

**PERPLEXITIES IN PAUL:  
THE BODY**

I Corinthians 6:12-20

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 18, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

**Focus Text**

*'All things are lawful for me', but not all things are beneficial. 'All things are lawful for me', but I will not be dominated by anything. 'Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food', and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, 'The two shall be one flesh.' But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.*

In the grand sweep of Christianity, there are major markers and divisions along the way that are more coherent in reality than they may be in our minds and memories.

In the Old Testament we walk through

- Creation and Fall – featuring Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel
- The Period of the Patriarchs – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua
- The Monarchies of Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon
- Followed by prophets and sages, poets and writers.

When we get to the New Testament, two figures dominate: Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul.

- The Gospels are written by others about Christ.
- By contrast, we meet Paul through letters he wrote to churches he had founded or individuals he knew, letters he had no idea would eventually make their way into Holy Scripture, to be read by others for centuries.

Since the first century, preachers, teachers and scholars have wrestled with the differing roles Jesus and Paul play within Christianity.

- For some, Jesus is the idealist, the reformer, the revolutionary, the saint; and Paul, the one who took Jesus' ideals and brought them to practical fruition in the Greco-Roman world.
- For others, Jesus is the purist; and Paul, the corrupter, of Christianity.

In addition, when we read Paul's letters, we encounter many theological dilemmas:

- Was Paul able to harness the spiritual power Jesus unleashed and bring it to life in a new culture? Likewise, can we take the faith we have inherited from both Paul and Jesus and bring it to life in the worlds of capitalism, democracy, freedom, and pluralism we inhabit, in the homes in which our children outpace us daily with their social development, their technology, their opportunities for knowledge and communication?
- Was Paul a theologian, an activist, or a mystic? Did he live by the mind, the hands, or the heart? Conversely, in our faith, is any one of these more important than the other?
- Did Paul radically excise law from Christian faith, leaving us a religion of "grace alone," a religion in which we can make most of our important ethical decisions with complete freedom of conscience, surrounded by God's grace, yet free from laws, rules, and traditions that serve as worthy guides much of the time but may be set aside as the situation warrants?
- Can we avoid the complexity of Paul in favor of the simpler life found in Christ's Sermon on the Mount – "Turn the other cheek," "Go the extra mile," "Give the second coat as well"? Is it possible simply for us to "do what Jesus did"?

- Finally, was Paul simply too much a product of his time for us to take him seriously – particularly in his attitudes toward women and sexuality, his apparent condoning of slavery, his expectation of the imminent return of Christ, and his willingness to spend time on trivial matters such as “food offered to idols”? Is he worth our time to take seriously?

I raise these questions at the outset of today’s sermon because for the next three weeks, and at several other points during this year, I will be preaching from the Letters of Paul. I will keep these questions in front of me as I prepare each sermon, yet I will not force answers for them all if the passage on which I am preaching does not surface a particular question. As we wade through Paul at various times this year, and as these and other questions become important for you, write or email or call me and perhaps we can talk about them outside this “pulpit-pew” relationship we have on Sunday mornings. Some of you do this already, and I enjoy it immensely.

Let us pray: *Lord, you have given us many interpreters of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Foremost among them is the Apostle Paul. As I seek to interpret him; and he, Christ, help us at Westminster to learn, to grow in our faith, and to “glorify you in our bodies.” In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*

We begin with perhaps one of the most difficult subjects: Paul’s understanding of the human body.

- This subject is difficult because the body is hard to talk about anywhere, but especially in worship, especially around children.
- It is difficult as well because discussions about the body – at least in church – often become discussions around sexuality, a topic which the church – like most parents with their children – rarely handle well, a topic in which the writings of Paul become cannon fodder in longstanding cultural wars, a topic whose discussion seems to lower everyone’s IQ by thirty or forty points.

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Let me begin by saying that in the Greek language in which Paul wrote, there are three words that impact our understanding of the body.

- The first is *sarx*, normally translated “flesh.” Flesh is the skin and bones, the muscle and fat, the hair and fingernails that make up our physicality. Flesh is what many of us mean when we say “body.”
- The second word is *pneuma*, translated “spirit.” Hardest to define, “spirit” is the soul, the conscience, the feelings, the emotions that make us who we are. We may not be able to define “spirit,” but we know it when we experience it.
- The third word Paul uses is *soma*, translated “body.” *Soma*, “body” is more than “flesh.” Pauline scholar Victor Furnish writes:

[Paul] means much more by “body” than just the physical body one “has.” [Paul] is thinking of the whole person, a “self” which precisely in its corporeality and creatureliness, is capable of communicating and therefore relating to other selves.<sup>1</sup>

Of these three words, we are generally on target if we think of “body” being the union of “flesh” and “spirit” into a living, breathing human being, a whole person. The body is who we are, flesh and spirit united.

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In one of his most important and well-known passages, Paul writes of the resurrection of the body:

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable *body* must put on imperishability, and this mortal *body* must put on immortality. ...then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

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<sup>1</sup>Victor Paul Furnish, *The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians* (1999), 57, quoted in Tom Are’s paper on I Corinthians 6:12-20 at the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminary, January 2009.

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’  
‘Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting?’<sup>2</sup>

When Paul writes these words, not only is he saying that the resurrection of the *body* will conquer death and remove its sting, but also he is saying that the “perishable selves” that inhabit this world – flesh and spirit – will be transformed and perfected into immortality. When nearly every Sunday in worship, during the Apostles’ Creed, we say, “I believe ... in the resurrection of the body,” we are saying that we believe our whole selves will be raised with Christ. Our bodies are that important.

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It is in this context – in which “body” = “whole self” – that we can hear Paul’s direct advice in today’s reading, advice in which certain words stand out to us like a red tie on a pink shirt.

The body is meant not for fornication [says Paul] but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?

As one of my clergy friends has said, these words are so specific that when we preach on them, they greatly reduce the number of people who will say at the door: “That sermon really spoke to me today.”<sup>3</sup>

The fact is these two aforementioned practices – prostitution and fornication – were common in the Greco-Roman world – common and expected among men of all classes.<sup>4</sup>

- It is debated whether Paul is using them as a metaphor to make his point,
- or addressing a specific practice among people in his congregation.

In reality, founding a church in the midst of Corinth, as Paul did, and asking people to use their bodies – their selves – for more noble purposes than giving them pell-mell to others was like founding a church in Las Vegas and asking people not to gamble or, these days, asking Presbyterians in Pittsburgh, of whom there are many, not to watch the Steelers. It was, shall we say, an uphill battle.

But if Paul’s words about these specific practices don’t speak directly to you – and make no bones about it, they may – then the words with which Paul ends this passage will:

Do you not know that your body – your whole self – is a temple of the Holy Spirit [which resides] within you?

Do you not know that your body – your whole self – is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit, which you have [been given] from God?

Do you not know that your body – your whole self – your whole life – was purchased with a price – the life and death and resurrection of Christ, the life and death and resurrection of – God?

Therefore, glorify God in your body. Glorify God in your whole being.

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The self is all we have with which to glorify God, and we engage in such glorification with everything we do.

- Because the self is “meant for the Lord,” the way we eat and sleep, study and think, speak and write, work and vote, rest and play, worship and serve, is “meant for the Lord.”

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<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians 15:51-55.

<sup>3</sup> Are, Moveable Feast, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (1997), 102.

- Because the self is “meant for the Lord,” the way we relate to other human beings “belongs to God.” The people with whom we live and work, the people we love and the people with whom we share a hymnbook, the people who sleep on our sidewalks and lie silently in our nursing homes and refugee camps are also bodies – “whole selves” – “given by God,” “meant for the Lord” in the same way we are. How our “selves” treat their “selves” matters to God.

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On Thursday morning I happened to catch on C-Span Senator Joe Biden’s farewell speech in the United States Senate prior to his swearing in this coming Tuesday as Vice-President. Biden, who is rarely brief, told story after story about what it was like to serve for thirty-six years in that chamber. He spoke of how important it was to develop relationships with other senators, other selves with whom he served.

I learned that lesson as a very young senator [Biden said]. I got here in '73. And one of the people...who kept me here was...Mike Mansfield, the majority leader.

...[H]e used to once a week have me report to his office...And he really was doing it, I know, in retrospect now, to take my pulse, see how I was doing.

...I walked in one day through those doors on the Republican side, and ...Jesse Helms, who came in '72 with me, was standing in the back excoriating Bob Dole for the Americans with Disability Act.

...I walked through the floor on my way to my meeting with Senator Mansfield. And I walked in and sat down on the other side of his desk....

And he had [a] pipe in his mouth, and he looked at me. He said, "Joe, it looks like something's bothering you."

..."Mr. Leader," I said, "I can't believe what I just heard on the floor of the Senate. I can't believe anyone could be so heartless and care so little about people with disabilities. I tell you, it makes me angry, Mr. Leader."

He said, "Joe, what would you say if I told you that four years ago, maybe five, Dot Helms and Jesse Helms were reading -- I think it's *The Charlotte Observer*, the local newspaper -- and they saw ...a piece in the paper about a young man in braces who was handicapped at an orphanage, who was in his early teens.

"And all the caption said was the young man wanted nothing more for Christmas than to be part of a family."

He said, "What would you say if I told you Dot Helms and Jesse Helms adopted that young man as their own child?"

I said, "I'd feel like a fool, an absolute fool."

He said, "Well, they did."

He said, "Joe, every man and woman sent here is sent here because their state recognizes something decent about them. It's easy to find the parts you don't like. I think your job, Joe, is to find out that part that caused [them] to be sent here."<sup>5</sup>

Our bodies, our whole selves, are meant for the Lord. Our task is to find that part of other selves which is decent, and to glorify God in our bodies, in our whole selves.

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<sup>5</sup> Available at [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/01/sen\\_joe\\_bidens\\_farewell\\_speech.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/01/sen_joe_bidens_farewell_speech.html).