All things lawful (1 Corinthians 6:12-20)

Is it possible to read Paul as an early exponent of a wellness ethic for sexuality?

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As a preacher, I tend to skirt much of what the apostle has to say about sex. I have many reasons for this, some of which are defensible. But the result—certainly in my own ministry, and perhaps in many churches that fit into a Venn diagram overlap of general social tolerance and instinctive prudery—is an absence of instruction, or even reflection, on an important part of people's lives. I suppose I trust people to figure things out for themselves, picking their way between what's left of cultural taboos on one hand and the ethical minefields of the sexual revolution on the other.

The relative frankness of much evangelical discourse on sex, however toxic its ultimate effects, is a bracing and for many people no doubt necessary alternative.

But in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul does not, to my non-expert eyes, seem to be simply stating or restating a prohibition. The term "fornication," in the NRSV translation, has a legalistic and formal connotation in recent English usage that comes from our own history of trying to enforce sexual and cultural hygiene; "fornication" sounds like the word a 1950s preacher would use to scold or frighten teenagers. What Paul seems to be talking about is less the seniors at Corinth High fumbling around in the

backseats of their parents' cars, violating a prohibition on sexual intercourse outside the bounds of legally solemnized wedlock, and more about things we would categorize with such (admittedly loaded and sometimes vague) terms as "adultery," "promiscuity," or even "sex addiction" today.

And to be clear, he does this in a way that is dehumanizing to women in general and to people who survive by sex work in particular. That's a good reason to find something to talk about in the gospel or Old Testament lesson this Sunday.

But he sets up his argument with what appears to be a quotation of a precept that may have been common among the Corinthian Christians, if not attributed (falsely or accurately) to Paul himself: "All things are lawful for me." This is a pretty big concession when we're talking about anything, let alone human sexuality. When he talks about food, it's easy enough to shift the focus to the conscience of one's neighbor. But this is different. The sexually immoral person (I'll skip "fornicator" here) "sins against the body itself."

There may be a way of reading this passage that rescues it from being just a passive aggressive rephrasing of a prohibition-based sexual ethic. But I think, even apart from that possibility, it is worth taking the first claims Paul makes at face value. Everything is lawful to me, but not everything is beneficial, and nothing should be permitted to "dominate" the believer. Is it, in fact, possible to pursue sex in a way that, while formally consensual and equal, is harmful to one's own well-being? Everyone should know by now that the legal status of marriage doesn't work any magical transformation of sex, so what does it mean for our sexuality to "glorify God" in our bodies regardless of our orientation or marital status?

If I am honest with myself, I have to admit that I have counted on residual bourgeois restraint to do a lot of the ethical work here. Everyone knows that selfishness and compulsion are problems, so no need to dwell on them. But when we are experiencing at the same time both a technological liberation of desire and a backlash aimed at fixing people within oppressive categories, those of us who haven't articulated a clear "beneficial" dimension to sexuality may need to try harder. Paul doesn't get us there, by any means. But he helps us ask the right questions.