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Excellence in Christian Living: Sex Ethics à la First Thessalonians 4:3-8

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Excellence.” It may eventually replace “self esteem” as the buzzword of choice. Fish that glossy Delta or American Airlines magazine out of the seat pocket in front of you and you’re sure to be exhorted to attend a workshop dedicated to “excellence” in business. A well-known conservative radio host broadcasts on the E. I. B. Network—“Excellence in Broadcasting.” Attend a parents orientation as your child enters college; you are sure to hear “excellence” (another buzzword) affirmed repeatedly.

The same holds true at the level of primary education. Your child’s teacher may not be able to articulate a coherent philosophy of education, but she or he will assure you that the educational outcomes (third buzzword; use one and others spring up like toadstools) will result in “excellence” for your child. I have a theory: the actual mass of excellence present in a given situation is inversely proportional to the number of times “excellence” is used to describe that situation. But for now let us content ourselves with the observation that our popular culture exalts “excellence,” at least in name.

Since we are all part of that culture, we cannot avoid being pulled along with the current at least a little. And there is no need to be paranoid about the concept of excellence itself; both Scripture and common sense urge us to high standards in our character, relationships, and work. Call it what you will—quality, goodness, integrity, rectitude—excellence in its best sense is the stuff of honest and decent living.

The problem lies in the word’s misuse and resultant cheapening. And the problem is not just “out there” in popular culture. It is all too common in the church. This is especially true when it comes to that area which is all-determi-

native for who we are and how we live our lives: our sexual identity and expression. We face a problem in the area of sex ethics.¹

A Modern Ancient Problem

“It’s not immoral to have sex before marriage in our church. . . . In our church, they have you read the Scripture and then you can interpret it the way you want to.” That was the testimony of a pregnant-out-of-wedlock teenager as recorded in a recent interview for a national women’s magazine.²

Her evangelical pastor protested, “Huh? We talk about chastity before marriage as God’s plan. She would have been taught that. Quite explicitly.” But somehow she didn’t get the message.

Such misunderstandings are not new. The apostle Paul encountered a similar problem in the church at Thessalonica in the early A.D. 50s. With Silas and Timothy, Paul founded a church there near the beginning of his second missionary journey (ca. A.D. 50-53). The Gospel message was received by many, Jew and Greek alike (Acts 17:4). But it was bitterly opposed by others, and Paul and Silas were forced to leave town by night (Acts 17:10).

The situation was a church-planter’s nightmare. A new congregation just a month or two of age—and robbed of its founding leadership. What would become of it? Would it melt away due to persecution? Jesus had prophesied of those who “receive the word with joy when they hear it, but . . . have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away” (Luke 8:13).³ Paul harbored similar fears about the Thessalonians as he journeyed to Berea, 50 miles away, and then to Athens, another 250 miles or more. Finally, after traveling yet another 50 miles (west to Corinth) and when he “could stand it no longer” (1 Thess. 3:1), he dashed off the letter we call First Thessalonians,

and “mailed” it via Timothy.

It is in this letter that we are reminded how very ancient the problem of sub-Christian sex ethics is among the people of God. At the same time we are also reminded of the nature of true excellence.

Paul’s Commitment to True Excellence

It is worth noting, first, that Paul placed a premium on a mode and level of living that our word “excellence” well describes. A little biblical spadework will bear this out.

True, the word “excellence” does not appear in the New Testament at all in the NIV, ASV, or KJV versions. But the RSV translates Philippians 4:8 as “if there is any excellence . . . think about these things.” And the word “excellency” is found in Paul twice in the ASV (1 Cor. 2:1: “And I, brethren, when I came unto you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God”; Phil. 3:8: “Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.”). Paul is hardly oblivious to the concept.

And we must recall that Paul wrote in Greek, not English. Just because a particular English word is lacking in a certain translation does not mean that Paul never mentions the reality denoted by that word. A close equivalent to our word “excellence” crops up when Paul speaks of things that are “pleasing” to God: the living sacrifice of our whole selves (Rom. 12:1), full-orbed service to God (Rom. 14:18), sacrificial monetary giving for the Gospel cause (Phil. 4:18).⁴

More broadly, given Paul’s high view of God’s glorious sovereignty (e.g., Rom. 11:36) and impeccable goodness (e.g., Rom 3:5-6), it is reasonable to assert that for Paul “excellence,” which we might define as the highest good, is present wherever God’s will is manifest. Paul refers to God’s will (using the word *thelema*) nearly two dozen times.

In Romans 2:18 “God’s will” is parallel (and probably synonymous) with “what is excellent.” In Romans 12:2 it is parallel with “what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Twice in Romans Paul speaks of his long-awaited arrival at Rome as an ultimate expression of God’s will in its salvation-historical outworking (1:10; 15:32; cf. 16:25-27). It is by God’s will that Paul is an apostle (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1). Paul’s apostolate is, in his view, not merely a *summum bonum* (highest good) in the generic sense but a matter of eschatological import, for through it the mystery of the Gospel has been fully disclosed (Eph. 1:9; cf. 3:2-7).

All of this is to say that where a twentieth-century Westerner would invoke the ideal of “excellence,” Paul probably thought more in terms of God’s realized will. And this brings us back to the Thessalonians. For Paul makes it abundantly clear that the “excellence” of God’s will is at work in their midst. Paul expresses this in two ways.

First, he stresses God’s gracious choice (*ekloge*) in extending the gospel call to them (1 Thess. 1:4). In the same vein he speaks of God’s call (1 Thess. 2:12; 4:7; 5:24). He also underscores that what the new Thessalonians face, whether persecution or blessing, they receive as the result of divine appointment (1 Thess. 3:3 [*keimai*]; 5:9 [*tithemi*]). “Excellence” is a reality for this fledgling church, Paul is sure, because of the work of God whose word they have believed (1 Thess. 2:13).

Second, Paul speaks expressly of God’s will for them. We have already established that for Paul, where God’s will is present, the highest good for God’s people is close at hand. In a compact set of exhortations at the close of his first epistle to them (1 Thess. 5:16-22), Paul lists a number of items that are God’s will for them and therefore indicators of excellence in the Pauline sense. These come in the form of seven⁵ imperatives: Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances. . . . Do not put out the

Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.

All of these commands, Paul says, are God’s will for them.⁶ They make for the highest good. They are the signature of God’s holy presence. Therefore, as God’s beloved people (1 Thess. 1:4) his readers should spare no pains to see that they comply with that “good and acceptable and perfect” will (cf. Rom. 12:2).

God’s Will: Sex Ethics at Center Stage

At the core of Paul’s concern for the Thessalonians is the working out of God’s will, or true excellence, in the area of sexual expression. The importance of this is signaled, first, by the literary flow of the epistle. Up to chapter four in the letter, Paul has done little but praise and commend his readers (1 Thess. 1-2). He has also described the anguish which led him to write to them, and his joy in learning that they were standing firm (1 Thess. 3). But his tone shifts at chapter four, whose first word (“Finally”; Gr. *loipon*) signals a decisive turn to a gravely serious issue.

We may infer that the issue of God’s will—excellence in its highest and purest sense—is of critical importance for Paul by virtue of a second set of observations. Not only does he explicitly refer to it in verse 3 (“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified”); he prefaces this appeal by solemnly grounding it in the apostolic instruction they have already embraced and in “the authority of the Lord Jesus” Himself (1 Thess. 4:1-2).

And what does God’s will call for? For the Thessalonians it calls for renewed attention to their sex lives. At a minimum they should avoid *porneia*, here a blanket term for the whole range of attitudes and actions which Scripture prohibits (1 Thess. 4:3). This is key to their Sanctification. But Paul is not content to pass lightly over this matter; he rather becomes quite explicit. “Each of you should learn to

control his own body [*skeuos*] in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God" (1 Thess. 4:4-5).

This must be viewed as explicit, quite pointed language due to Paul's use of the word *skeuos*. We may set aside the recurrent theory that it means "wife" here.⁷ Decisive is the weakness of the rabbinic evidence often relied on for this translation, as well as the fact that "if we were to apply this understanding of a woman to Paul she would be little more than a vessel for gratifying [sic] the sexual desire of her husband."⁸ "Body" is preferable to wife—but recent research takes things a step further. It seems that *skeuos* was in fact a euphemism for the male sex organ. This was noted long ago in Kittel's,⁹ but has only recently begun to be factored into discussion of the meaning of the passage, with scholars like J. Whitton and K. P. Donfried leading the way.¹⁰ Donfried's research is particularly impressive. While we should not overemphasize the extent of our knowledge of religion and culture in first-century Thessalonica,¹¹ it can be said that the cults of Dionysius and Cabirus played important roles. In both of these cults, from which at least some of Paul's readers must have been converted, the male sex organ played a prominent role. In the worship of Dionysius "the hope of a joyous afterlife is central and appears to be symbolized by the phallus."¹² Donfried goes on to ask "whether this emphasis on the phallus and sensuality offer a possible background for the exhortations of 1 Thess 4.3-8 in general and for the difficult problem of the *skeuos* in particular."¹³ It seems fair to conclude that Paul's use of *skeuos* is a notable example of his effective contextualization of the gospel message to a specific cultural setting.

The Gravity of Sexual Misconduct

The importance of sexual expression is seen not only in Paul's (1) relating it to God's will as foundational to

Sanctification, and (2) use of graphic language. It may also be inferred from the heavy artillery he employs to drive the point home.

First, misconduct in this area implies that one has not really come to know God at all: "not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God" (1 Thess. 4:5). This is probably not, as many have theorized, a teaching that sexual pleasure is *verboten* for Christians. It makes better sense to see Paul recognizing that in the pagan world, the drives and proclivities symbolized by *skeuos* too often controlled the man instead of vice versa. "Pagans at that time did not consider it wrong to indulge themselves sexually as much as they liked."¹⁴ To offer "the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness" (Rom. 6:13) rather than to God as instruments of righteousness is to fail a basic test of authentic Christian faith: not only hearing the Gospel, but acting on it (cf. Matt. 7:24).

Second, Paul points out that inappropriate sexual conduct is a flat violation of the command to love one's neighbor ("in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you."). He is not the least bit squeamish about invoking the specter of God's punishment for those who flaunt God's counsel. Apparently this stern exhortation had been part of his pedagogy from the time he first shared the Gospel with them.

Third, Paul invokes a two-fold theological rationale for heeding what he writes. First, there is God's calling: "For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (1 Thess. 4:7). It is the Christian's privilege and joy to rise to the level that God's effectual call elevates him. God dwells in holiness; those who yearn for communion with him will want to live in a manner that does not exclude them from his presence. Second, there is apostolic authority. Modern writers often treat Paul as if he wrote purely from his own

experience and in no way under the sway of inspiration. H. Ulonska, for example, accuses Paul of banning sexual desire from Christian marriage, “placing a neurotic and pathological burden upon it” by setting up a stark either-or for Christian women: “[sexless] saint or slut.”¹⁵ Such a scoffing approach to Paul runs head-on into his insistence that whoever “rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you His Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 4:8). Paul wanted the Thessalonians to think twice, at least, before swapping the Christian ethic Paul had instilled in them (via Old Testament instruction,¹⁶ his apostolic example [1 Thess. 2:10-12] and admonition, and the Holy Spirit) for the mess of pottage of fashionable pagan morals.

Paul’s (God’s) Call to Excellence Today

We have suggested that our modern rage for excellence has a correlate in Paul’s zeal for God’s will. In the sexually hypercharged setting of Thessalonica, Paul insists that honoring that will involves, quite literally, embodying it. Right down to individual body parts, when these are part of the problem, there must be godly response rather than heathen misuse. A few points cry out for explicit application in light of Paul’s pithy counsel.

We should note that while Paul apparently tailored his message to fit his setting, he did not tone it down. Notoriously, some modern formulations of ethics (even “Christian” ethics) have tended to go with the flow of today’s eroding sexual mores. *Porneia* has become permissible if it is sincere . . . or loving . . . or culturally acceptable . . . or convenient . . . or medically “safe” . . . or irresistibly enjoyable . . . or psychologically unavoidable (“I was abused as a child”) . . . or spiritually non-lethal via quick use of 1 John 1:9 (the pop-Christian equivalent of the “morning after” pill). The list could doubtless be extended. The problem of *porneia* in the pastorate has been amply documented.¹⁷ But con-

servative Christian circles at large, not just their pastoral leaders, are at risk here, as the invasion of ribald-to-obscene television programming (too often welcomed with secret joy, since a TV sit-com or video viewed privately at home is not a “bad witness” like public cinema attendance of the same tacky show) and provocative computer offerings (whether software or Internet) encourage an easy familiarity with sights, themes, and visually overpowering situations that eat away at healthy levels of modesty, innocence and shame. But if Paul in his time did not downplay sexuality as a key barometer of gospel health, neither should Christians today.

Perhaps we should go a step farther here. Many have observed (perhaps not always justly) that churches often stand against sex sin, but seldom deal with sexuality in constructive ways until it is too late for the offenders. Young people especially complain of this: At their hormonal peak in life they feel that pastors, parents and others in didactic roles are evasive when it comes to the explicit counsel and instruction they seek, yet quick to condemn when someone transgresses. Paul’s explicit language, and his willingness to risk the charge of reductionism by equating God’s will with Christian sexual expression to such a considerable extent, should encourage Christian leaders to grasp the nettle here and shepherd the flock in a robust manner when it comes to the sexual guidance their charges require and deserve. Admittedly the sorry moral state of Christian leadership today, to say nothing of the fragmentation and worldliness of Christian homes, makes this a tall order. But it was not an easy or popular topic for Paul to broach, either.

And finally, Keck rightly points out that the primary question for sex ethics, or any ethical question taking the Scriptures seriously, must not be simply, “What must/ought/should/may I do?” but rather “To whom am I accountable, and for what?”¹⁸ The question of God’s will, or

excellence as we have defined it, is ultimately not a sterile matter of do's-and-don'ts. Paul reminds us that what is at stake is our reception of the Lord's covenant love, our conforming to it in our ties with those around us (especially members of the opposite sex, with whom there is great potential for furthering the kingdom as we labor together—but also for shaming it if together we err), and our resultant reflecting of His holiness in our beings and behavior.

In other words, sex ethics is a relational issue, not a set of mechanical prescriptions. Our worship of the Father, our walk with Christ, our communion with the Spirit, and then the daunting complexities of the whole range of our interpersonal contacts with other humans, have everything to do with internalizing the relational richness to which the Gospel summons us.

All the more reason to ponder Paul's words to the Thessalonians, words full of potential to revitalize a church plying morally turbulent waters today.

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Endnotes

1 The definition of "ethics" varies widely. Ethical theorists often make no explicit mention of the canonical Christian Scriptures as relevant to ethics; see, e.g., "Ethics" in *Key Ideas in Human Thought*, Kenneth McLeish, ed. (Rocklin, California: Prima Publishing, 1995), 248ff. Others, however, see the Bible as founda-

tional and affirm a definition like that proposed by David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 14: "Christian ethics may be defined as the study of the way of life that conforms to the will of God—the way of life that is good, that pleases God and fulfills human nature." Jones also approvingly cites John Murray's definition: "Biblical ethics is concerned with the manner of life and behavior which the Bible requires and which the faith of the Bible produces" (ibid. 11 n. 1).

- 2 Jeanne Marie Laskas, "Someone to Love," *Good Housekeeping* 223/2 (August 1996), 125.
- 3 Scripture citations here and below are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.
- 4 In each case the Greek word is *euarestos*.
- 5 Observing the Greek syntax; the NIV makes *panta de dokimazete, to kalon katechete* ("Test everything. Hold on to the good.") into separate commands where Paul may intend a hendiadys.
- 6 Some commentators suggest that "God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18b) extends only to the first three commands of the section (5:16-18a). See, e.g., L. Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 174; J. E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1953), 203. It is perhaps just as likely that Paul, having given counsel on being joyful, prayerful, and thankful as functions of God's will (5:16-18a), goes on to apply the implications of God's will to dealing with the Holy Spirit, prophecy, matters calling for discernment, and outright evil.
- 7 For full discussion see G. P. Carras, "Jewish Ethics and Gentile Converts: Remarks on 1 Thess. 4:3-8," in *The Thessalonian Correspondence*, R. F. Collins ed., BETL

- LXXXVII (Leuven: University Press/Uitgeverij Peeters, 1990), 309ff.
- 8 Ibid., 309ff. Carras cites the following as raising the same objection to translating *skeuos* as wife: Bruce, Morris, Marshall, Rigaus, and J. B. Lightfoot (ibid., 310 n. 15).
 - 9 C. Maurer, "SKEUOS," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Studies* 28 (1982) 142-43; Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonican Correspondence," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985), 336-56.
 - 10 Whitton, "A Neglected Meaning for SKEUOS in 1 Thessalonians 4.4," *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982): 142-43; Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonican Correspondence," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985), 336-56.
 - 11 As pointed out long ago by C. Edson, "Cults of Thessalonica," *Harvard Theological Review* 41 (1948): 153-204, especially 153ff.
 - 12 Donfried, *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985), 337.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 H. Schurmann, *The First Epistle of the Thessalonians*, J. L. McKenzie, ed., W. Glen-Doepel trans. (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 50.
 - 15 "Christen und Heiden: Die paulinische Paranesis in 1 Thess. 4:3-8," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 43 (1987), 218. Ulonska's words are *Heilige* and *Hure*.
 - 16 Rightly stressing the integral role of the Old Testament to New Testament ethics is the important new study by L. E. Keck, "Rethinking 'New Testament Ethics,'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115/1 (1996), 3-16, especially 15. Keck owes a debt here to Brevard Childs.
 - 17 Cf. John H. Armstrong, *Can Fallen Pastors Be Restored? The Church's Response to Sexual Misconduct* (Chicago: Moody, 1995).
 - 18 Keck, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115/1 (1996), 16.