

FORNICATION IN THE PAGAN WORLD

by Curtis Pope

One of the most disturbing changes in American life over the last generation has been the general decline of sex morals as we reap the whirlwind of the “sexual revolution.” An interesting aspect of this behavioral phenomenon, however, is the more secular American social life becomes and the more open and unrestrained sexual conduct develops, the more closely our culture resembles that of the New Testament world.

In many cultures of the ancient world, fornication was openly practiced and was accepted at specified times, because of its association with fertility religions. This type of “sympathetic magic” worship held that public human participation in such activities influenced the gods to bless them with agricultural and domestic fertility. Two of the heinous aspects of Baal worship in the Old Testament were its practice of human sacrifice and ritual fornication.

While Greek religion was not originally organized around such fertility rites, contact with Asiatic cults in Anatolia introduced ecstatic “mystery religions” such as the cult of Dionysus, which involved alcoholic and sexual excess.

Even the worship of the traditional gods & goddesses of the Greek pantheon was affected by this oriental influence, as is seen in Strabo's reference to sacred prostitution at Aphrodite's temple in Corinth and the transformation of the Artemis cult at Ephesus from the worship of the classical goddess of the hunt, to the veneration of an image of the goddess covered with breasts or eggs and other fertility symbols. However, even before this Asiatic "sexual revolution", Greek mythology shows fornication was a regular part of the lives of the gods, and the many Greek words for sexual activity are a clear indication that humans followed suit.

Roman culture traditionally prided itself on a more puritanical disciplined outlook toward sexual morality, but by the New Testament era, Rome's historical self-image and its praise of "traditional family values" was no longer consistent with its practice. The legal sexual rights owners and masters had over their female slaves probably did much to promote fornication within the upper classes. Prostitution was rampant in much of the empire by the New Testament era & widely practiced by all levels of society. To make matters worse, this vice was generally accepted with only a social rather than a moral stigma attached to the prostitute and apparently none attached to her clients. An underground passageway from the Library of Celsus in Ephesus (built shortly after Bible times) and the local brothel indicates a level of social respectability so far unheard of in the United States.

The discovery of prominently displayed pornographic frescos and statues at Pompeii indicates an acceptance of such matters probably not nearly so shamelessly exhibited at Hugh Hefner's house. Juvenal, the Roman satirist, likewise portrays a sex-crazed society in which most traditional restraints to sexual misconduct have eroded and one in which the female appetite for such vices rivaled that of the men.

In spite of religious and social errors which promoted fornication in the ancient world, two misconceptions, both of which are being replicated in American culture, insured its wider acceptance: 1) morality is simply based on what is socially acceptable rather than any objective standard, and 2) fornication is as natural as any other human appetite. It is probably this argument that Paul counters in 1 Corinthians 6:13 when he quotes a common philosophy "Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food", comparing human hunger with sexual desire. As relevant to our time as to Paul's time, however, is the understanding that although we are sexual beings, "the body is not for fornication."

The comparison of our times with the moral decline of the ancient world is quite discouraging, but oddly enough, can provide some encouragement to modern saints. First of all, if Christians could be expected to "flee fornication" (1 Corinthians 6:18) in ancient Rome, we can certainly succeed in contemporary America.

Secondly, greater the discrepancy between the moral lives of Christians and those of the world, the more obvious the differences to those we are trying to teach as we “appear as lights in the world.” (Philippians 2:15).

Thirdly, the worse matters become here, the more it can make us long for heaven and our eternal home “where righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). However, we can only find such encouragement if we refuse to conform to a world that “is passing away” (1 John 2:17).¹

¹ Pope, C. (1998). [Fornication in the Pagan World](#). (S. Hall, Ed.) *Christianity Magazine*, 15(7), 19.