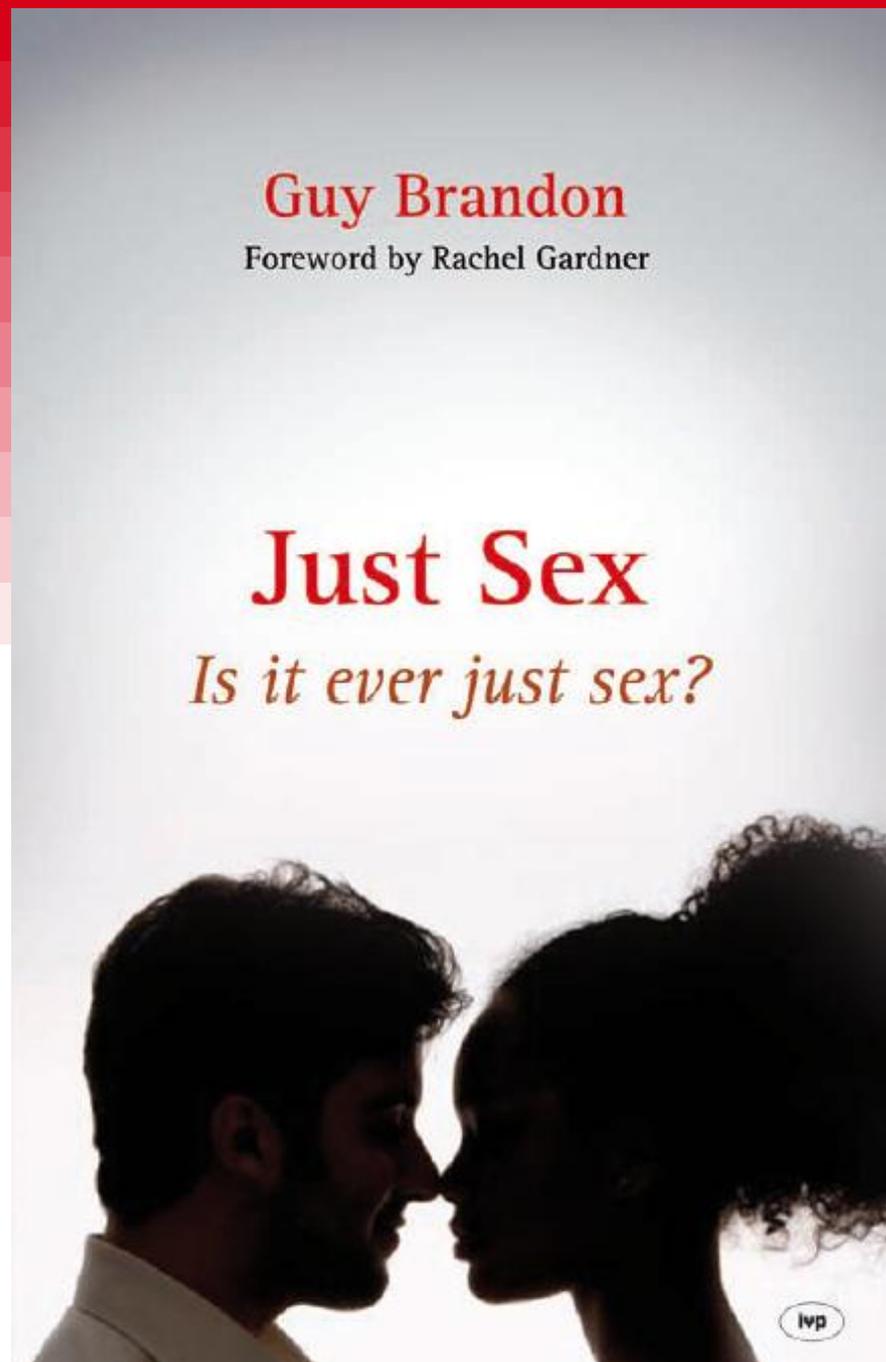


1 Corinthians 5-7

Three Bible Studies: Sexual Ethics



JUBILEE
CENTRE

A BIBLICAL VISION FOR SOCIETY

1 Corinthians 5-7

Three Bible Studies: Sexual Ethics

*Designed to supplement
'Just Sex: Is it ever just sex?'
by Guy Brandon (IVP, 2009)*

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Preface

Since 1983 the Jubilee Centre has conducted research into a biblical vision for society and how that vision might inform our response to a wide range of contemporary concerns. This has taken us into Sunday trading, credit and debt, international peace-building, criminal justice, care for the elderly, asylum and immigration, the environment, and numerous other fields. Our goal has always been the big picture – a rival to the ‘isms’ of our age. In 2005 we drew together the conclusions of our work to date in *Jubilee Manifesto: A framework, agenda and strategy for Christian social reform*, edited by Michael Schluter and John Ashcroft (IVP).

Our contention is that our well-being, both individually and collectively, is essentially a relational issue. Relationships is the big idea. Not ‘relationships’ as they are often talked about, restricted to little more than merely sexual relationships, but the complete spectrum of personal, social, economic, and political relationships that constitute our identities and contribute to our well-being.

Faced with a barrage of messages from a sexually permissive environment and lacking a clear rationale for biblical teaching, many Christians are unsure of what they think about sex – uncertain whether an ancient text has anything to say to our Brave New World and, if it does, unconvinced of whether they really want to pay it any attention. Even Church leaders are divided over key issues like sex before marriage, divorce and homosexuality.

One reason for the confusion is that people find themselves walking a narrow line between, on the one hand, affirming traditional standards of sexual conduct and, on the other, showing grace and forgiveness to those who have chosen alternative forms of behaviour. It is understandable and right that we should seek to comfort an individual who has been hurt by their own actions and those of another in a sexual relationship. Equally, in an age that extols diversity and multiculturalism, few people want to risk being accused of intolerance or prejudice. However, such desires and fears can obscure the need to uphold the biblical standards that can prevent so much pain – particularly when the reasons for these standards are poorly understood.

The first letter to the Corinthians was written to believers who shared our modern confusion. The three chapters covered by this set of three studies grapple with deeply personal issues of sexuality. In it, we discover a message of hope, that in Christ we can live a rich and fulfilling relational life that satisfies the needs both of us as individuals and of those around us. Explore with us as we seek to understand not just ‘what is permissible’, but what is fair and best for us and wider society and, ultimately, what brings glory to God.

Dr John Hayward
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Introduction

Background: Corinth

Corinth was a wealthy port city, located on a narrow strip of land connecting the Peloponnese peninsula in southern Greece to the rest of the country. Its location allowed Corinth to control north-south trade, as well as being a critical land link between east and west. The ancient city was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC. Some 100 years later Julius Caesar re-founded it as a Roman colony, and from 29 BC it served as the capital of the senatorial province of Achaëa (an ancient province of Greece). It attracted a wide diversity of people from across the empire, including retired soldiers (many freed slaves), Jews and Greeks, and many religions including mystery cults from Asia and Egypt. Roman law, culture and religion dominated, but Greek influences were apparent in language, philosophy, religion and culture.

The 'old' city was synonymous with sexual immorality and prostitution, and the reputation of the 'new' city was not much improved. It is within this historical context that 1 Corinthians is set.

The Church

The church at Corinth was established by Paul, probably around AD 50, and was made up of Jews and Gentiles. Jews brought their own religious background, whereas the Gentiles brought different pagan ideas and practices to the church. There was also a mixture of rich and poor, slave and free, and the diversity made for strife as differing perspectives, expectations and needs clashed.

The Letter

Paul's letter to the Corinthians includes some personal information for individuals, but was mostly intended for the whole church, to be read aloud as a substitute for his actual presence. The letter is not a comprehensive, carefully structured work of theology, as Romans is; it was written to address specific circumstances at a particular time, in response to communications to him (from Chloe's house, 1 Corinthians 1:11). Reading it is a bit like listening to just one side of a conversation so we have to be careful about taking general principles from it without knowing why he wrote what he did, and without checking they fit with his other letters and the rest of the Bible.

Despite the specific circumstances, the broader issues faced by the Corinthian community are common to all Christian communities - how to live as free and holy children of the Kingdom within the very real and destructive structures and influences of the World.

Themes

In introducing our studies of 1 Corinthians 5-7, it is useful to look at chapters 1-4, and chapter 15, which summarises some of Paul's foundational arguments.

In the earlier chapters, Paul establishes his authority and tackles the Corinthians on their pride and the divisions in the church. It seems that they had taken on board many of the popular philosophical ideas of the time, and were more interested in expert 'wisdom' and clever rhetoric than in humility and faith in God's grace through Jesus' sacrifice. Their enthusiasm was misdirected, and they could be confused, petty, spiritually ambitious and elitist, fascinated with the spectacular, judgmental of each other but without regard for their own morality. Paul has to remind them that they have missed the point: worldly wisdom is worthless compared with the 'foolishness' of the Cross.

In chapter 15, Paul focuses on the church's hope in the resurrection. Jesus' resurrection is proof of God's grace and intention for Christians, and the beginning – though not yet the completion – of his new Kingdom. Throughout the letter Paul tries to show the Corinthians their new identity in Christ, and why their current beliefs and behaviour are so unfitting. The resurrection is the foundation of the Christian community. Without it, the Christian faith is meaningless. But if it is true, it changes everything and the Corinthians cannot hold onto their old way of life and 'wisdom'.

First Study: 1 Corinthians 5

A Little Yeast

Welcome to the first of three studies in our mini series. Please read the introductory notes to give you the context for what follows, if you haven't already.

Prayer

1 Corinthians and chapter 5 in particular deal with difficult and often personal themes. We are all sexual beings and many struggle in this area. Pray for wisdom and sensitivity.

Read the text aloud.

Don't worry that you will not remember it, but trust that this living word will engage with you through the help of the Holy Spirit. Listen for repeated themes, take note of words that leap out at you, be expectant and patient. Try a different translation to hear it from a different perspective.

Introduction

Paul set up the church at Corinth but, after he left, problems developed about the setting and maintenance of appropriate community boundaries between the church and the world. Many in the church thought they could continue their former pagan associations and practices. Influenced by pagan ideas, they thought a person's spirit was what really mattered and so a person could do what they liked with their body.

1. The Corinthian's culture claimed that what they did with their bodies in terms of sex was irrelevant. What are our culture's sexual standards/beliefs?

Paul's basic message is that the church must demonstrate Kingdom integrity in everyday issues. Clear boundaries must be set not to separate out entirely from the world (Paul wants them to live quality lives in the world), but to be true to the gospel. They have indeed been set free, but this freedom is not freedom from, but rather freedom *for*...obedience to the way of Christ. Such freedom only exists within appropriate limits.

2. Paul warns about associating with immoral people – but what conditions on this does he state? (vv. 3, 9-11)

Every culture, no matter how liberal, has its limits. Even the sexually promiscuous Corinth had limits. Paul's anger is apparent in the strong language that he uses - the church is tolerating what the pagan world does not even tolerate! A man is living with his stepmother (presumably, because she is not referred to as mother), a relationship specifically prohibited in the Old Testament (see Lev. 18:8; Deut. 22:30, 27:20).

3. How does the church react to the offence in this chapter? (vv. 2, 6)

4. What does Paul say should happen to the evil doer and how does his response make you feel?

The mixed (Jewish and Gentile) congregants at Corinth would have thought of Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread (bread without yeast), remembering the Exodus. Today observant Jews go to extraordinary lengths to ensure that no yeast remains in the house. (See Exodus 12:8, 12:17ff).

This Passover theme is critical to Paul's message. Jesus' life and work culminated in His dying as the Passover lamb to free the world from the slavery of sin (our Egypt) and to begin our Exodus journey to the Promised Land. We therefore live in the time of the Passover - there is to be no yeast. Christ followers are to live differently in this new 'time' in which the Kingdom is both 'now' and 'not yet,' to live holy lives marked by sincerity (purity) and truthfulness (with Christ at the centre) (5:9).

Jesus uses the idea of 'yeast' in the same way. 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough' (Matthew 13:33).

5. Paul's comments about yeast suggest that this one person's sin has 'spread through the dough', i.e. the whole church. How has this one man's sexual sin affected others? More broadly, how do our 'freedoms' impact other people?

6. What are the similarities/differences between Corinth and where you live?

7. What are the differences/similarities between the Corinthian church and your own?

(One issue worth discussing is church discipline - does it happen and, if so, how, when, who does it and why?)

8. Churches and Christians as individuals often take on values from our wider culture (such as the idea of 'consenting adults in private'), as the Corinthians did. Is this idolatry? Why?

We are now trying to identify theological or application principles from the text that surpass the specific situation and culture of the text. They should be both instructive for the original audience and for us today. These principles must correspond to the teaching of the Bible as a whole. This is a very important step, but requires care!

9. What practical applications can we draw in the way the church views and addresses sin – whether sexual or otherwise?

As noted earlier, it is not the specific issues per se that are of interest here but how Paul addresses them. Therefore, as we move to the final step the challenge is, what are the issues that you and your community need to address, and what disciplinary steps need to be taken to expel the 'yeast'.

Remember that, while these studies are drawing out issues of sexual ethics, we should not and cannot, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians, make these the scapegoat issues. Rather, such sins are a consequence or a symptom of a much wider set of problems that often lie in our own behavioural blind spots.

Take some time to pray through the challenges raised by this study.

Second Study: 1 Corinthians 6

One Flesh

Welcome back to the second of our three studies. If you are new, this will make a lot more sense if you read the introductory notes.

What struck you most in last week's study?

In chapter 5, Paul addresses disturbing behaviour that has been reported to him. He criticises the community for tolerating incestuous behaviour that even the pagan world would shun. He commands them to remove this wicked person from their midst, before this evil 'leaven' (yeast) works its way through the community, destroying it from the inside. He extends his definition of a wicked person to include, amongst others, the sexually immoral, drunkards and the greedy. He urges the Corinthians to disassociate themselves from all such wicked persons.

Prayer

We continue to discuss difficult and often personal territory this week. Pray for sensitivity, and receptivity.

Read chapter 6 aloud.

Like chapter 5, chapter 6 is Paul's response to reports that have been brought to him.

- 1. What do we learn about judgment within the Church from this passage?**
- 2. Why are Christians not to bring lawsuits against each other? How might we apply this today, in our different context?**
- 3. Verses 9-10 follow straight on from the discussion around lawsuits, suggesting that the behaviours listed here are considered issues of justice. Why?**
- 4. What is Paul talking about in verses 12-20? How does his viewpoint differ from the Corinthians', and from our culture's own?**

5. **How does Paul respond to the Corinthian slogan - 'Everything is permissible for me'? (see also 1 Corinthians 10:23). (Is visiting prostitutes permissible?)**

6. **What do you think the second slogan means ('Food for the stomach and the stomach for food') – and why doesn't the Corinthians' logic follow?**

7. **Verses 16-17 encapsulate biblical teaching on sex ('one flesh'). Read Genesis 2:18-24 and Matthew 19:3-9. What themes and implications do you see here?**

8. **What is Paul's advice on how to respond to sexual temptation?**

9. **Given the Corinthian's preoccupation with their spiritual side, what must they have made of Paul's comment in verses 18-20?**

This language evokes the slave-market, emphasising that we have been bought out of slavery. So, why would we be so foolish to choose slavery over our freedom? A sexual sin is one against our bodies' true Lord and Master. Remember: our bodies have eternal significance.

10. **In what ways is Paul's message still relevant to our permissive age?**

11. **What are some of the consequences of breaking the 'One Flesh' relationship, and the pastoral issues that 1 Corinthians 6 might raise in the church? How might we address these?**

Allow time for prayerful response.

Third Study: 1 Corinthians 7

Sex, Separation & Singleness

Welcome to the third and final study in our mini-series. (If you are new, this will make a lot more sense if you read the introductory notes.)

This is perhaps the most challenging chapter, not just because of the issues addressed, but because there is a lot of material to be covered!

What struck you most last week?

Prayer

Take a few minutes to pray. Chapter 7 is a challenging chapter. Pray for wisdom and energy as you discuss these issues together.

Read 1 Corinthians 7 aloud.

1. Why do you think that this chapter was written?

The NIV reads, 'It is good for a man not to marry' (verse 1) but the Greek word used means 'to touch' – 'it is good for a man not to touch a woman'. Many commentators believe that this was a popular slogan quoted by the Corinthians that Paul is addressing; others think this is Paul's own opinion (hence some translations have quotation marks around this sentence and others don't). Whichever it is, Paul spends a lot of time in the rest of the chapter giving his complete opinion on this.

2. Does this chapter imply that sex is inherently bad? What is Paul's view?

3. What do you make of Paul's advice in verse 5?

4. Can you sense Paul's dilemma in chapter 7? He partly agrees, yet at the same time disagrees strongly with the Corinthian slogan of verse 1 - why is this?

Most translations of 7:8 refer to the 'unmarried and widows' but, as he addresses the 'never married' in 7:25ff it is most likely that in 7:8-16 he is focusing on the widowers and widows, and those who are single through separation.

5. What is Paul's advice to this group?**6. What does Paul have to say here about divorce?**

Paul uses the examples of circumcision and slavery as illustrations for his next point (7:17-24). (Note that the question of circumcision may not just be a theoretical discussion of adopting or dropping Jewish customs. There was even a 'decircumcision operation' known in the ancient world.)

7. What point(s) is Paul making here, beyond 'remain as you are'?

In 7:25-28 Paul stresses that he is not offering a command from the Lord, but wise, trustworthy counsel, in response to the present circumstances. His advice is that they remain as they are, given the 'present crisis.' His first reason for this advice is that he desires to save them from troubles.

'The present crisis' may mean a belief that Christ would soon return. But it could also refer to the situation of sexual immorality within the church which made for a bad environment for deciding life-long partnerships. Paul might have meant that they needed time to absorb his teaching before they started marrying again. Alternatively, he could have meant some form of persecution. Another possibility is the grain famine of the 40s and 50s predicted by Agabus in Acts 11:28.

8. In 7:25-38 Paul addresses those who have never been married. What message might we take from this today?**9. What do you make of Paul's stated preference for singleness? Depending on who is in your group, what principles for pastoral care can we draw out from this chapter as a whole for singles, those who have divorced or remarried, and about the value that Paul places on sex?**

Allow time for prayerful response.

About Jubilee Centre

The Jubilee Centre seeks to demonstrate the continued relevance of biblical principles to the challenges facing society today. It believes the Bible presents a coherent social vision, based on right relationships, that provides an alternative to contemporary political ideologies.

The Jubilee Centre has applied this relational agenda to areas as diverse as the economy, criminal justice, care for the elderly, asylum and immigration, and the environment. Its publications include the ground-breaking 'Jubilee Manifesto' and the quarterly 'Cambridge Papers', an influential collection of peer-reviewed studies. The Jubilee Centre maintains an extensive blog and archive of its resources, most of which can be downloaded for free, on its website.

Its range of resources for the 'Fair Sex Movement' include the popular 'Just Sex: Is it ever just sex?' by Guy Brandon (IVP, 2009) and three public information bulletins, available on the Jubilee Centre's YouTube channel, together with an accompanying set of discussion questions.

Most Jubilee Centre resources can be freely downloaded from its website. If you have benefitted from these studies and would like to help the Jubilee Centre continue developing similar tools, please make a donation towards the charity's work. Find out more using the contact details below:

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