

I'm Disappointed to Hear

1 Corinthians 5-6, *The Message*, a paraphrase written by Eugene Peterson

5¹⁻² I also received a report of scandalous sex within your church family, a kind that wouldn't be tolerated even outside the church: One of your men is sleeping with his stepmother. And you're so above it all that it doesn't even faze you! Shouldn't this break your hearts? Shouldn't it bring you to your knees in tears? Shouldn't this person and his conduct be confronted and dealt with?

3-5 I'll tell you what I would do. Even though I'm not there in person, consider me right there with you, because I can fully see what's going on. I'm telling you that this is wrong. You must not simply look the other way and hope it goes away on its own. Bring it out in the open and deal with it in the authority of Jesus our Master. Assemble the community—I'll be present in spirit with you and our Master Jesus will be present in power. Hold this man's conduct up to public scrutiny. Let him defend it if he can! But if he can't, then out with him! It will be totally devastating to him, of course, and embarrassing to you. But better devastation and embarrassment than damnation. You want him on his feet and forgiven before the Master on the Day of Judgment.

6-8 Your flip and callous arrogance in these things bothers me. You pass it off as a small thing, but it's anything but that. Yeast, too, is a "small thing," but it works its way through a whole batch of bread dough pretty fast. So get rid of this "yeast." Our true identity is flat and plain, not puffed up with the wrong kind of ingredient. The Messiah, our Passover Lamb, has already been sacrificed for the Passover meal, and we are the Unraised Bread part of the Feast. So let's live out our part in the Feast, not as raised bread swollen with the yeast of evil, but as flat bread—simple, genuine, unpretentious.

9-13 I wrote you in my earlier letter that you shouldn't make yourselves at home among the sexually promiscuous. I didn't mean that you should have nothing at all to do with outsiders of that sort. Or with crooks, whether blue- or white-collar. Or with spiritual phonies, for that matter. You'd have to leave the world entirely to do that! But I am saying that you shouldn't act as if everything is just fine when a friend who claims to be a Christian is promiscuous or crooked, is flip with God or rude to friends, gets drunk or becomes greedy and predatory. You can't just go along with this, treating it as acceptable behavior. I'm not responsible for what the outsiders do, but don't we have some responsibility for those within our community of believers? God decides on the outsiders, but we need to decide when our brothers and sisters are out of line and, if necessary, clean house.

6¹⁻⁴ And how dare you take each other to court! When you think you have been wronged, does it make any sense to go before a court that knows nothing of God's ways instead of a family of Christians? The day is coming when the world is going to stand before a jury made up of followers of Jesus. If someday you are going to rule on the world's fate, wouldn't it be a good idea to practice on some of these smaller cases? Why, we're even going to judge angels! So why not these everyday affairs? As these disagreements and wrongs surface, why would you ever entrust them to the judgment of people you don't trust in any other way?

5-6 I say this as bluntly as I can to wake you up to the stupidity of what you're doing. Is it possible that there isn't one levelheaded person among you who can make fair decisions when disagreements and disputes come up? I don't believe it. And here you are taking each other to court before people who don't even believe in God! How can they render justice if they don't believe in the God of justice?

7-8 These court cases are an ugly blot on your community. Wouldn't it be far better to just take it, to let yourselves be wronged and forget it? All you're doing is providing fuel for more wrong, more injustice, bringing more hurt to the people of your own spiritual family.

9-11 Don't you realize that this is not the way to live? Unjust people who don't care about God will not be joining in his kingdom. Those who use and abuse each other, use and abuse sex, use and abuse the earth and everything in it, don't qualify as citizens in God's kingdom. A number of you know from experience what I'm talking about, for not so long ago you were on that list. Since then, you've been cleaned up and given a fresh start by Jesus, our Master, our Messiah, and by our God present in us, the Spirit.

12 Just because something is technically legal doesn't mean that it's spiritually appropriate. If I went around doing whatever I thought I could get by with, I'd be a slave to my whims.

13 You know the old saying, "First you eat to live, and then you live to eat"? Well, it may be true that the body is only a temporary thing, but that's no excuse for stuffing your body with food, or indulging it with sex. Since the Master honors you with a body, honor him with your body!

14-15 God honored the Master's body by raising it from the grave. He'll treat yours with the same resurrection power. Until that time, remember that your bodies are created with the same dignity as the Master's body. You wouldn't take the Master's body off to a whorehouse, would you? I should hope not.

16-20 There's more to sex than mere skin on skin. Sex is as much spiritual mystery as physical fact. As written in Scripture, "The two become one." Since we want to become spiritually one with the Master, we must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than ever—the kind of sex that can never "become one." There is a sense in which sexual sins are different from all others. In sexual sin we violate the sacredness of our own bodies, these bodies that were made for God-given and God-modeled love, for "becoming one" with another. Or didn't you realize that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit? Don't you see that you can't live however you please, squandering what God paid such a high price for? The physical part of you is not some piece of property belonging to the spiritual part of you. God owns the whole works. So let people see God in and through your body.

Sermon

About ten years ago my mother gave me a packet of letters I had written to them while I was in college. In the late 1970's there was no email, no texting, no social media. And telephone calls made from the pay phone in the dorm lobby were only for emergencies.

Reading these letters 40 years after the fact is illuminating. They include events I do not remember. I watched my uncle make dentures? I spent that much time playing Rook? I had a date with him? I jumped off the roof of my dorm into a snowdrift?

It's apparent that along with telling my parents what I was doing and what I was thinking, I'd respond to what I heard from them. Here's the end of one letter: "How's the quilt coming, Mom? Is it done? Let me know about Sam's progress. Karen had a very good time in Oregon. I had plenty of money for books and everything. I haven't heard anything about the SSTers in Nicaragua. Time for supper – boy – I'm hungry!"

My mom wrote notes on the envelopes she received to remind her what to write to me – news from home, questions to ask, advice to give. This one caught my eye: "don't run after other guys." I wonder what prompted that piece of advice.

I also possess letters I received from my parents, more accurately from my mother. Imagine my surprise one day when I found a letter in my mailbox written by my dad. I can't find the letter now, but I vividly remember one sentence, "I'm disappointed to hear you're considering living in co-ed housing next year."

I'm sure Dad read my letters, but this was the one and only time he felt compelled to write one to me. (By the way, I lived with a group of women on Coffman 2nd South the next year. The coed group lived on Coffman 2nd North. The door between the two ends of the 2nd floor wasn't always kept shut. I wonder if Dad was aware of that?)

These letters from my college days give me insight into the New Testament epistles, including the one we're reading together, 1 Corinthians. Paul is writing to people he cares about, to a church he planted. He is responding to letters he's received from them and reports he's heard about them. The letter is personal, written to specific people at a specific time in a specific place. Reading it from *The Message*, a paraphrase in contemporary language, makes the practical and personal nature of this correspondence more apparent.

We must keep this in mind as we read his words. We must keep this in mind as we think about what his words have to say to us today. This is why we've read entire chapters of the book each Sunday. It helps us experience the entire document. The original letter wasn't divided into chapters and verses. The recipients would have read and heard it as one complete piece.

Recall how the letter begins. Chapters 1-4 contain greetings and discussion of some fundamental beliefs and values. Paul emphasizes loyalty to Jesus, not to Paul, Apollos, Cephas or any other leader or preacher. In chapter 5, he begins addressing specific issues in the congregation. I think of this as the "I'm disappointed to hear" portion of the letter. In the chapters we read today, the two main issues are sexual immorality and lawsuits. It's important to note that Paul addresses what is happening within the church – what some members are doing, how the other church members are responding or not responding to these actions, and how that is affecting the life and witness of the congregation.

These chapters are ripe with topics that receive a lot of attention in churches today. In 1 Corinthians 5:10, Paul identifies four vices that exclude people from inheriting the kingdom of God: sexual immorality, greed, theft (swindling, dishonesty), and idolatry. In the next verse, he restates these and adds two more, identifying them as practices that disqualify persons from continuing membership in the assembly: verbal abuse (reviling) and drunkenness. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, he repeats the earlier list and adds another four: adultery, male prostitution (sexual perversion, effeminatization), sodomy (male homosexuality), and robbery (extortion).

Most of the items name behavior that Paul criticizes in this letter. The two he doesn't discuss further, the two that refer to homosexual acts, are ones that have generated the most discussion in the modern church in recent years. The Greek words Paul uses for these acts are rare in Greek literature, despite the frequency of homosexual practice in Greek society. As a result, there's much uncertainty about the exact meaning of those two words in Paul's letter. This uncertainty is reflected in the way they are translated in the wide variety of Bible translations in use today.¹

I'm going to follow Paul's lead and not discuss these. To get an idea of my thoughts and biblical understanding, I refer you to my sermon on August 4 of last year about gender identity and sexual orientation.² I'm also not going to discuss in detail most of the other items on Paul's list. Nor am I going to talk about lawsuits, the other topic receiving a lot of Paul's attention.

Instead, I'm going to follow up on a something I said to you a month ago. As we were ending our series on vices and virtues, I mentioned that we were leaving one out. I told you I anticipated that a discussion about the vice of lust and the virtue of chastity would be part of our series on 1 Corinthians. Now I'm making good on that promise.

¹ These two paragraphs draw heavily from Dan Nighswander, *1 Corinthians: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2017, pp. 150-153

² <https://salinamennonite.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/20190804-Sermon-Rev.pdf>

Lust, similar to almost any other vice we could name, is inescapable. It is a vice to which no one is immune. Lust reduces sexual gratification to one's own physical, individual self-gratification. Everyone at one point or another falls victim to lustful desires. Lust is a vice because it doesn't honor the fullness of love. Lust is the root of the sexually immorality Paul rails against in his letter to the Corinthians. It's also the root of a situation I'll talk about in a few moments.

Chastity is the virtue usually held up against lust. However, chastity is not necessarily celibacy. Chastity directs our love in appropriate ways. A chaste life leads us to put love in its right place: loving God and loving our neighbor.

As humans living in physical bodies, we're filled with desires. Some desires draw us closer to God; others pull us further away. Some desires strengthen our relationships; others destroy them. Some desires satisfy; others leave us wanting. Sometimes satisfying one's own desires results in great harm to someone else.

We live in a world of unlimited, untamed, and unbridled desire where around each corner there is a temptation to satisfy our own selfish desires. It's important for us to recognize when our actions hurt someone else, damage our inner peace, and hinder our relationship with God. It's important for us to confess that too often we follow the desires of our own hearts and lose sight of what we truly long for; healthy human relationships and intimacy and communion with God.³

For more on healthy sexuality, I refer you again to last year and three sermons I preached on this topic during the month of July.⁴ You can access those on our church website.

In the words to the Corinthians we read today as well as throughout the rest of his letter, we see that Paul is quite concerned about how the actions of a few people affect the relationships within their community of faith, their worship as a congregation, and their reputation and witness to those outside the group. He urges them to address the scandal within the congregation. He directs them to take action to restore the wrongdoer to God and to the community. He advises them to refrain from practices that are technically legal but may not be spiritually appropriate. Later on he even suggests that they choose not to do some things that are alright for them to do, maybe even beneficial to them, but would be harmful to others in the group. Paul's words help me to process something I was recently disappointed to hear.

Many of us are eagerly anticipating the release of a new hymnal called *Voices Together*. Of course, we're also eagerly anticipating the time when we can meet in our building and sing together. MennoMedia, the publisher of the new hymnal, released this statement on June 30.⁵

In response to credible accusations of sexual abuse and spiritual manipulation by the hymn writer and composer David Haas, the committee compiling *Voices Together* has removed his songs from consideration.

While these songs will not be included in the new hymnal available this fall, five songs by David Hass are in *Sing the Journey* and *Sing the Story* and others are sung in Mennonite congregations. These include beloved songs "My Soul Is Filled with Joy," "I Will Come to You in the Silence," "Peace Before Us," "Blest are They," "We Are Called" and "Come and Be Light.

³ Commentary on lust and chastity draws from *Leader, Summer 2019, Vol. 16, No. 4*, ©2019 MennoMedia, pp. 43-44.

⁴ <https://salinamennonite.org/wp-content/uploads/sermons/2019/07/20190714-Sermon-Rev.pdf>;
<https://salinamennonite.org/wp-content/uploads/sermons/2019/07/20190721-Sermon-Rev.pdf>; <https://salinamennonite.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/20190728-Sermon-Rev.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/replacing-songs-of-david-haas/>

(The first three songs on this list are ones we've sung many times at Salina Mennonite Church. One of them was sung at my ordination. We sang one song on the list the month before this news was released. How disappointing to hear!)

Continuing on with the statement from MennoMedia:

Many communities are choosing not to sing these songs to prevent possible harm and to act in solidarity with survivors of abuse who are likely in their midst.

Determining whether or how to continue singing these songs requires difficult community conversations with substantial leadership from survivors of abuse. Many communities will be best served by choosing not to sing these songs at this time.

We grieve the loss of these beloved songs, and at the same time we recognize that other songs occupy similar musical, affective, and theological territory. We know there are intangible aspects that cannot truly be replaced, but we offer the following lists to recommend alternatives that cover comparable theological themes in related musical styles.

Here are several responses to this news release:

From one person:

God's spirit works to inspire imperfect individuals, and their songs, stories, works of art, and poetic lines continue to inspire. I think that music needs to be appreciated and sung based on the merits of the piece itself, and appreciated for the way it resonates with an individual's experience of God's spirit.

I feel deeply for the women whose trust has been betrayed, and whose lives have been forever changed or hurt. I can understand why they would be unable to sing David's music in the future. However I am not certain that removing his music from the hymnal, and, by anticipated intent, from individual and public appreciation, serves justice to the pieces themselves. What would our book of Psalms look like if we were to strike out all of David's psalms because of his affair with Bathsheba?

And from another person:

I appreciate everyone's comments to this situation. [As] a victim of molestation at a very young age ... I would like to offer these words. These songs were friends and appreciated by myself until this discovery of character. Now when I hear them I want to cry and throw up at the same time.

And, if played at my church, I would not be able to worship as I would like to. Please do not analyze me. I have forgiven. My congregation ... has chosen to use other meaningful music which there is plenty of. And, when someone else approaches us in the congregation about any other song that they find hurtful, we can address that situation as well. Also, with everyone probably not disposing of their old hymnals and supplements, congregations that choose to can still use those songs.

I wonder what Paul would write to Mennonite Church USA about this situation. I wonder what we would do if – when – we hear disappointing news about the imperfect individuals behind other inspirational creations.

Voices Together, MennoMedia, and Into Account, a organization offering support for survivors seeking justice, accountability, and recovery in Christian contexts, collaborated to produce a resource for congregations who are wondering how to respond when worship materials are implicated in abuse. This resource, titled *Show Strength*, offers a survivor-centered perspective on how individuals and

communities of faith can respond when it's discovered that beloved songs and prayers were written by a person who has perpetrated sexual violence. You can find the document under the resources tab on the Voices Together Hymnal website.⁶ I'll share just a few highlights now.

1. What does this resource address?
 - a. We worship a God who shows strength when siding with the oppressed, who lifts up the vulnerable, and who challenges injustice.
 - b. A survivor-centered response helps limit harm, interrupt patterns of sexual violence in our communities, and work toward just social transformation.
 - c. Every congregation includes people who have been sexually abused or violated.
2. What feelings are okay when I learn that songs are connected to a person who perpetrated violence?
 - a. Survivors may experience sadness, hurt, betrayal, confusion, rage, embarrassment, shame, relief, annoyance, resentment, or nothing at all. All feelings are okay and deserve respect and care.
 - b. Others may experience some of the same feelings as survivors as well as skepticism, defensiveness, or concern.
 - c. We can all show strength by facing our feelings and claiming our power to disrupt injustice.
3. What do we do with the deep formation we have experienced together with these songs in the past?
 - a. The meaning the songs have had for you is not invalidated. Your memories, your spirituality, your relationships, your *self* – these remain.
 - b. Your new knowledge of survivors' experiences also carries a responsibility. Renegotiating your relationship to these songs will help minimize survivors' suffering and disrupt cycles of violence.
4. Who owns the resources we use in worship? Can a song be separated from its source?
 - a. Songs and prayers used in worship are communal by nature.
 - b. When abuse is made known, new connections are added to songs and prayers. When people directly injured by the abuser's violence experience a song as inseparable from its source, communities of faith cannot claim to make such a separation without doing harm to survivors.
5. What makes someone's actions so bad that we can no longer sing their songs? What about the parts of the Bible attributed to David or Solomon?
 - a. We choose not to sing a composer's songs when doing so causes injury to survivors or enables abuse.
 - b. Factors include: whether the perpetrator is living and able to continue to abuse others, whether using their work increases their power or financial means and ability to abuse others, and whether continuing to use the work perpetuates a community culture or approach to faith that enables sexual violence.

Similar to the church in Corinth, our tendency is to ignore or cover up sexual immorality and even sexual abuse or violence. We do well to follow Paul's advice to bring it out into the open; address it as a faith community, seek justice and recovery for survivors, hold perpetrators accountable, and stop their ability to cause further harm. May God give us the strength and the will to do this. Amen.

⁶ <http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Show-Strength-6.pdf>