



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Sex and the City (of God)
(The Pornographic Culture, pp. 9-16)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Sex and the City of God

The biblical limitations regarding appropriate sexual behavior result from an awareness of the raw power of sex. Individuals now, like then, are involved in consensual sexual relationships that fall short of God's intention. Yet there is hope for our fallen sexual desires if we allow them to be rightly ordered by God.

Prayer

Loving God, may we, as a family of faith and the household of God, learn to strengthen marriages, celebrate fidelity in singleness, and strive together to present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to you. For we ask it in the name of your Son our Lord, who both celebrated the wedding at Cana and lived in singleness during his time on earth. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 6:13b-20

Reflection

In his Corinthian letters the Apostle Paul writes about a wide range of sexual practices. This church was so confused: it tolerated one member's gross sexual immorality "of a kind that is not found even among pagans" (1 Corinthians 5:1), yet other members wrote letters urging that Christians should avoid sexual intercourse completely (7:1). What place should sex have in the "new creation" of which these Christians had become a part?

Apparently the Corinthians did not take sexual sin seriously because they mistakenly believed (a) what they did with their bodies would not harm them spiritually, and (b) if they did condemn any member's sex life, they would show spiritual immaturity. Paul strongly rebukes them, saying that people who give free reign to disordered sexuality will have no place in God's kingdom. But then he adds the good news, "And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (6:9-11). "God is ready to rightly order our sexuality," Lake says, "if we are willing to acknowledge that it, like all aspects of our life, is in need of healing."

Husbands and wives becoming "one flesh" in sexual union both expresses and calls out the spiritual, emotional, and volitional union God intends for their marriage. "The limitations regarding appropriate sexual behavior," Lake writes, "result from a biblical awareness of the raw power of sex—whether used in licit or illicit ways." Thus Paul denounces visits to prostitutes because, regardless of how fleeting their encounter, sex forges an intimate union between the participants (6:15-16). "Your *body* is a temple of the Holy Ghost," he warns some startled Corinthians, who believed their true selves were unchanged by their sexual misbehavior.

Perhaps the other group of Corinthian Christians, who avoided sexual intercourse, believed that their self and body were distinct in another way: that they lived on a spiritual plane 'above' their bodies. Or perhaps they were abstaining from sex because they expected an early return of Christ. To them Paul gives nuanced guidance in chapter 7:



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▶ The sexual relationship, not feelings of love, is the unique bond between husband and wife, and in their sexuality they belong equally to one another. In this instruction, Lake observes, “The goodness of marital sex is not contingent on the production of children.” Neither husband nor wife should deny the other, unless they agree to forgo sexual activity for a short time for prayer (7:2-5).

▶ As beautiful and important as human sexuality is, an active sex life is not necessary for human happiness, but only for the establishment of a marriage. Paul considers his own singleness to be a gift from God, allowing him to serve God and others with undivided devotion (7:7-8, 32-35). “Jesus was born into a world where to be a rabbi or a Roman senator, one had to be married. But Christ demonstrated that one could be a fully integrated human being without benefit of sexual relations,” notes Lake.

Sexual intimacy is not the goal of human life. Its pleasure points beyond itself to the intimate enjoyment of God for which we were created. This supreme joy is available to all people. “In the kingdom of God, the promise is not that all the single people will finally get married, but that all will participate in the marriage supper of the Lamb of God. Jesus says that in heaven ‘they neither marry nor are given in marriage’ (Matthew 22:30), not because marriage is unimportant, but because it is pointing to something beyond itself. Once the true Bridegroom arrives, the ultimate fulfillment of all earthly longing will begin.”

Study Questions:

1. How does the Bible celebrate the goodness and joy of human sexuality without making it essential to our happiness?
2. “The Bible does not only condemn exploitative sexual behaviors,” Lake writes. How, for Paul, are some non-exploitative, consensual sexual behaviors contrary to God’s intention?
3. In 1 Corinthians 7:3-4, Lake notes, “the woman ... is a sexually active partner.” Discuss the quotation from Theodoret of Cyrus (*The Pornographic Culture*, p. 59) concerning the radical equality of Paul’s instruction here to husbands and wives.

Departing Hymn: “Sacred the Body”

Sex and the City of God

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1 or 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

[Note: This study guide covers the second half of Todd Lake’s article, “Sex and the City (of God).” The first half is discussed in the previous study guide, “Naked but Not Ashamed.”]

Teaching goals

1. To understand the Apostle Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 6-7 on sex for married and single Christians.
2. To reflect on why some non-exploitative, consensual sexual behavior falls short of God’s intention.
3. To understand the role of human sexuality in the new creation.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Pornographic Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

A friend, John, who teaches philosophy at a Baptist college, has a well-deserved reputation as a spiritual counselor. So a student leader of the campus Christian group, who was newly engaged to a beautiful young woman, sought out my friend for advice.

“What do you think about recreational sex?” the young man asked.

John was puzzled by the question. “Well, Christians should enjoy sex,” he replied.

“Of course, but I meant, can we go to clubs on the weekend and find someone who wants casual sex? I’ve done this all through college, but my fiancée thinks I must stop it after we’re married,” the young man complained. “You think it is O.K., don’t you?”

How would you answer this young Christian’s question? This encounter reminds us that some Christians’ views on sexuality are shaped by the powerful patterns of our culture, rather than by Scripture.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Ask the group to read aloud the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read aloud 1 Corinthians 6:13b-20 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The lesson focuses on Paul’s advice in 1 Corinthians 6-7 concerning sex in the “new creation” of God’s kingdom. Throughout this section Paul is responding to the Corinthians’ statements or questions, either actual ones that they wrote to him, or imagined ones that represent their views. Interpreters must distinguish when Paul is stating a Corinthian statement or question, and when he is responding. (For instance, the scripture reading begins with 6:13b because “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food” in 6:13a is not Paul’s teaching, but a Corinthian statement.)

Like the undergraduate student in the story above, the Corinthians may have separated what they

did with their bodies from what shaped their selves. New Testament scholar Richard Hays translates 1 Corinthians 6:18 this way (*First Corinthians, Interpretation Bible Commentary*, p. 105):

“Paul: Flee fornication!

Corinthians [*objecting*]: [But why?] Every sin a person commits is outside the body.

Paul: But the fornicator sins against his own body.”

The Corinthians believed that what they did with their bodies did not count as sin. Paul responds sharply: they are sinning in their bodies and in the body of Christ.

The final portion of the lesson summarizes Paul’s teachings in 1 Corinthians 7 to single and married Christians. Paul, at this stage of his ministry, anticipated an early return by Christ and this may explain why he seems to teach, “Stay in the state of marriage or singleness that you are in now.” Yet, we find in his teaching this enduring, wise advice: sex is appropriate and joyful in marriage, husbands and wives are equal in regard to sexuality, not all single Christian people are called to remain single, but singleness can be part of one’s Christian calling.

Study Questions

1. Human sexuality is celebrated in the creation stories (discussed in the previous study guide, “Naked and Not Ashamed”) and Song of Songs. Paul says that sex is the unique bond between husband and wife. Yet he also believed that singleness was part of his calling and that this could be true for other Christians. Jesus lived a fulfilled, but celibate life. Our ultimate joy will be to participate in the “marriage supper of the Lamb of God” (Revelation 19:9b). Members might discuss the implications for single people in the church today. Does this imply that Christian singles are wrong to long for intimacy with a marriage partner? Or does it mean that we should honor those who are called, or gifted, to singleness as complete and full members of the body of Christ?
2. Many people today, like the church members at Corinth, evaluate sexual behavior only in terms of pleasure and promises: if the partners consent to the terms of the relationship, then they may treat and be treated by one another as they desire within those terms. Paul finds in the creation story (1 Corinthians 6:16 echoes Genesis 2:24) the truth that sexual intimacy creates a singular union between male and female. He’s not making a psychological observation, but reminding us of how God has structured sexuality. The sexual sins listed in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 might be consensual, but they misuse this powerful union of sexuality.
3. Members may mention Paul’s subtle way of mentioning the wife’s right to sex first in verse 3, but reversing the order in verse 4; even in this way he manages to treat husbands and wives equally. Theodore of Cyrus concludes Paul must be “inspired by divine grace;” for if Paul were inspired by his (or our) culture, he would have granted men the right to have sex whenever and with whom-ever they please. Encourage members to discuss Paul’s understanding that the husband’s body “belongs” to the wife, and vice versa (NIV). For this reason, Paul does not go the other direction with equality and say that wives, too, can have sex whenever and with whomever they please.

Departing Hymn

“Sacred the Body” is on pp. 56-57 of *The Pornographic Culture*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.