LIBERTINES? (1 COR. 5-6)

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1. Introduction

It is over attitudes to sex that every reader of the Corinthian letters faces a dilemma. In 1 Corinthians 5-6 the opposition appear to be libertines; they not only connive at the incest in chapter 5, but seem to justify sexual promiscuity at large with their “Anything is permissible” in 6:12-20. However when we turn to chapter 7 we find them behaving as ascetics: they seem not only to abstain from sex themselves but to require the same standard from other people—husbands are not to sleep with their own wives, the unmarried are to stay celibate, married couples are to divorce. This presents the reader with a paradox: Paul’s opposition were libertines and ascetics at the same time.

Three avenues of escape seem possible in face of this impasse: the libertine interpretation of chapters 5-6 might be wrong, or the ascetic interpretation of chapter 7; or some reconciliation might be possible. It is the last option which is normally adopted, though in face of the glaring apparent contradiction, in contiguous passages 6:12-20/7:1-11, which is often glossed over rather quickly, and is sometimes ignored.¹ C.K. Barrett, for instance, contents himself by saying, “We know that developed gnosticism in the second century moved sometimes in the direction of asceticism, sometimes in that of libertinism. The disparagement of the material could already have led to the moral indifferentism of ‘All things are permitted me’—nothing done in the body really matters, and therefore anything may be done”.² The same line is taken by W. Schrage: “Eine entscheidende, überall und auch in Korinth


zugrundeliegende Voraussetzung sowohl des Libertinismus wie auch der Askese, ist ein negatives σωμα-Verständnis das denn auch gerade in 6,12ff frontal angegriffen und zurückgewiesen wird”. Schrage lists a number of Patristic passages in which the followers of Basilides, Carpocrates and other Gnostic groups are said to have acted as they pleased.

Such an apologia sounds persuasive at first hearing. The basic rejection of the physical might show itself in the two forms specified. Those who live in the Spirit should no longer concern themselves with physical pleasures; sex is the primary pleasure of the flesh, and they should rise above it, and live ascetic lives (chapter 7). But equally one may take it that all that matters is the spirit, and the acts of the flesh are irrelevant: in which case “anything is permissible” on the physical level without affecting the spirit (chapters 5-6). However this escape-route raises the suspicion of being too easy, and it is soon seen to be a cul-de-sac.

Barrett and Schrage suppose that the same group of gnosticising pneumatics lies behind both approaches; and this is supported by the text. At no point does Paul suggest that there is more than one opposition group involved. The people who maintain that “Anything is permissible” at 10:23 base themselves on their γυναικείος (8:1-4), and Paul’s final word in 7:40, “I think that I too have the Spirit of God”, implies that his opponents make the same claim. But surely the same people cannot simultaneously maintain that sexual acts are immaterial (like drinking “a glass of water”, as Lenin put it), and that celibacy is the rule for all?

A modern parallel may help to make the point clear. The charismatic movement is as a whole admirably conservative on sexual morals: not ascetic, but at least intolerant of deviance. However, as often happens with movements of the Spirit, there may be an over-reaching for the spiritual, and such happened in the early 90s in Sheffield, England. An innovative pastor introduced a Nine o’Clock [pm] Service with beat music and strobic lighting, and sex-sessions in the vestry. No

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3 W. Schrage, Der Erste Brief an die Korinther (EKK; Solothurn/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger/Neukirchener Verlag, 1991-) II, 15.
5 Schrage returns to the topic on pp. 54-56, where he notes that 7:1 represents the opposite pole to the libertinism of the previous verses. He is able to provide better evidence of gnostic ascesis, but his reconciliation of the two poles remains the same, a radical devaluing of the bodily.