

‘Glorify God in your bodies’: 1 Corinthians 6, 12—20 as a sexual ethic

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“‘All things are lawful for me,’ but not all things are helpful’ (v. 12). The Corinthians have a sexual ethic which starts from the question, ‘What is allowed? What may I do?’. And doubtless they could quote Paul back to himself to show that since they were free from the law, they could do anything; ‘For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery’ (Galatians 5:1). It follows, then, that there can be no restrictions upon what is permitted to the Christian. We are allowed to perform any sexual acts that we wish.

Paul’s reaction is not to revise his view that we are not under the Law but to suggest that asking what is permissible is not the right starting point. A proper sexual ethics is not, in the first place, about what is lawful, but about what is ‘helpful’. In this passage Paul subverts the Corinthians’ basic presuppositions in thinking about sexual ethics. Two thousand years later most Catholics need to submit to the same gentle subversion. The Church’s teaching on sexuality is normally seen in terms of what is allowed or forbidden; sexual ethics are classified as ‘permissive’ or ‘restrictive’, and the Church authorities are usually happy to oblige by stating the limits of acceptable behaviour. We all need to submit to the Pauline therapy, and this works, like any decent therapy, by means of a dialogue between the patient and the therapist. All New Testament scholars agree that much of 1. Cor. 6:12—20 is Paul quoting from the Corinthians, but unfortunately they cannot agree where to put the quotation marks!¹ This seems to be a plausible reconstruction of the therapeutic dialogue.

All things are lawful to me

But not all things are helpful

All things are lawful for me

But I will not be enslaved by anything.

Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food and God will destroy both one and the other.

The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never. Do you know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, 'The two shall become one flesh'. But he who is united with the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun immorality.

Every sin² which a man commits is outside the body.

The immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

The dialogue then moves off in a much less fashionable direction, which we will not bother to follow. Some people at Corinth have clearly decided that it is therefore much better to avoid sex altogether.

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote, 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman',

but because of the temptation to immorality each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband etc.

It may seem curious to have extreme promiscuity and asceticism, everything and nothing being permitted, coexisting in the same community, but it is a common conjunction. Irenaeus tells us that we can find the same polarisation within gnosticism a century later among the spiritual descendants of these Corinthians. Both extremes derive from the same despising of the body. If the body is unimportant one can either deduce that everything is permitted or nothing allowed. But Paul's starting point for a sexual ethic is different. We must ask what is 'helpful'.

'Helpfulness' seems to offer us a merely utilitarian criterion, but the English translation disguises the rich resonances of the Greek verb, *sumphero*. It means literally 'to bring together', as when, in Acts 19:19, the magicians bring their books together to burn them. What is 'helpful' is what knits the body of Christ together into unity, what brings us together in Christ. And it is no coincidence that Paul's sexual ethic starts with what 'brings together' since for him it is our bodiliness that enables us to be together. It is as bodily that we can be with each other. So the opening move away from the question of what is permissible to what brings together (*sumpherei*) is simply a consequence of his understanding of human sexuality.

Herbert McCabe wrote in a recent article, 'The ordinary way in which you are conscious of being bodily, conscious of "having a body", is being conscious of it as your way of being present to the world. Your body is first of all a means of communication and indeed it is the source of all others forms of communication.'³ McCabe was not in fact talking about what Paul meant by the human body, but his remarks give an insight into the common purpose which unites the bewildering variety of ways in which Paul uses the word 'body'. It is the possibility of mutual presence, and a proper sexual ethic is one which respects that potentiality. J. Christiaan Beker isolates three distinct ways in which Paul believes we can be 'bodily'.⁴ In the 'era of sin', before the coming of Christ, we had 'the body of sin', we lived in 'the flesh'. But when Paul talks about 'the sinful flesh' he is not suggesting that there is anything inherently sinful about being bodily. He is just suggesting that our unredeemed ways of living, of being bodily, went with a rejection of the other, the refusal of mutual presence. In that sense to live 'in the flesh' is to fail to be bodily in the proper sense of the word. It is 'unhelpful'; it does not 'bring together'. So he writes to the Galatians: 'Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like' (5:19).

Another sense in which Paul can talk of our 'bodiliness' is when he holds out the hope for a risen body, 'the body of glory', 'the spiritual body'. In Chapter 15 we discover that the Corinthians seem to have

found it unnecessary to believe in the resurrection of the body. It would have seemed to them to be a contradiction in terms. Salvation was salvation—release—from the body. But Paul, on the contrary, sees the resurrection as the raising of the body in glory and power (15:43); it is the flourishing of the body, the realisation of its potentiality for presence. Our present condition, the context for a sexual ethic, is described by Paul as living in ‘the mortal body’ (*soma thneton*). It is the state of being in which we can choose whether to open ourselves up or close ourselves in. Beker says, ‘The “mortal body” expresses our historical existence “between the times”; we are no longer the “body of sin” and we do not have yet the “spiritual body”’. The multivalent contextual meaning of the term “mortal body” yields a rich meaning: the Spirit indeed operates in the mortal body, so that we can glorify and worship God in our “bodies” (1. Cor. 6:20; Rom. 12:1), whereas at the same time the body is subject to death, decay, weakness and can even become synonymous with “the flesh” (2. Cor. 4:11)’.⁵ So our present way of being bodily is essentially ambivalent. We can be bodily in a way that is open, spiritual, that prefigures the glorious body of the resurrection. Or we can slip back into being bodily in fleshly ways, egocentric, closed in, devouring one another. And we find the way to life not by asking what is lawful, permissible, but by asking what ‘*sumpherei*’, what ‘brings together’, knits into unity.

The fundamental mistake that underlies the Corinthian position is shown by the next interchange in the therapy. The Corinthians say: ‘Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food and God will destroy both the one and the other’. Paul’s reply reflects the structure but subverts the presuppositions of the Corinthian statement: ‘The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord, and will also raise us up by his power’. Murphy O’Connor has argued that the Corinthian slogan is supposed to show just how absurd is the whole idea of the resurrection of the body. The body cannot be the sphere of important moral decisions; it is essentially ethically irrelevant, since the whole thing will rot in the grave, eyes, heart, stomach and all. One’s whole bodiliness belongs to an order that is passing away.

Paul opposes this, but not by standing up for the spiritual stature of the stomach. He would agree that the food and the stomach are going to be destroyed. He never argues for a resurrected stomach or a glorious kidney or a spiritual liver. In itself what we eat and drink is without importance, except in so far as it upsets or scandalises our brethren. A couple of chapters later he says, ‘Food will not commend us to God. We are not better off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. Only take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak’ (8:8f). So what you eat cannot be in itself of importance, except in

so far as one might neglect the charity owed to one's brother or sister. Thus far Paul would broadly agree with the Corinthians. The mistake that they make is in thinking of the body as just a collection of organs, so that to believe in the resurrection of the body is to commit yourself to the resurrection of a whole collection of bits and pieces. But we have argued that this is not how Paul understood our bodiliness. It is a mode of presence. It may be true that in this 'mortal body' we can only be present to each other if we are in the happy possession of a stomach, but it is not the possession of a stomach as such that makes us bodily. And it is as those who are able to be present to each other that we are open to the life of the Spirit and await the resurrection. So over and against the Corinthian co-ordinates of food/stomach/destruction, Paul gives us body/Lord/resurrection. Herbert McCabe has pointed out that the Corinthians have identified the ways in which the words 'stomach' and 'body' operate.⁶ But stomach is a word that operates only univocally, on one level. When we apply it to things that are not bulges in the middle of our bodies, then we can only do so metaphorically, as when the Latins talked about Rome as the 'stomach' of the Empire. But 'body' is a word that one can use analogically; it operates on many different levels of meaning, from the 'body of sin' to the 'glorious body'. So it is not just a metaphor to talk of ourselves as being the 'body of Christ': 'Do you know that your bodies are members of Christ?'

So far Paul has been trying to sharpen our sense of what it might mean to be bodily, the proper context for any ethics. He now goes on to draw the consequences for a sexual morality:

Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never. Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, 'The two shall become one flesh'. But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun immorality.

It is not clear why these Christian Corinthians had such an enthusiasm for sleeping with prostitutes. They may have been libertarians who celebrated their Christian freedom by visiting the brothels, or ascetics who satisfied their lusts while preserving the purity of their wives. In any case, they seem to have believed that to sleep with a prostitute was not in itself a particularly significant act. That is the meaning of their slogan, which is mistranslated in the RSV, 'Every sin which a man commits is outside the body'. In other words, sin cannot be a matter of what one does with one's body, but one's mind. Murphy O'Connor expresses it thus: 'The physical body is morally irrelevant for sin takes place on an entirely different level of one's being. In the words of R.M. Grant "Motives, not actions, are important"'.⁷ And Paul's reply gives us the heart of his sexual ethic. 'The immoral man sins against his own body'.

To be bodily is to be capable of giving yourself to someone; it is the possibility of mutual presence. To sleep with someone is to realise that possibility; it is to make a gift of oneself. And this is true regardless of one's motives or intentions. To sleep with a prostitute is to become truly one with her, one flesh. 'Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two shall become one flesh"'. So, for Paul, to sleep with a prostitute is to sin against one's own body because it is a negation of our bodiliness as the means of communication. It is an untruthful act; we become one with someone with whom we have no intention of sharing our lives. So what is at issue is not what is permissible or forbidden, but what the act means in and of itself. Paul's sexual ethic starts from the belief that, whatever one may intend or think or feel, one does in fact make a radical self-gift, become one body, when one sleeps with someone. A proper sexual ethic is one that helps one to live by the truth of what one does with one's body.

1 Corinthians is an exploration of what it means for us to live together in the body of Christ, the church, and so it is not surprising that Paul frequently refers to two of the most important bodily expressions of unity, food and sex. And these two threads intertwine significantly at the centre of the letter, Paul's discussion of the eucharist, the common meal which is the gift of a body. But the mistake that the Corinthians seem to have made was to identify the ways in which food and sex expressed and realised our bodiliness. Paul would largely, it seems, have agreed with them when they said that 'food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food and God will destroy both the one and the other'. What you ate and drank was not *in itself* important, except in so far as it built up or destroyed the community. But sex is not a matter of the sexual organs in just the same way as food is a matter for the stomach. One could not say that 'sex is for the genitals and the genitals for sex, and God will destroy both the one and the other'. Sleeping with someone does not just symbolise or express a unity. It *is* being one with them. If being bodily is being present to someone, then one's sexuality is the realisation of one's bodiliness in a way that eating is not. If one sits in a Wimpy bar and eats a hamburger in silence beside a stranger, this may be depressing. To casually and silently eat with a stranger may be a failure to express and explore one's common humanity, a lost opportunity, but it is hardly a sin! But it is quite different to casually and silently sleep with a stranger. That is not a failure to use a chance to be one with someone else; it is a lie, for they would be one in a way that is denied for the rest of their lives. Now, sharing the eucharist is, of course, an activity that combines characteristics of eating with people and sleeping with them. Paul attacks the Corinthians for eating and drinking together in a way that expresses disunity and division. But this is not just a regrettable failure of charity,

but a lie, since, as with sex, they are sharing a body: 'Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord' (11:27).

Paul's deep understanding of the significance of human sexuality is shown by how, in the last paragraph of this piece of the dialogue, he appeals to sexual imagery to describe our relationship with Christ:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

The 'body' that is the temple of the Holy Spirit is normally taken to be the individual body of each Corinthian—each of your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. That is a possible interpretation of the Greek if the single 'body' is taken in a distributive sense. But this is unlikely, and for two reasons. First of all, when Paul wishes to talk about their individual bodies in verse 15 he uses the plural form and so it would be curious if he shifted to the singular to mean the same thing four verses later. Secondly, the early church fathers found the Greek of this verse puzzling and when they quote it often change it to the plural. So it seems most plausible to argue that the body that is the temple of the Holy Spirit is the single Body of Christ. The proper context for understanding what it means for us to be sexual, bodily creatures is our membership of the Body of Christ. How we belong to each other sexually has to be discerned in the light of how we are one body in Christ. For the 'body of Christ' is not just a metaphor, as would be the case if it were a word that Paul used univocally, but the fruition of all that it means for us to be bodily and thus sexual. And so he describes our unity with Christ in sexual terms. How can we buy and own a prostitute, when we have been bought by Christ? We are his prostitutes, bought with a price.

The Pauline therapy has gradually shifted one's sense of what it means to be sexual, from sex as merely a bodily function to being the possibility of presence and union with another, and from the context of sexuality as being merely one's individual relationship with another to that of our belonging in the Body of Christ. It is a therapy which aims to heal one, to liberate one from fantasy and illusion. The nearest parallel that I can think of in the Bible is the eighth-century prophet Hosea's reaction to the fertility rites of his contemporaries. The Israelites had been seduced by the Canaanite fertility cult, which centred on the myth of Ba'al's marriage to his sister. This sexual mythology was copied, re-enacted in the rites of the cult which brought fertility to the land. For a strict monotheist like Hosea, this sexual mythology was abominable. But rather than simply rejecting the whole language of sexuality as an appropriate way of talking about our relationship with God, he does

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something far more subtle. If you would be married to your God, then be truly married, not just in the repetition of a myth but in history. Instead of just ritually acting out the loss of fertility, the barrenness of winter, you will live it historically in exile. And when your God comes to restore you and marry you, it will not be just in the annual cult of springtime: 'And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice, in steadfast love and mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord' (2:19f). He redeems the language of the fertility cult by moving beyond the fantasy of sexual mythology to marriage as a real and historical engagement.

The Pauline touchstone of a proper Christian sexual ethics would be whether it heals one of fantasy and helps one to live out historically the truth of one's sexuality. For the typical Western fear of the body still afflicts our society. The apparent obsession with sex is in fact a flight from sexuality in the deepest sense, the gift of oneself to another. It is a fear of engagement that afflicts the *voyeur*, as Susan Griffin has shown so well in her book *Pornography and Silence*: 'These pages will argue that pornography is an expression not of human erotic feeling and desire, not of a love of the life of the body, but of a fear of bodily knowledge, and a desire to silence eros.'⁸ The *voyeur* cannot take the risk of shared life, any continued engagement, with the sex-object; the photographed body, the body in the picture on the wall, is the body that can be controlled totally, that can be observed without the threat of returning the stare. 'Above all the *voyeur* must see and not feel. He keeps a safe distance. He does not perspire and his photographs do not glisten with sweat. He is not touched by reality. And yet, in his mind, he can believe he possess reality. For he has control over these images he makes and he shapes them to his will'.⁹ The *voyeur* represents in an extreme form that flight from vulnerability, the safe refuge in fantasy, that characterizes all unhealed sexuality.

'Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two shall become one flesh"'(v. 16). This suggests that the act of giving your body of itself implies a past and a future. It is a unity that must find expression in a shared history. To be bodily is to live in time. And one reason for the current crisis in sexual morality is that we have a weakened sense of what it means to live in time, and to find the significance of our lives realised not in an instance but in the stretch of a lifetime. This loss of a sense that our lives might have meaning as a whole, a necessary sensitivity if one is to perceive what it might mean to be a sexual being who can give one's body to someone else, has been brilliantly analysed by Alisdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. He points to the way in which

modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behaviour.

So work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal. Both childhood and old age have been wrenched away from the rest of human life and made into distinct realms. And all these separations have been achieved so that it is the distinctiveness of each and not the unity of the life of the individual who passes through those parts in terms of which we are taught to think and to feel.¹⁰

MacIntyre believes that we can only recover a proper sense of who we are and of what is virtuous by regaining some sense of our lives as wholes, which have sense as stories that reach from a birth to a death. 'To ask "What is the good for me?" is to ask how best I might live out that (narrative) unity (of my life) and bring it to completion'.¹¹ And so a proper sense of the sexually appropriate goes with a recovery of an awareness of how we are historical, temporal beings, who can make promises to each other, and so pledge ourselves with our bodies. As Hosea offered his contemporaries release from the merely mythological sexuality of Ba'al and his lover, the timeless repetition of spring and winter, so a proper Pauline sexual ethic heals one of the fantasy of the abstracted moment so that we may live in time together, and so glorify God in our bodies.

- 1 See J. Murphy O'Connor, 'Corinthian Slogans in 1. Cor. 6: 12–20, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 40/3, 1978, pp 391–396.
- 2 This translation of 1. Cor. is taken from the RSV, except that I have changed the location of some of the quotation marks, and altered v. 18, which the RSV gives as 'every other sin'. The Greek is clearly 'every sin'; the RSV alters it presumably because it can make no sense of statement. When, as Murphy O'Connor claims, this is recognised as a Corinthian slogan, then of course it makes perfect sense.
- 3 'A Long Sermon for Holy Week — Part 3: The Easter Vigil: The Mystery of New Life', *New Blackfriars*, April 1986, p. 167.
- 4 in *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*, Edinburgh, 1980, p. 287ff.
- 5 *op. cit.* p. 288.
- 6 An unpublished sermon to which I am deeply indebted.
- 7 *op. cit.*, p. 393.
- 8 *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge against Nature*, London, 1981, p. 1.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 122.
- 10 *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*, London, 1981, p. 190.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 203.