

Question: Why is Paul so concerned with sexual immorality in his letter to the Corinthians?

Answer: “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans.” (1 Corinthians 5:1) Paul was constantly dealing with various issues in churches throughout the Roman Empire. Most of the letters to the churches that Paul writes are addressing specific issues the people there were inquiring about in light of their new Christian faiths. No community gave Paul more problems than the Corinthians. One of the biggest issues that Paul addressed on a regular basis in the Corinthian church was sexual immorality. Remember, Paul was preaching and teaching the Gentiles. The Gentiles were Romans, converting from the Roman Imperial Cult to Christianity. A brief review of the Roman Imperial Cult may help to understand the difficulties Paul faced. The Romans were **polytheistic**, meaning they believed in many gods. The Romans affiliated different gods with nearly every event and happening in their lives. The sun was the god Helios, the goddess of the moon was Selene/Luna, the goddess of victory was Nike/Victoria. The plethora of gods the Romans worshipped were constantly facing many human problems and temptations. In other words, the Romans **anthropomorphized** their gods, giving them human characteristics, feelings, and temptations. Zeus, one of the primary gods of the Romans, committed on several occasions sexually immoral acts. He cheated on his wife and was very promiscuous. If the gods the Gentiles worshipped (prior to their conversion to Christianity) were promiscuous and impure, then it was presumed that the people who worshipped them were promiscuous and impure as well.

The Christian Way that Paul preached demanded that the Gentiles discontinue their promiscuity. This did not seem to be understood by the church at Corinth because the Gentiles continued in their ill advised ways. One explanation for the Gentiles continued bad behavior at Corinth was their Platonic view of body and soul. The typical first century understanding of the body and soul was that they were two completely separate entities. What a person did with their body had no effect on their soul and visa versa. If one were to commit an immoral act with their body, in no way would this affect their soul. Thus, the immorality Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians would not be seen from the Gentiles perspective as a big deal because only the body was being corrupted. Through the Platonic viewpoint, the Romans developed a negative understanding of the body. They believed that it was a useless waste, a prison for the soul.

Paul writes to the Corinthians that their Platonic view of the body is wrong. Paul preached on the unity of body and soul and wrote to the church at Corinth that what you do with your body has direct influence on the state of your soul. He writes that the body is a temple, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” (1 Corinthians 3:16-17) Paul wanted all the churches he oversaw to know that whatever corrupts the body corrupts the soul. Paul takes the understanding of the body further by stating that as Christians we are the body of Christ. If we do something to corrupt our bodies, we are also corrupting the bodies of the entire faith community including Jesus himself, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:27)

Sexual morality, with respect of the body and soul is even more important to Paul because of the resurrection of the dead made possible through Christ’s giving his life on the cross. The question was asked by the Corinthians, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” (1 Corinthians 13:35) Paul writes almost in disgust, as if he had told the Corinthians several times before that their soul and body will both be raised. The body that was once perishable will become imperishable, the once mortal will become immortal. This is why it is so important that we respect our bodies, Paul states that we will not be just a wandering soul in heaven but we will be raised spiritual bodies. We are the extended body of Christ and our bodies will rise on the last day, therefore, we must respect the importance of our earthly vessel.

The Catholic Church today has continued to teach and preach sexual morality amongst its members. Pope John Paul II gave several sermons on human sexuality that has come to be known as the Theology of the Body. The pope explains how human sexuality points to why we were created and the relationship Christ has to the Church. The pope’s theology gives a very positive outlook on human sexuality and its importance to our Catholic faith.

Additional Reading: *The City of God*, St. Augustine of Hippo
The Corinthian Body, Dale B. Martin
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