

BEYOND DUALISMS: PAUL ON SEX, SARX AND SŌMA

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I HEARD RECENTLY of an educated Catholic parishioner who declared himself opposed to lay ministers of communion on the grounds that 'they might have had sex the night before'. The attitude underlying his thinking sinks its roots deep into the human psyche: sex and the sacred are incompatible. Neither Judaism (as is frequently claimed) nor Christianity has been immune to its influence. The doctrine of creation ('And God saw that it was good!') did not inhibit Hebrew theologians from devising purity rules to protect the sacred from the miasma of sex, nor did belief in the incarnation prevent Christian theologians from placing a healthy distance between God and the flesh.

The reasons why the attitude persisted in the Church are complex. Along with the Hebrew bible Christians took on board levitical notions of holiness, but there were other and more powerful influences at work in the formative centuries as there have been ever since. The 'orthodox' theologians of the early centuries are rightly credited with having defended the wholeness of human nature against the dualism of Marcion, the gnostics, the manichees *et hoc genus omne*;¹ but 'orthodoxy' and 'heresy' grew up side by side and there was cross-pollination. It was not through studying the bible that Augustine came to associate 'original sin' with sexual intercourse.² To the New Testament recommendations of celibacy many ecclesiastical writers added considerations which owed more to a dualistic disdain for the body than to any biblical teaching. The Church's apologists were ardent in rebutting their opponents' view that marriage was evil, but they were not exactly eulogistic about it themselves. It was indeed a God-given means of procreation and a cure for concupiscence, but there was nothing to be said for it as a positive, integrating human experience capable of leading to God.³

Paul on sex

Many have identified Paul as the poisonous root of this negative thinking about marriage and sex. It is claimed that he was hostile to the body and felt distaste for sex; he only tolerated marriage as the lesser of two evils and an unfortunate necessity for the ungifted majority.

That Paul was much in favour with both 'orthodox' theologians and with the 'heretics' whom they opposed cannot be denied. But history has surely taught us that his friends no less than his enemies are capable of getting him wrong. To be fair to him we need to consider what *he* said or did not say, and why.

Those who blame Paul for Christianity's disparagement of sex point especially to his statements about marriage and sex in 1 Corinthians 7 and to the many places where he speaks pejoratively about the 'flesh' (*sarx*). His understanding of this latter will be remarked on later (though it is worthwhile noting in advance that Paul *distinguishes* between the 'flesh' and the 'body'—a distinction which often escapes his critics). But first, some basic observations on 1 Corinthians.

The epistle contains Paul's most explicit recorded assertions about marriage and sex. They are well known—indeed notorious, since few can fail to notice how grudging they appear. It is good to avoid marriage (or marriage and sex) altogether, but because most Christians cannot cope without it it is better to be practical. For spouses sexual intercourse is a mutual obligation and a necessary safeguard against illicit sex. Paul wishes that everyone could be celibate like himself, but 'it is better to marry than to burn' (1 Cor 7, 1ff, 7ff). All this, so it is often thought, represents Paul's best attempt to formulate a theology of marriage. Add to this a fervent belief that God's eternal word has no need of learned interpretation, and there is your unshakable Christian doctrine of marriage in a nutshell.

It is not as easy as that; and although people who spend their lives grappling with the historical nature of biblical statements (God's word in the *time-bound* word of humans) have cautioned over and over again against reading the bible like a catechism which fell from heaven, the point still needs to be made, and very particularly in the case of Paul's epistles.

1 Corinthians is not a timeless treatise but the occasional letter of a busy missionary and pastor. It is addressed to a very specific situation whose complexity we are only beginning to grasp and

this with much uncertainty. One thing we can say with a degree of certainty is that the Christians of Corinth were thoroughly mixed up about sex and celibacy, being inclined on the one hand to sexual anarchy and on the other to a dangerously unrealistic sexual asceticism (some at least imagined that it was sinful to get married).⁴ It is vital to recognize that Paul is not calling his own tunes on the subject in hand. It is not even possible to say with certainty which statements reflect his own considered views and which represent Corinthian slogans quoted by Paul for correction or repudiation. We cannot assume that the statement, 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman' (7,1) is one that Paul would have spontaneously chosen to introduce a straight discourse on marriage and sex. It is far more likely that it represents a slogan of desperately pretentious pneumatics which Paul partially upholds out of pastoral prudence. If Paul describes marital sex simply as something 'due' to one's spouse, are we to take this as his noblest attempt to explain its significance, or (as the context suggests) were there some Christian spouses who were forcing abstention on their less 'religiously'-minded partners? There are good reasons for thinking—in view of the way-out religious attitudes of many at Corinth—that Paul's (qualified) advocacy of celibacy in this chapter was intended in the situation as a pastoral concession rather than as a statement of eternal verities. To reconstruct the details of the dialogue between Paul and his addressees requires a great deal of extremely tricky and tentative detective work. To read the epistle at its face value as God's eternal will for Christians is to get Christianity wrong. But from an early age many of Paul's interpreters have done just that. From 7,1 Tertullian and Jerome deduced that it was bad to touch a woman. Augustine, who considered the verse to have been divinely pronounced by a 'voice from the clouds', was more moderate in his judgement, concluding only that the joyful use of sex was a venial sin.⁵

There is another factor too to be considered should we be tempted to take 1 Corinthians as an adequate basis for a Christian evaluation of sex and marriage. Paul (at least at the time when he wrote this epistle) believed that Christ was soon to come again to end or at least transform life as we know it. At one point in 1 Cor 7 he expressly motivates his recommendation of celibacy with the reminder that the end is nigh (v 26); and in general his assertions about marriage and celibacy in the chapter are to be read in the light of his conviction that 'the form (structures and

rationale) of this world is on its way out' (v 23). Paul evaluated marriage in the light of his own perspectives. But his perspectives are not ours. If Ephesians, whether or not it was written by Paul,⁶ could offer a truly sublime view of marriage and sex (5,25ff), this was surely because its author had abandoned the earlier expectation of an imminent 'second coming'. You have one view of marriage when the Titanic is sinking; you have quite another view when you realize you were not on it.

Paul on sarx

The other standard basis for Paul's alleged hostility to sex are his derogatory statements about *sarx* (the 'flesh'). Along with sin, death and the law, the 'flesh' clearly plays a leading role in Paul's demonology. Although we are constantly reminded that the 'flesh' for Paul is not in itself sinful but only that dimension of our nature which makes us vulnerable to sin, there are passages in the epistles which do not let it off so lightly. The instinct of the flesh is set on 'death' and hostility towards God; it does not submit to God's law and is impotent to do so; those who are 'in the flesh' cannot please God (Rom 8,6ff). The person who is 'fleshly' is 'sold in bondage under sin': 'nothing that is good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh' (Rom 7,14.18). 'The flesh lusts against the spirit' (Gal 5,17).

To make things worse, in some notorious passages Paul associates *sarx* with sexual sins. First among its 'works' are 'fornication, impurity and licentiousness' (Gal 5,19). It entails sinful passions and desires (Rom 7,5; 13,14). Christians are to renounce it by 'mortifying the deeds of the body' (Rom 8,12f). Salvation itself, so it can easily appear from Rom 7-8, depends on being liberated by the Spirit from the compulsion of sexual sin—the 'law of sin which is in my members' (Rom 7,23; 8,2). One might perhaps excuse Julius Cassianus the encratite for thinking that Paul's statement about 'sowing in the flesh and reaping corruption' (Gal 6,8) referred to sexual intercourse (though Jerome scored a good point by reminding him that Paul speaks about 'sowing' in one's *own* flesh).⁷

The point is that Paul's remarks about the 'flesh' do lend themselves without too much difficulty to a dualistic interpretation, whereby humans are divided into flesh and spirit and evil resides in the former. Add to this the fact that 'carnal' for us is synonymous with 'sexual', and we may easily find ourselves appealing to Paul's

authority to support the view that sex belongs to the baser part of our being or even that it is *per se* sinful and might only be redeemed when set to serve a nobler cause.⁸

A closer look at the epistles suggests however that when Paul does use *sarx* in a pejorative sense he is not thinking of a human being's 'lower nature' in the sense in which we conceive of it (heirs as we are to a non-Pauline dualism), nor does he associate it uniquely with the sphere of sexual disorder.⁹ Apart from Rom 7, 14ff, where for his own purposes he uses an anthropology which is not his own, the 'flesh' for him designates not our baser instincts in rebellion against our higher self, but the *whole* of us in so far as we resist God's action in Christ. If there is a dualism in Paul's thinking, it is not between the 'fleshly' and 'spiritual' dimensions of human existence but between a human existence conformed to the 'old aeon' and left to its own resources and one which is repatterned on the crucified and risen Christ by the power of the Spirit. The *sarx* is opposed not to the 'spirit' but to the Spirit.

The best confirmation of this is the fact that Paul could use the concept *sarx* accusingly not only against people who were prone to sexual excess but also (and more frequently) against people who rather than allow themselves to be transformed in the newness of the Spirit clung to their own guarantees (Gal 3,3), placed their confidence in their religious status (Phil 3,3) or brought human self-assertiveness into the Christian community (1 Cor 3,3). True, our 'fleshly' instinct may express itself in a disordered sexuality; but it can also energize passions which have nothing to do with sex and everything to do with destroying the community (among the 'works of the flesh' in Gal 5,19ff Paul lists at least eight non-sexual social sins). The 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5,22f)—the multiform activity of love—is indeed diametrically opposed to the 'works of the flesh'; but nowhere does Paul say that sexuality is excluded from the Spirit's action or imply that it somehow occupies a limbo between redemption and non-redemption. Transference from the realm of the *sarx* to that of the Spirit surely means that the *whole* person henceforth 'pleases God' (Rom 8,8f).

So much at least needs to be said in defence of Paul. It is important, however, for the sake of historical perspective and the proper use of the bible, not to overdo it. Writers sympathetic to Paul are perhaps tempted to go to the other extreme. Thus, for example, it is claimed that Paul possessed a highly sophisticated theology of sexuality, and that marriage for him was 'rich in

religious value', indeed integral to the whole order of salvation. The claim that Paul was positively enthusiastic about marriage and sex seems to me to contain a considerable element of wishful thinking.

It is true that Paul nowhere says that sexuality is excluded from the Spirit's action; but neither does he go out of his way to say that it is included. Although his remarks in 1 Cor 6,12ff reveal something of his appreciation of the profoundly personal and moral significance of sexual intercourse, it is remarkable that he applies Gen 2,24 to casual sex with a prostitute and never thinks to explore its riches in the context of a stable union (unlike Ephesians). And even when one makes allowance for the peculiar situation in Corinth and for Paul's eschatology at the time of writing the epistle, it remains true that his handling of marriage and sex in chapter 7 shows not the slightest spark of positive enthusiasm. Why could he not tell the pseudo-ascetics of Corinth what he told the Philippians—to set their minds on 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable and just, whatever is pure, lovely, gracious, excellent and praiseworthy', and that marriage and sex are among them? When all is said and done, Paul prefers celibacy and even suggests that marriage distracts spouses from their Lord (vv 7. 32-40).¹⁰ 'In the detailed discussions of 1 Cor 7 one looks in vain for a positive appreciation of love between the sexes or of the richness of human experience in marriage and the family.'¹¹

But that is not the end of the story. The proper question to ask is not whether Paul possessed the sort of constructive theology of sexuality which we consider relevant to our own age and culture (that may be just another way of using the bible like a text-book which fell from heaven), but whether he provides us with categories or insights which can help us to build such a theology. To use an analogy: in Gal 3,28 (whether or not the formula is his own) and in his Adam christology in general he provides us with an insight which could contribute powerfully to a modern theology of the sexes: '...there is not "male and female", for you are all one in Christ Jesus'. Paul apparently never thought to apply this theological insight to concrete social reality (what concerns him here as elsewhere is the equality of Jew and gentile not that of male and female). But the insight is there to be used. Similarly Paul made no attempt to encourage a positive understanding of sexuality. But he provides a seminal insight: namely in his view of the theological and christological significance of the 'body' (*sōma*).

Paul on sōma

It is now commonly accepted that *sōma* in Paul's 'technical' vocabulary denotes not *part* of a person (in the sense of ancient or modern dualism) but the person in his or her *totality*, seen from a particular point of view.¹² Although (and it is crucial to recognize the point) Paul's notion of *sōma* takes full account of *this* body which we now experience in all its physicality, it implies no distinction between this and some *other* dimension of human existence. 'The only human existence there is—even in the sphere of the Spirit—is somatic existence'; 'man does not *have* a *sōma*; he *is sōma*' (Bultmann).

Regarding the point of view from which a person is seen as *sōma*, there is no necessity to choose between the two most influential accounts offered by recent interpreters: *sōma* is the person in so far as s/he has a relationship with herself or himself and can dispose of self for or against God (Bultmann); and *sōma* is the 'possibility of human communication' (Käsemann). *Sōma* in fact is the place of *wholeness* with oneself, with others, with creation and with God (who comes to us in the somatic existence of Christ). Since the person who is faced with the possibility and the imperative of wholeness is always open to the temptation to opt for its opposite, Paul *sometimes* associates *sōma* with *sarx* and sin.¹³ But in general his attitude towards the *sōma* is overwhelmingly positive. It is the sphere in which God wills the total integration of his creature, in opposition to the alienating and disintegrating power of the *sarx*. God wants to save the person precisely as *sōma*: 'the *sōma* is *for* the Lord and the Lord is *for* the *sōma*' (1 Cor 6,13).

Clearly the *sōma* involves not just one aspect of a person's activity but his or her entire activity through the whole nexus of relationships—with self, with others and with God—for all these are somatic relationships in this life and beyond. But among these relationships sexual union belongs in a peculiarly vivid manner to the sphere of *sōma*. It therefore engages the *person* whom God wants to save, and precisely in the sphere where salvation is *meaningful*. It is significant that Paul never associates marital intercourse with the *sarx* but only with the *sōma*. Sexual union in conformity with the will of the Creator, along with praise, thanksgiving, worship and mutual love and service, is part of that activity whereby persons 'glorify God in their *sōma*', and are sanctified.

Although Paul never developed his thought along these lines, there are indications in his epistles that his understanding of

salvation would by no means preclude such a development. We note three significant examples.

At the beginning of Rom 12 he exhorts his hearers to respond to the whole majestic plan of God's mercy by 'presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship'. To those who wish to find everywhere in Paul a programme of sexual asceticism the word 'sacrifice' (in conjunction with 'presenting your bodies') will readily be taken as a reference to the 'sacrifice' of celibacy. But we need to interpret this not in the light of centuries of Christian asceticism but in the light of Romans itself. Paul uses the metaphor not for ascetical self-denial but for thankful adoration. The passage is to be read in antithesis to Rom 1, 18-32, where Paul depicts the tragic disorder of creation as a backdrop to his gospel of salvation. Humankind's refusal to recognize God as God and to glorify him and give him thanks leads to an inversion of the relationship between the creature and the Creator: humankind *worshipped* the creation rather than the Creator (v 21.25). It is precisely the disintegration of the relationship between the creature and the Creator which leads to the disintegration of relationships among humans. Paramount here is the disorder of *sexual* relationships (vv 26ff). The 'dishonouring of the *sōma*' (v 25) is a paradigm of humankind's refusal to embrace with gratitude God's will for his creation (the ironic allusions to Gen 1 in vv 23-27 sharpen the point). In the light of all this and of the intervening chapters, what can Paul mean in ch 12 by 'presenting one's body' as a sacrifice and act of worship? Not, surely, the ascetical renunciation of the body, but the humble and joyful reordering of all somatic existence (including sexual relationships) to the worship of the Creator who has now reasserted his saving dominion over creation and restored it to what he wanted it to be.

A second passage that might be built upon is the more directly sexual and more expressly christological 1 Cor 6, 12-20 where Paul exhorts against frequenting prostitutes. The Corinthians, or some of them, apparently held that sex was ethically and religiously indifferent—merely a physiological activity like eating and drinking (v 13a is almost certainly a Corinthian slogan). Paul counters that sex has to do with the *sōma* and the *sōma* with the profoundly personal relationship between the Christian and the Lord both now and in the future resurrection (vv 13b-14). This relationship is graphically explicated in what follows: 'Do you not know that

your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?' (v 15). What is striking here is not only Paul's disturbingly 'physical' view of the relationship between the Christian and Christ (a view which v 17 only *interprets* without detracting from it) but also and more especially his suggestion that this relationship is involved with unparalleled intimacy in the act of sexual intercourse. Paul applies this insight only negatively ('Shun immorality!') but it is surely capable of a positive development in the context of a God-willed sexual union.¹⁴ For it implies that sexual intercourse can consolidate the union between Christians and Christ in deepening their own union as members of his *sōma*. The theological and pastoral potential of Paul's insight is enormous, even if he himself made no positive use of it.¹⁵

Of considerable importance, finally, is 1 Cor 15, where Paul speaks of the resurrection/transformation of the *sōma* as the completion of God's work of salvation. He is rebutting 'some' at Corinth who denied that there was resurrection of the dead. What their reasons were is much debated. Very probably their dualistic view of the human person made it impossible for them to conceive of resurrection except as the pointless reanimation of a corpse. Perhaps they believed in the immortality of the soul, or perhaps they held that salvation was complete with spiritual regeneration in this life: at all events they excluded the body from salvation. Paul argues that salvation concerns precisely the body, for Christians are destined to be raised/transformed in their *essential humanity*. The *sōma* is to be eschatologically changed by God's power. It will become *sōma pneumatikon*. Yet it remains *sōma*—the substantial point of *continuity* between now and then.

Whatever this means exactly, its significance for a theology of sexuality and marriage is immense. For it implies both that the *sōma's* whole activity, including the mutual love of sexual union, is capable of eschatological transformation without losing its deepest significance and, conversely, that this significance itself ultimately derives from the *sōma's* future resurrection (see also 1 Cor 6, 12-14). It should not surprise us that those who denied that there was resurrection of the *sōma* (1 Cor 15) were the very people who regarded sex as ethically and religiously irrelevant (1 Cor 5; 6, 12-20). Put positively: the fact that the *sōma* is destined for resurrection when its capacity to relate to God and to others will be given a new and permanent dimension must mean that the

mutual love expressed in a sexual union is in its own way a foreshadowing of the final union of all God's children.

There is a great deal in Paul therefore which could provide both impetus and direction in developing a theology of sex which is truly constructive for present-day Christians who increasingly feel the need to interpret their *total* human experience in the light of their vocation to holiness.

In the elaboration of such a theology Paul might usefully make one final contribution. For all the rich potential of his reflections for a positive theological evaluation of sex, there is much in his epistles to remind us (even abstracting from his eschatology) that our present mode of being is provisional and looks to the *future* for the full revelation of its meaning. Our *sōma* is mortal as Paul keeps on insisting and only in the future will it 'put on immortality'. For all our enthusiasm for this life's potential there is something better and more wonderful. This is not to detract from what has been said above but only to caution against making sexuality autonomous and self-validating, as perhaps we may be tempted to do through reaction against the past and—not inconceivably—under pressure from a wisdom which is not of God.¹⁶ Our present experience of the *sōma*, marvellous as it might be, *points beyond itself* to the moment when 'that which is perfect' comes and 'Christ will change our humble *sōma* to be like his own in glory'.

NOTES

¹ See Wiles, M. F.: *The divine apostle: the interpretation of St Paul's epistles in the early Church* (Cambridge, 1967), pp 26ff.

² Cf Beatrice, P. F.: *Tradux peccati: alle fonti della dottrina agostiniana del peccato originale* (Milan 1978).

³ Cf Phipps, W. E.: 'Is Paul's attitude toward sexual relations contained in 1 Cor 7,1?', *New Testament studies*, vol. 28, pp 125-131.

⁴ Cf 1 Cor 5, 1ff; 6, 12ff; 7, 28.36.

⁵ Cf Phipps, *art. cit.*, p 126.

⁶ In this article it is assumed that it was not. If it was it would reinforce the position adopted by many that by the time of his latest correspondence Paul no longer expected an imminent 'second coming'.

⁷ See Jerome on Gal 6, 8: Migne, *P. L.* 26, 459f.

⁸ Cf (?) the (post-Pauline) 1 Tim 2,14f: Eve succumbed to the devil's seduction, 'yet woman will be saved through bearing children...'

⁹ For a history of the interpretation of Paul's *sarx* concept, see Jewett, R.: *Paul's anthropological terms: a study of their use in conflict settings* (Leiden, 1971), pp 49-95.

¹⁰ It has been suggested that the form of the Greek participle which Paul uses to designate the married in vv 33f shows that he means that the distraction occurs only during the honeymoon period. That must be as good an attempt as any to let Paul off the hook.

¹¹ Bornkamm, G.: *Paul* (London, 1971), pp 207f.

¹² For the history of research into Paul's understanding of *sōma*, see Jewett, *op. cit.*, pp 201–250.

¹³ Rom 6, 6.12ff; 7,23 ff; 8,12f.

¹⁴ Perhaps the enigmatic 1 Cor 7,14 ('the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife...') may be taken as an indication that Paul did see it positively.

¹⁵ For a positive interpretation of v 18, see Byrne, B.: 'Sinning against one's own body: Paul's understanding of the sexual relationship in 1 Corinthians 6:18', *Catholic biblical quarterly*, 54, 1983, pp 608–616.

¹⁶ A random example: Nelson, James B.: *Embodiment: an approach to sexuality and Christian theology* (London, 1979). The author thinks that virtually every form of sexual activity has positive theological significance.