

# What does 1 Corinthians 6:9 teach about sexuality, and how should we live in response?

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In 1 Cor. 6: 9-10, Paul gives a long list of “wrongdoers [who] will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Presbyterian New Testament scholars Paul Achtemeier and Marion Soards, whom I hold in high esteem, think that when 1 Cor 6:9 uses the Greek terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, Paul *clearly* is speaking about same-sex erotic behavior among males and excluding such people from being heirs of God’s kingdom. Thus, in the contemporary debate about the ordination of non-celibate gays and lesbians, they use this text to limit the issue to “homoerotic practice” aside from any other criteria that make people hold interpersonal relationships dear.

But is it really so clear that 1 Cor 6:9 is about “homoerotic practice” and is it really so clear who is excluded from being heirs of God’s kingdom? I suggest that there is actually a lack of clarity. The lack of clarity shows up in several ways. One is in the variety among translations. Another is the difficulty we have in making direct correlations between biblical texts and the way we construe reality today. Most importantly, however, the argument about clarity does not adequately consider the context in 1 Corinthians 6, and this context is eye-opening with respect to how Paul deals with sexual behavior among the Corinthians.

**Translations.** Though *malakoi* literally means soft, it is often used in Greek to describe effeminate men, and many interpreters suggest that this identifies receptive partners in same-sex erotic behavior among males. One would be hard pressed to deduce anything about a receptive partner from the King James translation which simply says “effeminate” or from Luther’s translation quite literally as “weakling.” The Revised Standard Version combines the two terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* into one translation as “sexual perverts,” a questionable move in translating, which the New Revised

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Standard Version tries to “correct” by reverting to two terms. With respect to *malakoi* the NRSV translation is “male prostitutes.” When the translation tradition moves between the extremes of “weakling” and “male prostitutes,” this indicates lack of clarity in our understanding of the term. Simply the variety in translations is one indication that the church has no sustained tradition of clarity about the meaning of *malakoi* in 1 Cor 6:9.

The problem of clarity is perhaps even more difficult with *arsenokoitai*. 1 Cor 6:9 is the first place we know of in all of Greek literature in which this term is used. Paul apparently coined it. So how does one know what a word means the first time it ever appears? Granted, we know some things from the formation of the word. It is compounded from a term for “bed” and a term for “male” with an agency ending – implicitly one who beds a male. Again, a quick review of translations shows the uncertainty in the meaning. The King James Version has “abusers of themselves with mankind”; Luther has an equivalent of “violators of boys,” perhaps implying pederasty; and the NRSV introduces “sodomites,” an astonishing innovation in the translation tradition.

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**Correlation.** A further difficulty is attempting to correlate our interpretations of the biblical text with the way we interpret reality. For example, the list in 1 Cor 6:9-10 includes the word *methusoi*, translated in the NRSV as “drunkards.” But what kind of present reality are we able to correlate with Paul’s word *methusoi*? People who drink alcohol in any quantity? People who occasionally drink to excess? People who drink too much on a regular basis? Further, how much is too much? The text itself does not enable us to know

with certainty what present reality we should correlate with *methusoi*. Similarly, it is not at all clear how we should correlate *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* with realities of our time. Do the words refer to men who engage in promiscuous sex with men? Do the words refer to women at all? Can they be stretched to include men and women in same-sex relationships marked by mutuality and covenant fidelity in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow – relationships that Paul could scarcely imagine? The church faces uncertainty not only in translating *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* but also in knowing how to correlate these terms with sexual behavior today.

**Context.** The context is eye opening. 1 Cor 6:9-10 lists categories of human beings who are excluded from being heirs of God’s kingdom. But in 6:11 Paul says

that even though some of the Corinthians used to belong to these categories, they no longer do: “And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” At first glance it appears obvious that when the Corinthians became believers, they changed their behavior. But as true as this may be, Paul spends the rest of the chapter dealing with the sexual behavior of some heterosexual males in the Corinthian Christian community. Even after being washed, sanctified, and justified, some of the Corinthian believers were still engaging in sexual intercourse with prostitutes.

The remainder of the chapter is Paul’s attempt to deal with their behavior. His argument is triadic. He reminds the Corinthians of their relationship to Christ, to the Holy Spirit, and to God. “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” he asks (6:15). In order to deal with sexual behavior that Paul considers to be problematic, he first reminds the Corinthians of their relationship with Christ.

But then he reminds them also of their relationship with the Holy Spirit: “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?” (6:19).

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Unfortunately, this has often been interpreted only in individualistic terms, as if each believer’s body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. But this is all in the second person plural, so that the emphasis is on the community as the body of Christ, as is evident elsewhere in 1 Corinthians (e.g. 11:29 with respect to the Lord’s supper). The meaning is something like: “Do you not know that your [corporate] body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who [lives] among you.” Not only does Paul

remind them of their relationship with the Spirit but also of their place in the corporate body of believers.

Paul’s thought then moves to the third part of the triad: “. . . [your corporate body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who lives among 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” (6:19-20). Here Paul reminds the Corinthians of their relationship with God. This is not altogether apparent because Paul uses a divine passive. That is, he expresses “you were bought with a price” in the passive voice, but had he expressed it in the active voice, he would have said, “God bought you with a price.” Here again the “you” is plural, and Paul’s exhortation to

glorify God in “your body” is also plural, that is, it is addressed to the corporate body.

In sum, when Paul is faced with sexual behavior from some believers in the Corinthian congregation which does not fit his own expectations, he does not fit these Corinthian believers into the categories of 6:9-10, which would exclude them from being heirs of God’s kingdom. On the contrary, his way of dealing with their behavior is to remind them of their relationships with Christ, with the Holy Spirit, and with God with the expectation that they would live out their sexuality as members of a community that lives in dependence upon the grace of God.

1 Corinthians 6 distinguishes two groups of people – those who are excluded as heirs of God’s kingdom in 6:9-10 and those who in the community of believers stand in a relationship with Christ, with the Spirit, and with God (6:12-20). Surprisingly, some Corinthians whose sexual behavior does not fit Paul’s expectations are still included in the second category.

The analogy to our own struggles about sexuality is strong. Even if this text suggested that all same-sex erotic activity were sinful – and it is by no means clear

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that it does – it still would not offer grounds for a categorical exclusion of non-celibate gay and lesbian Christians from the ministries of the church. As with all Christians, gay and lesbian Christians live their lives as part of a community in relation to Christ, to the Spirit, and to God. All of our lives, including our sexual lives, are caught up in and transformed by this relationship. 1 Corinthians 6 reminds us of this good news. It reminds us of the importance of sexual ethics. It calls us to glorify God in our bodies. But it offers no support

to our attempts to exclude from ministry those whom God has bought with a price and joined to the body of Christ.