

7 *Why Does Jesus Mention Balaam in Revelation 2:14?*

How Jesus' Reference to Balaam Applies to Paul

If we dig a little deeper into the eating of idol-meat issue, we find Jesus mentions Balaam in Revelation 2:14.¹ Jesus says the source of this heretical idol meat doctrine is a “teaching of Balaam.” Jesus says Balaam taught one can eat meat sacrificed to idols, among other things. Why is Jesus mentioning *Balaam*, a figure from the era of Moses? Evidently because Balaam is a *figure* who resembles the one who in the New Testament era teaches eating meat sacrificed to idols is permissible.

What do we know about Balaam that would help us identify who was the Balaam-type figure in the New Testament church?

The Biblical story of Balaam in the book of Numbers does not reveal the precise nature of the teachings of Balaam. Jesus alone tells us that Balaam taught the Israelites they could eat meat sacrificed to idols and commit fornication. (Rev. 2:14.) Thus, with these additional facts, let's make a synopsis of the story of Balaam. Then we can see whether anyone appears similar in the New Testament era.

- Balaam was a Prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures who was changed from an enemy to a friend by an angelic vision on a Road.

1. Revelation 2:14: “But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there some that hold *the teaching of Balaam*, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication.” (ASV)

Why Does Jesus Mention Balaam in Revelation 2:14?

- Balaam, after properly serving the Lord for a time, changed back into being an enemy.
- This inspired prophet is deemed to be an enemy of God because he taught it was permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication. This part of the story was omitted in Moses' account. Jesus alone reveals this.

Who else is a prophet of God who was changed from an enemy to a friend by an angelic-type vision on a Road, but then later taught it was permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols? Who likewise taught an act of fornication condemned by Jesus (*i.e.*, remarriage after divorce if certain circumstances were lacking) was perfectly permissible? (See page 138.) Who likewise is interpreted by most Paulinists as saying fornication is no longer strictly prohibited and no longer leads to spiritual death but instead the propriety of fornication is examined solely based on its expediency? On those key points, we shall see in this chapter that Balaam identically matches Paul.

Jesus is putting a thin veil over the fact He is talking about Paul. Jesus reveals His purpose by referring to Balaam in Revelation 2:14.

By citing the example of Balaam, Jesus reminds us that a true prophet who is turned from evil to good then could turn back and completely apostasize. Jesus' citation to Balaam in this context destroys our assumptions that Paul could never apostasize. By referencing Balaam, Jesus is telling us, at the very least, that Paul *could* turn and apostasize after his Road to Damascus experience. Paul could be just like Balaam who did so after his Road to Moab experience.

Is Revelation 2:14 A Type of Parable?

Did Jesus mention the “teaching of Balaam” as a parable to identify Paul?

It appears Revelation 2:14 is a type of parable. Jesus identifies the false teaching as the “teaching of Balaam.” Yet Balaam is dead. Someone in the apostolic era is like Balaam. To know whom Jesus meant, one has to find someone who matches Balaam’s historically-known qualities.

Furthermore, we have a second reason to believe a parable is intended in Revelation 2:14. At the end of Revelation chapter 2, Jesus says: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches.” (Rev. 2:29.) This is Jesus’ standard catch-phrase when He wanted you to know there are symbolic meanings in His words.

Let’s next try to identify who was the Balaam-like figure in the New Testament apostolic era by studying the life of the original Balaam.

*Balaam Was Changed to A True Prophet By
A Vision on A Road*

In the book of Numbers (written by Moses), Balaam begins as a soothsayer intent on accepting money from Moab’s King Balak. He was offered payment to travel to Moab to curse Israel. As such, he begins as an enemy of the true God.

God then appeared to Balaam and told him not to curse Israel. (Numbers 22:5-12.) King Balak then called on Balaam again to come to Moab. However, God appeared to Balaam and allowed him to go on condition Balaam did only what the Lord told him to do. (Numbers 22:20.) Apparently after starting on his trip, Balaam decided to still curse Israel. On route to Moab, Balaam (on a donkey) and his two companions are stopped on a road by an unseen angel of the Lord. (Some commentators think Numbers 22:35 proves this was actually Jesus, the “eternal” angel of His presence—Gill.) Then the famous incident takes place where Balaam’s donkey talks back to him. The donkey complains that Balaam is goading him by smiting him with his staff: “What have I done

unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?” (Numbers 22:28.) At first Balaam cannot see the angel which is blocking the donkey. (Numbers 22:25-27.) Balaam is in a sense blinded. However, then God “opened the eyes of Balaam” and he could see the angel. (Numbers 22:31-33.)

Balaam then confesses to the angel that he sinned. (Numbers 22:34.) He offers to go home. The angel tells Balaam to continue onto Moab, but repeats the command that Balaam must only bless the Israelites. (Numbers 22:35.) Then Balaam proceeded to Moab. (Numbers 22:36.)

Next when Balaam arrived in Moab, he warned King Balak that he could only do what the Lord allowed him to say. (Numbers 22:36-38.) Balaam’s famous oracles of blessings over Israel then followed. (Numbers 23:1-29.)

While giving the blessing, God through Moses says Balaam was directly led by the Holy Spirit. Balaam simultaneously turned away from his prior practice of using omens. Moses writes in Numbers 24:1-2:

(1) And when Balaam **saw that it pleased Jehovah to bless Israel**, he went not, as at the other times, to meet with enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness. (2) And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel dwelling according to their tribes; and **the Spirit of God came upon him**. [Then Balaam blesses Israel.]

Thus Balaam had become a true prophet whom Moses reveals was having true communications from Yahweh God. Balaam is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and repeats precisely what God wants him to say. God wants us to know through Moses that Balaam begins as a **truly inspired prophet** of God Almighty. The last we see of Balaam in action, he is acting as a good prophet. His words of blessings end up as part of standard synagogue services to this very day, known as the *Mah Tov*.

How Balaam Fell: His Idol Meat & Fornication Teaching

Then something negative happens that Moses only cryptically revealed. In Numbers 31:16, Moses writes: “Behold, these caused the children of Israel, **through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against Jehovah** in the matter of Peor, and so the plague was among the congregation of Jehovah.” Balaam had counseled the Israelites that they could sin in some unspecified manner. This cryptic statement is the only explanation why later in Numbers 31:8 that the Israelites, during their slaying of the Midianites, also kill Balaam.

Rabbinic tradition tries to fill in the missing information. It attributed to Balaam the lapse of Israel into the immorality we find in Numbers 25:1-9.²

Jesus, however, gives us an inspired message on what was missing in the Biblical account. Jesus says Balaam misled the Israelites by teaching them they can eat meat sacrificed to idols and they can commit fornication. Jesus is the only inspired source of this information. Jesus says:

But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there some that hold the teaching of Balaam, **who taught** Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, **to eat things sacrificed to idols**, and to commit fornication. (Rev. 2:14, ASV.)

The Rabbinic tradition in Judaism supports what Jesus said, but only in general terms.

2. Morris Jastrow Jr., “Balaam,” *Encyclopedia of Judaism* (online at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=161&letter=B&search=balaam>.) If we look at Numbers 25:2, we will see the Israelites were invited to the sacrifices to idols, and ate the idol meat. (Numbers 25:2, “for they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods; and **the people did eat**, and bowed down to their gods.”)

So Who is Balaam in the New Testament Era?

The prophet Balaam was a person whose life mirrors apostle Paul's life to an extraordinary degree. Absent Jesus telling us that Balaam taught it was permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols, we would never have known *how virtually identical are the two lives*. Yet when Jesus filled in the missing detail, it made the parallel between Balaam and Paul become extraordinarily uncanny.

In particular, Balaam's Road to Moab experience has many striking parallels to Paul's Road to Damascus experience. In fact, how it affects both Paul and Balaam is identical. Balaam is on his road with the wrong intent to curse God's people. This is true for Paul too, aiming to imprison God's people. (Acts 22:5.) Balaam is on the road with two companions. Paul likewise has companions with him. (Acts 22:9.)

Next, Balaam is given a message by the angel that converts his way to the true God. Gill even says this 'angel' is the "eternal angel" (non-created) of the Lord's presence—Jesus—because of the unique wording of Numbers 22:35. Likewise, Paul gets a message from Jesus that converts his way to the true God. (Acts 22:8.) Both Balaam and Paul follow God *for a time*. Both apostasize when they teach it is permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

There is another odd parallel between Balaam and Paul. After Balaam strikes his donkey to make him move, Balaam's donkey asks: "What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?" (Numbers 22:28.) The donkey in effect asks *Why are you persecuting me?* Balaam then learns that an angel of God was itself stopping the donkey from moving. Balaam learns it is hard for the donkey to keep on kicking (moving ahead) against the goads of God's angel. *It is hard to keep on kicking against divine goads.*

Now compare this to Paul and his vision. Paul is likewise confronted by Jesus with a similar question: “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (Acts 22:7.) And most telling, Jesus adds in the “Hebrew” tongue: “it is hard for thee *to kick against the goad.*” (Acts 26:14.)

When Jesus spoke to Paul on the road in the Book of Acts, He was speaking in a manner that would allow us to invoke the memory of the story of Balaam. In Acts, Jesus laid the seeds for us to later identify Paul as the apostolic era Balaam. To repeat, first Jesus asks Paul why Paul is persecuting Jesus. The donkey asked Balaam the same question. He asked why was Balaam persecuting him. Second, Jesus said to Paul that it is hard for Paul to keep moving forward against God’s goads. Likewise, Balaam’s donkey was up against the goads of God’s angel. Jesus’ words in the vision experience with Paul were well chosen to invoke a *precise* parallel to the story of Balaam. Thus, we could never miss the point in Revelation 2:14. We thereby could identify the NT Balaam.

What Does It all Mean?

Paulinists apparently sense a problem if Balaam’s story were ever told in detail. They always identify Balaam as merely a false teacher or someone who prophesied for money. But this misses Jesus’ point.

Balaam is precisely the example, unique in Hebrew Scriptures, of an enemy converted by a vision on a road, turned into a true spokesperson of God, but who later *apostasizes* by saying it is permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols. ***Balaam precisely matches Paul in an uncanny way despite millennia separating them.***

Thus, in Paul’s vision experience, God laid the groundwork for a comparison to events two millennia earlier. What an amazing God we have! Jesus specifically made sure the encounter with Paul would have all the earmarks of the Balaam encounter:

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- It would be on a road.
- There would be a divine vision.
- Jesus would ask why is Paul persecuting Him.
- Jesus would let Paul know it is hard to go up against the gods of God.
- The experience would turn Paul around to be a true spokesperson of God *for a time*.
- Finally, Paul would fall like Balaam did by teaching it was permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

Of course, to understand this, you have to have ears to hear. (Rev. 2:29.)

In other words, God set in motion what happened on the Road to Moab, just as He did on the Road to Damascus. Paul apparently indeed had the experience he claims. That's why Jesus could cite the teaching of Balaam as repeating itself in the apostolic era. Yet, to cement the similarity, Jesus had to give us a crucial new similarity between Balaam and Paul. By disclosing Balaam's idol meat teaching, Jesus in Revelation 2:14 suddenly made appear an extraordinary parallel between Paul and Balaam that otherwise remained hidden.

Just as Jesus said Elijah was John the Baptist, "if you are willing to receive it" (Matt. 11:14), Jesus is saying the teaching of Balaam that deceives Christians is the teaching of Paul, "if you are willing to receive it."

What About Permission to Commit Fornication?

Jesus in Revelation 2:14 says the Balaam of the apostolic era also taught *Christians* that it is permissible "to commit fornication."

In the Hebrew Scripture, the word *fornication* meant primarily adultery. In English, it has evolved into almost exclusively the meaning of unwed sexual intercourse. The reason for this change in meaning is because Paul used the synonym for this word in 1 Corinthians 7:2 apparently to mean unwed sexual intercourse.³ However, in the Hebrew, *fornication*'s meaning differs from our own usage.

Brown-Driver-Brigg's Hebrew Dictionary defines the contexts for *fornication* (Hebrew *zanah*) as:

- 1a1) to be a harlot, act as a harlot.
- 1a2) to commit **adultery**
- 1a3) to be a cult prostitute
- 1a4) to be unfaithful (to God)

Thus, fornication in Hebrew is synonymous with adultery. (Out of this arises metaphorical meanings such as 1a1, 1a3 and 1a4 above.) In turn, adultery was sex with another man's wife. (Lev. 20:10.) There is no concept within *zanah* of 'to have sex among unwed partners.' One can also see in context of Matthew 5:32 that the Greek word for *fornication*, as Jesus intended it, had to have the underlying Hebrew meaning of only *adultery*. Jesus says you can only put your wife away if she committed *zanah*, translated in Greek as *fornication* but which must mean she committed *adultery*. Thus, because the word *fornication* in Hebrew here did not mean sexual relations among unwed people which meaning mismatches the context, we know Jesus' original spoken language only meant *adultery*. This then was innocently translated as *fornication* but is too broad in meaning.

3. The debate has raged whether the New Testament word *porneia* had the primary meaning of *unwed sexual intercourse*, or the more limited meaning of *sexual intercourse with a cultic or commercial prostitute*. It seems clear that Paul's usage was intended to mean *unwed sexual intercourse*. Jesus' usage in Matthew 5:32 can only mean *adultery*. The word has many broad meanings in Greek, but the corresponding word in Hebrew (*zanah*) meant *adultery* and metaphorically *prostitution*.

So if we rely upon the primary Hebrew meaning of the word *fornication*—*adultery*, let's ask whether Paul ever permitted an act of adultery which Jesus specifically prohibited? The answer is yes. It is a most disturbing contradiction.

This involves Paul's statement on remarriage. Paul says a wife whose "unbelieving [husband] leaves (*chorizo*)"⁴ her is "not under bondage." (1 Cor. 7:15.) No divorce certificate was issued, yet she is not under bondage to her departing husband. Almost every commentator agrees the context means she is free to remarry without committing *adultery*. (Calvin, Clarke, Gill, etc.) Yet, as Paul describes the situation, the Christian woman was not abandoned because she committed adultery. Nor had she received a certificate of divorce.

However, Jesus said in the Greek version of Matthew 5:32 the husband who unjustifiably leaves the wife "causes her to commit adultery" if she remarries. In the Hebrew version of the same verse, Jesus says instead that a husband who leaves a wife without giving a certificate of divorce causes the wife, if she remarries, to commit adultery.⁵

Whether you accept the Greek or Hebrew version of Matthew, Paul says the Christian woman who both was *unjustifiably* abandoned and abandoned *without a divorce*

4. This was not the word used for *divorce* in the NT: *apoluo*. *Chorizo* means *to place room between, depart, or separate*. (Strong's # 5563.)

5. There is an apparent corruption of the Greek version of Matthew in this verse. In the Hebrew version, what Jesus is saying is when a man leaves a wife *without a bill of divorcement*, and the woman remarries, she commits adultery as does the one who marries her. In *The Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* by Howard, Matthew 5:32 reads in part: "And I say to you that everyone who leaves his wife is to give her a bill of divorce." Then it goes on to treat the violation of this principle as the cause of adultery, both by the man leaving and the wife who remarries another. The Hebrew appears more correct because Deuteronomy 24:2 allows a woman who receives a certificate of divorce to remarry. However, even if the Greek version of 5:32 were correct, Jesus is merely saying that if the certificate were improperly delivered to the wife, without her being guilty of an *unseemly thing* as required by Deut. 24:1, the divorce was invalid and the right of remarriage under Deut. 24:2 does not exist. This makes sense even if Jesus never said it.

certificate does not commit adultery by remarrying. However, Jesus says she *absolutely* does commit adultery under either of those circumstances. Since adultery is synonymous with fornication in Jesus' original vernacular, Paul permits the very act of fornication which Jesus prohibits.

Incidentally, if the Greek text were correct, Jesus would be resolving a dispute under the divorce Law on what *unseemly* thing was necessary to justify a bill of divorce.⁶ Yet, if the Hebrew version of Matthew 5:32 were correct, Jesus was re-invigorating the requirement of using a bill of divorce, which apparently had fallen into disuse. Men apparently were abandoning their wives and simply remarrying with impunity. Whether the Greek or Hebrew text is correct, Jesus was reinvigorating the Law of Moses, and as Campenhausen explains, Jesus "reaffirmed" it.⁷ (For more on the fact that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew and then translated into Greek, see page xiii of Appendix B.)

Regardless, what remains the problem is that under either text tradition, Paul permits the very act of fornication/adultery that Jesus prohibits.

What About Paul's Anti-Fornication Statements?

If we ignore the prior example, could Paul ever possibly be faulted for permitting fornication? Didn't Paul oppose fornication, as he says in Galatians 5:19 that those who "practice fornication" shall not "inherit the kingdom of God"?⁸

6. The Bible required "some unseemly thing" for divorce. (Deut. 24:1.) Hillel thought any trivial reason qualified, while Shammai believed adultery alone justified divorce. ("Adultery," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.) In the Greek version of Matthew 5:32, Jesus would be siding with Shammai's view.

7. Hans van Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (J. A. Baker, trans.) (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972) at 13.

Yes, Revelation 2:14 still could apply to Paul. First, most Paulinist commentators dispute Paul means to threaten Christians in Galatians 5:19. (Clarke, Barnes, Gill.) Because of Paul's other teachings of eternal security, these commentators claim Galatians 5:19 means only unsaved persons who engage in fornication are threatened with exclusion. Thus, they contend Galatians 5:19 is not a message to Christians. Hence this verse does not prove what Paul taught Christians about the consequences of fornication.

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8. This is Paul's strongest anti-fornication statement. His other negative statements are weaker. For example, Paul in 1 Cor. 6:18 says "Flee fornication...he that commits fornication sins against his own body." This is not very strong because Paul did not say you sin against God; you sin against yourself. This means it affects only yourself, giving you room to permit it. Again Paul in 1 Cor. 7:1 says it is "good for a man not to touch a woman." In context, the concern is it can lead to fornication. Yet, again, Paul is not strong. He does not make the prohibition direct or threaten a serious loss. Again in 1 Thess. 4:3 (ASV), Paul says "the will of God" is that "you abstain from fornication." Paul goes on to say that if you "reject this" (*i.e.*, 'annul this'), you "reject God who gives His Holy Spirit to you." (1 Thess. 4:8.) This appears strong—to threaten loss of salvation for fornication by a Christian. However, the Pauline commentators explain the context does not justify this is talking about fornication in its broad sense. The *New American Standard* (Protestant-Lockman Foundation) commentary in the footnotes says that the word translated "fornication" or "immorality" here really only means "unlawful marriage." It explains "many [incorrectly] think that this passage deals with a variety of moral regulations (fornication, adultery...)." It then explains this passage deals *in this context* instead with "a specific problem, namely marriage within degrees of consanguinity..." (See reprint of this commentary at <http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/1thessalonians/1thessalonians4.htm>.) Furthermore, most Paulinists find Paul's doctrine of eternal security trumps this verse. Because this verse threatens God will deny you for the sin of "fornication" (as translated), this must be directed at a non-believer. It does not say the person has *received the Holy Spirit yet*. Otherwise, Paul would be contradicting himself that salvation does not depend on what you do. (Romans 4:4.) Thus, this is read to be a warning to a non-believer, not a believer. As a result, while 1 Thess. 4:3, 8 at first appears strongly against fornication, Paulinists interpret it so it does not apply to anything but to a very specific consanguinity issue or not to a Christian at all.

However, this view is unsatisfactory because clearly Paul's warning in Galatians 5:19 is intended for Christians. The Book of Galatians is addressed to genuine believers (Gal 1:8-9). In Galatians 5:13, Paul refers to those addressed in Galatians 5:13-26 as *brethren*. Furthermore, in Galatians 6:1, Paul again refers to those being warned as *brethren*.

This has led other Paulinists to admit that Paul is warning Christians in Galatians 5:19-21. However, they still have a response that permits a Christian to commit fornication without losing their inheritance in heaven. They claim Paul means that fornicating Christians (a) only are at risk if they *practice* fornication and (b) if so, they only risk losing a reward (*i.e.*, sharing ruling authority in heaven.)

They point to Paul's use of the term "practice" in Gal. 5:21. They insist Paul means that occasional *fornication by a Christian* is permissible.⁹ Paul's words are "they who **practice** such things [*e.g.*, fornication] shall not inherit the kingdom of God." Paul's threat does not intend to warn a Christian who engages in *occasional* fornication that they should fear the loss of salvation.¹⁰

John MacArthur is a major voice of modern evangelical Christianity. His position reflects this.

Some people wonder if that verse means a Christian can lose his salvation if he has ever done any of those things. Although the Authorized Version says 'they who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God,' the Greek word for *do* is *prasso*, which means 'to practice.' It is a verb that speaks of **habitual practice** rather than occasional doing. Thus, the verse refers to those who habitually practice such things as an expression of their char-

9. James, by contrast, says a single act breaks all the law. (James 2:13.)

10. Paul's *occasional-practice* distinction is at variance to the Hebrew Scriptures. The Law says it only takes one act of adultery or murder to be deemed worthy of death. (Lev. 20:10, Numbers 35:16; Ezek. 33:18.)

acters. The word of God bases its evaluation of a person's character ***not on his infrequent actions***, but on his habitual actions, for they demonstrate his true character. The people who habitually perform the works of the flesh will not inherit the Kingdom because they are not God's people.

Some ***Christians may do some of those things infrequently, but that doesn't mean they will forfeit the full salvation of the Kingdom of God***. Rather they will receive divine discipline now and forfeit some of their heavenly rewards.¹¹

MacArthur thus concedes Paul's threat in Galatians 5:19 is only for a person who *practices* fornication. MacArthur says a true Christian will never practice this, and thus is never threatened *actually* with loss of salvation. A true Christian at most will *occasionally* commit fornication. The Christian who does so has an eternal destiny as safe and secure as the Christian who resists *all* acts of fornication.

In the quote above, MacArthur then adds to Paul's words to make Paul appear to say fornication is not entirely permissible for a Christian. Paul does not ever say anything anywhere about Christian fornicators receiving divine discipline. That is John MacArthur's hopeful addition.

Putting this unfounded addition to one side, what is still clear is MacArthur admits Paul does not intend to alarm Christians who "infrequently" commit fornication that they have anything serious to concern themselves about. Paul's warning in Galatians 5:19 does not apply to warn a Christian who occasionally fornicates. Thus, MacArthur can reassure such Christians that heaven awaits them despite committing

11. John MacArthur, *Liberty in Christ*, reprinted at <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/sg1669.htm>.

unrepentant occasional fornication. MacArthur says God would never condemn you for occasional *fornication*, citing Paul's words in Galatians 5:21.

Furthermore, Dillow insists that even if a Christian practices fornication, Paul does not mean to threaten anything more than loss of rewards. Dillow argues that Galatians 5:19 and the comparable 1 Corinthians 6:9 mean by threatening the loss of an inheritance of the kingdom to threaten only a loss of rewards. The argument is a forced-one, stretching over chapters 3-5 of Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings*. Yet, if this is how Paulinists construe Paul to keep him squared with his *faith-alone* doctrine, then I can rely upon Dillow to conclude Paul never puts a serious threat over the Christian who *practices* fornication. And when I combine MacArthur's distinction with Dillow's views, I can say Paul never threatens *at all* a Christian who *occasionally* commits fornication.

*Paul Is Boldly Claimed To Teach
Fornication Is Permissible*

Now that we see how Paulinists dismiss the threats in Galatians 5:19-21, it should come as no surprise that mainstream Christians declare Paul says a Christian can commit fornication, not repent, and expect to be saved. Galatians 5:19-21 never enters their analysis.

They argue strenuously that Paul permits fornication, apparently to make their point more blatant about Paul's doctrine of grace. To prove Paul permits fornication, they rely upon three independent proofs.

1. Paul's Says Fornication is Permissible But It Might Be Unprofitable

First, Paulinists say Paul declared the Law abolished, and that in its place the new criteria is: "all things are lawful but not all things are expedient" (1 Cor. 6:12). Paul thereby

implied it was permissible you could commit fornication. The test is expediency; it is no longer whether it is absolutely prohibited.

This reasoning is bluntly stated by Bob George. Mr. George is an author of numerous mainstream theological books on eternal security. Over the past several years, he has been a national radio talk host whose daily topic is often eternal security. You have been able to hear him on the radio in Los Angeles every week day. He bluntly said in a 1993 broadcast that Paul says it is permissible to commit fornication:

And as Paul said, 'All things are permissible, but not all things are profitable.' ***So is committing fornication permissible? YES.*** Is it profitable? No, it isn't.¹²

George is not alone. John MacArthur, a giant of modern evangelical Christianity, says the same thing. In addressing whether fornication is permissible in the article quoted on page 143, MacArthur never once cites any absolute prohibition on acts of fornication from the Hebrew Scriptures. Instead, he quotes Paul's axiom "all things are lawful..." Then MacArthur tries to prove fornication is not expedient. Fornication harms you, it enslaves you, etc. He tries to squeeze out a negative answer using Paul's principle, "All things are permissible, but not all things are profitable."¹³ Thus, the starting point is that fornication is not wrong *per se*. You have to look at its *expediency*, *i.e.*, its costs versus its benefits. Then if the costs outweigh the benefits, it is wrong.

Thus, George and MacArthur reflect Paul's paradigm shift. The Law is gone. In its place a new analysis is applied. Under it, fornication is permissible but not necessarily profit-

12. Bob George, *People to People* (Radio Talk Show), 11/16/93.

13. John MacArthur, *Back to Basics: The Presentation of My Life: Sacrifice* at <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/1390.htm> (last accessed 2005).

able. A strong case can be made about its unhealthy results, etc. Therefore George and MacArthur say ‘don’t do it.’ This is an *antinomian* (anti-Law) shift away from simply knowing that the Law says it is wrong. In its place, we now have a cost-benefit analysis whether fornication *works* for you.

Under Paul’s balancing test, we can see the result just as easily could be that fornication is more beneficial for me. As long as the guilt from violating the Law is erased, then I do no wrong if I think “fornication” works for me. As long as I applied a cost-benefit analysis of what is more expedient, and I reasonably justify it, it is no sin. For example, if I love someone and commit “fornication” with her, and it suits our mutual needs to ignore the legalities of the situation, then in a very cogent way, I have justified fornication in a manner that passes the cost-benefit analysis Paul offers. “All things are lawful” and in this scenario it is more “expedient” to not be hyper-technical about our behavior.

This example raises the dilemma the church faces today: it desperately wants to give a cost-benefit analysis for this scenario to steer people away from such fornication because Paul ***removed the ability to cite the Law itself as reason enough***. Consequently, the modern Pauline-Christian analysis of right-and-wrong starts from “all things are permissible,” including fornication. Then by applying the *costs versus the benefits test*, their analysis tries to steer people to an outcome parallel to the Law.

Thus, clearly Paul’s saying all things are permissible includes fornication. It is only to be abandoned if the costs outweigh the benefits. However, there are going to be times where the benefits of fornication will outweigh the costs. That is why Paul is still the leading candidate to be the Balaam figure of the New Testament era mentioned in Revelation 2:14.

2. Paul's Doctrine of Grace Means Fornication is Permissible

Other Paulinists defend that Paul teaches fornication is permissible with no significant penalty for a Christian on another ground. This is Paul's doctrine of grace. All your future acts of fornication are already forgiven when you became a Christian, they insist. Such a sin might cause the loss of rewards, but there is no loss of something you cannot afford to lose. Luther defends this idea:

[N]o sin will separate us from the Lamb, **even though we commit fornication** and murder a thousand times a day.¹⁴

Zane Hodges, a leading evangelical writer, similarly says:

Paul does not say...his readers should question their salvation if they become involved in **sexual impurity**.¹⁵

Unless these mainstream writers are wrong, Paul is teaching a grace that permits sexual immorality with no serious loss. At least there is no penalty.

What about loss of rewards? Paul never says expressly you lose a reward for fornication. But assuming he did say this, if anyone loses a reward that does not affect salvation, it is certainly not a penalty. It is not even a set back. You simply do not move ahead. In fact, you will have eternity to overcome the loss of initial rewards. It is no problem at all. How many would not trade a few lost rewards you can live without to take today the delectable pleasures of fornication?

14.Martin Luther, *Luther Works, I Letters* (American Ed.) Vol. 48 at 282.

15.Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free!* (Dallas, TX: Redencion Viva, 1989) at 94.

In sum, Paul's grace doctrines are read to permit fornication with no serious consequence or penalties. This second proof reconfirms that Revelation 2:14 is Jesus' direct identification of Paul as the one bringing the "teaching of Balaam."

3. The Sexually Immoral Man in 1 Cor. 5 Was Never Lost

As the third and final proof that Paul says fornication is permissible, Paulinists actually cite 1 Corinthians 5:5. They insist this passage proves that a sexually immoral Christian is never at risk of losing salvation.

In that passage, Paul deals with a sexually immoral member of the Corinthian church who lives with his father's wife, his step-mother. If the father is alive, this is *incest*. Paul decrees: "deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." (1 Cor. 5:5.)

Dillow contends Paul ordered the man was to be expelled and then killed. Paul's wording therefore proves that if the man were killed in his unrepentant state that Paul meant this carnal Christian was still saved. Dillow, whose book is now treated as required reading at many evangelical seminars, explains:

An extreme example of the '**consistently carnal Christian**' seems to be found in 1 Cor. 5:5....Paul hands this carnal Christian over to physical death, but **he notes that he will be saved at the day of the Lord Jesus.**¹⁶

Thus, Dillow means that Paul wants the man killed immediately. (Paul's conduct shows disregard for the civil rights protected in the Law of the accused.)¹⁷ Dillow understands Paul's other words as assuring us that the man's death

16.Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings* (1993) at 321.

in this situation means the man will enjoy salvation despite his unrepentant and consistent sin. Thus, this verse proves eternal security, Dillow claims.

Dillow is not an aberrant view of this passage. The mainstream idea of *once saved always saved* boldly proclaims this passage teaches a Christian is free to commit repetitive unrepentant fornication without the slightest threat to their salvation.

The man who had 'his father's wife'—a terrible sin—didn't lose his salvation thereby. (Dave Hunt.)¹⁸

Some have regarded 1 Corinthians 5:5 as ***the strongest verse in the Bible for once saved, always saved and I would not disagree.*** (R.T.

17. Many commentators try to avoid what Dillow so gladly affirms. They argue Paul did not mean the person should be killed. However, the early church fathers correctly understood Paul's command was to kill the man. Tertullian said Paul was invoking the Hebrew Scripture's familiar "judicial process" whereby a "wicked person being put out of their midst" was done by the "destruction of the flesh." (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, Book 5, ch. VII.) This is evident in Paul's language about *purging*. It was taken directly from the death penalty laws in the Mosaic Law, e.g., Deut. 17:7, 21:21, 22:21. Furthermore, Paul uses the language of a judicial officer rendering a verdict in 1 Cor. 5:3, which a death sentence would require. This incident reveals a flaw in Paul's ideas that *all* the Law was abrogated, even its civil rights to protect the accused. Under the Law, a hearing was necessary where two eye witnesses tell the judge the persons were caught in the very sexual act prohibited in the Law. No inference was permitted in capital cases. (Deut. 17:7; cf. John 8:4.) Second, the witnesses in an incest case with a stepmother had to confirm the father was alive at the time of the act. Otherwise, as some Rabbis pointed out, the act was not *precisely* prohibited by the Law. Then, in strict compliance with the Law, Paul should have required the two witnesses to be the *first* to throw stones. (Deut. 17:7; John 8:4 *et seq.*) Paul instead presumptuously declares the death penalty over an accused without hearing testimony and questioning the circumstances. Paul's abrogation of the Law thus cut out barriers against precipitous actions by those in authority. Paul took full advantage of a freedom he gave himself from the Law of Moses to *ignore civil rights* protected in the Law.

Kendall, *Once Saved Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985) at 156.)

In spite of the sin of fornication, Paul still regarded the person as a saved man. (Gromacki, *Salvation is Forever* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976) at 138.)

If Dillow and these writers are correct (and they are accepted as correct by mainstream evangelical Christianity which Moody Press typifies), then Paul taught a carnal sexually immoral and unrepentant fornicating Christian has nothing significant to lose. Paul is supposedly saying a Christian can commit even incest with his step-mother and be saved all the while. Thus, of course, the same must be true of “consistently unrepentant fornicating Christians.”

Recap: How Mainstream Christianity Proves Paul Teaches A Christian May Fornicate

Accordingly, mainstream Christianity offers several proofs that Paul teaches it is permissible for a Christian to commit fornication although it may not be expedient:

- The Law is abrogated.
- If one said fornication were strictly impermissible, that is not only Legalism, but also it implies a works-salvation.
- Paul only warns loss of rewards in Galatians 5:19 if a Christian *practices* fornication. (Dillow.) Thus, no rewards nor salvation are lost for occasional fornication; and
- Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians 5:5 implies consistent acts of unrepentant incest do not even threaten loss of salvation, so practicing unrepentant fornication cannot possibly pose such a threat.

18. Dave Hunt, *CIB Bulletin* (Camarillo, CA: Christian Information Bureau) (June 1989) at 1.

Why Paul Must Be The Figure Who Permitted Fornication

Consequently, Paul permitted an act of adultery that Jesus prohibited. Paul permitted a Christian woman who was unjustly abandoned without a divorce certificate to remarry. However, Jesus said absent there being grounds she committed adultery and/or a certificate, if she remarried, she committed adultery. Paul thus permitted fornication in the sense that Jesus was condemning fornication in Revelation 2:14. Paul's doctrine on remarriage and *fornication* evoked Jesus' harsh response in Revelation 2:14.

Furthermore, if we look to verses where Paul uses the term *fornication* (where he usually means unwed sex), mainstream Christianity today teaches Paul's other lessons mean either (1) fornication is clearly occasionally permissible for a Christian with not even loss of rewards or (2) if the fornication is repetitive and unrepentant, it poses no threat to a Christian's salvation, citing 1 Corinthians 5:5. In either case, fornication is subject only to the expediency test. This has opened the doors to all kinds of immorality condemned in the Law of Moses. In fact, if we cite the Law and we insist salvation must be threatened if you commit sexual sins because of Jesus' words in Mark 9:42-47 (better heaven maimed than hell whole), we are labelled a heretic. We are seen as undermining Paul's doctrine of salvation by faith without works.

Thus, the Paulinist spin on Galatians 5:19 as threatening loss of *rewards*, not salvation, for *practicing* fornication (Dillow) is the only rational view that squares Paul with Paul. If you disagree, and you claim Paul means to threaten a Christian with losing salvation (and thus he teaches what Jesus teaches in Mark 9:42-47), Stanley accuses you of being a dangerous heretic attacking the core of Christianity:

The very gospel [*i.e.*, of Paul] itself comes under attack when the eternal security of the believer is questioned.¹⁹

Consequently, if Paulinists have won the day that Galatians 5:19 does not teach any loss of salvation for an occasionally or repetitiously fornicating Christian, no one can cite Galatians 5:19 to prove Paul ‘prohibited’ fornication either for such a Christian. If Paulinists also construe it as permitting *occasional* fornication by a Christian *with no threat* (as most do), I then can cite this verse to prove Paul at minimum permits *occasional* fornication by a Christian with no negative consequences whatsoever, *not even loss of rewards!* Such a limited loss of rewards is only reserved for those who *practice* fornication!

This brings us right back to our conclusion that Revelation 2:14 is talking about Paul. He injected a moral ambiguity into Christianity by abrogation of the Law. He changed Biblical morality into the principle “all things are permissible, but not all things are expedient.” Paul implied in 1 Corinthians 5:5 that the member who engaged in a persistent and unrepentant incest relationship was still saved. This led others such as Luther to conclude Paul taught a Christian was *permitted* to commit fornication. While it might not be always *expedient*, fornication was permissible. This formula was identical to Paul’s teaching that it was *permissible* to eat meat sacrificed to idols, even though it was not always *expedient* to do so. Only if by eating such meat you would harm the conscience of another should you refrain. With that same principle, Paul is understood in the Modern Gospel to permit Christians to fornicate *occasionally* without any fear and even commit repetitious unrepentant fornication while remaining saved all the while.

19. Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Thomas Nelson Publishers: 1990) at 192.

*Recapitulation of The Meaning of
Revelation 2:14*

To repeat, Revelation 2:14 states:

But I have a few things against thee, because ***thou hast there some that hold the teaching of Balaam***, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, ***to eat things sacrificed to idols***, and ***to commit fornication***.

The Christians at Pergamum were being criticized by Jesus for some members holding to the “teaching of Balaam.” Who was Balaam? He was a figure who precisely prefigures Paul.

The only missing pieces were *first* whether Paul taught it was permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols. We saw in the prior chapter that Paul taught it is permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols. (See page 117.)

The *second* missing piece was whether Paul also taught it was permissible to commit fornication. We saw first that in Jesus’ day, adultery and fornication were synonymous in the underlying vernacular in which Jesus spoke. We also saw that Paul permitted an act of adultery that Jesus squarely prohibited, *i.e.*, remarriage by a wife whose husband had no grounds for divorce or where a certificate of divorce had not been used at all.

Or, if we instead look at merely passages where Paul talks about fornication (which for Paul usually means unwed sex), Paul fares no better. While Paul has one, perhaps three verses, that disparage fornication, there is no verse clear-cut saying fornication is *impermissible*. Indeed, Paul’s teachings lead Paulinists to insist Paul says fornication is permissible. All things are permissible, they quote Paul. Yet, not all things are expedient. So they insist, fornication may not be expedient, but it is not *per se* wrong. The Law is abrogated. To claim it is wrong *per se* is heretical legalism. Even if one performs fornication a thousand times a day, the young Luther says

Conclusion

Paul's grace teaching means we remain saved. Luther's youthful view is corroborated by every other mainstream interpreter of Paul's gospel. They appear to be correct because if you can lose your salvation for fornication then you keep it by obeying God, which would be a works-contingent salvation. Paul calls that heresy, plain and certain.

When you add up all the facts that parallel Paul to Revelation 2:14, the conclusion is overwhelming. Paul is certainly the intended author of the "teaching of Balaam" that Jesus identified in Revelation 2:14. He matches Balaam's life almost identically. He teaches it is permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Finally, he also teaches it is permissible to commit fornication (*i.e.*, adultery in remarriage). Paul is also understood by leading commentators to have taught fornication as he used the term (*i.e.*, unwed sex) was (a) occasionally permissible, although it was not necessarily expedient to fornicate, with utterly no *negative* consequence; and (b) able to be committed repetitiously and without repentance with no repercussion on salvation. There is therefore no ground to distinguish Paul from the teacher of Balaam's doctrine in Revelation 2:14. Thus, Jesus was identifying Paul in Revelation 2:14 by referring to Balaam.

Conclusion

When the early church leader Irenaeus in 180 A.D. defended Paul's authenticity from opponents of Paul *within the church*, Irenaeus argued that if you accept Luke's Gospel, then you must accept Luke's account in Acts that Jesus revealed himself to Paul. For Irenaeus, this vision experience sealed the case in favor of Paul. Thus for Irenaeus, once Paul has a vision of Jesus on a road, the case in favor of Paul is settled.²⁰ However, not once did the story of Balaam's experience on the road and temporary conversion into a true prophet cause Irenaeus to see the error in this argument. Here is Irenaeus' argument from circa 180 A.D. in defense of Paul:

But again, we allege the same **against those who do not recognize Paul as an apostle**: that they should either reject the other words of the Gospel which we have come to know through **Luke alone**, and not make use of them; or else, if they do receive all these, **they must necessarily admit also that testimony concerning Paul**, when he (Luke) tells us that the Lord spoke at first to him from heaven: 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me? I am Jesus Christ, whom thou persecutest.' [Acts 26:15]. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* Book III: 257.)²¹

However, Irenaeus missed the point. Paul could be a Balaam. He could be converted on a road **for a time**, but later apostasize. Irenaeus' argument simply overlooks that clear example from Scripture. Thus, I accept Luke's Gospel and I accept Paul's account in Acts 22 of having a direct encounter with Jesus. However, it does not resolve the issue. Paul could still have been a Balaam later. Revelation 2:14 is Jesus telling me that Paul indeed was the modern Balaam of the New Testament church.

20. Please note that Paul's position in the New Testament church was still being disputed into 180 A.D. This was a dissent from good Christians whom Irenaeus presupposed accepted Luke's gospel, and would thereby be persuaded to accept Luke's account in Acts.

21. Irenaeus in this quote also made an incorrect supposition that Jesus in the three vision accounts in Acts 9, 22, and 26 appointed Paul an apostle. Jesus never does so. Instead, Jesus says Paul is to be a *martus*, a witness. For further discussion on that, see page 215 *et seq.* Even had Jesus appointed Paul an apostle, Irenaeus would also have been overlooking the case of Judas. The fact Judas was an apostle did not prevent his fall later. Thus, whether a true prophet or apostle, God gives us abundant examples that one can fall from such status.