

oiJ loJgoi tav Pau:loi provV tav Korinqiotav!

BY: ERIK JAMES FREIBURGER

“FOR WORDS, LIKE NATURE, HALF REVEAL
AND HALF CONCEAL THE SOUL WITHIN.”

ALFRED TENNYSON

INTRODUCTION

“But words are words; I never yet did hear, That the bruised heart was pierced through the ear.” William Shakespeare’s elegant poetics bring to life the true nature and power behind the words to which any writer is aware. The Apostle Paul is of no doubt just as pierced as his readers were to the heart in his first letter to the Corinthians. 1 Corinthians is meant to stir the soul and create a response of a great apologetic attitude to which can only be understood through his original words and not just a translational perspective. For this reason we hope to explore Paul’s use of the Greek language and what he intended in the meaning of 1 Corinthians 6:9-20.

MEANINGS AND INTERPRETATIONAL ARGUMENTS

There have been a certain number of translational arguments behind the passage of 1 Corinthians 6:9-20 throughout history. The debate around this passage is usually centered around three principles of thought. First is the exploration as to the source of Paul’s vices listed in verses 9 and 10. Secondly is his use of scriptural rhetoric and his intentions behind it. And thirdly is the overall meaning and intent of 1 Corinthians 6:9-20.

It has been a goal of many scholars to try and identify where Paul formulated the vices which he lists in verse 9 and 10 specifically with the intent of finding those sources outside of the Jewish historical setting. In one such a case William Thiselton writes that, “in 1932 B.S. Easton argued that the ‘catalogues’ were primarily derived from the Stoics and their list of virtues. In 1936 A Vogtle traveled further along the same road, interpreting the list in terms of a successive expansion of

Plato's cardinal virtues (and their opposites) first by Stoics and then especially by those strands in Hellenistic Judaism which utilized Stoic thought."¹

In response it seems quick to assume Paul's ethic was shaped by Stoic philosophy particularly in light of his argument and debate with them in Acts 17:16-34. The Corinthians also being a Greek people would already perhaps be influenced by Stoic principles leaving them in the moral decay in which Paul is combating and refuting against.

The theory of Stoic philosophy influencing Paul's moral concepts also does not seem to give credit to Paul's training as a pharisaic Jew (Phil. 3:5) nor to the historicity of the Jewish faith and nation. It is more reasonable to assume Paul's ethic was shaped by Jewish tradition and Old Testament literature with the spiritual consideration that he was now a Christian and responsive to the gospels and the teachings of Christ.

Rhetorical elements were also very prevalent in Paul's writing and often a center of controversy and discussion in a scholarly context. In this passage specifically Paul uses a series of eight rhetorical questions of "[h] oujk oi]date o}ti...u]mw:n" translated as "do you not know that" (1 Cor. 3:16; 5:6; 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16), which is meant to humiliate their pride in sin. Ben Witherington makes the point, "All these rhetorical questions are meant to shame the Corinthians into seeing their real moral condition and to deflate their unwarranted pride."² It is a constructive criticism meant to return the church members to a corrective action within their lifestyle.

This same rhetorical use is Paul's attempt to build a Christian ethic upon these Corinthianized sayings. It is a process where he doesn't directly refute their meaning but rather redirects their intent to a constructive manner. Hence he moves from "I am allowed to do anything..." to an attitude that recognizes "Not everything is good for you." (1 Cor. 6:12) It seems especially significant to note that Paul's use of this rhetorical criticism contradicts the earlier argument that Paul uses Greek philosophic principles to shape his ethic. Paul is actually combating the Corinthians Hellenistic use of

¹ Thielton, Anthony C. (N.I.G.T.C.: The First Epistle to the Corinthians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.) Page 440.

freedom (“I am allowed to do anything”) with a proper view of a constructive ethic shaped outside of Greek philosophy.

Perhaps less noted by scholars is the debate around Paul’s use of a rhetorical element in a larger over all picture of scripture with his use of the word “naovV” often translated as the word temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 3:12) and the apostles connecting it to the living essence of what a Christian is. It seems relevant to recognize the apostle’s continual connection of the Christian life with the perspective of a temple to the Holy Spirit.

In the exegesis of the word naovV it is a noun meant to be defined as temple, the inner part of a Jewish temple, a sanctuary, or the model of a temple or shrine. The diversity of this interpretation demands the context of its use individually looked at within each passage it is found. In 1 Cor. 6:19 the plural use of “uJmi:n” translated “all of you” unites the Christian community as a whole, rendering the translational use of “nao;V” (temple) applicable with the expectation that each individual would be seen as part of that temple of the Holy Spirit and equally responsible to care for one another accordingly. As Thiselton comments, “The universal presence of images of the deities in Graeco-Roman temples would have made the principle more vivid to first century readers.”³ In the expansion of that thought the image of the temple would have also been seen as in the first century they were not localized to one structure and could have a diverse number of placements making up the temple as a whole.

With this understanding of the use of the noun naovV it seems Paul’s intent was to expand the Corinthians ethic beyond sexual responsibility to also encompass a responsibility to care for one another holistically. This ethic gave the Corinthians an accountability of caring for one another physically in health and fitness, psychologically in intellectual stimulus and emotional support, and in spiritual construction through the practice of rightful worship to God through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and scripture.

² Witherington III, Ben. (Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.) Page 164.

The last debate scholars often focus around is the over all intent of this passage and Paul's reason for writing it. Specifically it seems accepted that Paul's intent was in addressing a man in the church who is going to prostitutes which may be closely connected to the contexts addressed also in chapter 7 where Paul continues to form a Christian ethical view of sexuality. In support of this Witherington writes, "Paul is trying to establish both a Christian view of the importance of the human body in the order of redemption and the practical implications of an eschatological world view for present sexual conduct. He continues to address his audience's view of human sexuality and their aberrant theology of salvation in Ch. 7."⁴

More specifically in this passage Paul's intent was of the acts of homosexual pederasty to which this man was conducting. Verse nine's use of the word "malakoi" and "arsenokoitai" were used to illustrate the act of homosexual pederasty even though most translations seem to down grade the vice to simple homosexuality. Witherington again notes, "The two terms refer respectively, then, to the leading and following partners in a homosexual pederastic tryst."⁵ This action is more defined by the man engaging in homosexual acts with children or youth rather than just the understanding of adult homosexuality.

From this understanding, contemporarily there has been an argument raised that Paul is only condemning pederastic homosexuality as a whole. An argument which scholars have often attempted to support by using this passage as an example to defend adult homosexuality (Scroggs and Boswell)⁶ however this is not the case. As Ben Witherington points out, "If this were the only passage where Paul addressed the issue, one could argue in that way. But Rom. 1:26f. clearly shows Paul's view of

³ Thiselton, Anthony C. (N.I.G.T.C.: The First Epistle to the Corinthians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.) Page 474.

⁴ Witherington III, Ben. (Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.) Page 164.

⁵ Witherington III, Ben. (Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.) Page 166.

⁶ Thiselton, Anthony C. (N.I.G.T.C.: The First Epistle to the Corinthians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.) Page 441.

homosexual relationships in general. The reference there to lesbian relationships shows that Paul's condemnation of same sex relationships is not limited to pederasty."⁷

On a personal note, it seems exceptionally offensive that scholars who place supportive roles in this argument are limiting themselves to singular passages of scripture simply to defend their own collective opinions rather than seeking a truthful response to which Paul addresses over all scripture. Perhaps, this practice itself is a modern element of "Corinthianizing" Paul's writings in an attempt to say "I am allowed to do anything." (1 Cor. 6:12) A response to which Paul was truly addressing in this passage and has already been previously discussed.

CONCLUSION

Over all 1 Corinthians 6:9-20 may be filled with academic debate such as the exploration as to the source of Paul's vices, his use of scriptural rhetoric, and the seeking of the over all meaning and intent of the passage but, it cannot be denied that it is a passage which addresses all hearers and commands a response within our relationship to Christ Jesus.

Paul's letters to the Corinthians in conclusion fit a context which did more than simply communicate Christian principles and thought. They were words of power and influence which whether read in a public setting, closely whispered between friends, or just gazed at by the personal reader would stir the soul, pierce the heart, and inspire us to live life to its fullest potential.

⁷ Witherington III, Ben. (Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.) Page 166.

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