

# PAULINE CHALLENGE TO AFRICAN MASCULINITIES: READING PAULINE TEXTS IN THE CONTEXT OF HIV/AIDS

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses Pauline masculinity in the context of HIV/AIDS. If any success against HIV/AIDS is to be achieved, men need to be constructively involved in this struggle rather than merely being vilified. It is directed towards those who want to live by the ideals set by Paul. The article argues that in many ways Paul challenges dangerous masculinities and that, if his challenge is taken seriously, Christian communities may witness a decline in HIV prevalence. The article focuses specifically on Paul's teaching on marriage and sex.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The discipline of masculinities continues to generate a great deal of interest among scholars (Morrell 2001; Lindsay & Miescher 2003). Not only has the subject been addressed from both historical and sociological perspectives, but scholars of religion have also paid attention to it (Chitando & Chirongoma forthcoming; Van Klinken 2011). Recently the subject of masculinity has been discussed in light of the debilitating effects of HIV/AIDS, in particular in Africa. Chitando (2007) and Sathiparsad (2007) examined how perceptions of masculinity expose people to HIV/AIDS. Earlier studies on men and HIV, however, vilified men for their spread of HIV. There is now a need to positively engage men in the fight rather than continue disparaging them, because we believe that, if any success is to be achieved against HIV/AIDS, men need to be constructively involved in

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this struggle. Even HIV/AIDS policymakers have realised this. For example, in 2000 the UNAIDS slogan for the HIV/AIDS prevention campaign “Men make a difference” originated from the fact that, although men were considered to be at the centre of the spread of the virus, they were not at the centre of responses to the pandemic. One of the reasons for this is the non- or scarce involvement in prevailing masculinities. It is therefore urgent that masculinities be investigated if sub-Saharan Africa is to defeat HIV/AIDS.

As stated earlier, some reasonable amount of work has been published on the subject but this is far from sufficient. This is especially so in the sphere of biblical studies. Although there have been studies on biblical masculinities (e.g. Moore & Anderson 2003; Byron 2006), currently few studies have engaged the Bible in addressing dangerous masculinities in times of HIV/AIDS. However, considering the influence that the Bible continues to hold among many in this region, it is my argument that we need to do more in engaging masculinities using the Bible. In this article I choose to focus on Pauline masculinity. Paul addresses masculinities in many different ways, namely in his teaching on marriage, sex, and gender equity, and in his own self-understanding (Togarasei forthcoming).

In this article I choose to focus specifically on Paul’s teaching on marriage and sex to find out how this teaching can be used to address the challenge of HIV/AIDS. However, I need to make a disclaimer before I proceed. I am aware of the problems of using Paul to address our contemporary issues. Not only is there a huge time and cultural gap between us and Paul, but people do not all agree on our interpretations of Paul’s statements. Clines (2003:181-192), for example, finds the figure of Paul presenting a man who was against women, always surrounding himself with men, and striving to make men out of women. However, I do not agree with Clines’ portrayal of Paul. In many of his statements Paul also accommodated women and, compared to his contemporaries, he was way ahead in accommodating issues of women welfare. My argument is directed towards those who want to live by the ideals set by Paul, and they amount to at least 72% of sub-Saharan Africa’s population ([www.oikumen.org](http://www.oikumen.org)).

## 2. DEFINITION OF MASCULINITY

Masculinity can simply be defined as the quality of being masculine (The freedictionary n.d.). It is a set of behaviour patterns that men ought to follow in a given society. Meischer and Lindsay (2003:4) define masculinity as

... a cluster of norms, values and behavioral patterns expressing explicit and implicit expectations of how men should act and represent themselves to others.

These patterns generally tend to be similar across cultures, thus giving rise to universal masculinity attributes such as toughness, aggressiveness, stoicism and sexuality (Gilmore 1990). There are also variations from society to society and from culture to culture, because masculinity is not a natural attribute but rather a socially constructed and fluid one (Courtenay 2000; Morrell 1998, 2001). Because of these societal and cultural variations, scholars now prefer to talk of “masculinities”, not merely of one universal masculinity. Be that as it may, it has also been observed that not all the masculinities in a given society are equal (Morrell 2001). In every society there is always a masculinity that dominates not only women but also other masculinities. This kind of masculinity is called hegemonic masculinity and is usually a result of the predominant culture in the given society. Hegemonic masculinity therefore gives power and privilege to those who own the predominant culture, exerting pressure on all other masculinities to adopt it in order to be considered “real men”. Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994) mention that the related masculinities that fall under the hegemonic one are called “subordinate variants”. Hegemonic masculinity defines all other subordinate masculinities as inferior and inadequate, and exerts pressure on men under these to work towards achieving the hegemonic one.

Like culture, hegemonic masculinity is not static. It is dynamic as it is affected by cultural changes in society. This can clearly be exemplified in the African context where, prior to the coming of the missionaries and the imperialists, traditional African masculinity was defined by specific behaviour patterns that underwent a major revolution with the coming of Western civilisation. Independence and, in particular, globalisation have also changed the definition of a real man. In our globalised world, hegemonic masculinity is affected not only by the changing local culture but also by the changing global culture. The fact that masculinity is dynamic is good news for gender scholars (Morrell 2001:7). This implies that there is always an opportunity to fight and change masculinities that become irrelevant or even dangerous at any point in human history.

The above understanding of masculinity guides this article. As will be revealed later, there were hegemonic masculinities even in Paul’s time. What was Paul’s attitude to these and what implications might this have for African Christians who follow Paul’s example and their hegemonic masculinities in the context of HIV/AIDS. I shall now discuss Paul and masculinity under the themes mentioned earlier.

### 3. MARRIAGE

Paul's teaching concerning marriage is found in 1 Corinthians 7:2 and 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8. In the former text, the Corinthians had asked Paul about marriage following an ascetic attitude that seems to have been driven by some of their colleagues. These probably viewed marriage as giving in to the demands of the flesh and therefore a sign of moral failure. This attitude seems to have been promoted by ascetic practices of the time that demanded a celibate life, among other demands (Marsh 1980:1433). Although Barclay (1975) is of the opinion that in Corinth this attitude was a result of sexual laxity in the city, I tend to agree with Boyarin (1994:160) who considers this to originate from Hellenistic Judaism, including Palestine, which had developed extremely pessimistic notions of sexuality to the point of equating it with evil. In Paul's circles, and indeed among the Corinthians, it can then be argued, masculinity called for anti-sex and therefore anti-marriage. How did Paul deal with this? Contrary to the hegemonic masculinity which Paul himself also upheld, Paul viewed marriage as a solution to sexual immorality. Although he considered celibacy to be the higher state of sexuality (1 Cor. 7:38), he regarded marriage as a fully honourable condition for a Christian. While some scholars are of the opinion that Paul never married (cf. Clines 2003), others believe that he was celibate when he wrote 1 Corinthians 7:

it is almost certain that he had been married at one time. It seems that his marriage had ended either because his wife had died or, possibly, because she had left him when he became a Christian (Datiri 2006:1385).

According to Paul, those who are burning with a passion for sex should marry.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, Paul emphasises the sanctity of the institution of marriage. Whereas in 1 Corinthians Paul addresses both men and women, in 1 Thessalonians Paul addresses men, informing them that they should marry in honour not out of passion like Gentiles.<sup>1</sup> In both texts Paul views marriage as a solution to sexual immorality. It is also clear from these texts that Paul advocates monogamy. However, some scholars who, throughout the history of New Testament interpretation, have read 1 Cor.7 argue that Paul was against marriage and thus use this reading to advocate celibacy.

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1 There are various explanations of what Paul meant by "vessel" in 1 Thess. 4:3 (Yarbrough 1984:68). In this instance, I follow the Revised Standard Version's translation of 'skeuos' (vessel) to wife. In the context of the entire passage, it is likely that Paul was talking about taking a wife.

Tertullian, Ambrose and Jerome are some of the earliest interpreters to take such a position. Their interpretation was also upheld by scholars such as L.H. Marshall (1946:336) who found, in 1 Corinthians 7:2, Paul affirming complete sexual abstinence, and more recently by Conzelmann (1975:116) who argued that it is obvious from the reading of 1 Cor.7 that Paul only offered marriage as an option in order to avoid sexual immorality. Be that as it may, current New Testament scholarship no longer accepts this reading of Paul's attitude to marriage. Fee (1987:266-356), Witherington III (1988:40-42) and Laughery (n.d.) argue that Paul was not against marriage and, as Datiri (2006:1365) suggests, he could have been married at some point. In fact, Paul's view that marriage is the solution to sexual immorality comes in handy in our context of HIV/AIDS.

Paul's acceptance of marriage despite the reasons for it corresponds with African masculinities. In the majority of African societies, a real man is one who is married. As one young man interviewed in Lira, Uganda, put it,

To call oneself a man it is simplest after (one is) married with children.  
No children and you are still a boy (Baker & Ricardo 2005:5).

Among the Shona in Zimbabwe and the Tswana in Botswana, traditionally an unmarried man was not allowed to take part at the traditional court (*dare/kgotla*: Shona and Setswana, respectively). He was considered a boy as long as he was not married. This position still prevails in some African churches. As long as one is not married, one cannot be counted among the elders of the church.

The Pauline teaching on marriage and the African traditional way of defining manhood through marriage can therefore be used by African Christians for HIV/AIDS prevention. Although some studies have shown that marriage contributes significantly to the spread of HIV, since it tends to prohibit the use of condoms (Parikh 2007; Chirau 2006; Bruce & Clark 2004), it remains the second most efficient method of HIV prevention after abstinence, especially when the married couple are not infected and remain faithful to each other.

The church, using the teaching of Paul, should therefore promote marriage, especially in the context of HIV/AIDS. Although many churches from mainline to African Independent churches are already promoting marriage (Togarasei *et al.* 2008), there are cultural practices such as payment of bride price which tend to prohibit marriage. In addition, the predominant masculinity of manhood being defined on the basis of wealth also prohibits some men burning with passion from marrying as they seek

to accumulate wealth for bride price and for social recognition as “a man”.<sup>2</sup> The church should help construct a masculinity that promotes marriage and, if necessary, even call for the abolition of the practice of bride price payment. Payment of bride price is indeed a masculine attribute. This means that, among many other meanings, bride price is an indication that a man has wealth and thus able to care for his wife. Bride price can still be justified on this basis, but LaFont (2007:1-19) correctly argues that at present *lobola* (bride price) is more often regarded as payment for a bride, meaning that the husband and his family have purchased the woman, including her future domestic production and children. Therefore, this practice, right from the beginning of the marriage, relegates the woman to an inferior position. It puts her in a powerless position that promotes sexual and physical abuse and limits her ability to negotiate safe sex even when she knows her husband’s unfaithfulness. It is my opinion that, in this era of HIV/AIDS, the church should call for the abolition of the payment of bride price as it is one reason that leads to rampant practices of cohabitation, as young men fail to raise bride price for marriage. This practice makes it difficult for poor young men to marry, leaving them with few options but to engage in premarital sex. After all, traditional marriage practices that could be used by the poor, for example, *kutema ugariri*,<sup>3</sup> have become obsolete. To reduce the spread of HIV, it is important for the church, using Paul’s writings as canon, to encourage all those burning with sexual passion to marry and to discourage the commercialisation<sup>4</sup> of bride price which prevents many, in particular the poor, from marrying. The definition of masculinity on the basis of the accumulation of wealth should also be discouraged.

Paul also advocates a monogamous marriage, “each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (1 Cor. 7:2). This echoes the public health call for faithfulness to one partner within marriage. Although studies have shown low rates of HIV spread within polygamous societies, it is a known fact that, within polygamous marriages, when one spouse is infected the others are at high risk (Lawson 2002:391-400). Paul’s teaching

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- 2 Niehaus (2002:77-97) argues that for want of money to pay bride price, some young men in South African mines even engage in homosexuality.
  - 3 A practice where men who could not afford to pay *lobola* worked for their in-laws for a specific number of years in lieu of the *lobola*. They would be given the wife at the end of that specified period.
  - 4 By commercialisation of bride price I mean the high charges made by parents for *lobola* for their daughters. Traditionally, just a token of appreciation in the form of a hoe and later some herds of cattle; currently some parents demand considerable amounts of money, several herds of cattle and costly gadgets such as cellular phones or even cars, making marriage too expensive for the majority of young men.

leaves no room for polygamy or any other extramarital relationships. In his interpretation of 1 Cor. 7:2, Gorman (2004:252) mentions that Paul not only expects husbands (and wives) to fulfil the appropriate conjugal needs of their spouses but, in contrast with much of the pagan world, he also expects them not to engage in sex with others. This is a challenge to African masculinity because, among other behavioural qualities, a real African man is one who has many sexual partners. For example, traditionally among the Shona of Zimbabwe a man was compared to a bull in charge of many cows (Shoko 2007:21). Men therefore married many wives and a real man was defined thus. Polygamy is no longer a common practice among African men. However, the need for many sexual partners still pervades the definition of a real man. Thus, an important element of contemporary masculinity is having girlfriends. One may be legally or customarily married to one wife but, in addition to this, one will have a girlfriend or many girlfriends. At present, such girlfriends are called “small houses” and even some Christian men follow this practice. There is no doubt that the practice of multiple sexual partners is a major contributor to high HIV prevalence. Paul’s teaching therefore would go a long way in addressing this problem. Like Christians married to Christ and him alone, Paul (2 Cor. 11:2) states that a real man is faithful to his wife and a real woman is faithful to her husband.

#### 4. SEX

The above discussion of marriage revealed that the circle of Paul viewed sex negatively and therefore did not regard it as a sign of masculinity. However, showing that he was not a theorist but a realist, Paul accepted sex as a Christian practice: “The husband should give his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband” (1 Cor. 7:3). It is clear that, although Paul preferred celibacy, he accepted marriage as a pragmatic concession, that is, in view of people’s inability to abstain.

For Paul, sex was to be limited to the marriage institution. Likewise, Neyrey (1990:120) correctly observes that Paul permitted sex but still subjected it to numerous regulations. First, no to promiscuity. Paul is against the promiscuous crossing of boundaries marked by the ritual of marriage. Although not explicitly stated, Paul’s view of marriage is that of monogamy, as argued earlier. One’s sexual needs should be satisfied in the marriage institution: “Each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband” (1 Cor. 7:2). In 1 Cor. 6:16 Paul asked rhetorically: “Do you not know that he who joins himself to the prostitute becomes one body with her?” The Corinthian men, according to this text, were having sex with prostitutes guided by their slogan: “All things are

lawful for me" (1 Cor. 6:12). These Corinthian male Christians probably projected their masculinity as a field where the penetration of women was a legitimate way of satisfying one's sexual needs (Marin 2006). In response to this form of masculinity, Paul then juxtaposed his own slogan: "but not all things are helpful (and) I will not be enslaved by anything." By this slogan Paul therefore was telling the Corinthian men that, if penetration of a woman is a sign of masculinity, exerting self-control is even more. On several occasions Paul emphasised self-control as a sign of masculinity.

In Galatians 5:23, he lists masculinity as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In 1 Cor. 9:25, Paul uses the athlete, one of the great ideal figures of masculinity in antiquity, as an example of self-control (Foxhall & Salmon 1998). Marin (2006) observes that Paul implied that "the sexually active male (involved in extra-marital sex) becomes a passive victim of his passions." In a context where being passive was associated with femininity and being active with masculinity, Paul made promiscuity a sign of femininity.

Secondly, Paul mentions that sexual relations are subject to control: "For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does" (1 Cor. 7:4).

Thirdly, Paul does not allow married couples to refuse each other sexual intercourse, except if it is for a short time to do a more spiritual thing: prayer (1 Cor. 7:5-6).

In the African context, sex is the key to constructions of masculinity such that Paul's call for celibacy would be a non-starter. In a focus group discussion in Namibia, Brown, Sorrell and Raffaelli (2005:591) state that one man had the following to say about manhood: "There is no secret about it (to) 'be a man' means to have sex." Although society often does not promote this definition of masculinity, in particular among the unmarried, boys share this definition with their peers. In a study on masculinity in Zambia, Simpson (2007:177) found that many men recalled feelings of "being a man" when vaginal penetration and ejaculation were achieved. Manhood is defined not only by having sex but by having sex with many partners. In the same Namibian study, both men and women agreed that a man, in both traditional and contemporary societies, have more than one sexual partner. One respondent mentioned: "Multiple sexual partners are part of tradition and to have just one suggests poverty, low status and weak manhood" (Brown, Sorrell & Raffaelli 2005:590). This attitude to sex is very strong among many men in Africa. Thus, as highlighted above, an important element of contemporary masculinity is having girlfriends in addition to one's partner. One man may be legally or customarily married



to one wife or staying with a long-time partner, but he will also have a girlfriend or many girlfriends.

In light of the danger posed by the above understanding of manhood, Paul's teaching on sex can help curb the problem. His limitation of sex within marriage can indeed help reduce the spread of HIV. His association of promiscuity with femininity can be useful in dissuading many African men who consider masculinity to be defined by the number of sexual partners they have. Paul's call that those burning with sexual passion should marry can help reduce premarital sex, which has become so prevalent even in church. In light of the escalation of the cost of living and the commercialisation of bride price, many young men burning with sexual passion now resort to premarital sex. In his study of young men in Nairobi, Spronk (2005:44-73) showed a general tendency by young men to delay marrying until they are in their thirties. Meanwhile they will be engaging in premarital sex. This obviously exposes them to many sexual partners and, in turn, to high risks of contracting HIV. In a number of focus group discussions held at the University of Botswana, Department of Theology and Religious Studies Ditungelile Project on HIV prevention (2006-2008), several people mentioned commercialisation of bride price as contributing to the prevalent practice of co-habitation in Botswana. Burning with sexual passion but having no money to pay *lobola*, the young men mentioned that they have no other option but to co-habit, exposing themselves and their partners to the risk of contracting HIV. Basing their position on Paul's teaching that marriage is the solution to sexual immorality, it is my opinion that the church must speak against the commercialisation of bride price or even call for the abolition of this practice. Be that as it may, the church should advocate for measures that encourage marriage so that sexual intercourse is limited to the married.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Van Klinken (2011:3) observes: "The HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa has reinforced a critical interest in men and masculinities, both in organizations that seek to combat HIV and among academic scholars who seek to explain the spread and impact of the epidemic in Africa." Van Klinken emphasises what many scholars have mentioned about HIV, namely the fact that this is a gendered pandemic. It spreads through the soils of gender inequality. In light of this, many scholars have tried to address gender issues as a way of responding to the academic. This article added a voice to this subject by addressing masculinity from a biblical perspective. It is a reading of Pauline texts with those who consider them canonical and authoritative. This article revealed that it does not suffice to continue to vilify men for

spreading HIV without constructively engaging them. Where men have continued to be battered, little has been said to shift the “dangerous” masculinities. One must accept that men are not what they are simply because of men. Women also play a role in moulding them into who they are. The article addressed Christian communities to challenge them to use Paul’s teaching in transforming dangerous masculinities in the context of HIV/AIDS. Whereas more Pauline texts could be engaged, for limitations of space, the article used Paul’s teaching on marriage and sex, two major driving institutions of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa.

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### Keywords

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### Sleutelwoorde

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