

**The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
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1 Corinthians

**III. 1 Corinthians 5:1-6:20
Sex and Courts**

After Paul's reflection on the significance of the Cross of Christ and his, perhaps defensive remarks on himself and the missionary Apollos, he turns to specific problems that vex the Corinthian community. The issues that Paul confronts appear to be very specific and reflect first-century conditions. The way in which he deals with those issues may, however, be instructive for contemporary Christians.

The first problem that Paul confronts is a matter of sexual ethics. A man is in a relationship with his step-mother (5:1), an arrangement that the Corinthians apparently find acceptable, but Paul finds problematic. His objections to the arrangement lead him to urge the community to expel the man involved, to "hand him over to Satan" (v. 5). As often Paul immediately qualifies his recommendation by indicating that it does not mean general dissociation from society (vv 9-12). That may be comforting to a contemporary audience, but what of Paul's basic admonition to expel the offender? It was probably based on teachings in the Book of Leviticus that prohibited sexual relations between people within certain degrees of kinship with one another (Leviticus 18, especially v. 8). Those regulations were meant to preserve the "holiness" of the people of Israel.

After dealing with the matter of sexual behavior that Paul finds objectionable, he turns to another that apparently has been reported to him. Members of the Corinthian community are actually going to civil court to redress grievances (6:1). Paul finds this fact scandalous and urges his addressees to find ways to adjudicate disputes among themselves (6:7). Even more basically, he finds it a scandal that members of his community should have lawsuits against one another at all (6:7). He admonishes them not to have any wrongdoers among themselves and lists various categories of sinners (6:9-11). Most of the elements of that list would stir little controversy today, although two (NRSV: "male prostitutes, sodomites") have often been translated to support negative judgments on any same-sex relations.

In concluding this reflection on sex and law, Paul returns to foundational principles of a very specifically Christian sort (6:13-20), and probably reflects debates that are happening within the Corinthian community. He begins by balancing two principles, “all things may be lawful.” He is perhaps citing a claim made by the man who was in a relationship with his step-mother. His next phrase, “but not all things are beneficial,” introduces a consideration that he will constantly put before the Corinthians. Their existence as the “body of Christ” is a fundamental value that must be preserved. Corresponding to that social value is a personal one that Paul now highlights. The bodies of the Corinthians are temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19), making them incompatible with sexual immorality. Bodies and what we do with them matter very much for Paul, perhaps in contrast to some in the community who have a very exalted notion of the human soul or spirit, liberated from bodily constraints. Paul concludes with the admonition to “glorify God in your bodies.”

Questions for Discussion:

1. Was Paul’s recommendation that a member of the congregation be expelled justifiable?
2. Is the category of “holiness,” which may have motivated Paul’s judgment, something that makes sense today? If so, what does it mean? Should the Christian community be concerned to be “holy.”
3. Are there grounds on which you would want to exclude a member of your congregation? If so, what would they be?

4. What do you make of Paul's insistence on the relevance of the "body" for the moral and spiritual life? In what ways does modern society challenge or support that claim?

For further study:

Adela Y. Collins, "The Function of 'Excommunication' in Paul,"
Harvard Theological Review, 73 (1980), 251-67.