

Miguel Ruiz: New light on the oldest profession

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The history of Christianity is a twisted tale of conflict over sexuality and the suppression of those who dissent the party line on bedroom ethics. These days, it is commonly argued that there is only one correct approach, from sound exegesis of Scripture, to human sexuality and appropriate boundaries. However, we still must concede that what is commonly accepted as "right" today is not exactly how we have always taught. Throughout the centuries, various sexual practices have gone in and out of favor with the church catholic at various times and in various cultures, as external influences have doubtlessly impacted how the relevant Scripture passages were read and understood. We've run the gamut from repressing to libertine, and everything in between. It is nothing short of confounding how difficult it is to get the Bible to speak directly and consistently on these matters. If we truly value and respect the Word of God, we would be wise to continue listening and respectfully consider alternate interpretations, especially those coming from fellow believers as a matter of conscience. We've all made mistakes in Biblical interpretation before, probably not for the last time. So I challenge you to listen with an open mind as I explain how we've been largely wrong about a particular issue for a number of years: Prostitution.

Prostitution gets a bad rap in our culture today, and as a result, women in this profession are grossly mistreated. When we think of sex workers, the stereotype that comes to mind is a scantily clad woman, working a corner, wearing too much makeup. She renders her plunder to a psychologically manipulative and physically abusive pimp who doesn't take very good care of her. It has truly become a dangerous profession in our day, largely because a judgmental spirit against it fosters a suppression of its legitimacy, resulting in occupational trauma. Unfortunately, this is often done in the name of Christianity. It doesn't have to be so. The exegetical scholarship on this issue is no longer as conclusive as we once thought. Let's take a look at what the Bible really has to say about prostitution, from the beginning.

The first recorded prostitute is Tamar. She slept with Judah after his three sons died without knocking her up. Oddly enough, Judah did not realize it was his three-time daughter in law. When it was discovered that she was pregnant and she gave proof that it was at his doing, his response was (and I quote the ESV), "She is more righteous than I."

Consider the significance of this. Judah is not just one of the patriarchs of Israel. Neither is he the firstborn, from whom the Messiah was expected to come. Rather, the first three sons were passed up *in favor of Judah!* The very father of the tribe of Jesus, an essential link in the genealogy of salvation, has declared a prostitute to be more righteous than him! What does that say about how he viewed them? It reminds me of something Jesus used to say; "The tax collectors and prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you." From the popular Christian sexual ethic of today, you would expect a much more severe evisceration of this demographic, but these words seem rather flattering.

Further down the history of salvation we see Rahab, who assisted the spies in Jericho at the beginning of the Israeli conquest. The spies had no qualms heading to her place to hide, which may even have been construed as a "business transaction." They showed her respect

and promised her both safety and a secured place among the people of God. Did I mention she also became a part of the lineage which led to Christ? The holy family is not too good for hookers. (See Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 for more praise of her.)

Jesus openly elevated the status of prostitutes. He called many of them as followers, and nary a word is recorded of his chastisement of their livelihood. Instead, we see "Wherever the Gospel is preached, what she has done will be told in memory of her." Jesus went out of his way to honor and uplift these downtrodden members of society. And all we have for them judgement and condemnation?

"Oh, but isn't prostitution adultery?" Not according to Webster's dictionary, which defines it as, "sex between a married person and someone who is not that person's spouse." So prostitution *can* be adultery, but only if the John is married.

Sure, the Levitical code condemned prostitution, along with the eating of shrimp and the wearing of clothing with mixed fabric. Unless you hold to those other restrictions, there is no reason to assert some of them as mandatory for today. What would be the basis for that such a selective reading? Prejudice.

What about New Testament condemnations of fornication? The word commonly translated as "fornication" (pornea), actually refers to sexual immorality generally, not fornication specifically. Many modern translations have reversed this err, effectively removing the word from the New Testament! You could, potentially, make the case that fornication is defrauding, in the sense that it is often achieved dishonestly: promising commitment, feigning infatuation, blindly following temporary feelings of romance. With a professional, however, the exchange is consensual and contractual. Everything is mutually agreed upon, transparent, and up front. Would that all our relations proceeded thusly! If society were freed from this stigmatization, far fewer would resort to deception to meet this need.

1 Corinthians 6:9 is the ultimate "clobber verse" that is whipped out to shame professional sex workers and prove that God hates them: "...prostitutes shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." And yet, several of them clearly have: Rahab, Mary Magdalene, etc.... Perhaps this verse doesn't mean what it might seem. Could it refer to temple prostitutes in the fertility cults of the time, whose pagan worship was mutually exclusive with the worship of the one true God? It fits the textual evidence so much better than writing off an entire discriminated demographic whose line of work has left them in oppression for millennia. It also fits with examples from the Old Testament: When righteous kings of Israel led a revival and return to faithfulness, they always drove out the *shrine* prostitutes.

Verse 15 mentions prostitution in a seemingly derogatory light, but the passage is about sexual immorality generally. It lists no specifics besides prostitution. Surely adultery, rape, etc... are also forms of sexual immorality. So the intent of the passage clearly isn't to spell out a definitive list of what is or is not sexually immoral. Rather, sexual immorality is, analogously, a prostitution of ourselves to the God of pleasure, rather than the one true God. From this passage alone, prostitution itself may or may not be considered "sexual immorality."

It is time for Christianity to move beyond this mistreatment of hard working young women, if we want anybody to take our faith seriously in contemporary society. Let us consider, as an example of the Gospel's transformational effect on society, the arrangement in parts of Nevada, where prostitution is legalized and regulated. The girls receive medical benefits, vacation time, and can freely advertise their services with business cards and websites. What does this do for the industry? For one, their services are much more fairly

compensated. We should not take lightly the benefit that their labors provide society. Those running back-alley operations to hide from the law are far more likely to get dirt for pay. This results in a higher client load in order to make ends meet, which takes a much more severe toll on their health. And when society is done with them, we toss them aside like yesterday's garbage, while the rest of us enjoy our retirement plan. Is this justice? Does this model the compassion Christ taught? We're so busy patting ourselves on the back for having obtained more "respectable" vocations that we don't even notice how our systems have trampled them. Surely these "least of these" would receive a much stronger hand up from Christ Himself; they did when He was walking the earth. Why not work to transition as many of them as possible from victims of thuggery and abuse to respectable entrepreneurs who run their own escort service? After all, a women's body ought to be her own business, not somebody else's.

Enough with occupational discrimination. In the past, the church has also shunned bartenders, casino operators, lingerie manufacturers, and goat herders. These are honorable professions that are widely accepted and valued by Christians today. The church has changed its mind on other issues, such as polygamy, once permitted and later overturned. It is time to overturn this ancient prejudice as well. Sure, prostitutes are sinners, like everybody else, and need forgiveness from Jesus. But according to the Scriptures, their job isn't the problem. The story of God and the Christian prostitute isn't done being written yet.

Who knows? Maybe Jesus and Paul really meant to condemn prostitution, but didn't choose their words carefully enough. It's always possible that they were simply wrong on this issue.