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**An Exegetical Paper on 1 Corinthians 6:12-18**

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## Context

In his account of the early development of the Christian church, Luke dedicates a whole chapter to the formation of the community of Jesus' followers in Corinth (Acts 18). Paul, who was called by God to preach Jesus "among the Gentiles" (Gal 1:15), is presented by Luke as playing a prominent part in this work. Paul planted the community (1 Cor. 3:6), or laid its foundation (3:10). He was to the Corinthians a "father in Christ Jesus" (4:15). Paul claimed that he and his ministry associates "were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ" (2 Cor 10:14). During Paul's one-and-a-half years of ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:11), "many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized" (Acts 18:8).

As former idol-worshipping pagans, they brought to their new way of life a Hellenistic worldview and some distorted views of ethical behavior. Although they believed in Jesus, their lives radically needed to be rearranged. Even after their baptism, their resocialization was incomplete. Their transformation was to be ongoing. Much of Corinthian culture was still in them. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is continuing the process of nurturing new believers immersed in a pagan Roman city influenced by idolatry and sexual immorality.

The ancient city of Corinth was deeply religious, yet one in which sexual immorality flourished. Its history is obscure until the early 8th-century b.c. when the city-state of Corinth began to develop as a commercial center.<sup>1</sup> Corinth's independence ended in 338 b.c. when it came under Macedonian control. It came into conflict with Rome and was destroyed by the Roman consul Lucius Mummius in 146 b.c. Its citizens were killed or sold into slavery. Corinth lay in ruins for one hundred years until it was refounded in 44 b.c. by Julius Caesar as a Roman

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<sup>1</sup> The chief source of Corinth's wealth was its possession of the isthmus, which controlled: (1) The land traffic between the Attica Peninsula (where Athens is located) and the Peloponnese; and (2) The sea traffic between the Aegean and Ionian seas by way of the Corinthian and Saronic gulfs.

colony.<sup>2</sup> The new Corinth flourished and became the administrative capital of the Roman province of Achaëa in 27 b.c.<sup>3</sup> Greek was the language on the streets, while Latin was the language in public spaces (courts).

Corinth was a strategic juncture for commerce and travel, located 48 miles west of Athens on a narrow isthmus between the Aegean and Adriatic Seas. The remains of the ancient city of Corinth lie just north of Acrocorinth.<sup>4</sup> Corinth had harbors on the two gulfs that surround it: (1) Lechaëum on the Gulf of Corinth (two miles to the northwest) and (2) Cenchreæ on the Saronic Gulf (six miles to the southeast).<sup>5</sup> Because the voyage around the southern tip of Greece (Peloponnesus peninsula) was dangerous, many ships were carried or dragged on rollers on a five-mile stone roadway (*diolkos*) between the Corinthian and Saronic gulfs across the isthmus and put to sea again.<sup>6</sup>

Historians estimate that Corinth had between fifty and one hundred thousand residents in the mid-first century a.d. Its diverse population consisted of retired soldiers, freedmen from Rome, Jewish merchants, Greeks, Egyptians, Parthians, Syrians, Asians, Ethiopians, etc. Thousands of artisans and slaves made up the bulk of the population. Only 2-5% were wealthy, while 95% lived in abject poverty. The wealthy lived in *villas* (typically country Roman houses

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<sup>2</sup> After 44 bc, Corinth was repopulated by freedmen from Rome and Roman government officials and businessmen. It was also made up of local Greeks and orientals, including a large number of Jews.

<sup>3</sup> Modern Corinth, three miles northeast of the site of ancient Corinth, near the gulf, was founded in 1858 after the ancient site was abandoned because of a severe earthquake.

<sup>4</sup> Acrocorinth is the acropolis (*acro*=summit + *polis* = city) of Corinth. It is a monolithic rock overseeing the ancient city of Corinth. It rose about 1,800 feet into the southern sky.

<sup>5</sup> The city was connected with its principal port, Lechaëum. Immediately behind the south stoa began the road leading to the city's other port of Cenchreæ, on the Saronic Gulf.

<sup>6</sup> Several attempts to build a canal were unsuccessful. Periander the tyrant (c. 625–585 b.c.), who built the *diolkos* across the isthmus for the transfer of ships and cargo, planned to breach the isthmus. Emperor Nero began the project, but a canal was not completed until 1893.

for wealthy people built in the times of the Republic and the Empire), while the poor lived in *insulae* (multi-level apartment dwellings crammed together in several parts of town that provided housing for the bulk of the urban populace).

While Corinth was a religious city, with temples, shrines and altars all over the city, prostitution and sexual immorality also flourished. The priestesses of the temple of Aphrodite on Acrocorinth, known as the *hierodouloi* (“sacred slaves”), engaged in prostitution. Richard Hays observes that “prostitution was not only legal; it was a widely accepted social convention.”<sup>7</sup>

In Greco-Roman society, there was a double standard regarding the sexual behavior of men and women. According to Charles Talbert, “the sexual latitude allowed to men by Greek public opinion was virtually unrestricted. Sexual relations of males with both boys and harlots were generally tolerated.”<sup>8</sup> Extramarital sex for men was not considered shameful, except among the Stoics. Demosthenes, a famous Greek orator in ancient Athens, said, “Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children.”<sup>9</sup>

There was incredible diversity among Jesus’ followers in Corinth. Paul points out that among the Corinthian Christians, there were Jews, Greeks, slaves, free, etc. (1 Cor 12:13). Among the Jews were Aquila, Priscilla and Crispus. There were Romans such as Fortunatus, Quartus, Gaius, and Titius Justus. There were wealthier members like Gaius, Stephanus, Titius Justus and Erastus. There were Greeks such as Stephanas, Achaicus and Erastus.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 102.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc, 2002), 32.

<sup>9</sup> Demosthenes with an English translation by Norman W. DeWitt, Ph.D., and Norman J. DeWitt, Ph.D. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1949.

The bulk of the congregation was made up of non-elite, poorer members of society (1 Cor 1:26). The way Paul speaks of their former way of life suggests that the bulk of the congregation was non-Jewish (6:10–11; 8:7; 12:2). There is general agreement among scholars that by the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, there was more than one gathering of Jesus' followers in Corinth of varying sizes.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus and sent it through Stephanus (1 Cor 16:8, 16-18). This letter was not a theological treatise, but an occasional letter rooted in missional circumstances surrounding Jesus' followers in Corinth. Paul wrote this letter in response to information he received from "Chloe's household" (1 Cor 1:11; cf 5:1; 11:18). Paul heard that there was serious dissension within the community; sexual immorality (5:1–8; 6:12–20); legal disputes among believers (6:1–11); abuses of the Lord's Supper (11:17–34); and controversies about the resurrection of the dead (15:1–58).

Paul was also responding to questions he received from the Corinthians in a letter they wrote him (1 Cor 7:1): Some of their questions were regarding sex within marriage (7:1b–40); eating meat that had been offered to idols (8:1–11:1); spiritual gifts in the community's worship (12:1–14:40); and Paul's collection for Jerusalem (16:1–4).

### **Exposition**

Having addressed a type of sexual immorality among the Corinthians that even the larger Greco-Roman society considered unlawful (1 Cor 5:1-13), Paul proceeded to deal with the common practice of men having sex with prostitutes in 1 Corinthians 6:12-18. This pericope presents a challenge to Bible readers because it contains, according to many commentators,

several Corinthian slogans, “though there is debate over which of the phrases might represent the Corinthian position.”<sup>10</sup>

Paul uses two Greek words that appear repeatedly in this section— *σῶμα* (*sōma*, “body”) and *πορνεία* (*porneia*, “sexual immorality”). The following word study will focus on the semantic domain<sup>11</sup> of these Greek terms according to their usage in the New Testament. This will involve studying them (1) within 1 Corinthians; (2) within Paul’s other letters; and finally in (3) the New Testament. This will be key to determining what *σῶμα* and *πορνεία* mean within the pericope of 1 Corinthians 6:12-18.

The Greek word *σῶμα* (*sōma*) appears 46 times in 1 Corinthians and is translated body every time in the ESV. Though Paul uses *σῶμα* metaphorically in 1 Corinthians to describe the church (12:13), he understands the word to indicate “the whole person with reference to their physicality.”<sup>12</sup> Paul contrasts *σῶμα* with a shadow, denoting its “substantive reality.”<sup>13</sup> When Luke quotes Jesus’ reference to a human “corpse,” he uses *σῶμα*. *Paul and other New Testament writers seem to reject the platonic view of “the body as that which falls away with death and liberates the soul.”*<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gorman, Michael J. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017) 301.

<sup>11</sup> The semantic domain or range of a word refers to what the word *can* mean in all the contexts where it appears.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathon Lookadoo, “Body,” ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 984.

<sup>14</sup> Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990–), 322.

The Greek word *πορνεία* (*porneia*, “sexual immorality”) relates specifically to the frequenting of prostitutes, but in the New Testament more broadly applies to other sexual sins: homosexual activity, extramarital sex, incest, etc. The Greek *πόρνη* (*pornē*) refers to a woman who offers her body sexually for money—a prostitute (1 Cor 6:15-16; cf Deut 23:17). The Greek *πόρνος* (*pornos*) refers to a man who has sex with a prostitute (1 Cor 6:9). That the problem of *porneia* presented itself more prominently in Corinth is evident by the fact that the word-group *pornē* appears fifteen times in his Corinthian correspondence and six times in his other letters.

Paul begins with a statement that either represents a Corinthian slogan or a Corinthian misunderstanding of what Paul meant by living in freedom from certain Torah-based restrictions. “All things are lawful for me” is repeated twice (**6:12**), with two qualifying statements—“not all things are helpful” and “I will not be dominated by anything.” Though they may be “free” to do anything, is the result profitable? Are they in bondage to the thing they are free to do?

Commentators generally agree that “some men within the Christian community were going to prostitutes and arguing for the right to do so.”<sup>15</sup> That some in Corinth are using this slogan (“all things are lawful”) to justify their practice of having sex with prostitutes will become evident later in the paragraph. Another slogan the Corinthians may have used to defend their “sexual immorality” was that “food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food” (**6:13**). The basis from which the Corinthians have argued that going to prostitutes is permissible is the notion that the body doesn’t matter. After all, “God will destroy both one and the other.” Paul counters their dualistic theology by stating that “the body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.”

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<sup>15</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 276.



Paul continues by giving theological reasons for why the proper treatment of the body matters: (1) “God raised the Lord [in bodily form] and will also raise us by his power” (6:14); (2) furthermore, “your bodies are members of Christ” (6:15); finally, there are spiritual consequences for having sex with prostitutes, since “he who is joined [sexually] to a prostitute becomes one body with her” (6:16). On this latter point, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, which states that husband and wife “become one flesh” when they have sexual intercourse. Paul then states that having sex with prostitutes and being one with the Lord are mutually exclusive, since “he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (6:17).

In 1 Corinthians 6:18a, Paul tells the Corinthians to *φεύγετε τὴν πορνείαν*. In the ESV this command is rendered, “Flee from sexual immorality...” The Greek verb *φεύγω* (*pheugō*, “flee”) is found here in the *present imperative* mood, in the *active voice*, in the *second-person, plural form*—*φεύγετε* (*pheugete*). It could be translated as: “ya’ll should always be fleeing from sexual immorality,” because in the *present imperative*, neither the beginning nor the ending of the action (in this case “fleeing”) is implied.

The imperative mood in Greek will either be found in the present or aorist aspect. Unlike in English, this is not referring to when an action is supposed to happen. The present aspect of the imperative connotes an imperfective action—*don’t be eating those cookies!*; while the aorist connotes a perfective action—*don’t eat those cookies!* The *present imperative* is used if the action is going to continue or be repeated (“keep reading,” “stay optimistic,” “remain positive”), while *the aorist imperative* is often used in cases where the action is going to occur just once (“shut the window,” “eat your food,” “stand up”). In the *aorist imperative*, both the beginning

and completion of the action are implied. Rather than the *orist* aspect, Paul uses the *present* for the verb “flee” in 1 Corinthians 6:18.

Thus the verb φεύγω in 1 Corinthians 6:18 is used as a command to continue an action already being pursued. In other words, the *present* aspect implies a continuation of the action. The action of “fleeing” sexual immorality should be habitually repeated as a pattern of behavior for Jesus’ followers in Corinth. It is a command to keep repeating the act of “fleeing” because the opportunity to have sex with prostitutes was ever-present in Corinth.

Paul and the Corinthians seem to disagree about the moral impact of physical actions involving the body (1 Cor 6:12-17). Some in Corinth, influenced by Greek dualism, still believe that matter was inherently evil and that actions involving the physical body were morally indifferent. The Greek word ἐκτός (*ektos*),<sup>16</sup> used as a preposition in 1 Corinthians 6:18b, has important theological implications for Paul’s point concerning sins in relation to the human body. “Every other sin a person commits is outside [*ektos*] the body...”

Murray Harris exposit 1 Corinthians 6:18 by explaining the significance of *ektos*.<sup>17</sup> He provides some context to the passage by pointing out that “Paul is countering certain libertines at Corinth...” Harris does not adopt the view that 1 Corinthians 6:18b is a Corinthian slogan,

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<sup>16</sup> It is used eight times in the New Testament. It is formed from the words ἐκ + τός. The word ἐκ means “out of,” while the suffix τός creates verbal adjectives of possibility, either active or passive. *Ektos* is mostly used as an adverb, such as in Matthew 23:26, “You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside [*ektos*] also may be clean” or in 1 Timothy 5:19, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except [*ektos*] on the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

<sup>17</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference Resource for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 255-257.

though there are Corinthian slogans, such as “I am free to do anything” (6:12, NEB), in the immediate context.<sup>18</sup>

Paul’s goal in this pericope is to point out that committing *πορνείαν* (*porneia*), unlike smoking tobacco, drinking alcohol, gluttony, or drug abuse, etc., is a sin against one’s own body. Not that these pernicious habits don’t do physical damage to our bodies. Science has demonstrated that they do a great deal of damage, but as Jesus said, what is ingested by the mouth has no power to morally defile a person (Matt 15:11, 17). What causes physical harm indeed has an impact on the whole person. For example, alcohol impairs judgment, which will indirectly impact moral character through the decisions made under the influence. Paul himself believed that “nothing is unclean in itself” (Rom. 14:14). But for Paul, *porneia* seems to be unique.

Harris points out that “when Paul affirms that any and every sin, apart from sexual immorality, is ‘outside the body’ (*ἐκτὸς τοῦ σώματος*), he means that all other sins do not [directly] involve the whole person, *σῶμα* and *πνεῦμα*, as the sexual act uniquely does...For Paul, *the uniqueness of sexual sin* resided in the fact that its stain on the personality as a repudiation of God’s intent for sexual relations was deep and permanent. That is, it adversely affects the character more severely than all other transgressions, and it is irreversibly damaging in its effects. Paul saw the sexual act as more than an outward physical encounter involving only bodily organs. It is an outward and inward personal bonding, involving both body and spirit, a reciprocal communication between two individuals on both a physical and a spiritual plane. To

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<sup>18</sup> Since the Greek manuscripts do not contain quotation marks, it is hard to determine exactly what were the Corinthian slogans. Thus differences of opinion exist among scholars.

be joined to a prostitute was to become not only ἐν σῶμα or μία σὰρξ with her (v. 16) but in some real sense ἐν πνεῦμα with her (v. 17).<sup>19</sup>

According to Richard Hays, some believers in Corinth were “going to prostitutes and contending that such conduct was harmless.”<sup>20</sup> Paul addresses this thinking by pointing out that the generally true statement that “sin is committed outside the body” does not apply to *porneia*. Paul is strongly admonishing the Corinthians to abandon the dualist idea that the physical body is unimportant.

In 1 Corinthians 6:12-18, Paul “challenges ancient and modern claims suggesting that human beings...have inalienable rights to the control and use of their bodies and to the sexual practices of their choosing.”<sup>21</sup> The universal principle that is communicated here is that what Christians do with their bodies matters. While he was dealing specifically with the practice of having sex with prostitutes, Paul’s teachings apply more broadly to drug and alcohol abuse, gluttony or any form of extramarital sex. Paul concluded this section by saying, “You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body (1 Cor 6:20). And later in the letter, he stated, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31).

Another important lesson drawn from Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 6:12-18 has to do with the emotional bond between two people who are sexually involved. While for many, sexual intercourse is purely a physical act, according to Paul “he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her” (1 Cor 6:16). He goes on to explain that in the same way, “he who is joined

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<sup>19</sup> Murray J. Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament: An Essential Reference Resource for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 257

<sup>20</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 102.

<sup>21</sup> Gorman, Michael J. *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2017) 301.

to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (1 Cor 6:17). Having sex with multiple partners not only places a person at risk for acquiring sexually transmitted diseases, sexual promiscuity also has long-term emotional and psychological effects.

In 1 Corinthians 6:18, Paul uses the Greek verb φεύγω (“flee”). In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, φεύγω appears four times in Genesis 39. Potiphar’s wife tries to sexually seduce Joseph, but rather than giving in to her, he “fled [ἔφυγεν] and got out of the house” (Gen 39:12). Some scholars believe that Paul had this incident in mind when he admonished the Corinthians to φεύγετε (*pheugete*) sexual immorality. For example, Richard B. Hays sees “a possible echo here of the story of Joseph’s fleeing from Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39:12), which became proverbial in Jewish tradition for resistance to the lure of sexual immorality.”<sup>22</sup>

Christians are to “flee” from sexual immorality with the same intensity and resolution that Joseph had when fleeing from Potiphar’s wife. Paul uses the same verb later to encourage Christians against “idolatry” (1 Cor 10:14). As Jesus said in his sermon on the mount, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away” (Matt 5:29-30). Drastic measures sometimes have to be taken to eliminate the source of sin in our lives. For the one struggling with pornography addiction, eliminating the smartphone may be the way to fulfill Paul’s admonition to “flee” or Jesus’ command to “tear” out the right eye and “cut” off the right hand.

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<sup>22</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 105.

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