



DAVENANT DIGESTS

DOES CREEDAL ORTHODOXY REQUIRE TRADITIONAL SEXUAL ETHICS?

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Introduction

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORIC CHRISTIAN CREEDAL THEOLOGY AND HISTORIC CHRISTIAN SEXUAL ETHICS?

Where are we to place sexual ethics in our understanding of the Christian faith? Are sexual ethics like the forbidding lines of small print qualifying the free offer of the gospel? Can they be treated as matters of indifference for Christian orthodoxy and fellowship, the only important thing being that we hold to the doctrinal content of the creeds? Are sexual ethics part of a second standard alongside the standards of the creeds? Or might they occupy a different place entirely?

In his book, *A Conversation Waiting to Begin*, Oliver O’Donovan discusses the changing attitudes of liberal Christians to the fact that the fourth and



fifth century Church bequeathed creeds delineating orthodoxy, not creeds concerning Christian standards of moral behavior.¹

For liberal Christians, at least until the middle of the twentieth century, the apparent privileging of doctrinal over ethical statements as grounds for ecumenical Christian unity was troubling. They believed in the priority of ethics, both in Jesus’s own teaching and in that of the earliest churches. The grounds of Christian fellowship, they maintained, should be determined by shared morality—on ethical principles that were universally known—rather than by the more contested doctrines of the creeds.

However, the last few decades have witnessed a marked change in the liberal position:

We now hear it urged that the grounds of Christian communion are simply creedal, not moral at all. A universal morality, once the solid rock on which the liberal critique of theology was built, has been swallowed up in the shifting sands of change; moral differences can, and should, be accommodated.²

Yet, if liberals have shifted, it would seem to other observers that the position of conservative Christians has undergone no less significant a transformation. James K.A. Smith observes that, while fundamentalist Christians in the early twentieth century overwhelmingly measured orthodoxy in doctrinal terms—at least implicitly in terms of creedal commitments such as the virgin conception, the bodily resurrection, or the divinity of Christ—in the current context the term “orthodox” is routinely used in a strikingly different sense:

[I]n many cases “orthodox Christianity” means only one thing: a particular view of sexuality and marriage. Indeed, in some books of late,

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1. Oliver O’Donovan, *A Conversation Waiting to Begin: The Churches and the Gay Controversy* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 35.

2. O’Donovan, *Conversation*, 36.

the adjective “orthodox” is only invoked when talking about morality, and sexual morality in particular.³

For Smith, this “recent, innovative, and narrow” development in the use of the term “orthodox” is an unhealthy one; he argues that “it reflects a trait of modernity that those who use it would abhor: a tendency to reduce Christianity to a morality.”⁴

The need for an understanding of the relationship between ethics and orthodoxy, between Christian standards of morality and the conditions of fellowship, is clearly a pressing one in our current context.

Smith maintains that the Christian ethical commitments that are increasingly being foregrounded as criteria of orthodoxy are “traditional” and weighty concerns which cannot be regarded as matters of indifference. Nevertheless, when it comes to defining “orthodoxy,” he fears that conciliar orthodoxy is being overwhelmed by the other things being appended to it. The term “orthodox,” disconnected from the creeds and councils, “quickly becomes a cheap epithet we idiosyncratically attach to views and positions in order to write off those we disagree with as ‘heretics’ and unbelievers.”⁵

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3. James K.A. Smith, “On ‘orthodox Christianity’: some observations, and a couple of questions,” *Fors Clavigera* (blog), August 4, 2017, <http://forsclavigera.blogspot.com/2017/08/on-orthodox-christianity-some.html>.

4. Smith, “Orthodox Christianity.”

5. Smith, “Orthodox Christianity.”

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Taking Stock

IMPLICIT WITHIN SMITH AND O'DONOVAN'S CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE VARYING LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE APPROACHES TO RELATING ETHICS AND ORTHODOXY, WE ALREADY SEE SOME OF THE DIFFERENT OPTIONS THAT ARE OPEN TO US.

First. A foregrounding of standards of morality—or reduction of Christianity to such standards—and tolerance of disagreement on doctrinal commitments. This is the older liberal position, as O'Donovan characterizes it. Smith argues that contemporary conservative Christians have moved in this direction. Arguably, however, conservatives would generally be considerably less tolerant of doctrinal heterodoxy and the claim that they would “reduce” Christianity to a morality is a tendentious one at best.

Second. A foregrounding of standards of doctrine—or reduction of Christianity to such standards—and tolerance of disagreement on ethical principles. This was O'Donovan's characterization of the liberal position about a decade ago. The tolerance of different ethical principles has probably waned considerably in many quarters since then, possibly resulting in a return to something akin to the first position: those who oppose innovations such as same-sex marriage are out of step with the living faith of the Spirit. A latitudinarianism on issues of creedal orthodoxy may be accompanied by an intolerance of disagreement on the new sexual orthodoxies.

DOCTRINE AND ETHICS ARE NOT REALITIES EXTERNAL TO EACH OTHER... BUT THEY MAINTAIN THE INTEGRITY AND ORGANIC UNITY OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH'S TRUTHFUL WAYS OF LIFE.



Third. An appending of a distinct body of ethical commitments to Christianity's doctrinal commitments as standards of orthodoxy. One might think of this as "orthodoxy plus": an authoritative, yet ill-defined, Christian *halakha* is added to the creedal and conciliar measures of orthodoxy. In my estimation, this is Smith's more convincing representation of the emerging position among many conservative Christians.

Fourth. Orthodoxy as defined by conciliar measures of doctrine alone. Traditional principles of Christian ethics are weighty and consequential matters, such that disagreement regarding them is not merely a matter of toleration. However, they are not standards by which "orthodoxy" can be judged. This would seem to be Smith's own position.

O'Donovan suggests a fifth approach, speaking of a "reigning ecumenical consensus" that has been challenged by the liberal toleration and accommodation of moral differences:

The consensus holds that doctrines and moral practices are deeply intertwined, and to agree on the one is to agree on the other. Communion is itself both a moral practice and the *idioma* of the third person of the Trinity. It would be hard to imagine a morally pluralist Christianity that

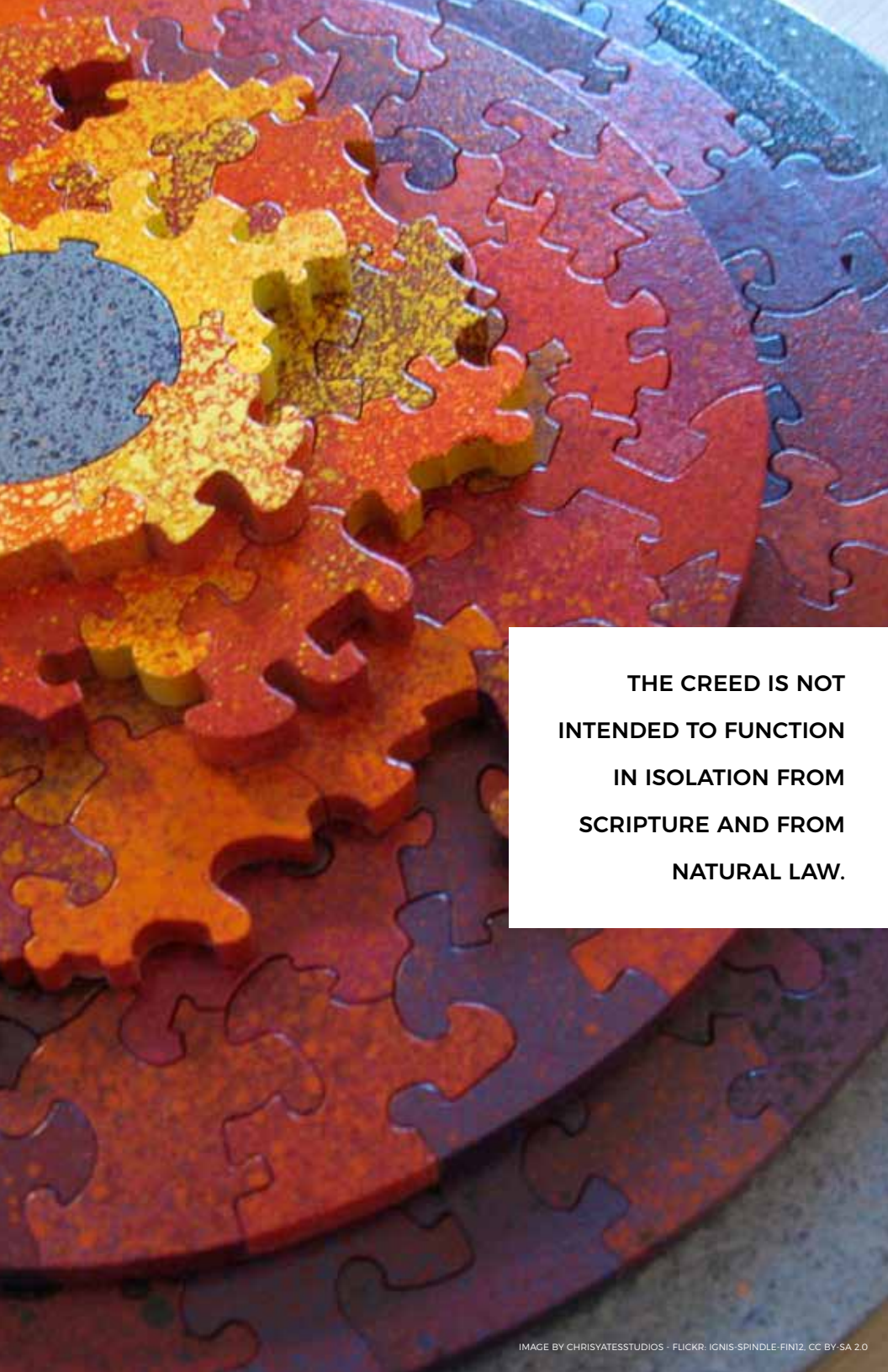
had not lopped off the Third Article of the creed—which would mean lopping off the church, that common life in the harmony of God's will which is better than toleration... Belief is never neutral in respect of practice; the Epistle of James declared that faith without works is dead. With whatever latitude or rigor, a Christian communion must surely have *some* idea of its specific moral shape: *these* works are of a kind that attests living faith, *those* indicate that faith is dead.⁶

For such an approach, which should be distinguished from the other positions outlined above, ethics are implicated in orthodox doctrine and the two cannot be neatly separated. Foundational for this understanding is the recognition that doctrine and ethics are not realities external to each other, to be appended to, detached from, or placed over against each other, but, in a mutually implicating relation, they maintain the integrity and organic unity of the Christian faith's truthful ways of life.

Law, Gospel, and Creed

RATHER THAN FUNCTIONING AS SELF-CONTAINED RULES, PARTICULAR MORAL COMMANDS "ARE DIFFERENT MATRICES FOR ONE DEMAND [THE LAW OF LOVE], DISTRIBUTING THE WAY IT

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6. O'Donovan, *Conversation*, 36-37.



**THE CREED IS NOT
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ENCOUNTERS US WITHIN THE COMPLEX ORDER
OF THE CREATED WORLD.”⁷

On account of their interconnection, what might appear to be a relatively small moral difference to many can nonetheless expose vast and momentous disagreements: “There are, indeed, smaller and larger differences; but—and the point is crucial—their size is not determined by the *matter* of the difference as such, but by the *relation* in which it stands to wider agreements and disagreements.”⁸ Discerning this relation is the task that falls to the Church in its acts of judgment.

In the Old Testament Law, we can see a similarly interconnected body of principles and commands. Rather than being a mere assemblage of detached divine commands, there is a grammar and unity to the body of the Law. The whole can be summed up in the law of love, articulated in the two great summary commandments (Matthew 22:34-40), or encapsulated in principles such as justice, mercy, and faith (Matthew 23:23). The Law is expressed in condensed form in the Ten Commandments, which are refracted in a larger body of case law, which expound what the central principles of the Law mean in concrete practice.

Becoming literate in the Law is a matter of learning how to move between exposition and condensation, of being able to articulate the connection between the part and the whole. Where such literacy is absent, the Law can be distorted in many ways. When the parts are detached from the central principles, it can easily devolve into a system of legalistic or moralistic rules. Others may treat specific unwelcome commands of the Law as dispensable, playing the unifying principles of the Law off against its parts to justify maximal hermeneutical license.

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7. O'Donovan, *Conversation*, 47.

8. O'Donovan, *Conversation*, 47.

Likewise, the creed doesn't stand alone, nor do its statements interpret themselves. Terms such as "judgment," "Scripture," "holy," "sins," or "communion" aren't empty or essentially contested terms, permitting us to fill them however we might please. Rather, their content is extensively unpacked in the Scriptures themselves, apart from which the creed cannot have its proper sense. The creed is never intended to function as a de-focusing of unwelcome scriptural teachings so that error can take refuge in vague terminology, nor is it a lowest common denominator. The creed is not intended to function in isolation from Scripture and from natural law. It is like a steering wheel, which makes possible the effective driving of a vehicle, yet never in detachment from the driver, nor from the rest of the steering mechanism.

When Smith complains about the danger of reducing Christianity to a morality, he is identifying a real problem. However, in implicitly treating the creed and the requirements of Christian morality as external to each other, he is unwittingly reducing orthodoxy. While the creed clearly isn't a self-contained document presenting the sum of "orthodox" Christian ethics, it does give us the grammar by which to articulate Christian ethics aright.

The creed guards against the moralism that Smith is rightly concerned about. It does so by framing the Christian life by the fundamental truths of the faith, revealing not merely the content but also the manner and the causes of a true evangelical obedience.

The newness of life to which the Christian is called is defined by true confession and worship of the Triune God, over against all idolatry. It is made possible by the salvation from our sins that is achieved by Christ, a salvation according to the reliable testimony of the Scriptures. It occurs against the

horizon of the future advent of Christ to judge all flesh. It is formed within the holiness of the one catholic and apostolic Church that is established and given its life by the work of the Spirit. It is grounded in the free remission of our sins that is declared in baptism. It is lived in the certain hope and anticipation of a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. It upholds the truth of God's intimate claim upon each of our bodies, manifested in the assurance of future resurrection.

The Corinthian Way

THE EXTENT OF THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN ORTHODOXY AND ETHICS CAN BE ILLUSTRATED BY THE APOSTLE PAUL'S ARTICULATION OF CHRISTIAN SEXUAL ETHICS IN 1 CORINTHIANS 5-6.

In making his argument for the excommunication of the sexually immoral man and in defending the importance of Christian chastity, Paul grounds his case upon a number of doctrinal claims that would later be placed within the creed.

Paul presents the communion of the Church as requiring the preservation of our corporate holiness in 5:6-8. The toleration of sexual immorality in our midst compromises and violates the union that the creed declares. The creedal claim that the Church is "one" and "holy" must be practically manifested in the excommunication of the sexually immoral person—a little leaven can

leaven the whole lump. In contrast to the tolerance that societies of autonomous and detached individuals can encourage, the corporeal metaphor in terms of which Paul conceives the Church reveals our inescapable “involvement” with each other in the “body” of Christ, and the fact that we don’t act in isolation from each other. Dealing decisively with the sinful man is a matter of protecting the health of the entire Church, not just of addressing his individual corruption. The ambiguity of the “spirit” with whose salvation Paul is concerned (5:5) may also be noteworthy here: is it the excommunicated man’s, or the Corinthian church’s?

The Second Coming of Christ to judge the living and the dead is appealed to as a basis for immediate and resolute action against sin in the present in 5:3-5 and 6:9. To hold this doctrine can never merely be a matter of abstract doctrine; truly to believe it is to inject our behaviour and our judgments in the present with considerable urgency, lest we be found unprepared when our Lord returns.

In 5:7 and 6:19-20, Paul foregrounds Christ’s sacrifice. By his death, Christ has redeemed us for himself, laying claim to our bodies, wherein we must

glorify him. We are no longer our own, and this claim upon bodies relates in an especially direct sense to our sexual conduct. As our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, God has claimed them in the most intimate of ways, as the site of his dwelling.

Baptism for the remission of sins is emphasized in 6:11—“but you were washed.” Baptism must mark a decisive existential break between the old sinful course of our lives and our renewed life in

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THE BODY IS NOT MERELY A FLESHLY ENCUMBRANCE TO BE SHUFFLED OFF IN DUE TIME; IT IS A PERSONAL REALITY THAT IS DESTINED TO BE TRANSFORMED. CONSEQUENTLY, OUR BEHAVIOUR—ESPECIALLY OUR SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR—IN THE BODY IS A MATTER OF CONSIDERABLE IMPORTANCE.



Christ. We are no longer the people that we once were, people characterized by sins such as those Paul enumerates in the preceding verses.

After emphasizing baptism, Paul relates Christian chastity to the resurrection of the body (6:13-17). The Christian’s body has been marked out for resurrection and will be raised up on the last day. The body is not merely a fleshly encumbrance to be shuffled off in due time; it is a personal reality that is destined to be transformed. Consequently, our behaviour—especially our sexual behaviour—in the body is a matter of considerable importance.

Beyond these points, Paul references Genesis 2:24 from the creation narrative in verse 16: “*The two ... shall become one flesh.*” Paul’s appeal to Genesis at this juncture is a strong assertion of God as creator—the first article of the creed—of the priority of divine creative will over all private intent in the realm of sexual relations. Irrespective of the design of the man sleeping with the prostitute, by his action he is entering into bodily union with her. God’s union of man and woman in creation has an objective force by which the morality of all of our sexual behaviour can be measured.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in addition to the reference to Genesis 2:24, Paul alludes to the biblical command to expel the wicked person from the

congregation of the people of God (5:13). This command, which typically required execution by stoning and was applied, among other things, to serious sexual sins (e.g. Deuteronomy 22:21, 24), Paul relates to the Church's practice of excommunication. This is a particularly striking example of Paul's use of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture.

Taking the Authority of Scripture Seriously

CHRISTOPHER SEITZ HAS ARGUED THAT RECENT DEBATES SURROUNDING SAME-SEX RELATIONS IN ANGLICANISM ARE A "SYMPTOM OF A DEEPER DISAGREEMENT OVER THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE."⁹

9. Christopher R. Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 174.



In place of the creedal confidence that the Holy Spirit “spake by the prophets,” we have a re-imagining of the Old Testament as something more akin to a developmental phase, with the current work of the Holy Spirit among enlightened postmodern Christians being detachable from the scriptural witness.

[T]he idea of developing religious wisdom goes hand in hand with an acceptance that texts from past contexts *can only with real difficulty have any kind of meaning for the present full-stop*. The Bible becomes ‘stories’ or ‘resources,’ at best, and its language is evocative or imaginative; it has no legislative (halakhic), exhortative, constraining, or strictly referential sense; it has “themes,” which resonate with intuitions or convictions already in place, and so forth.¹⁰

10. Seitz, *Christian Scripture*, 178.

When the authority of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture has been so compromised, further undermining of Christian doctrine typically follows:

[O]nce one begins thinking along these lines, that is, of using the New's allegedly 'new religion' to sort out the 'religion of a First Testament,' instead of seeking to hear God's Word of triune address in both Testaments, appropriate to their character as 'prophet and apostle,' it is then an almost effortless transition to believing both Old and New Testaments *are themselves only the provisional proving ground for religious virtues said to be en route to a Holy Spirit's fresh declaration of unprecedented 'new truth' in our day.*¹¹

Our exploration of Paul's argument reveals that Christian ethics are neither a series of propositional claims that must be added to the creed nor an important body of Christian teaching that must nonetheless be maintained in careful detachment from it. Rather, they are the shape that orthodoxy should take in practice.

And, where Christian ethics are compromised, the undermining of the creed is seldom far behind. Whether it is the toleration of substantial moral disagreement and failure to exercise discipline in a manner that undermines the holy unity of the Church, the downplaying of the body and God's claims upon it, the denial of an objective force to God's creative ordering of the world, or the radical devaluation of the biblical witness, the downgrading of the truths of the creed has often been the consequence of the rejection of Christian ethical norms. In particular, where significant ethical differences are tolerated, the clarity and authority of the testimony of the Scriptures themselves is practically abandoned.

The deep entanglement of creed and ethics confronts us with the necessity of decision and of the exercise of judgment. The creed cannot be safely upheld

11. Seitz, *Christian Scripture*, 187, emphasis in original.

in the softness of intellectual assent to abstract doctrines, but it summons us to the virtues of the chest, demanding manly resolve, decisive judgment, and committed action. As Paul's employment of the doctrines of the later creed in 1 Corinthians illustrates, these doctrines do not just invite judgment and action, but require them. They give urgency, necessity, and weight (backed by the reality of a divine reckoning) to our practical judgment and action.

Conclusion

THE CONTESTED CHARACTER OF CHRISTIAN TEACHING CONCERNING SEXUAL ETHICS DOES NOT ABSOLVE US FROM THE RESPONSIBILITY OF JUDGMENT, ALLOWING US TO PUNT THE DECIDING OF CONTROVERTED ISSUES INTO THE LONG GRASS OF A UTOPIAN ECCLESIOLOGY.¹²

No, the doctrines of the creed present us with the urgency and necessity of wise judgment on these matters. Besides, the fact that differences exist on some matters does not mean that there is in clarity in the scriptural witness; indeed, our sense of Scripture's in clarity is often the consequence of our sinful toleration of clear error in our churches. This is not to dismiss the necessity of wisdom, caution, and precision in judgment, something that conservative Christians have often lacked in their preemptory yet ill-considered judgments upon the heterodoxy of others. Even in our condemnation of heresy, we should aim at the restoration of the erring person.

12. It should be considered that the authority enjoyed by the councils and creeds arose less from the ideal conditions of their formation than from the manly exercise of committed judgment by subsequent leaders of the Church, who effected and solidified the orthodox consensus by not tolerating divergence from them.



In Corinth, Paul wrote into a situation where substantial differences existed regarding the ethical requirements of the Christian message. Indeed, it was also a situation where significant differences existed on matters such as the resurrection, which would later become creedal tenets of orthodoxy. The connection between denial or neglect of the bodily resurrection and rejection of Christian sexual ethics is not difficult to discern in 6:13-14. Paul did not present himself as settling differences that might otherwise have needed to be tolerated, but he rebuked the Corinthians for their failure to act against the sexual immoral man in their midst and to cease keeping company with any who claimed the name of Christ while continuing in sin (5:9-13).

Orthodoxy must give form and impetus to our ethical judgments and practice at every point, ensuring that they are evangelical in their character, bearing the imprint of the gospel. What emerges from Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 5-6 is an understanding of orthodoxy as exerting a strong gravitational pull upon practice, giving weight to our actions and judgments that they would otherwise lack. Those who claim orthodoxy must display its gravity in their actions. Christian ethics, as it operates under this gravity, will always proceed from and according to God's self-revelation in Christ, never permitting itself to be degraded into legalism or moralism.



WHAT ARE “DAVENANT DIGESTS?”

Davenant Digests seek to bring the church’s past into clear focus for Christians today, and use it to shed light on the challenges of the church’s present. Written in a clear, lively, and down-to-earth style, these short introductions aim to answer questions that ordinary Christians have, in terms that ordinary Christians will want to read.



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