

DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT CONDEMN SEXUAL INTERCOURSE OUTSIDE MARRIAGE?

A recent study concludes: "*porneia* means unlawful sexual conduct, or unlawful conduct in general. . . . Aside from the instance of R. Eliezer, there is no evidence in traditional or contemporary usage of the word *porneia* that takes it to mean pre-betrothal, pre-marital, heterosexual intercourse of a non-cultic or non-commercial nature, i.e., what we call 'fornication' today."¹ From the general context of the article, "traditional or contemporary" refers to the first Christian century,² during the latter part of which Rabbi Eliezer lived.³

In 1 Cor 7:1-2, 7a Paul said (and I give a very literal translation): "Concerning what you wrote, (it is) good for a man not to touch a woman. On account of fornications let each (man) have his own wife, and let each (woman) have her own husband. . . . This I say by way of concession, not by way of command." Obviously the Apostle is not speaking of idolatry, nor of marriages prohibited by law, nor of evil in general. He is not speaking of sacred prostitutes, an institution which at one time had flourished in Corinth, but which was most likely nonexistent in a Roman *colonia*.⁴ Surely he is not speaking of commercial prostitution. He is not saying that it is likely that a girl who remains unmarried and does not have the special gift which he possesses (see 1 Cor 7:7b) will become a whore, because the reason that he gives for both a man and a woman is the same: *dia tas porneias*.⁵ Thus the only possible understanding in

¹ B. Malina, "Does *Porneia* Mean Fornication?" *Novum Testamentum* 14 (1972) 17.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 10 and 17 n. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ Commentators often forget that the classical descriptions of Corinth and words and expressions such as *korinthiazein* in the sense of "to lead a dissolute life" and *kore korinthe* as a euphemism for a prostitute had their origin in the city destroyed in 146 B.C. Only in 46 B.C. was the rebuilding of the city commenced. The great temple of Aphrodite Pandemos, which reportedly housed a thousand hierodules, was not rebuilt.

⁵ The phrase is generally taken as meaning "lest fornication occur." Thus, R. Kugelman, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," in R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer, and R. Murphy, eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* 2 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968) 263: "To avoid immorality, men and women, even the baptized, should marry"; H. Conzelman, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia, 1975) p. 116: "A positive ground for marriage is not given, but only its negative aim, the avoidance of *porneia*." Recent English translations or, better, paraphrases of the expression include: *New English Bible*, "Because there is so much immorality"; *Jerusalem Bible*, "since sex is always a danger"—which is tendentious and misleading; *New American Bible*, "to avoid immorality"; *Revised Standard Version*, "because of the temptation to immorality." Conzelman, *1 Corinthians*, p. 114, gives a translation which does not agree with his exegesis: "but because of the sins of sexual immorality." The expression could refer to things which had already occurred and which displeased Paul; if such is what the phrase

context of *porneia* is illicit sexual intercourse (see also 1 Cor 7:9, where Paul says of the "unmarried" (*agamoi*) and the widows, "if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry" (*ei de ouk egkrateuontai gamēsatosan*)).

Thus, while it may be correct to state that *porneia* does not have the precise meaning of "fornication," in the context of 1 Cor 7:1-7 *porneia* includes what is meant by "fornication" as it is used today. Thus Paul does not provide support for lessening of standards regarding premarital conduct.⁶

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refers to, it would be an even stronger indication that he considered premarital sexual intimacy wrong.

⁶R. A. McCormick, "Notes on Moral Theology: April-September 1972," THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 34 (1973) 86 n. 1, gives Malina's conclusion without comment. In the *National Catholic Reporter* 10, 14 (Jan. 30, 1976) 9, McCormick uses it for questioning the scriptural references contained in the document of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration on Certain Questions concerning Sexual Ethics," no. 16.