



Whitefield BRIEFING

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Paul's Pastoral Paradigm for Civil Partnerships

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What would the apostle Paul have done had he received the following 'pastoral statement' from the House of Bishops while church planting in Corinth?

lay people who have registered civil partnerships ought not to be asked to give assurance about the nature of their relationships before being admitted to baptism, confirmation and communion.¹

Would he have incorporated it into his apostolic traditions to be maintained by the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 11:2), especially as 'ought not to' when translated into Greek would have read that pastors and teachers were under obligation not to ask, i.e. they were precluded from doing so?

Furthermore, would he have agreed with the House of Bishops that

Sexual relationships outside of marriage, whether heterosexual or between people of the same sex, are regarded as falling short of God's purposes for human beings²

and would he also have allowed double standards as they have for those not ordained to the teaching and preaching office of the church and those who are?

the conscientious decision of those who enter into homophile relationships must be respected and that the Church must not 'reject those who sincerely believe it is God's call to them'. Nevertheless, because of 'the distinctive nature of their calling, status and consecration' the clergy 'cannot claim the liberty to enter into sexually active homophile relationships'.³

There may seem to be no other response to the new situation that has been legitimized in the UK this month, than the House of Bishops' recommendation that says, in effect, to see nothing, to say nothing and do nothing.

There is, however, a response based on Paul's pastoral paradigm in 1 Corinthians 6:9-20. It has three great benefits, for it offers

- * a new beginning
- * a set of compelling reasons why Christians who feel their deepest needs have not been met must not embrace the contemporary culture's legitimising of same sex relationships or enter into civil partnerships, and
- * a way back for ill-instructed Christians who have conformed to the values of this present age by entering into partnerships.

The aim of this Briefing is to trace how the apostle Paul pastorally addressed a form of culturally endorsed sexual activity (1 Corinthians 6:9-20) that, in episcopal speak, was 'regarded as falling short of God's purposes for human beings' but was condoned by society, and to suggest briefly how this paradigm might be applied to the issues surrounding civil partnerships.

'It is permitted'

Christian young men were having sex with high-class call girls brought in for a dinner party in what ancient historians have dubbed 'the unholy trinity of eating, drinking and sex'. The last was euphemistically referred to as 'after dinners', an activity 'artistically' portrayed in first-century pictures still found in some ancient houses.

These young men justified doing 'it' by citing a culturally endorsed aphorism widely used in the Paul's day - 'Everything is permitted for me' (6:12).

Cicero put the case in a powerful way and would have agreed with the Christian young men.

If there is anyone who thinks that youth should be forbidden affairs with courtesans, he is doubtless eminently austere, but his view is contrary not only to the licence of this age, but also to the custom and concession of our ancestors. For when was this not a common practice? When was it blamed? When was it forbidden? When, in fact, was it that what is allowed not allowed? (*quod licet, non liceret*)⁴

Paul's three fold pastoral response

If you had been Paul, how would you have handled the issue? He did not adopt a 'see nothing, do nothing, say nothing' policy. Rather his pastoral sensitivity in dealing with this issue provides us with a powerful paradigm that requires facing the reality of what this and similar activities ultimately do. Paul recalls that they had been converted. This meant young Christian men could never be the same; and he provides compelling reasons why only fools would continue to fornicate as the basis for his two commands 'to flee immorality' and 'to glorify God in your body'.

1. Face the fact

Paul commences his response to this situation with a command to the young men. 'You must not be deceived', even if everybody is doing 'it' as their 'after dinner' activity; those who behave this way are excluded from the kingdom of God.

Paul cites fornication as the first of ten activities which exclude from the kingdom, regardless of popular aphorisms and arguments mounted to the contrary in Roman society. In passing, it is significant that six of these activities tend now to be ignored and two have somehow become the intense focus of present day discussion (6:9-10).

The young men receive a stark warning that they must not be deceived. At heaven's gates fornicators will not be granted access. The message is clear. It

will be like this for all the activities cited. Entry to heaven will not be negotiable, and the argument coined by secular society then 'all things are permitted for me'(6:12) and now (abstinence is contrary to the 'spirit of the age') will not change God's mind.

2. Face THE FACT

Paul knew that 'such were some of you' but he reminded them of the great reversal that had occurred. Three times he used the stronger of the Greek adversatives, 'but'. He wrote '*but* you were washed, *but* you were sanctified, *but* you were justified (acquitted) (6:11). The great cleansing from the filth of sin, the great transformation of their soiled lives and the great acquittal had done this for each young Christian man.

Secondly he reminded them that two persons of the Trinity had acted in their lives and that had completely effected this everlasting change.

3. Face facts—8 reasons why not

The young men of Corinth would have happily recalled the occasion of becoming Christians and no doubt remembered this at the Lord's Supper. However, Paul's pastoral strategy does not leave it there because he cannot do so if he really cares for their spiritual wellbeing. He provides eight reasons for the two commands he issues as the way forward.

(i) It is against their well-being (v. 12a): They said 'everything is permitted'. Paul strongly refutes this, using the strong 'but' not everything is 'beneficial' i.e. for the 'wellbeing' of the person. The portrayal of the male genitals in Pompeii with the words underneath 'here resides joy' (*hic habitat felicitas*) was, and is, simply not true, however short term. Like all sin, lust never ever delivers on its promise to bring lasting joy.

(ii) it is harmfully addictive (v. 12b): They said 'every thing is permitted'. Paul confronts them with fornication as enslavement.

While the young men may have felt they were in control of their lives, fornication had become addictive, controlling their thoughts and actions, so that they could not do without it. It was not love but uncontrolled lust.

In Roman marriage men continued this addiction outside the marriage bed and Roman society, which endorsed fornication, was also indifferent to men's adultery however destructive that was.

(iii) It is against the creator's intention (v. 13): They said, 'Food is for the body and the body was designed to consume food'. That was obvious. But Paul declares the designer's intention was never that

the body would be used for immoral purposes. The body was intended to achieve the Lord's purposes and the Lord clearly has a purpose in giving us 'the body'.

(iv) It contradicts the body's future (v. 14): The body is not 'the prison house of the soul' to cite Plato's known and memorable analogy. The Christian's mortal body will be raised just as God raised the Lord at his resurrection.

(v) Christians are members of Christ's body (v. 15a): Paul in his opening greeting described them as 'sanctified in Christ Jesus' (1:2); they are this because they have been joined to Christ ontologically as members of His body. They clearly had not registered the implications of this fact.

(vi) No sex is ever casual (vv. 15b-17): Young men saw their activities as simply a fun evening with a casual partner provided by the host. But even a 'one night stand' with a high class prostitute created a 'one flesh' relationship, another fact they had not taken into account. Paul argued this on the basis of Genesis 2:24 and affirmed that the Christian is ontologically joined to the Lord and therefore one spirit with him.

(vii) It is a unique sin (v. 18): Paul affirms that all other sins are 'outside' the body but their sexual activity is the one sin that damages the intrinsic nature of the body.

(viii) The title deeds have been transferred (vv. 19-20): The young men must not operate as their passions dictated and society endorsed. They were indwelt by the Holy Spirit whom they have from God by reason of the work of 'the Spirit of our God'.

Christ purchased them, body and soul, at great cost and they no longer have ownership of their bodies.

4. Pastorally, not yet an impasse

Two binding commands solve what might be seen as an impasse because they had 'permanently damaged' their purity. The solution is twofold.

(i) Flee fornication (v. 18): They must from now on flee immorality, no longer putting themselves in temptation's way by attending the dinners.

(ii) Glorify God (v. 20): To do this they must live and use their bodies in a way that is honouring to God, (v. 20). Paul later furthers this discussion using himself as a paradigm. Even though he has the gift of singleness (7:7), he does not hide from the church that he has to bring his body under control (9:27), die daily (15:31) and metaphorically fight the wild beasts, sexual passions (15:32).

Civil partnerships and Nero

At the age of 27 Nero celebrated his 'marriage' to a Roman freedman, Pythagoras, at a public banquet a decade after he became emperor. According to Tacitus, it was done with

the full rites of legitimate marriage, the wife of one of that herd of 'degenerates', who bore the name of Pythagoras. The veil was drawn over the imperial head, witnesses dispatched to the scene, the dowry, the couches of wedded love, the nuptial torches, were there: everything, in fine, which night enshrouds even if a woman is the bride, was left open to view.⁵

Three years later in A.D. 67 he went through a similar ceremony with Sporus, the son of a freedman.

though already 'married' to Pythagoras, a freedman, he formally 'married' Sporus, and assigned the boy a dowry according to contract; and the Romans as well as others publicly celebrated their wedding.⁶

Pastoral ways forward

How might Christians using the above Pauline pastoral paradigm shape a strategy in the uncharted sea of civil partnerships?

The meaning of the two terms Paul uses for consensual sex between two males is clear. They describe the passive and active sexual roles. Translating the first term as 'prostitute' is incorrect.

Kingdom inclusion

In the case of the Christian young men of Corinth, the best thing that could ever happen to any person had occurred prior to his writing 1 Corinthians.

Christ changed everything, cleansing them from the indelible effects of sin by washing them, incorporating them into himself, making them permanently holy, and acquitting them of the consequences of all their sin (6:10). They were no longer identified by the acts that would have excluded them from the Kingdom.

Kingdom exclusion

Exclusion applies as much to the unrepentant idolater, the thief, the drunkard, the verbally abusive person, the dishonest person and the covetous, money-grubber as well as the fornicator and the adulterer, as it does to those in same gender sex (6:9-10).

It is not the case that God has the 'ideal' but allows the 'real' for some, as the Bishops' statement

suggests. It is non-negotiable. As Paul puts it—‘You must not be deceived’(v.9). At some stage in the pastoral process this must be declared regardless of how much a person may ‘sincerely believe it is God’s call to them’.

Cogent arguments

Everybody did it! Society endorsed it. So why shouldn’t Corinthian Christians do it? Using Paul’s argument in relation to same sex relationships that are casual or in a civil partnership is not being homophobic, any more that what he writes about fornication could be called heterophobic. He gives very clear commands as to what must not be done and also what must be done as the only way forward, by providing coherent arguments both positive and negative why sexual activity outside God’s plan of marriage must not occur in the Christian’s life.

What applied to casual or stable heterosexual liaisons whether fornication, stable adultery or stable incest in I Corinthians is also applicable to stable homosexual activity even though the State has now provided for a legal partnership. The three commands binding on Corinthian Christians as are still binding on the consciences of contemporary Christians, regardless of any subsequent ‘pastoral statement’ to the contrary — ‘you must not be deceived’, ‘you must flee immorality’, and ‘you must glorify God in your body’.

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- 1 *Civil Partnerships—A Pastoral Statement from the House of Bishops of the Church of England*, 23, (25th July 2005). See Andrew Carey, Church of England Newspaper 23/30 December 2005 for comments of some bishops with reservations about aspects of the pastoral statement.
 - 2 *Marriage: a teaching document of the House of Bishops*, (1999).
 - 3 *Issues in Human Sexuality—A Statement from the House of Bishops* (2003).
 - 4 *pro Caelio*, 20.48 The Greek verb, ‘it is permitted’ that the young men in Roman Corinth used was rendered in Latin as *licitum est*.
 - 5 Tacitus, *Annals* 15.37 M.T. Griffin, *Nero: the End of a Dynasty* (London: Batsford, 1984), pp. 164.
 - 6 Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 62.2-3.

For further reading

For the House of Bishops’ statement <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/pr5605.html>

For first-century background see Bruce W. Winter, ‘Elitist Ethics and Christian Permissiveness (1 Corinthians 6:12-20, 10:23, 15:29-34) “All things are permitted (for me)” (6:12, 10:23), *After Paul left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), ch.5.

For a full discussion of the terms used by Paul see Bruce W. Winter, ‘Homosexual Terminology in 1 Corinthians 6.9: the Roman Context and the Greek Loan-word’, ed. A.N.S. Lane *Scripture and Interpretation: Historical and Theological Studies in Honour of David Wright* (Leicester: Apollos, July, 1997), pp. 275–90 and a shorter version in *After Paul left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, 2001), pp.110-20.

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