marries for the sake of begetting children must practice continence so that it is not desire he feels for his wife, whom he ought to love, and that he beget children with a chaste and controlled will.”43 Desire was one of the four major types of passion, along with grief, fear, and pleasure (and sometimes anger).44 When Paul uses the term ἐπιθυμία in 1 Thess 4:5 the notion of Eros is not far away. Erotic love was thought to be a kind of desire.45 It began in desire,46 and could be characterized as the “runaway movement of the desiderative power.”47 Furthermore, by coordinating ἐπιθυμία with ῥόθος, Paul shows that he was aware of an important classification system of sexual desire in the philosophic tradition.48 The first type is “natural desire,” put forward by Aristotle in analogy with the moderate consumption of food. The second type of sexual desire is understood as if it were excess in the quantity consumed.49 Epicurus proposed a more complex categorization of pleasures: the natural and necessary; the natural but unnecessary; the empty or unnatural and unnecessary.50 Sexual desire was placed in the second category; yet, when this desire becomes excessive, it moves into the third.51 Thus,
for a significant number of ancient thinkers, including Paul, since erotic desire is insatiable, it is “against nature.”

Paul’s discourse about marriage could have been, and in the centuries after him would be, tweaked ever so slightly to transform it into an argument for asceticism. Indeed, his exhortation to the married males in the church of Thessaloniki to engage in passionless sex with their wives is the next to the last stop before celibacy. Paul and many of his early orthodox interpreters got off the train at passionless sex, glad that the philosophers had provided for this stopping point and apprehensive of those who wanted to go all the way to abstinence.

It may at first be rather disorienting to read these two verses from 1 Thessalonians that refuse to be co-opted by promoters of either heterosexual marriage or church hierarchy. First Thess 4:4-5 is not about later historical periods’ obsessions with the asymmetrical complementarity of male and female union (the Protestant dream) or about absolute ecclesial authority (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and some Lutherans). Rather, Paul briefly alludes to a familiar debate in Greco-Roman philosophical circles concerning the role of passion in the life of the ideal male. This earliest piece of Christian moral teaching shows the continuity between Paul and elite, male concern for the management of bodily resources and the preservation of personal honor. The philosophical morality that expressed this widespread concern can be reduced to a motto: “Correct use.” Using food, using clothing, using sex—all could be done correctly, or naturally, if done without (or with a minimum amount of) passion.

By first-century standards, Paul provided an adequate ethic of marriage. It is doubtful, however, that those of us who care deeply about marriage today will want to ask Paul to guide us, at least if we have only his direct treatments on the topic to work with. Values central to marriage today in many areas of the West—values like equality, friendship, and mutual openness—need to be reaffirmed, but we must face up to the fact that they are not present in Paul’s marriage ethic itself, which devotes itself exclusively to the management of the ideal male’s body. This does not mean that they cannot be theologically defended. They most certainly can be on various biblical grounds and in terms of human reason. They might even be defended by returning to Pauline theology, particularly in his high esteem for φιλία and yes, even ἐρως, when it comes to describing key relations: God and Christ, God and the world, and Christ and believers. But this is another story.

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52 See S. Lilja, Homosexuality in Republican and Augustan Rome, Commentationes Humanarum Litteratum 74 (Helsinki: Societas Scientarum Fennica, 1982) 124-125; Brown, Lucretius on Love and Sex, 107, 229-231.