

Modern Evangelicalism is known for “purity culture,” which emerged in 1990 with the advent of “purity rings”—presented to young people to signify a pledge to refrain from all sex before marriage (and from all non-heterosexual sex forever.) Purity culture has caused great anguish; its main proponent has renounced it. Even if you haven’t been affected, someone you know surely has. Understanding where it comes from and how it misuses Scripture can help.

There are long antecedents to evangelical purity culture in Western Christianity. In Catholicism Mary is revered as morally pure (without the taint of original sin) because she is ever-virgin. (Augustine taught that “original sin” was transmitted by sexual intercourse.) The 1968 Papal Encyclical, *Humanae Vitae: On the Regulation of Firth*, taught married sex without the intention of creating new life is only justified for “grave reasons.” The only acceptable way to limit conception (“Natural Family Planning”) requires only having sex during the days in a woman’s cycle when she has the least biological drive to do so. Many sexual acts not leading to intercourse are prohibited in Catholic teaching.

All this comes from a male, mostly white, cis-gender hierarchy, so it could be triggering to have someone from this precise demographic address the topic. So I will briefly sketch the outlines of this presentation—If it doesn’t sound helpful, I’ll take no offense if you prefer to leave the Zoom. So: quick preview of main topic, then a few preliminaries, then on to our main topic.

### PREVIEW OF MAIN TOPIC

I have three goals in this presentation: first, to demonstrate that 1 Corinthians, the letter that is most used to buttress the claims of “purity culture,” doesn’t in fact do so; second, to demonstrate that the “purity” part of purity culture is a distortion of the ancient Jewish understanding of purity; third to suggest that when selecting from values rooted in scripture, purity is ill-suited for an developing an ethic for human sexuality—and that other values like justice and wisdom (and maybe even joy) have more to offer.

I will not offer specific opinions on the specifics of a sexual ethic to replace the purity rules. We need to hear a lot more from women and queer people on such matters and a lot less—for maybe the next 1000 years—from straight cis-men.

### PRELIMINARIES ON INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE AS A SOURCE OF REFLECTION ON SEXUAL ETHICS

1. All Scripture needs to be interpreted: that means even widely accepted interpretations may be (and have been) wrong. It’s perfectly legitimate to disagree with or protest various interpretations of Scripture—especially when it’s evident that the interpretations cause harm.

2. I don't for a moment believe Scripture teaches that God punishes temporal sins with infinite torments. This hell doctrine functions as a sword of Damocles in the purity culture teaching.

3. The command, instructions, laws, rules, prohibitions, regarding any area of life, including sex, are presented very differently in Scripture than in modern law codes. The instructions in Scripture are always part of a narrative. Even the laws of Leviticus (with more laws than any book) are part of storyline: "When it was time for the Israelites to build the tabernacle, God said to Moses ... "To make meaning of these instructions, we have to consider the historical-cultural context. Many ignore this and assume all the ethical instructions are automatic" moral absolutes" that apply in every culture across the ages. Of course, that breaks down for even very conservative readings and is not consistently applied. But it is asserted, nonetheless.

#### ON TO OUR MAIN TOPIC: WHAT 1 CORINTHIANS ACTUALLY SAYS ABOUT SEX

1 Corinthians is the letter of Paul that people most appeal to when teaching about "sexual purity." 1 Corinthians was written primarily to non-Jews learning to worship the God of Israel owing to the appeal of the message of Jesus—as part of a correspondence in which Paul is answering questions posed by the Corinthians in a letter we don't have access to. Reading it is like stumbling into a conference where the speaker is doing Q&A and you can only hear their answers, because no one is giving the microphone to the questioners. It's nowhere near a comprehensive or even wide-ranging treatment of sexual ethics. And of course, all communication is profoundly shaped by cultural and historical context and the context of 1 Corinthians is far removed from our own, making interpretation all the more challenging.

While 1 Corinthians has arguably more to say about sex than any other book in Scripture, it's focus is narrow. Of 16 chapters only 3 include instructions related to sex. That's telling—this is not a topic that warrants a comprehensive treatment in Scripture. Caroline Kittle and her team offer a curriculum on sexuality for youth (*Our Whole Lives*) developed by U.C.C and it is more comprehensive than anything in Scripture. So what do these 3 chapters say about sex?

**1 Cor. 5** deals with an instance of egregious incest violation: a Corinthian Christian is having sex with his father's wife and is bragging about it.

**1 Cor. 6** deals with lawsuits between church members (nothing to do with sex); It also deals with the ethics of sex with prostitutes.

**1 Cor. 7** deals with marital sex, how it is ethically better than sex with prostitutes.

The purity rules hinge on the Greek word "**porneia**" (used in 1 Cor. 6 and 7) Evangelicals define it as "all sexual acts outside of the marriage between one man and one woman." Scholars of the period

like Sarah Ruden say *porneia* refers to prostitution with the related terms *porne* and  *pornos* referring to female and male prostitutes. The condemnation of prostitution is not aimed at the prostitutes themselves, who were usually slaves; as Ruden points out, Paul's condemnation of prostitution was likely connected to the brutality suffered by prostitutes.

Older English translations use "fornication" for *porneia*; later ones use the non-specific and unhelpful "immorality." But Ruden says the "steady meaning [of *porneia*] in polytheistic literature is 'prostitution' or 'whoring.'"<sup>1</sup> Ruden also describes how difficult it is to define marriage in antiquity: slaves couldn't get married; the terms of marriage differed according to social class, so there was an array of committed sexual unions. We also know in ancient Judaism *polygony* (a man having multiple wives, or wives and concubines, as King David and others did) was allowed, including evidence for the practice in the early church (the requirement that bishops are to be the "husband of one wife" in 1 Timothy 3:7).

So claiming Scriptural warrant for the central claim of purity culture (all sexual acts outside of marriage defined as between one man and one woman) is bogus: Problem 1.

Problem 2: framing sexual ethics as a matter of "purity" is especially unwarranted in the context of ancient Judaism (the form of Israelite religion up to and including the era of Jesus and Paul.) Doing so demonstrates ignorance of how the purity code worked in ancient Judaism. Many Christian scholars (let alone pastors) are poorly informed about purity in ancient Judaism. How is this possible? 150 years ago, there was only 1 document outside of Scripture that described purity codes from the ancient near east. Today that are over a million. Many Christian scholars are simply uninterested in the complexities of Israel's approach to purity, assuming (incorrectly) that Jesus and Paul nullified ritual purity even for Jewish disciples. Jewish scholarship on this topic is largely ignored.

Jewish scholars aware of these relatively recent findings point out the following:

1. All cultures of the ancient near east (Egypt, Persian, Babylon, etc.) had priesthoods, temples, sacrifices, prohibited foods, and purity codes. When they compare Israel's purity code to the purity codes of the neighboring nations, Israel's purity code is simpler represents a reform of purity in the direction of not employing purity codes to accuse/marginalize groups of people.

2. In ancient Judaism ritual purity rules had nothing to do with sin. Impurity was caused by contact with certain naturally occurring things (corpses, genital discharge, blood) and would only render a person temporarily impure—which simply meant they had to undergo purification before entering the temple. Ritual purity is concerned to respect sacred space—much as we think it's offensive to trapse mud onto a clean carpet, especially in someone else's home. Mary Douglas defines impurity as

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Among the People, by Sarah Ruden, p. 15

“matter out of place.” In fact, it was understood that Israelites had a moral obligation to do things that would render them ritually impure—like burying the dead. Ritual impurity wasn’t sinful and wasn’t focused on sex.

3. A limited number of offenses in ancient Judaism are treated in the “holiness code”—some of these matters are regarded as a “moral impurity” (though that term isn’t used.) The main ones were idolatry, bloodshed, and incest—offenses so egregious that left unchecked could drive God’s presence out of the holy land. While the ritual purity code applied only to Israelites—mostly priests regarding temple service, this other code applied to Israelites and Gentiles living in the land. It was of special interest to Paul, the Jewish apostle to the Gentiles, when he was trying to figure out what parts of Torah applied to non-Jewish Jesus followers.

4. Here’s a gem from Mary Douglas, the go-to scholar on ancient purity codes; she says purity codes provide a means of social control, but ironically, **“The more fragile [a society’s] control system, the more the community is afraid of its own collapse, and the less able to discipline its members by physical coercion. This is the context in which accusations of impurity flourish.”** (*Jacob’s Tears*, Mary Douglas) This obviously applies to purity culture: when male dominance is uncontested in a society, purity codes are *less* prominent. It’s when male dominance is contested, that forces in society threatened by this, *emphasize* purity codes as a means of social control.

All this complex and nerdy background about ancient Judaism regarding purity is essential for properly interpreting Paul’s writings, despite the fact that engaging it is demanding. Paul was an ancient Jew. As a Pharisee, the ins and outs of the Leviticus purity code were especially important to him. Remember, the three most egregious sins prohibited in Leviticus (prohibitions that applied to Israelites living in the land and non-Israelites living in the land) were murder, incest, and idolatry. Paul taught that Gentile Christians were not to take on the burden of full Torah observance, so these grave matters that were binding on non-Jews living in the land of Israel probably guided him in what did ethical norms did apply to Gentiles. This is the focus of a new stream within biblical studies called, “Paul Within Judaism.”

When Paul addresses the man committing incest and bragging about it in 1 Cor. 5, he’s reflecting Torah’s abhorrence of incest in Leviticus, which is included in the egregious sins that left unchecked can drive the divine presence from the land of Israel. (Our society also roundly condemns incest, while not defining it exactly the as ancient Judaism did.) In 1 Cor. 6, Paul inveighs against men having sex with prostitutes, a practice closely tied to idolatry (the root of all evil in Jewish moral logic); again, this this is another example of his focus on the most egregious sins that Torah considers binding on Gentiles living with Israelites in the land. In other words, Paul is addressing the matters that make sense if we read him as in his Jewish context. He is employing an ancient moral logic situated in a historical and cultural context that that many Christian scholars, let alone pastors, haven’t done their homework to understand.

Purity culture, by contrast, is focused on premarital sex, which Paul doesn't even address explicitly. Why not? In his world, females were often betrothed to a man before puberty, and married shortly after puberty. There was no long period of fertility before marriage for parents to worry about. Remarkably Song of Songs, an erotic love poem in Scripture, involves two young people who don't seem to be married. In other words, the concerns about sex in ancient Judaism seem different than our modern religious preoccupations. So, once again, glib assertions of "The Bible says" is often a sign the speaker hasn't done their homework in studying the Bible.

To sum up: "purity" is one of the least helpful ways to frame sexual ethics. Sure, it has a biblical ring to it, because the Bible is from the ancient near east, where purity codes were universal. But many Christian scholars, let alone, pastors or youth leaders, or other unqualified people who write Christian books, are woefully ignorant regarding the complexities and meaning of ancient Jewish purity codes. So it mainly functions as a buzz word.

Of course, these so-called ethical experts (most of whom haven't read more than an introduction to ethics, if that) warn us that if we don't do as they say, we are abandoning Scripture and thus sure to slide down the slippery slope to "If it feels good, do it." Just because they have the biggest megaphones doesn't mean they get to set the terms for employing values derived from Scripture in developing ethics regarding sexuality. For example, there are two prominent values in Scripture that can be helpful for ethical reflection regarding sex.

#### JUSTICE AS A LENS FOR ETHICAL DISCERNMENT

David Gushee's *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, has a great chapter on how evangelicals dethroned justice as the central norm of the Hebrew Bible and the teaching of Jesus<sup>2</sup>. This norm is barely recognized in purity culture. And yet, justice has to do with how we treat others: do we respect their dignity as those who bear the image of God? do we treat them fairly? Do we avoid oppressing them, taking advantage, etc. Maybe justice is downgraded because it undermines the rule of men over women, which conservative Christianity is dug in to preserve.

Justice, as a value within Scripture, can't be boiled down to universal moral absolutes unaffected by cultural and historical context—and this may make it less appealing to those with a strong need for certainty. A little thought, and we can see that what is considered "just" can vary from one cultural or historical context to the next. In some cultures, it's considered just for parents to choose a marriage partner for their children. In others that would be unjust. In ancient Israel it was considered just for a 30 year old man to "take" even a 12 year old girl as his wife. In our time, that is criminal. But even within Scripture itself what is considered just changes: Abraham married his half-sister, Sarah. This is

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<sup>2</sup> See *Introducing Christian Ethics* by David Gushee, pp. 120-128

forbidden in Torah. In one period, accumulating wealth is a sign of blessing, whereas Jesus in Luke 16: 15 says it can be an abomination. Perhaps even more troubling for white or European Christianity is the insistence of justice that ethics requires examining power, and “the implications of ‘power over’ [others] are best understood from below.”<sup>3</sup>

While the specifics of justice may evolve, principles of justice are more stable, such as, the principle that when we consider our actions, we need to take into account their impact on those directly affected and on the community as a whole. In Scripture, justice especially relates to the problem of oppression. The worst corruption of a judge is to fail to rule on behalf of the oppressed. Judges were not just umpires, they were agents of justice, especially for the oppressed.

The helpful thing about justice as a lens for ethical discernment is that justice is a muscle we exercise so to speak, in all our dealings with others, including how we express ourselves sexually, and not a special set of virtues that only apply to sex.

#### WISDOM AS A LENS FOR ETHICAL DISCERNMENT

Wisdom is a different ethical mode than justice. Wisdom is imagined as a divine feminine presence delighting in the creation, delighting in humans, desiring their flourishing, and advising them. The counsel of Wisdom always takes into account our humanity—it’s possibilities and its limits. If justice leans toward ethical ideals, especially ideals fully realized in the age to come, wisdom pays special attention to what is “realistic” rather than “idealistic”; that is, it takes into account the actual potentials and limitations of our humanity, here and now. Like justice, it is also highly situational. Whether an action is wise or foolish depends very much on the circumstances. So wisdom is dancing with us—adjusting her moves to ours and our moves to hers. It’s the difference between using a map for directions or driving with a GPS. The GPS remains calm and non-judgmental when we make a turn that takes us farther from our destination and says, “recalculating!” In a way, wisdom is adjacent to a research-based approach as it is concerned with observable realities, and taking into account cause and effect, actions and consequences.

Together, these two lenses can be quite helpful for developing sexual ethics; there are others to consider. Joy (along with the other fruit of the Spirit) is an obvious lens in Scripture to employ. Covenant (framing relationships within explicit mutual commitments) is another. Wisdom in particular would dictate that a sexual ethic take into account the substantially altered social circumstances of modern marriage (e.g. delayed onset, prolonged lifespan, egalitarian power sharing, improved contraception technologies, altered economic impact of children)

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 177

Speaking of helpful or unhelpful lenses derived from Scripture, a final postscript: Patriarchy is another lens found in Scripture, one that is prominent in the ancient world as well as our own. As patriarchy weakens in large swathes of the modern world, defending a (weakened) form of it fuels purity culture and related approaches to gender and sexuality. We can choose to support patriarchy in our sexual ethic or reject it. The existence of writings considered sacred and their inclusion in our moral discernments, does not absolve us of our moral agency and responsibility. Inasmuch as we look to Scripture as a source of discernment, it's obvious that arguments grounded in Scripture are used to justify supporting or resisting patriarchy. So we consider the fruit of patriarchy. Evidence of egregious harm connected to the rule of men over women and gender variant people is self-evident. It's easy to see how patriarchy violates explicit values found in Scripture like justice, wisdom, and the ethical priority of "love your neighbor as yourself," enshrined in the golden rule. Hope for a new age also augers its defeat. Faithfulness to God, ethical discernments, and following Jesus all require making choices.