

Dear Jerri, #12

One of the texts that is often under discussion when looking at same-sex relationships is I Corinthians 6:9-10. Please be patient with me as I continue inching toward that text. In my last letter, I showed how the Apostle Paul speaks about marriage in I Corinthians 7. Due to his expectation that Jesus would be returning soon, Paul's primary advice was to forget marriage and devote oneself entirely to servicing the gospel. Yet, he recognized that human passions are often inflamed and so Paul conceded that it was better to marry than to burn. I think it is important to keep Paul's remarks about marriage in chapter 7 in mind, when looking at Paul's remarks about homosexuality in chapter 6. Whatever is going on in chapter 6, Paul is not arguing against homosexuality in order to preserve "traditional family values."

Before jumping into I Corinthians 6:9-10, I want to take a wider view of how this letter to the church in Corinth is unfolding. Some scholars believe that what we call "First and Second Corinthians" may actually be two out of four or more letters that Paul wrote to this church. Without question there was correspondence that went in the other direction, which we do not have. So, I Corinthians is a very situational, highly contextualized letter. But, we do not have access to much of the situation or context. So, it is even more important here than in other places to keep a wide view, trying to discern what the real issues are and what the conversation behind the letter was all about.

- In I Corinthians 1-5, it is already evident that there were factions in this church, as well as a scandal over someone who was living with his father's wife. What is curious about I Corinthians 6 is that it begins with this: "When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints?" Paul is aghast that the church in Corinth would rather yield their disputes to a secular court than to let the church adjudicate their differences. And what are the disputes tearing at the unity of this church? Here is a quick overview of the things that Paul addresses throughout the rest of I Corinthians, most of which seem to be in response to inquiries from the church itself.

- In chapter 7, Paul begins "Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman.'" And later, "Now concerning virgins." Sexual propriety and marriage are in question.

- In chapter 8, Paul says, "Now concerning food sacrificed to idols." Apparently, in this chapter, someone was claiming to have special knowledge that allowed them to press their view on everyone else, to which Paul responds, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

- In chapter 9, Paul begins with a sentence that surely has a backstory: "This is my defense to those who would examine me."

- In chapter 10, Paul begins with reminding the Corinthians of Israel's unfaithfulness during the wilderness journey in the book of Exodus, and how God punished their idolatry and fornication. He summarizes, "Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did." One of the arguments to which Paul is responding in this chapter is that some of them were exercising a kind of license to the harm of others, which they defended with the phrase, "All things are lawful." Paul would add, "but not all things are beneficial."

- In chapter 11, Paul offers a description about the Lord's Supper that we now call the "Words of Institution" during communion. However, Paul is not just giving a lesson in "Theology 101." He is addressing a dispute over the proper way of celebrating the Lord's Supper with a long introduction that notes this: "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk."
- In chapters 12-14, including the wonderful "Love Chapter" that is often read at weddings, Paul is actually addressing a dispute over the proper way of practicing spiritual gifts when the believers are gathered: "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed."
- Chapter 15 addresses a dispute over the resurrection: "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?"
- And finally, chapter 16 addresses the matter of receiving a benevolence offering: "Now concerning the collection for the saints."

So, what does this overview of I Corinthians tell us about the 6th chapter? What I find interesting is how Paul goes about addressing their questions. His methods vary. Sometimes he cites a biblical event. At other times he refers to something from the life of Jesus, although this is fairly rare. On some occasions he refers to custom, with the phrase "do you not know?" or "it is proper." At other times he admits that he has no final word on the matter and is not interested in arguing the point if someone disagrees. Paul's most reliable approach is the "rule of love," which takes shape in various ways, depending on the situation. But here is the grand takeaway from this overview: ***Paul does not look for a Bible verse to quote in order to settle each question.*** That's not how the Scriptures function for this theologian of the church. We will bear that in mind as we look at chapter 6 more closely next week.

~ ***The Rev. Dr. D. Mark Davis***