

Class Notes for Lessons 10 and 11 1 Corinthians 7

I. IN RESPONSE TO THE CORINTHIAN LETTER

With the words “Now for the matters you wrote about,” Paul moves on to the second part of the letter, his response to a letter from Corinth. Rather than a friendly exchange, in which the new believers in Corinth are asking spiritual advice of their mentor in the Lord, their letter was probably a response to Paul’s previous letter mentioned in 5:9, in which they were taking exception to his position on point after point. In light of their own theology of spirit, with heavy emphasis on “wisdom” and “knowledge,” they have answered Paul with a kind of “Why can’t we?” attitude, in which they are looking for his response.

So he takes up the items in their letter one by one, most of them introduced by *peri de* (“now about”; 7:1, 25; 8:1 [cf. 8:4]; 12:1; 16:1, 12), and at an appropriate place inserts one more item about which he had been informed (11:17–34). Since there is a certain logic to the whole presentation, the present sequencing is probably Paul’s own and is not dictated by their letter. The matters on marriage in chap. 7 follow directly from the concerns over sexual immorality in 5:1–13 and 6:12–20; chaps. 8–10 return to the matter of “idolatry,” specifically that of eating meals in the pagan temples. This item of “false worship” is followed by a series of items dealing with Christian worship (11:2–16, which sets up 11:17–34, followed by the issue of tongues in worship in 12–14). This in turn is followed by the matter of their denying the resurrection of believers, which is a key theological issue behind chaps. 12–14 as well as much of the rest of the letter. Chap. 16 then takes up a number of “house cleaning” items, some of which also come from their letter. Not every item is equally combative (e.g., chaps. 8–10 are much more so than 7:1–24 or 7:25–40); nonetheless in every case he takes exception to *their* position, or at least to the position of some among them who have influenced the whole.

A. MARRIAGE AND RELATED MATTERS (7:1–40)

The first two items Paul takes up (7:1–24 and 7:25–40) are directly related to each other as well as to the issue in 6:12–20. Both sections deal with matters related to marriage (sexual relations, divorce, second marriages, marriage itself). What is less clear is *how* the two sections are related to each other, not to mention the relationship of the individual items within each; indeed, the traditional interpretation tends to see most of the argument as a digression from the basic question as to whether people should get married or not. But for several reasons that is an inadequate view. Unless there are convincing reasons to the contrary, a

reconstruction that evidences an inner logic to the whole, as is usual in Paul, is to be preferred.

For such a reconstruction several items need to be noted: (1) On the basis of its usage elsewhere, one may rightfully assume that the *peri de* of 7:25 is to be taken seriously as the start of a different issue from those spoken to in 7:1–24. (2) This is further confirmed by the repeated occurrence of “virgins” (six times) and the verbs for “getting married” (eight times) in 7:25–40, while the former does not appear at all and the latter only twice in 7:1–24. (3) In the former section, vv. 8, 10, and 12 take up items in a kind of sequence that suggests that 7:1–7 should be viewed as the first in that sequence. (4) Although both sections are about “items related to marriage,” the controlling motif of Paul’s answer is: “Do not seek a change in status.” This occurs in every subsection (vv. 2, 8, 10, 11, 12–16, 26–27, 37, 40) and is the singular theme of the paragraph that ties the two sections together (vv. 17–24) – although in each case an exception is allowed. (5) Therefore, even though the issues are slightly different in the two sections, the same theological motivation on the part of the Corinthians almost certainly lies behind their argument in both.

To get at the problem(s) being addressed, one needs first to see the structure of the whole. We may begin with what appears to be the anomaly in the argument, vv. 17–24, whose point seems clear: “Remain in the place you were at the time of your call.” What is of interest is that neither of the specifics in that section (circumcision and slavery) is related to the *subject* matter of chap. 7; nonetheless, the thrice-repeated “Let each abide in his/her calling” dominates every paragraph. Thus:

- vv. 1–7— to the married: stay married with full conjugal rights
- vv. 8–9— to the “unmarried” and widows: it is good to remain unmarried
- vv. 10–11— to the married (both partners believers): remain married
- vv. 12–16— to those with an unbelieving spouse: remain married
- vv. 25–38— to “virgins”: it is good to remain unmarried
- vv. 39–40— to married women (and widows): the married are bound to the marriage; when widowed it is good to remain that way

This suggests that vv. 1–16 deal basically with those who are already married, or who have formerly been married but whose marriages have been dissolved by death; whereas vv. 25–38 speak to a special group who have yet to be married, to which is added a final word to married women, who are to remain as they are until their husbands’ death.

The question that needs to be answered is, why all this, both the individual sections and the recurring motif? A careful look at each of the parts as outlined

above indicates that in both sections there has been some considerable pressure within the church to dissolve or abstain from marriage. Paul's response on both sides is the same: "Stay as you are." For the married there are no real exceptions; here he has the command of the Lord. But for the never-before married and widows/widowers, he allows genuine exceptions, even though singleness is clearly his own preference. Precisely because of his own responses in vv. 1–16, he therefore affirms in the second section that "marriage is no sin." What he does instead is to give his own reasons for singleness—the urgency of a "present distress."

What, then, was the Corinthian position? Almost certainly it was not whether to get married or not (the traditional approach); rather, the answer lies in what appears to be Paul's quotation from their letter in v. 1 ("It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman"), plus his insistence in 7:28 that the "virgin" who marries has not sinned (cf. v. 36). Such a view would put pressure on the married to dissolve their marriages—or abstain from sexual relations within marriage—and on the engaged and widows not to marry at all. What would seem to lie behind this position is their opinion that as those who are "spiritual" they are above the merely earthly existence of others; marriage belongs to this age that is passing away. The apparently thought of themselves as having already realized the "resurrection from the dead" by being in spirit and thus already as the angels (cf. 11:2–16; 13:1), neither marrying nor giving in marriage (cf. Luke 20:35).

Two other features about the nature of the argument need to be noted: First, along with 11:2–16, this is one of the least combative sections of the letter. Indeed, after the argumentation of 1:10–6:20, this section is altogether placid. Furthermore, also along with 11:2–16, this is one of the least "authority-conscious" sections in all of his letters. Phrases like "I say this by way of concession, not of command" (v. 6), "it is good for them" (vv. 8, 26), "I have no command, but I give my opinion" (v. 25; cf. 40) are not your standard Paul. Second, in a way quite unlike anything else in all his letters, the argument alternates between men and women (12 times in all). And in every case there is complete mutuality between the two sexes.

The net result is a section of considerable importance for the ongoing church, for marriage-related questions are addressed here as nowhere else in the NT. Yet apart from the command in v. 10, the whole is filled with what is acknowledged by the apostle as his personal opinion. That does not mean that it lacks authority or may be disregarded. But much of it functions more at the level of biblical guidelines than biblical mandate, and in using these texts one needs to keep that distinction in view.

1. To the Married (or Formerly Married) Stay as You Are (7:1–16)

If our reconstruction of the problem is correct, then this first section is basically a response to some who have argued for cessation of sexual relations within marriage on the basis of their slogan: “It is good for a man not to have relations with a woman.” Three such situations are addressed: (1) in vv. 2–7 Paul forbids the practice of depriving a marriage partner (probably husbands) of sexual relations; (2) in vv. 10–11 he forbids those who would eliminate the problem of sexual relations altogether by separating from a believing spouse; and (3) in vv. 12–16 he speaks to the “rest,” those who have an unbelieving spouse, and makes basically the same ruling: the Christian should not initiate a divorce.

Since these three issues can all be seen to arise out of the same theological stance quoted in v. 1, it seems most likely that they were all spoken to in the Corinthian letter. That is, on the basis of the slogan that it is *good* not to have sexual relations, they were arguing for abstinence within marriage; and since abstinence might be difficult for some, then divorce was being recommended as a viable alternative—most certainly so when the marriage partner “one touches” is an unbeliever. Not only does Paul say no in each case, but even his exceptions are no real exceptions (temporary abstinence for prayer in the first instance; remaining single or remarrying the same spouse in the case of Christians; and acquiescing to the pagan partner who decides to divorce).

In light of this analysis, then, the question of the place of vv. 8–9 remains. Part of the problem is to determine to whom Paul is speaking. In any case, these verses seem to flow directly out of v. 7; the “unmarried” and widows are spoken to here partly because they provide a natural contrast to the married in vv. 2–7 (how they are to “remain as they are”), and partly in anticipation of this kind of question in vv. 25–40.

No abstinence within marriage (7:1–7)

This opening paragraph is crucial to understanding the entire chapter, yet it is full of notorious difficulties that should make any interpreter properly cautious: What is the meaning of v. 1b? Whose statement is it? How then does v. 2 relate to it? What is the force of the prohibition in v. 5? What is the antecedent of “this” in v. 6? And, finally, how does v. 7 respond to the whole?

There are two basic ways of understanding the text, neither of which is totally without difficulties. The traditional view sees the entire paragraph as Paul’s position on marriage in general, in response to their query as to its advisability. Thus v. 1b sets forth Paul’s basic response as to whether or not one should get married: It is good not to. But that is an ideal that few attain, so as a prophylactic against illicit sexual relations such as he had just addressed in 6:12–20, he encourages them to marry (v. 2). Once married they should give themselves to

full conjugal responsibility, with the one exception of mutual, but not prolonged, abstinence for times of prayer. But this is a concession, not a command (v. 6), meaning that marriage (v. 2) is a concession in light of realities, whereas celibacy (v. 1b) is still the ideal. This in effect is the point of v. 7, where Paul wishes that all were celibate as he is; but he recognizes that not all are, so he affirms those who are not. Vv. 8–9 then repeat all this, v. 8 corresponding to vv. 7 and 1b, and v. 9 to vv. 2–6.

According to this view the problem lay within Corinth itself, reflecting a discussion between libertine and ascetic elements. In light of Paul's prior prohibition of sexual immorality (cf. 5:9–10), they had wondered whether sexual intercourse was permitted at all. Although possible, this reconstruction has a large number of difficulties, both in terms of its view of their letter to Paul and in many of the details. Furthermore, it has some difficulty with why Paul would address the question again in a somewhat different vein in vv. 25–38.

The alternative is the one adopted here. V. 1b is seen as a quotation from their letter, with which Paul would be in some agreement. But he does not agree with how they are using it. The imperative in v. 5, if taken at face value, does not anticipate deprivation on the part of the “ascetics,” but speaks to the actual situation: “Stop depriving one another”—implying that this is what some are doing. Vv. 2 and 6 are crucial. According to this view, v. 2 directs those already married not to go along with sexual abstinence within marriage; rather, they should not only “have their own spouses” but should afford them full conjugal rights (vv. 3–4). The reason for this lies with the *porneia* addressed in 6:12–20. In prohibiting their stance in v. 5, he does allow that temporary, mutually agreed upon abstinence for prayer might be all right, but it should never be the rule. Again the reason is the lack of self-control (= the instances of *porneia* in v. 2), which is now clearly within the marriage relationship. But temporary abstinence is only a concession (the only express concession in the paragraph!); even for something as worthy as prayer it is not a normal part of Christian marriage and is thus not a command. At the end Paul states his own position on the whole matter. He would prefer that they were as he is, and thus could all go along with their slogan, but that is not the reality of Christian existence in terms of gifts. These differ; hence their slogan does not apply to the married state. The married are to stay as they are.

This view seems to be supported by almost all the details in the text itself. It is also supported by the overall structure, which sees vv. 2–5, the heart of the paragraph, as its main point, not a digression after a concession.

1 The new section of the letter is signaled by the opening prepositional phrase, “Now for the matters you wrote about.” This “now about” formula appears five

more times (7:25; 8:1 [8:4]; 12:1; 16:1; 16:12). Almost certainly these pick up subsequent items in their letter to Paul.

The sentence that immediately follows—without prior warning or introduction—is one of the more difficult in the letter, and certainly one of the most misused in the history of the church. The problems are two: (1) what does it mean? and (2) whose statement is it, Paul’s or the Corinthian’s?

The first issue can be resolved beyond reasonable doubt. “To touch a woman” is a euphemism for sexual intercourse, for which a comparable English usage would be: “It is good for a man not to have relations with a woman.” This is demonstrated both by the linguistic evidence and the universal understanding of it in the early church. The idiom “to touch a woman” occurs nine times in Greek antiquity, ranging across six centuries and a variety of writers, and in every other instance, without ambiguity it refers to having sexual intercourse. There is no evidence of any kind that it can be extended or watered down to mean, “It is good for a man not to marry.” Although the phrase “It is good” in this kind of expression may mean morally good, which would fit the Corinthian point of view, more likely in its present Pauline form it means something closer to “It is desirable, or to one’s advantage” (cf. vv. 8, 26). In either case, there can be little question that the statement is promoting an ascetic ideal, not simply celibacy *per se*.

The second issue is more problematic. Traditionally it has been interpreted at face value as Paul’s own position, in which he is seen to affirm not only celibacy but a basically ascetic position toward sex and marriage. In this he is viewed as standing over against his own Jewish heritage (Gen. 2:18: “It is *not* good for the man to be alone”). Nonetheless, because of the problems already noted in 6:12–20, he accedes to marriage (v. 2) and insists on full conjugal relationships within that marriage (vv. 3–5). Besides the obvious advantage of taking a text at face value, what else supports the sentence as a Pauline position is the language of the slogan, which has similarities to vv. 8 and 26.

The difficulties with this view, however, seem far to outweigh its advantages. Besides the context and several details that make more sense of it as a Corinthian position, there is the considerable problem that Paul was simply not an ascetic. This is especially so with regard to food and drink (cf. 9:19–23; 10:25–26, 29b–30; Rom. 14). Indeed, Paul later takes a strongly positive attitude toward marriage (Eph. 5:25–33).

Most likely, therefore, as in 6:12–13 and 8:1 and 4, Paul is here quoting from the letter itself, if not in actual language at least in sentiment. This also best explains its abruptness following the mention of their letter. If so, here is another expression of their “spirituality” with its negative attitude toward the material world and the body (see on 6:13; cf. 15:12). In such a case, their position would

have gone something like: “Since you yourself are unmarried, and are not actively seeking marriage, and since you have denied *porneia* in your letter to us, is it not so that one is better off not to have sexual intercourse at all? After all, in the new age which we have already entered by the Spirit, there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage. Why should we not ‘be as the angels’ now? Besides, since the body counts for nothing, if some wish to fulfill physical needs there are always the prostitutes.”

Paul’s own attitude toward their slogan is very similar to that in 6:12. In certain situations, for example, for those gifted with celibacy and vis-à-vis *porneia*, he obviously would salute it, but as a slogan to justify “spiritual marriages,” divorce, or not getting married at all, Paul will have none of it. As he will affirm in v. 7, celibacy is a *charisma* (“spiritual gift”) and therefore cannot be a higher good than another *charisma*, even though he might have his own personal preferences based on his own experience.

2 This verse is crucial to one’s understanding of v. 1b. The “but” with which the sentence begins is clearly adversative to v. 1b. Traditionally it has been held to be a condescension to marriage because of the prevalence of sexual immorality in Corinth. This view, however, runs into considerable difficulties with the *language* of the sentence. More likely it is the beginning of an extended qualification of their position, in which Paul strongly urges that such abstinence as they are arguing for within marriage is strictly forbidden. The structure of vv. 2–4 supports this understanding. After the prepositional phrase “because of the instances of sexual immorality,” there are three sets of balanced pairs—each with asyndeton, suggesting that they belong together:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 2) Each man should have his own wife, | A |
| And | |
| Each woman should have her own husband | B |
| 3) The husband should give to his wife her due, | A |
| likewise | |
| The wife to her husband | B |
| 4) The wife does not have authority over her own | A |
| body, | |
| but her husband does, | |
| likewise | |
| The husband does not have authority over his own | B |
| body, | |
| But his wife does. | |

If vv. 3–4 were an added explanation to v. 2, as the traditional view maintains, then one would expect some kind of particle or conjunction to make that

relationship clear. As it is, the three pairs belong together as a singular qualification to v. 1b, each adding a further dimension to the insistence on full sexuality within marriage.

The reason for this injunction is (literally) “because of the sexual immoralities.” This unusual plural has been variously understood, usually as reflecting the enormity of this evil in Corinth itself, and also as implying fornication (“illicit sexual relations between unmarried persons”). The word can certainly denote the latter, but in the immediately preceding paragraph it refers specifically to cases of prostitution. Since the similar phrase in 7:5, “because of your lack of self-control,” speaks to those who are already married, it is arguable that because some husbands are being deprived of sexual relations (v. 5a), they are going to the prostitutes. That easily accounts for the plural, which under any circumstances should refer to sexual immoralities that are occurring, not that are anticipated.

His response to their slogan—and remedy for the cases of *porneia*— is (literally): “Let each man be having his own wife, and each woman be having her own husband.” This sentence in particular presents considerable difficulties for the traditional view. First, it does not say that people should get married, a verb Paul is obviously willing to use in this section when he intends that (v. 9). Second, there is no known evidence that the idiom “to have a wife” means “to take a wife.” In fact this idiom is common in biblical Greek and usually means either to “have sexually” (Exod. 2:1; Deut. 28:30; Isa. 13:16) or simply *to be* married or to be in continuing sexual relations with a man or woman (see esp. 5:1 and 7:29; cf. Mark 6:18; John 4:18). Third, the terms “each man/woman” and “his/her own” should mean that Paul intends everyone in the community to get married. Since the rest of the chapter contradicts that, this is read in other ways: to “imply monogamy” or to mean “as a general rule.”

When the clauses are taken at face value, however, giving all the words their normal usage, then Paul is saying no to their slogan as far as married partners are concerned. Thus he means: “Let each man who is already married continue in relations with his own wife, and each wife likewise.” And that means a *full* conjugal life, which is what vv. 3–5 will now argue in detail. Even though not specifically enunciated here, this is the first in a series of admonitions on “Stay as you are.”

3–4 In two balanced pairs of sentences Paul elaborates on v. 2, that “having one’s own spouse” means full, mutual sexual relations. The sentences emphasize two things: (1) that sexual relations are a “due” within marriage (v. 3) because (2) the body is not one’s free possession but belongs to one’s spouse (v. 4). Although one can make sense of these two emphases in the traditional view (because of the temptation to immorality, marriage must be fully sexual), they are especially

understandable if Paul is responding to the rejection of the marriage bed on the part of some. All three sentences belong together as a single, expanded qualification of their position. This also makes sense of the emphasis on mutuality: The way to correct an abuse of mutual relations is not to make demands on the offending party only, but to emphasize the mutual responsibility of each.

The language of obligation, literally “the payment of what is due,” implies that married couples are indebted to one another sexually. Such language has often been found offensive, both by the ascetic (who sees abstinence as a higher good) and the “liberated” person (who sees “obligation” as a demeaning way to speak of such a relationship). This usage, however, is to be explained in light of v. 5, where some are in fact depriving their spouses of sexual relations. Although not primarily a duty, there are times when the duty aspect needs to be heard for the sake of the marriage. And Paul’s emphasis, it must be noted, is not on “You owe me,” but on “I owe you.”

The second pair elaborates the first. Not only are sexual relations a “due” within marriage, but they are so because through the unique giving of oneself in Christian marriage one comes under the “authority” of the other. This verb implies authority over something in such a way as to do with it as one sees fit. Here the implication is that in the mutuality of sexual relations the body of the one is the “free” possession of the other. But this, too, needs to be heard in light of v. 5. The emphasis is not on “possessing” the body of the other; rather, in marriage I do not have authority over my own body, to do with it as I please. Therefore, one cannot *deprive* the other (v. 5). In responding as he does, with emphasis on the full mutuality of sexuality within marriage, Paul puts sexual relations within Christian marriage on much higher ground than one finds in most cultures, including the church, where sex is often viewed as the husband’s privilege and the wife’s obligation. For Paul the marriage bed is both unitive (cf. 6:16) and an affirmation that the two belong to one another in total mutuality.

5 The prohibition with which this verse begins seems to confirm the point of view argued for to this point. Although it could imply nothing more than “while we are on the subject, do not forbid sex to one another either,” both the verb used to express the prohibition and the concession in the rest of the verse seem to ask too much of such a view. The structure of Paul’s sentence, and its emphases, can perhaps best be seen visually:

Stop defrauding one another (in this matter)
unless perhaps
by mutual consent
for a set time
in order that
you may devote time to prayer

and
may be together again
in order that
Satan might not tempt you (or *lest* Satan tempt you)
because of your incontinence

The net result of all this is (a) that Paul seems almost certainly to be forbidding something that is already going on, and (b) that he altogether eliminates abstinence as a normal practice, acceding to it only hypothetically and under certain conditions. His concern is that some have been yielding to the temptations of Satan, the believers' "ancient foe" (cf. Gen. 3:1–15), who is intent on separating people from God through disobedience. The disobedience in this case has to do with *porneia* ("sexual immorality"). But Satan can so tempt them only because of their own "lack of self-control," which leads to incontinence. Thus this final clause leads back to the phrase with which this entire response began (v. 2, "because of the instances of sexual immorality").

6 With the pronoun "this" in the emphatic position, "*This* I say," Paul inserts into the argument that what has just been said is a concession to them (meeting them partway), not a command. As with so much else, this sentence is especially difficult for the traditional view, which must make either v. 2 or all of vv. 2–5 a concession to his own preference for celibacy. The problems with this are several: (1) It makes the "this" jump over the one certain concession in the passage (the "unless perhaps" clause of v. 5, which immediately precedes the pronoun), for something earlier that is not clearly an "indulgence." (2) If it did refer to v. 2 or 2–5 together, then the real concession, it must be pointed out, is not to marriage, but to their incontinence and resultant sexual immoralities. (3) Despite protests to the contrary, the verbs in vv. 2, 3, and 5 are in fact imperatives. If they lack the kind of imperative expression of "Do this" or "Don't do this," they nonetheless function as "commands" within the present context. Because of these difficulties, some have argued that this sentence begins the next paragraph (through v. 9) and that the "this" points forward, as often in Paul. But that is not the obvious reading of the text, and it requires the variant "for" in v. 7 in order for it to work.

As throughout the paragraph, the ordinary sense of the words in their immediate context offers the best understanding of the sentence. Their letter has argued for abstinence from sexual relations within marriage, to which Paul in vv. 2–5a has responded with an emphatic no. That leads to incontinence, he says in v. 5c, and the cases of sexual immorality that already are a plague on your house. So stop defrauding one another in this matter, he commands, unless perhaps there is temporary abstinence by mutual consent at set times for prayer. But *this* is a concession to you; you are not to take it as a command. Thus even such a good thing as temporary abstinence for prayer will not be raised to the level of

command, precisely because of (1) the difficulties that already persist in the church over this matter, and (2) the fact that such matters belong to the category of “gift” not requirement, as he will go on to say in v. 7.

7 With this sentence Paul brings this first item to its conclusion. This reflection on his own status, and his preference for it both for himself and others, is best explained if the Corinthians themselves had appealed to it in making their own case. “To be sure,” he says, “I wish all people to be as I am.” But in sharp contrast to them, who on the basis of his nonmarried state would turn what is at best a questionable principle into law, he qualifies it in terms of spiritual gifts.

What is not clear is precisely what about himself he is referring to. Most interpreters read this in light of vv. 8–9, plus his clear preference in vv. 26–38 for singleness, as a wish on his part that people did not have to get married at all. In light of the argument to this point, however, it is much more likely that he is referring to his actual gift of celibacy, which would mean celibacy in its true sense—not referring to singleness as such (after all, many who are “celibate” in this sense wish they were otherwise), but to that singular gift of freedom from the desire or need of sexual fulfillment that made it possible for him to live without marriage in the first place.

Therefore, despite personal preference for his own status, he recognizes that his celibacy is a *charisma* (“gracious gift”), not a requirement; and that places the whole question on an entirely different plane. They were urging celibacy for the married, using his situation as part of the reason for it. But Paul says no; celibacy is for the celibate, and as such it is strictly a matter of *charisma*. Such gifts can neither be reduced to principle, nor can any one of them be required across the board for all, as apparently they were trying to do. Thus he concludes, “Even though I could wish that all were as I am, the fact is that each one has his/her own gift, one gift of one kind, another gift of another kind.” In this context it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that sexual life in marriage is the “gift of another kind.”

The whole argument, therefore, is summed up in these final words. In another context he will argue that singleness, even without the gift of celibacy in this sense, may be the preferred option for the presently single— but not for their reasons (vv. 25–38). But in the present context he is both affirming his own celibate—and single—status and denying that those who are already married may also be celibate (vv. 2–6) or single (vv. 10–16). They are to “remain as they are.” But before he addresses this latter item, this reference to his own situation has caused him first of all to reflect on how that affects some others who are “as he is” but without his gift (vv. 8–9).

Here is a passage that has suffered much, partly because the traditional interpretation has often caused people to approach the text with an agenda in hand

different from Paul's own. Interest has been deflected away from his, over no celibacy within marriage, to questions about marriage itself, and especially whether marriage might be a less "spiritual" calling than celibacy. Thus the truly "spiritual" are celibate; for the rest there is the "concession" to marriage, which exists basically to curb illicit desire. But Paul would have none of this. For him both marriage and celibacy are gifts, and despite his own preference for his gift, he certainly does not raise it to a higher spirituality. That is to fly full in the face of the text itself.

On the other hand, the real point of the text, the abusing of sexual relationships within marriage, needs especially to be heard anew in the church. Since Paul by the Spirit can be forthright on this matter, so should we. First, the affirmation of sexual relations within marriage as such is a much-needed corrective to some who still follow Augustine and treat sexuality itself as part of the Fall. God made us sexual creatures; and because God made us so, sex is good. Within Christian marriage it is the most intimate celebration of life together in Christ. Second, the mutuality of sexual relations, and of marriage itself, also needs to be heard. Too many still treat sex as though it were the privilege of the husband and the duty of the wife. But not so. It is the privilege and duty of both together. Each belongs mutually to the other. In sexual intercourse, as nowhere else, husbands and wives symbolically express both their unity and mutuality. Finally, perhaps it needs also to be noted that v. 5 not only prohibits the "defrauding" of one another in this matter, but also, by the very fact of the mutuality argued for in vv. 3–4, prohibits the holding back of sexual relations as a means of manipulation within the marriage relationship. That both abuses sex and destroys mutual love and respect.

Either singleness or marriage for the "unmarried" and widows (7:8–9)

The way this paragraph begins is similar in form to the beginning of vv. 10 and 12. Each has a connective *de* ("now"), a verb of speaking or commanding in the first person singular, and the people addressed in the dative. This suggests that Paul is taking up a series of situations to which he will apply the general rule, "Stay as you are."

This first one, however, presents several difficulties, partly because of its location in the argument but mostly because we tend to recoil at what our English translations universally tell us it means: Marriage is a grudging condescension to those who burn with sexual passion and cannot be continent. Unfortunately, what Paul himself intended is not clear. The first question is the contextual one, What is this passage doing here? The surrounding materials deal in their entirety with those who are trying to dissolve marriage, either by abstinence or divorce. Paul's word to them is to remain as they were at the time of their call. Vv. 8–9, on the other hand, speak to people who are not now married and urge them also to remain

that way (v. 8), although a genuine exception is allowed in v. 9. As such this seems to have more in common with vv. 25–38, although the reasons for marriage are not similar. This problem is further complicated by the fact that one cannot be sure either to whom this is addressed or what is the exact nature of the exception in v. 9.

Most likely the contextual question is to be resolved in light of v. 7, where Paul has just spoken both to his own personal preference for celibacy (as a genuine gift of freedom from sexual need) and to his awareness that his is not the only gift. Thus he speaks to those who are in his situation—not now married, but without his gift—before he comes back to the further question of the dissolution of marriages. As such the passage also anticipates the question about the “virgins” in vv. 25–38.

8 The series begins with a word to “the unmarried and the widows.” The question is, to whom does the word *agamois* (“unmarried”) refer? Traditionally this has been seen as addressing all categories of the unmarried, especially the never-before married, to whom Paul adds the special category of widows. So much is this so that the RSV translated both this word and the word *parthenon* (“virgins”) in v. 25 as “unmarried.” But this presents several difficulties. Since from this point of view Paul has already advised the unmarried to get married (v. 2), why this repetition? and why pick it up again in vv. 25–38? The answer usually has been that vv. 1–7 give the general principle, which is now being specifically addressed in these two verses. But that founders on the following sections, which are structurally tied to this one but which do not deal with getting married at all.

On the other hand, several items favor the suggestion that *agamois* should be translated “widowers.” First, since being “widowed” in antiquity created special problems for women, most cultures had a word for widows; however, they did not always have a word for the male counterpart. Greek has such a word, but it appears seldom to have been used, and never in the *koine* period, in which *agamos* served in its place. Second, since throughout the entire passage Paul deals with husbands and wives in mutuality (12 times in all), it would seem to fit naturally into the total argument to see that pattern here as well. After all, if *agamois* refers to all the unmarried, then why add widows? Third, this word appears again in v. 11 for a woman separated from her husband, and in v. 34 in contrast to the “virgin” (one who was never before married), indicating that in his regular usage it denotes not the “unmarried” in general, but the “demarried,” those formerly but not now married. On balance, “widower” seems to be the best understanding of the word here. That would also help to explain the presence of these verses in this context, where all of the cases in vv. 1–16 deal with those presently or formerly married, while vv. 25–38 take up the issue of the never-before married.

To those whose marriages have been dissolved through death, Paul advises that “It is good for them to stay unmarried, even as I do.” If our understanding of v. 7 is correct, then it is at least possible that the language “it is good” reflects the Corinthian appeal to Paul’s present unmarried state as reason for abstention from sexual relations. In the case of abstention on the part of the formerly married by not getting married, Paul would stand in full agreement (cf. vv. 39–40 for attitudes toward the remarriage of widows). Here is the first specific articulation in the argument of the principle, “Remain as you are.” But in v. 9 he also articulates the first genuine exception, namely that such people should get married if they are not living in continence.

9 For many later Christians this has been the troubling verse. Paul is seen to be arguing in v. 8 for all singles to stay that way, then as making allowance for marriage for those who cannot remain continent, for it is better to be married than to be consumed with sexual passion. But it is doubtful whether Paul’s point is quite so stark. In the first place, Paul does not say (as the NIV), “if they *cannot* control themselves.” Rather he says, “if they do not, or are not practicing continence (or exercising self-control).” The implication is that some of these people are doing the same as some of the married in vv. 1–7, practicing “sexual immorality,” that is, probably also going to the prostitutes. The antidote for such sin is to get married instead.

With an explanatory “for” Paul appends a reason: “It is better to marry (or to be married) than to burn.” This final word is the difficult one. The usage is clearly metaphorical, but it could refer either to burning with desire or burning in judgment (cf. 3:15). Since both of these can be supported from Jewish sources, that evidence is not decisive. The question must finally be decided contextually, and by Paul’s usage in 2 Cor. 11:29, which is almost certainly a metaphor for inner passion. Even though the larger context, including the warning in 6:9–10, could be argued to support the judgment metaphor, such an idea is missing from the immediate context altogether. It seems more likely, therefore, that Paul intended that those who are committing sexual sins should rather marry than be consumed by the passions of their sins.

In this case, then, Paul is not so much offering marriage as the remedy for the sexual desire of “inflamed youth,” which is the most common way of viewing the text, but as the proper alternative for those who are already consumed by that desire and are sinning.

A text like this one is difficult for moderns. But if our interpretation is correct, then its advice is twofold. On the one hand, consistent with the general view in Jewish and Christian antiquity, Paul urges the formerly married to remain in their present single state. He will encourage that again in vv. 39–40. But he also clearly recognizes that that represents what he thinks is “good”; it may not be

elevated to the position of a commandment. On the other hand, it is a strong word against the formerly married who are not living in continence. For them, marriage is the proper alternative to their being consumed by their sins.

No divorce for Christian partners (7:10–11)

This is the second in the series of directives that began with v. 8. It is also the second directive (along with vv. 1–7) to those who are already married to “remain as they are.” Just as they may not reject sexual relations within marriage, so they may not dissolve their marriages through divorce.

As throughout the chapter Paul addresses both men and women. Paul’s response, along with that of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, has served as the basis for law in the church on the whole question of divorce and remarriage. But one must remember that the original intent of the passage was not to establish law but to address a specific situation in Corinth—their apparent rejection of marriage on ascetic grounds. The text needs to be heard in its own historical context before it is applied to broader contexts.

10 In speaking to “the married,” Paul is presupposing in this first instance that both partners are believers. This is made certain by vv. 12–16, where, in a way that balances with vv. 10–11, he addresses “the rest,” whom that context defines as believers married to unbelievers. Along with the imperatives in vv. 2–5a, this is the only “command” in the entire chapter. While Paul displays ambivalence toward whether widowers and widows should get married (vv. 8–9), he consistently rejects the notion that the married may dissolve their marriages.

But in saying “I give this command,” he remembers that Jesus himself spoke to this question, so he appeals to his authority. It is “not I” from whom this command comes, “but the Lord.” This is one of the rare instances in Paul’s letters when he appeals directly to the teaching of Jesus (cf. 9:14; 11:23; 1 Tim. 5:18), which fact means neither that Paul lacks authority nor that Jesus does not ordinarily count as authority for him. The clue is to be found in v. 12, where in contrast to this parenthetical insertion he says, “I, not the Lord.” Christ is always Paul’s ultimate authority. When he has no direct command, he still speaks as one who is trustworthy (v. 25) because he has the Spirit of God (v. 40). Two reasons suggest themselves as to why he does not appeal more often directly to Jesus. (1) From his point of view his ethical instructions *all* come from the Lord. If he does not appeal more often to the sayings of Jesus themselves, that is because such teachings are the *presupposition* of his own. The “ways” of Jesus are lived out and taught in the “ways” of the apostle (see on 4:16; cf. 11:1). Hence he feels no need for such an appeal. Those ways have already been taught before he writes his letters, so that he simply appeals to prior instructions (cf. 1 Thess. 4:1, 11–12). (2) But for many other issues that arose in the Gentile churches, Paul speaks on his

own authority (which of course derives from the Lord), precisely because Jesus did not address such questions. However, in this present matter, on which Paul probably had not previously given instruction, there is a Jesus word, so he appeals to it. In vv. 12–16, on the other hand, where the issue lies outside the province of Jesus’ teaching, it is Paul who speaks, not the Lord.

Paul addresses the wives first, “A wife must not separate from her husband.” Much has been made of the use of the verb “to separate oneself from,” in distinction from the verb used in vv. 12–13, “to divorce.” But that probably reflects our own urgencies for greater precision. Divorce in Greco–Roman culture could be “legalized” by means of documents; but more often it simply happened. In this culture divorce was divorce, whether established by a document or not. Either the man sent his wife away (= “divorce” in the sense of v. 12), or else either of them “left” the other (= “to separate”). But the evidence is ambiguous as far as the verbs are concerned. Ordinarily when the wife “divorces” she simply leaves her husband (“is separated” from him); the same verb is used in v. 15 of a pagan partner of either sex who leaves, and occurs regularly in the papyri for mutual divorce (agreeing to “separate from each other”). On the other hand, a man ordinarily “divorced” his wife (“sent her away”); nonetheless in v. 13 the wife can do the same.

What needs to be noted is that such an action by a woman was generally not allowed among the Jews. Divorce was the man’s prerogative, and for almost any reason whatsoever. But women could, and did, divorce their husbands in the Greco–Roman world, although for obvious socio-economic reasons it was not common for them to do so. Under any circumstances—and especially if Paul were merely answering questions put by the Corinthians on the permissibility of divorce—it is remarkable that Paul should begin his response by speaking to the wife, and speak primarily to her, while the word to the husband in v. 11 appears almost as an afterthought. Thus he applies the word of Jesus to her and “commands” that she not “separate from her husband.” She is to “remain as she is.”

11 Given the circumstances in Corinth, the exception allowed in this passage also seems remarkable. “No divorce” is what is “commanded” for believers; nonetheless, just as in all the other situations addressed in this chapter, Paul allows an exception: “but if indeed she is separated.” This is a present general condition (cf. 6:4), indicating “if for any reason this condition may possibly occur.” In this kind of construction, where the general condition qualifies what has already been said, the previous sentence expresses the ideal situation (in this case, no divorce), while the following conditional clause introduced by a *de* (“but”) “describes the alternative possibility which is permissible but not ideal” (in this case separation, but without remarriage). Thus “no divorce” is not turned into law, and the woman who does so is not put out of the community. What is disallowed is precisely what

one finds in the teaching of Jesus: no adultery. Hence if she does separate, she must continue to follow the dictum “Stay as you are,” meaning now “Remain unmarried.”

Even though divorce in the Corinthians’ case was at first predicated on precisely the opposite concern—not to be married at all—with the exception clause Paul is now generalizing and probably no longer has their reason for separation in mind. The wife who may happen to divorce her husband may not use her present unmarried condition as an excuse for remarriage to someone else. If she does in fact desire to remarry, she must “be reconciled to her husband.” This is in keeping with Paul’s view expressed elsewhere that for believers marriage is permanent, from its inception until the decease of one of the partners (7:39; Rom. 7:1–3). Thus the priorities of the directive are clear: she is to remain as she is and not divorce her husband; but if she were to disobey this first directive, then she must again remain as she is and not commit adultery by remarrying someone else. If she does not like her new unmarried status, then she must be reconciled to her husband. What is true of the wife, Paul adds, is likewise true of the husband: “And a husband must not divorce his wife.” The lack of an exception here suggests that this is not where the problem lay; and in any case, what is said of the wife would apply to the husband as well.

In a culture in which divorce has become the norm, this text has become a bone of contention. Some find Paul and Jesus too harsh and try to find ways around the plain sense of the text. Others turn the text into law and make divorce the worst of all sins in the church. Neither of these seems an appropriate response. On the one hand, there is little question that both Paul and Jesus disallowed divorce between two believers, especially when it served as grounds for remarriage. Paul does not give reasons for that here, but his view of marriage in Eph. 5:22–33 indicates that it is related to his view of the unitive aspect of marriage and the mutuality of Christian love, which makes it very similar to the reasons Jesus gives.

On the other hand, Paul does not raise this norm to law. Divorce may happen, and such a person is not ostracized from the community. But it must also be remembered that in this setting divorce was being sought for ascetic reasons, which is almost the precise opposite of most such situations in our own culture! What is not allowed is remarriage, both because for him that presupposes the teaching of Jesus that such is adultery.

No divorce for mixed marriages (7:12–16)

With yet another “I speak now to . . .” Paul moves to the third in the series of directives that began in v. 8. In this case the issue is clearly defined by the content; it continues the matter of divorce, this time when one partner is Christian and the other pagan. The answer is consistent with vv. 10–11; they are to “stay as

they are.” The believer may not initiate divorce (vv. 12–13), for which in this instance a reason is added (v. 14). But as before, there is an exception; if the pagan chooses to leave, then the believer is not bound to maintain the marriage (v. 15ab). But God’s call is to “peace” (v. 15c), which means further that one should maintain the marriage in the hope of the unbelieving spouse’s conversion (v. 16). As throughout, the entire section forms balanced pairs between men and women.

Almost certainly this issue came from their letter. The argument in vv. 14c and 16 takes the form of debate; it makes best sense if Paul is over against them on this issue. As before, their position would follow from the slogan in v. 1b. But in this case they have not only argued for the suspension of sexual relations by divorce, but most likely they have added the grounds that the pagan partner contaminates the marriage (see on v. 14). Quite the contrary, Paul argues: mixed marriages are essentially Christian marriages (v. 14) and, when maintained, they afford an opportunity for the unbelieving partner to be saved (v. 16). Thus, as throughout, the exception (v. 15) is real but not ideal; it is allowed but is not to be pursued.

12–13 After the “unmarried” and “widows” have been addressed in vv. 8–9 and the “married” in vv. 10–11, one might well wonder who can be left to constitute “the rest”! But what follows makes it clear; they are believers who are married to unbelievers. With two sets of perfectly balanced sentences, Paul sets forth his judgments, this time in the order of husband and wife. What he has already said in vv. 10–11, as the Lord’s command, continues to hold for mixed marriages. Believers are not to initiate divorce. If there is a distinction between the verbs, then in this case he envisions a more active putting away of the pagan partner (cf. the husband in v. 11); whereas the wife in v. 10 and the pagan spouse in v. 15 separate themselves from the relationship (see on v. 10). Here the clauses are simple particulars (“If such and such is the case, then abide by this ruling”), implying the actual existence of such cases in the community.

But at the same time, these sentences anticipate the exception of v. 15: “If any brother has a wife who is not a believer *and she is willing to live with him.*” Already this places the initiative with the unbeliever if the marriage is to be dissolved. What it also demonstrates is that not all conversions were household conversions, as in the case of Stephanas (16:15). Illustrations of both phenomena abound in the Greco–Roman world (i.e., where the family took on the religion of the head of the household or where only one, especially in the case of wives, became the devotee of a deity other than that of the spouse). In this case Paul has the latter in view, in which the spouse has at least tolerated conversion.

14 Picking up the two relationships from vv. 12–13, but now in reverse order, Paul explains why the directive in those verses has been given. Both the argument and the language of this passage are unusual for Paul. The problem lies with the

use of the word “sanctified” of the spouse and “holy” of the children, words that in Paul ordinarily carry moral/ethical implications. The word in fact has already been used in 1:30 and 6:11 as a metaphor for salvation itself. But whatever it means here, it cannot carry that force, not only because the idea that marriage can effect salvation for the pagan partner would be nonsense to Paul but also because v. 16 completely disallows such a sense. The question, then, is what sense it does carry.

Among many options, the most viable seems to be one that ties this explanation directly to the Corinthian stance. If we are correct in seeing v. 1b (“It is good for a man not to have relations with a woman”) as the grounds for some in Corinth to argue for sexual abstinence within marriage, then in the case of a pagan partner they have even stronger grounds, since Paul himself, in his letter to which they are now responding, had told them not to have close associations with immoral people (see 5:9–11). According to 5:10 they had interpreted that to mean “no intermingling with outsiders,” of which the closest kind would be a believer’s sharing the marriage bed with a pagan. Thus they would have argued that such an association “defiled” the believing spouse.

To the contrary, Paul now argues, it is not the believer who is *defiled* but the unbeliever who is *sanctified* in her or his relationship with the believer. This does not mean that they have acquired salvation or holiness. But from Paul’s perspective, as long as the marriage is maintained the potential for their realizing salvation remains. To that degree they are “sanctified” in the believing spouse. In this case, if the husband/wife is “holy,” then the unbelieving spouse is also “holy,” that is, set apart in a special way that hopefully will lead to their salvation (v. 16).

The second part of the verse fits into this same framework. Here in particular Paul seems to be carrying on an argument with the Corinthians. “Otherwise” (meaning “if we allow your position”), he argues, “your children would be unclean. But as it is” (i.e., “allowing my position”) “they are holy.” The difficult term is “unclean,” which also echoes Jewish ritual language. If you are correct, he argues, then your children lie outside the covenant; but as it is, through their relationship with the believer, who maintains the marriage and thus keeps intact the relationship with the children, they too can be understood to be “holy” in the same way as the unbelieving spouse. Thus in both cases Paul is setting forth a high view of the grace of God at work through the believer toward members of his/her own household (cf. 1 Pet. 3:1), and for him that constitutes grounds enough for maintaining the marriage.

15 In keeping with the pattern of the entire argument (vv. 5, 9, 11a, 21, 28, 36, 39), Paul once more qualifies the ideal, “stay as you are,” with an exception. The believer may not pursue divorce, “but if” the unbeliever separates, let him or her do so. That is, if the pagan spouse seeks the dissolution of the marriage, then

allow the divorce. Except for some differences regarding the nuance of the verb, all are agreed on that much.

The differences begin with the next sentence, in which Paul offers a further explanation of the first one: “The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances.” That is, they are not bound to the ruling given above about maintaining the marriage. They have wanted to dissolve such marriages. Paul has said no. But now he allows that if the pagan wants out, then one is not enslaved.

This statement is the source of the notorious “Pauline privilege,” in which the text is understood to mean that the believer is free to remarry. However, several converging data indicate that Paul is essentially repeating his first sentence: that the believer is not bound to maintain the marriage if the pagan partner opts out. (1) Remarriage is not an issue at all; indeed, it seems to be quite the opposite. In a context in which people are arguing for the right to dissolve marriage, Paul would scarcely be addressing the issue of remarriage, and certainly not in such circuitous fashion. (2) The verb “to be under bondage” is not his ordinary one for the “binding” character of marriage (cf. 7:39; Rom. 7:2); that means that Paul does not intend to say one is not “bound to the marriage.” One is simply not under bondage to maintain the marriage, which the other person wishes to dissolve. From Paul’s point of view, one is bound to a marriage until death breaks the bond (7:39). (3) In v. 11, even though there is a similar exception regarding divorce, he explicitly disallows remarriage. (4) Such a concern misses the theme of the chapter, which has to do with not seeking a change in status. The exceptions in each case do not allow a change in partners but in status, either from single to married or vice versa, but not both!

The third sentence in this verse (lit. “But in peace God has called us”) is also perplexing. The question is whether the “call to peace” refers to the dissolution of the marriage (v. 15ab) or to its preservation (vv. 12–14). To put that in another way, does all of vv. 15–16 deal with the exception (the dissolution of the mixed marriage), or does only v. 15ab do so, while vv. 15c and 16 return to the question of maintaining the marriage?

It is common to take the clause as a further explanation of the two preceding sentences, the implication being that one should not “contest the divorce” *because* God has called us “to live” in peace. That means either that living in peace “would not be possible if the unbelieving partner were forced to live with the believer,” or that one should let the separation occur in as peaceful a way as possible, not creating unnecessary disturbances. It should be noted that for those who take the “pessimistic” stance toward v. 16, this is the necessary meaning of the sentence, although not everyone who takes this view subscribes to the pessimistic view of v. 16.

The difficulty with this interpretation is twofold: (1) It tends to run roughshod over the normal sense of Paul's conjunctions; and (2) it misses the Jewish background to Paul's use of the "call to peace." The first problem has to do with the *de* of this sentence, which ordinarily has either adversative or consecutive force. But neither of these makes any sense for this point of view. Thus many leave it untranslated; but that will not do since this view in fact requires a *causal* nuance to this sentence. That is, without the "call to live in peace" being the *cause* of the admonition not to contest the separation, one can make no sense of it at all. The problem, of course, is that *de* simply will not sustain that nuance. More likely, then, the structure of the paragraph is thus:

The ideal:	Do not divorce a pagan spouse (vv. 12–13) <i>gar</i> ("for")
The reason:	They are sanctified in you (14) <i>de</i> ("but")
The exception:	If they choose to leave, let it be so (15ab) <i>de</i> ("rather" than the exception)
The reason (again):	God has called us to peace (15c) <i>gar</i> ("for") Perhaps you will yet save your spouse (16)

Not only does this give due force to all of the conjunctive words but it also fits the context better, which has to do with urging them *not* to dissolve mixed marriages, not with making peace if they are dissolved.

But what then does it mean for Paul to protest, "Rather (than dissolving the marriage) God has called us to peace"? Very likely this reflects Paul's Jewish heritage, which "for the sake of peace" did certain deeds toward the less favored, or even toward the Gentiles, with a view toward winning the favor of Judaism with them. This accords with his concern for Christians' living peaceably with all people (Rom. 12:18). Thus, despite the exception Paul prefers that they follow "God's call into the ways of peace." That means that they should "stay as they are" (in this case, maintain the marriage), and view that on the one hand as God's calling (v. 17), and on the other hand as an opportunity for the salvation of the spouse (v. 16).

16 The two questions that conclude the argument are tied to v. 15c with a "for," thus offering a final reason—albeit hypothetical—for maintaining a mixed marriage. Much discussion has centered on whether by these questions Paul expected a positive or negative answer. That is, is he offering them the hope that if they maintain the marriage their partners might be saved, or is he telling them not to fight the separation because they have no assurance that they will ever be saved? In fact the questions are ambiguous and do not lend themselves to either a positive or a negative answer. Probably they are purposely left indefinite, for Paul

makes no promises that maintaining the marriage will turn out in their favor. Nonetheless, since the questions give reasons for maintaining the marriage as their response to God's call into the ways of peace, almost certainly they go with vv. 12–14, not with v. 15ab. To that degree they offer yet a further explanation of the pagan mate's "sanctification," and a further reason for maintaining the marriage. They cannot be sure, but perhaps they will be responsible for saving their spouses.

In speaking of "saving one's spouse," Paul is referring to their "evangelizing" or "winning" them, whether by word or deed (cf. 1 Pet. 3:1). This use of "save" is not unique; in 9:22 (cf. Rom. 11 :14) Paul speaks of becoming all things to all people so that by every possible means he might "save" some, where "save" is used as a synonym for "winning" people for the gospel. Yet in a similar context in 10:33 he puts the same verb in the passive, "in order that they might be saved." This, of course, is what it means to "save" them in the other sense.

Our situation is usually made more complex because our concerns are often the precise opposite of theirs, which caused this to be written in the first place. They wanted to dissolve marriages; we want to know whether remarriage is permitted. Two things, therefore, need to be pointed out. First, Paul does not speak to the question of remarriage. If that is one's concern, then it must be wrestled with in the much larger context of Scripture. Second, the real point of the passage needs to be given a fair hearing. When a married man or woman hears and responds to the call of the gospel but the married partner does not—at least at the same time—let the new believer consider the spouse sanctified, that is, also set apart for the gospel. And then let him or her so live that in due time they might "save" their spouses. That's the Good News that this passage sets before us.

The Guiding Principle -- Stay as One Was When Called. 7:17-24.

With this paragraph Paul appears to move a field a bit, but that is true only in content, not overall concern. In v. 15, in the context of staying with a mixed marriage rather than dissolving it, he set forth the general maxim: "God has called us to peace." Now he picks up that theme in order to press home the theological point that controls his response throughout chap. 7. Under the rubric "It is good not to have relations with a woman," they were seeking to change their present status, apparently because as believers they saw this as conforming to the more spiritual existence that they had already attained. Thus they saw one's status with regard to marriage/celebrity as having religious significance and sought change because of it. Under the theme of "call" Paul seeks to put their "spirituality" into a radically different perspective. They should remain in whatever social setting they were at the time of their call since God's call to be in Christ (cf. 1:9) transcends such settings so as to make them essentially irrelevant. That is, the call to Christ as created such a change in one's essential relationship (with God) that one does not need to seek change in other relationships (with people). These latter are

transformed and given new meaning by the former. Thus one is no better off in one condition than in the other.

To make this point Paul illustrates from two other kinds of social settings -- circumcision and slavery. The very lack of urgency in these matters indicates that they are not at issue. What is at issue is the Corinthians' concern over change of status. The argument is structured around the single imperative "remain (walk) as one was when called," which both opens the paragraph (v. 17) and concludes the two illustrations (vv. 20, 24). The language of "calling" dominates the whole. It forms the heart of each of the imperatives and is repeated for all four of the social conditions addressed (circumcision, uncircumcision, slave, free).

The argument is easily traced. V. 17 sets forth the basic principle: They are to live out their Christian lives in the situation where God called them. Vv. 18-19 apply this to ethno-religious life (being Jew or Gentile), which now counts for nothing. There are no exceptions here: let each one remain in his/her calling (v. 20). The principle is next applied to the slave and the free person (vv. 21-24). However, this case is unlike the others in that the slave may not freely choose change of status. So the structure of the argument alters slightly, even though the point remains the same. Paul begins by addressing the slave (v. 21a), but as in each of the preceding marital situations, there is an exception (v. 21b). He never does address the free person directly; rather, in vv. 22-23 he returns to the illustration by showing how one's calling in Christ makes irrelevant being either slave or free, and concludes once again with the statement of the principle (v. 24).

Since the theme of "calling" is central to the argument, it may be helpful to outline it in advance:

1. The concept of call is first of all a way of describing Christian conversion. God calls people to be "in Christ" (1:9).

2. That call came to a person in a given social setting. This is the clear emphasis in all the verbs in this passage, especially as it is associated with various social options (vv. 18 [twice], 21, 22 [twice]).

3. These two realities are pressed theologically in various ways:

- a. God's call to Christ that comes in these various settings renders the settings themselves irrelevant (vv. 18-19, 22).

- b. Because of this, change is not necessary; indeed, one may live out the Christian life in whatever setting that call took place.

c. On the other hand, precisely because the settings are irrelevant, if change does take place, that too is irrelevant. What one is not to do is to seek change as though it had religious significance, which it does not.

17 This sentence is tied to what precedes by the excepting conjunction “nevertheless,” which itself refers back to the exception in v. 15ab. The brother or sister is not bound in such cases; nevertheless, change is not to be the rule; rather, one is urged to stay in one’s social condition at the time of one’s conversion. But Paul says this theologically by relating it to God’s “call.” The imperative in this case (lit. “let each person walk”) has to do with how one lives out the whole of life, especially the Christian life, in the present age (cf. I Thess. 4:1; Gal. 5:16). Paul’s concern, therefore, is not that they retain their present social setting, but that they recognize it as the proper one in which to live out God’s call.

The two clauses that express this new attitude toward their present situation form a balanced pair in Paul’s sentence:

to each as the Lord assigned,
each as God has called,
thus (meaning in accordance with the assignment and calling) let
each person conduct his/her life.

Some have argued that the two clauses are synonymous; but the change in subject and verb (including tense) suggests otherwise. The thought is similar to Paul’s description of his call to vocation in 1:1, in which he was called to be Christ’s apostle (the historical expression of the call) through the prior will of God (the theological ground for it). Here the various social situations are to be understood as something Christ “assigned” to them at the time God called them to salvation. The two clauses together, therefore, help define what is meant by “calling” throughout the passage. The concept of “call” in the clause “as God has called” refers to conversion, that is, to their calling by God to be in fellowship with his Son (1:9; cf. 1:24). But the concern throughout is with their social situation at the time of that call, which is now to be seen as that which “the Lord assigned to each.” That does not mean that one is forever locked into that setting. Rather, Paul means that by calling a person within a given situation, that situation itself is taken up in the call and thus sanctified to him or her. Similarly, by saving a person in that setting, Christ thereby “assigned” it to him/her as his/her place of living out life in Christ. In the present context that means being married, whether to a believer or an unbeliever.

But this is not to be understood as law, as the various exceptions, and especially the distinction between circumcision and God's commandments in v. 19, indicate. Paul's intent is not to lay down a rule that one may not change; rather, by thus hallowing one's situation in life, he is trying to help the Corinthians see that their social status is ultimately irrelevant as such (i.e., they can live out their Christian life in any of the various options) and therefore their desire to change is equally irrelevant -- because it has nothing to do with genuine spirituality as their slogan would infer (v. 1b).

That this is a theological statement over against their desire to change status is made clear by the additional clause: (literally) "Even so (i.e., in this same way) in all the churches I give directions." This is the second of four instances in this letter where Paul appeals to what goes on in other churches (4:17; 11:16; 14:33; see also on 1:2 and 16:1). The lack of this kind of appeal in his other letters suggests that this is his way of reminding them that theirs is the theology that is off track, not his (cf. 4: 17).

Thus he tells them that being in Christ does not negate their present situation; but neither is he arguing that it absolutizes it. Rather, the call to Christ sets them free to live out their new life within it. It is not change per se that he is against, but change as a Christian. That is to give significance to one's social setting. Paul's point is that God's call, which comes to them where they are as his gracious gift, totally eliminates social setting as having any kind of religious significance. And how better can he illustrate that than by the one mark of sociological distinction that formerly did have religious significance but does so no more -- circumcision.

18 Having theologized their present situation (namely, that those married when converted, whether to believer or pagan, should view that as the place to live out God's calling, assigned to them by Christ), Paul proceeds to illustrate his point by way of another social setting; but in this case the setting also carries religious overtones, which marriage does not. Therefore, it serves as a perfect illustration of the irrelevancy of such things for people who are trying to give religious significance to celibacy. The very lack of passion over this matter indicates that it is not an issue in the church in Corinth, as it was later to become in Galatia and Philippi (Phil. 3:2-11). The gospel absolutely transcends, and thereby eliminates altogether, all merely social distinctions. In Christ Jew and Greek together, whether slave or free, make up one body (12:13; cf. Gal. 3:28, which also includes male and female). Since this is so, by analogy it frees one from the urgency to change one's situation, as the Corinthians are trying to do (or to change someone else's, as the Judaizers would do to the Galatian churches!).

Thus he argues, “Was anyone already circumcised when he was called?” That is, were you a Jew when you came to faith in Christ? If so, then “he should not become uncircumcised. “ One can scarcely imagine a situation in Corinth where Jewish believers might actually have been doing so; rather, this is simply an illustration of the principle that is to be applied to their own concern. So also: “Was anyone uncircumcised when he was called?” That is, were you a Gentile when you came to faith? If so, then “he should not be circumcised.” This operation, of course, was being urged by certain sectors of the church on Gentile Christians. But here it is not first of all a religious issue, but a sociological one. Being Jew or Gentile simply means nothing to God; whatever one was when called is what one still is, with no need to change. Christ has made such distinctions obsolete.

What is perhaps more significant is that this is the single social condition in the entire section for which there is no kind of exception. The reason is obvious. This one is not simply sociological; it is inherently theological as well. Paul’s own experience of grace, which came to him quite apart from his circumcision as a Jew, forever stamped his own understanding of the gospel as transcending either circumcision or uncircumcision. Thus, even though it was a matter to which he could acquiesce for pragmatic reasons (Acts 16:3), he was absolutely unyielding when anyone tried to give it religious significance. To do so was to make it count, and that meant to blunt salvation as God’s gracious gift. That is the theological point he will make in the next sentence, which gives the reason for no change in this matter.

19 This is the first occurrence of what has to be one of the more remarkable statements that Paul ever made. It will be picked up again in the Galatian controversy as the absolute that disallows the circumcision of Gentile believers (Gal. 5:6; 6:15): “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing.” In this basically Gentile church that will be readily understood, precisely because this was never an issue for them. But it is hard for us to imagine the horror with which a fellow Jew would have responded. For not only did circumcision count, it counted for everything. Above all else this was the sign of the covenant, and therefore of their special standing with God. But Paul has seen clearly the implications of this issue for the gospel. Allow change here, and the cross is effectually negated, because such a change for religious reasons attaches significance to status as such. This in effect destroys grace as God’s way of salvation. Paul’s point, of course, is that they should themselves transfer the principle to their desire to be “demarried”: “Marriage is nothing; and celibacy is nothing.” These things belong to the category of the irrelevant.

But Paul is quick to add that such a principle does not relativize obedience itself. “What counts” is not sociological conditions, but “keeping God’s commands” (cf. 9:21). If Paul’s fellow Jew would have been scandalized by his former statement, he would have been quite mystified by this one. From his perspective these sentences would be totally non sequitur, indeed contradictory. To be circumcised is to keep the commandment of God. But Paul obviously thinks otherwise. How can Paul eliminate “works” (circumcision) and then turn about and insist on “works” after all? The answer of course is that Paul did not consider obedience to the “commands of God” as “works of the law.” That is an unfortunate confounding of terms that Paul himself would scarcely have understood. One’s proper response to grace is obedience to the will of God. In a church where spirituality had degenerated into something very close to antinomian behavior, Paul simply cannot allow a religious statement like “circumcision counts for nothing” to be turned into “obedience to the will of God counts for nothing” (cf. 9:21).

20 The first analogy having been given (v. 18), and its theological reason having been stated (v. 19), Paul now repeats the principle with which he began: (literally) “Each one, in the calling in (by) which he/she was called, in this let him/her remain.” It has been argued that by this statement Paul intended to emphasize that each one should remain in his/her Christian calling, that is, that each one should remain a Christian. Much more likely the word “calling” here carries the same kind of double nuance that it did in 1:26 and that seems to be in view in v. 17. Paul wants them to live out their Christian life (i.e., their “calling” to Christ) in the situation (“calling”) where they were when God called them to Christ. The emphasis is on both, that they can be Christians in whatever situation God called them, and therefore that they do not need to change situations -- precisely because they are in Christ. Let their “calling” (becoming believers) sanctify the setting of their calling.

21 Paul now moves to a second supporting illustration, which in general is structured like the former. It begins with a word to the slave in the form of a question, followed by a command; and this is followed by a theological reason in support of the command. In this case, however, there are also some significant differences. First, he begins with the situation of the slave, but there is no corresponding word to the free person. That is picked up by implication when he comes to the theological reason in vv. 22-23. There are some obvious reasons for this. To correspond with the former, he would need to have said: “Were you a slave when called, do not become a freedman; were you a free person when called, do not become a slave.” But for slaves this was not an option; and for free people, although they could -- and many did--sell themselves into slavery, that would not

be the kind of “change” that one would normally seek. Thus the differences in the two illustrations may be seen by a display of the structure of each argument:

A. First illustration: circumcision (18-20)

1. To the circumcised: do not change (18a)
2. To the uncircumcised: do not change (18b)

Reason: Neither counts (19)

Conclusion: Stay in your “calling” (20)

B. Second illustration: slavery (21-24)

1. To the slave: do not be concerned (21a)
Exception: If granted, make use of freedom (21b)
Reason: (1) to slave: one is Christ’s freedman (22a)
2. To free person: one is Christ’s slave (22b)
-Additional theological reason (23)
Conclusion: Stay in your “calling” with God (24)

Second, in contrast to vv. 18-19, but as in vv. 27-28, the question and command are not expressed with the indefinite “anyone,” but in the second person singular (cf. 4:7). It is difficult to know what to make of this. On the one hand, it is a standard way in Judaism to express general commands and very well may do so here. On the other hand, the situation in vv. 27-28 seems to be reflecting a real concern in the community that is finally particularized in vv. 36-38. It may be, therefore, that this does indeed strike a note of concern within the community, to which Paul here speaks an ad hoc word. Nonetheless, the principle is Paul’s greater urgency, so that the social questions about slavery are eclipsed by the theological reasons of vv. 22-23 .

Third, the command is not “Stay as you are,” but rather “Don’t let it trouble you.” Although this gets at the same point that has been raised throughout, it is a significantly different way of saying it. The reason seems clear: Paul realizes that in this case, in contrast to both marriage/divorce and circumcision/uncircumcision, the slave could not choose his/her status. That is, one could sell oneself into slavery, but slaves could not choose freedom. But in some ways this becomes an even more powerful illustration for him because his real concern throughout has not been with change per se, but with those who were desiring change as Christians. His point right along, therefore, has not been simply, “Stay where you are,” but precisely as in this case, “Do not let your social condition be a concern to you.” Your calling in Christ eclipses such conditions, but thereby also transforms them into situations where you may live out your Christian “calling.”

Fourth, in contrast to the two conditions in v. 18, but quite like all the situations in vv. 1-16, an exception is made: (literally) “If indeed (or, even though) you are able to become free, rather (or, by all means) make use of [it].” On its own the sentence is ambiguous, and scholarship has been rather evenly divided as to whether Paul intended, “Even supposing you could go free, you would be better off making the most of your slavery” (NAB), or “Although if you can gain your freedom, do so” (NIV). The problem lies with the verb “make use of,” whose object must be understood from the context. The difficulties are best illustrated by the fact that grammar and context are argued as in support of both options.

Those who favor the first, the so-called “negative” option argue (1) that the combination *ei kai* often means “even though” (e.g., 2 Cor. 7:8; 12: 11); (2) that the *mallon* (“rather”) often carries the adversative sense of “instead”; (3) that the *gar* (“for”) that introduces the next clause follows naturally as the reason for staying in slavery; and (4) that the context seems to require it since the whole point is to remain as one is, and to read this text positively is to bring about a change of status.

Despite these arguments and the significant number of scholars who go this way, the so-called “positive” option, which supplies “freedom” as the object of the verb, seems by far the better one. First, for several lexical and grammatical reasons: (1) the normal sense of the combination *ei kai* is not “even though,” but “if indeed” (cf. 4:7; 7:1 1, 28); (2) in an elliptical sentence one would ordinarily supply a word from that sentence -- in this case “freedom” -- not a word from an earlier sentence; (3) the verb “to make use of” is an aorist infinitive, suggesting a single action, not the present, which would carry the sense needed for “keep on in slavery”; (4) the clause begins with the strong adversative “but,” which lends itself to an excepting clause (cf. vv. 9, 11, 15) but makes little sense as the conjunction joining an intensification of the negative imperative, which would expect, “and even though . . .”; (5) the word “rather” regularly has an relative sense, that is, “by all means make use of it”; and (6) the verb “make use of” does not work well with the negative view, which requires the verb to have a unique meaning (“make the most of,” “put up with”); whereas in this view it has Paul’s ordinary sense of “make use of” or “take advantage of” (cf. v. 31; and esp. 9:12, 15).

But even more important than these lexical-grammatical considerations are the two that have to do with historical and literary context. First, the view that a slave could reject manumission (being set free) has no historical basis of any kind. That is, a freed slave may continue to serve a master as a freedman, but by the very fact of manumission he or she is no longer a slave. Paul did not intend to suggest that they had the choice between freedom and slavery, but that when, from the slave’s perspective, they were able to become free, they should make the best of it

because that had been given them by the master. Thus, it is extremely unlikely historically that Paul would have suggested, “Make use of your slavery, even if you are able to become free,” since that choice did not exist at all.

Second, the structure of the argument of the entire chapter, and of vv. 17-24 in particular, suggests that the clause is intended to be a genuine exception to the prior imperative. This is the pattern throughout the chapter; it would be highly unusual for this one “exception” to be no exception at all, but rather an intensification of the imperative.

Finally, as the structural display indicates, on the basis of the previous pattern of vv. 18-19, the theological statement of vv. 22-23 does not give a reason for staying in slavery, but for the original imperative. That is, Paul is saying, “Were you a slave when called? Don’t let that trouble you, for he who was a slave when called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman,” to which the exception clause, just as in v. 11, is a parenthesis.

Paul’s point, then, is not that one must stay where one was when called. Rather, it is precisely as the imperative in this verse implies: Whatever your situation was at the time of your call, don’t let that become a concern to you. One’s calling in Christ raises one above that urgency. In the context, after all, Paul is still addressing those who feel compelled to dissolve their marriages. Change may occur, but one’s calling in Christ means that change is unnecessary, and certainly not to be a compulsion.

22 Just as v. 19 gave the theological reason for v. 18 (why Jews should not try to become as Gentiles, and vice versa), so this sentence gives the theological reason for v. 21a, why the Christian slave should not let his/her social situation be the occasion for distress. To which now he adds the situation of the free person. Neither slavery nor freedom counts for anything to the one who is called into fellowship with Christ. Paul makes that point with a word play on slave and free in terms of one’s relationship to Christ. Thus (literally), “The called-in-the-Lord slave is the Lord’s freed man.” That is, the person whose social condition was that of slavery when he/she responded to God’s call to be “in the Lord,” has by that call been given status with the Lord himself that removes him or her from being someone else’s slave -- even though that old relationship still obtains. The word “freedman” is the technical term for those who were formerly slaves, but had been manumitted. Under Roman law manumitted slaves (“freedmen”) often lived with their former owners, to whom they agreed to continue to render service. But when called to be in Christ, even though one’s social status is still that of slave, the relationship of “freedman” has now been established with the Lord. Moreover, the “purchase with a price” metaphor in v. 23 suggests that it is not simply the

relationship with the Lord that is in view, but the “freedom” from the bondage of one’s former sins.

Likewise, “the person who was free when called is Christ’s slave.” This person has not heretofore been addressed, although because of the contrasting pairs in the former illustration, one may be sure that he has not been very far away. The implied imperative for which this is now the theological reason would go something like: “Were you a free person when called? Don’t let that be a matter of importance to you.” And why not? “Because the free person who has been called to be in fellowship with Christ is in fact Christ’s slave.” That is, even though such people too have been “set free” in Christ, they have come into a relationship with Christ that can best be described by the metaphor of “slavery.” Our calling has eliminated the option of belonging to ourselves. We belong to another, Christ.

This imagery, of course, must be understood in light of GrecoRoman slavery, not that of recent American history. Slavery was in fact the bottom rung on the social order, but for the most part it provided generally well for up to one-third of the population in a city like Corinth or Rome. The slave had considerable freedom and very often experienced mutual benefit along with the master. The owner received the benefit of the slave’s services; and the slave had steady “employment,” including having all his or her basic needs met -- indeed, for many to be a slave was preferable to being a freedman, whose securities were often tenuous at best. But the one thing that marked the slave was that in the final analysis, he did not belong to himself but to another. That is Paul’s point with this imagery.

By saying that in Christ the slave is freed, and the free person is a slave, Paul is once again minimizing present social status. Since these reversals have already taken place in their call to Christ, neither is of consequence to the one who is in Christ.

23 To reinforce the theological point of v. 22, Paul pushes the metaphors of that verse one step further. He begins by repeating the imagery from 6:20, “You were bought with a price.” Only in this case the imagery carries its full double nuance, precisely because it speaks to both people in v. 22. On the one hand, as in 6:20, the basic metaphor is that of becoming the slave of someone through purchase. That speaks directly to the “free person” who through his/her calling to Christ has become “a slave of Christ.” On the other hand, for the one who was a slave when called, it is the metaphor of purchase for freedom, as in Gal. 3:3; 4:5; Rev. 5:9. The slave is free and the free person a slave because both have been purchased by Christ through the blood of the cross. Thus the metaphor comes full circle. The slave is still socially a slave, but in Christ he/she is both free and slave: purchased

by Christ so as to be set free by him, one has at the same time come under Christ's rightful ownership. The free person is still socially free, but in Christ he/she is both slave and free: purchased by Christ so as to belong to him, one has at the same time experienced the freedom that only he can give.

The final result, therefore, is: "Do not become slaves of men." Again this is not literal, as in "Do not sell yourselves into slavery," but metaphorical. Precisely because the slave is both free and slave in Christ, and the free person is both slave and free in Christ, they must not let themselves come under the bondage of mere humans. They are the slaves of another who has at the same time set them free. With these final words Paul is probably reflecting once again on their penchant to let merely human wisdom, disguised in the form of "spirituality," dictate their present anxieties about the need to be free from certain social settings, especially marriage. Don't come under such bondage, he tells them.

24 With the addition of the vocative, "Brothers [and sisters]" (see on 1:10), Paul concludes by repeating the controlling imperative one more time (see on vv. 17 and 20). In this case the sentence is very close to v. 20, with two modifications: (1) the phrase "in the calling" is replaced by the relative pronoun "in whatever"; (2) the imperative is modified by the prepositional phrase "with God" (NIV, "as responsible to God"). Both of these changes seem to verify our interpretation of vv. 17 and 20, that simultaneously Paul is referring to one's situation when called and to God's call thereby making that situation irrelevant to one's relationship to God (or to put that positively, it sanctifies that situation as a place where one can truly live out God's call in the present age).

First, in the context of the argument the relative clause must have something like the word "situation" supplied (lit. "in whatever [situation] he was called"), and can only mean something like the NEB has translated: "In the condition in which he received his call." The emphasis here is on one's situation, not on one's calling per se, and the point is that it is all right to stay wherever one was when called. Second, the prepositional phrase "with God" puts the whole issue into perspective. One is not simply to remain in one's situation (married, single, circumcised, uncircumcised, slave, free), because in many cases change may come about without one's seeking it. Paul's point right along has been that one should remain with God; that is, whether one is slave or free, one's status is finally determined by one's being "before" or "in the sight of" God in that situation. That sets one free both to remain in it and especially to live out the Christian calling therein.

With these words the argument with those who would dissolve their marriages in favor of the higher spiritual status of celibacy is brought to an end. The analogy

is that of the slave and the free, and the point is that neither marriage nor celibacy is significant; they should serve God where they are. But the concern raised by the celibates is not over. So in the next section Paul will again apply the principle here argued; but because he disagrees with their reasons, even if he agrees that singleness is best, he turns out to affirm change (i.e., marriage) in rather strong terms.

In an exceedingly mobile culture, in which upward mobility is almost a sacred duty, a passage like this does not get an easy hearing. On the one hand, there are those who think so poorly of their status that they find difficulty seeing it as a place in which to live out their calling as believers. The standard formula begins, “Oh, I’m just a” On the other hand, the tendency of most is to see status as significant, and change as necessary. Paul’s argument needs to be heard anew. Status of any kind is ultimately irrelevant with God. One is simply no better off one way or another. That does not mean that in a culture that provides opportunity one should not seek “to better oneself.” But it does mean that one whose life has been determined by God’s call should not put any stock in it. Paul’s concern is not with change, one way or the other, but with “living out one’s calling” in whatever situation one is found. There let one serve the Lord, and let the call of God sanctify to oneself the situation, whether it be mixed marriage, singleness, blue -- or white -- collar work, or socioeconomic condition.

About the “Virgins” (7:25-40)

After telling the married not to seek change, but to remain as they are, Paul now moves to a second, closely related item from their letter: whether some who are called “virgins” should get married. But much of Paul’s answer is less than certain.

Besides a large number of details throughout, the difficulties are basically four: (1) the meaning of the term “virgins”; (2) the structure of the argument, which is especially related to the meaning of vv. 36-38 -- whether it is the conclusion of the argument begun in v. 25, or whether it is “a special case”; (3) the intent and meaning of the central section (vv. 29-35) for the argument as a whole; and (4) the nature of the problem in Corinth as to (a) what was going on, (b) what they said in their letter, and (c) how it relates to the preceding issue (vv. 1-24).

The first two matters are interrelated, in that if one thinks vv. 36-38 are a special case, then the word “virgin” may or may not mean the same thing throughout the section. All of this is made more difficult by our uncertainties to whether Greek or Roman customs prevailed in the Corinth of Paul’s day, and the exact nature of these customs in any case.

With the proper degree of hesitation due such difficult texts, we proceed on the basis of the following reconstruction:

(1) Since the subject matter, “virgins,” is specifically mentioned in the three parts of the argument (vv. 28, 34, 36-38), common sense dictates that unless there are overwhelming reasons to think otherwise, the entire passage is a singular response to one issue. That means that what is begun in v. 26 is brought to its conclusion with the strong inferential conjunction “so then” in v. 38.

(2) Of the various options for the meaning of “virgins” (see on v. 25), that seems most probable which sees Paul as speaking to some who are betrothed and are now questioning whether to go through with their marriages.

(3) It is also highly likely, given the obvious similarities between this section and the preceding, that the same ascetic stance (namely v. 1b: “It is good for a man not to have relations with a woman”) dictates their attitude here.

However, in this case, quite in contrast to the former where they were urging a change of status, they argued, “It is good for [such a] man to remain as he is” (v. 26), meaning “to keep his ‘virgin’ a virgin” (v. 37). Indeed, it seems altogether likely that they have either said or implied that going through with the marriage would constitute “sin” (vv. 28, 36).

(4) Thus they have Paul on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, he is known to favor celibacy -- or perhaps they have appealed to his own example (see v. 7) . On the other hand, he totally disagrees with their ascetic reasons for such a stance. His problem therefore is how to affirm celibacy without at the same time affirming their asceticism.

(5) This difficulty is increased in light of Paul’s immediately preceding argument that people should stay as they are at the time of their call. For the merely single, that would be easy enough. But how do the betrothed stay as they are? Do they bring the betrothal to its normal conclusion (= marriage), or dissolve the relationship altogether?

(6) Probably because of his simultaneous agreement with their stance but disagreement with their theology, Paul’s argument takes on a character of its own, quite unlike anything else in his extant letters. He begins with a caution, that what is about to be said, even though he thinks it trustworthy, is less than a command of the Lord; it is his “opinion” (v. 25). The argument is then laced with “I think” (36), “I am sparing you” (28), “I wish” (32), “I say this for your good” (35), “let him do as he wishes” (36), “he shall do well” (37). What imperatives do appear

(v. 27) merely reiterate the stance of vv. 17-24, and as elsewhere are immediately qualified. Whatever else, this is not your standard Paul.

The net result is an argument that does indeed express his own (trustworthy) opinion that in their present situation celibacy is the better option; but it is not the only option. Marriage is a perfectly valid alternative; and whatever else, it is no sin. Despite the confusion of celibacy with asceticism on the part of so many scholars, Paul is no ascetic. Celibate, yes; ascetic, no. His new reasons are basically eschatological (i.e., the truly eschatological person has a radically altered perspective from which he or she views such relationships; vv. 29-31), although they also involve the prospect of “undivided” concern for the things of the Lord (vv. 32b-34). But whether they are married or unmarried he wants them to be “free of anxiety” (v. 32a).

The argument, then, is in three parts: (1) Vv. 25-28 offer the opening statement, in which he picks up their slogan, agrees with it, and then qualifies it. (2) Vv. 29-35 offer two interrelated reasons for his preference for celibacy, neither of which is to be understood as an attempt -- as the pneumatics are doing -- to put a noose around their necks (v. 35). (3) Rather (vv. 36-38), the two options, to marry or to refrain, are both open to them. If one feels a compulsion to be married, so be it (v. 36); but if one is under no such compulsion, so much the better (v. 37). So then (v. 38), the one does well, and the other, especially in the light of present conditions (v. 26), does even better. He concludes the whole discussion with a final word to the women (vv. 39-40), reminding them that they are bound to their one husband as long as he lives, but that on his decease they, too, have the same two options: to remarry (within the context of the faith) or to stay as widows, of which the latter is preferable. But again, this is his opinion, wherein he also thinks he has the mind of the Lord.

Singleness is preferable but not required (7:25-28).

This paragraph both announces the topic to be taken up next and gives Paul’s basic response to it. But it also has its share of difficulties. As they have argued, and he agrees, “It is good for the virgins to remain as they are” (v. 26). But his own reason for it, “because of the present crisis,” is less than clear. In v. 27 he seems to apply the slogan -- by means of terse questions followed by imperatives, similar to those in v. 18. But the precise nature of these questions, both as to who is being addressed and their place in the immediate context, is also not clear. In any case, the final question at least (if not both) is qualified by the reality that marriage is no sin. Paul’s own reasons for his opinion are then added to the qualification: The married will have distress in the present life, and Paul wishes to spare them.

25 The new topic is signaled by the second “now about” in the letter (see on v. 1). But who are the “virgins”? There are three basic views, each of which is determined in part by how one understands vv.36-38, and none of which is completely free of difficulties. (1) The nearly universal tradition of the church up to the twentieth century (cf. the NIV margin for vv. 36-38) has been “that the Corinthians consulted him about the special case of giving virgin daughters in marriage; whereupon Paul generalized, first stating the guiding principle (ver. 27), then applying it to both sexes (vv. 28-35), and finally dealing with the special point which the Corinthians had put to him (vv. 36-38).” This position rests on some linguistic features of vv. 36-38 which suggest that the man being addressed has a jurisdictional relationship to the one who is called “his (own) virgin.” The crucial item for this point of view is the change of verbs in v. 38 from *gameo* (“to marry”) to *gamizo* (which in the Gospels means “to give in marriage”). But despite both this long history and some items in vv. 36-38 that can be seen to favor it, this view has far more difficulties than advantages: (a) Nothing in vv. 25-35 even remotely suggests that Paul is addressing such an issue; indeed, it is fair to say that without v. 38, with its change of verbs, this view would never have arisen, or at least would never have gained popularity. (b) The terms father, guardian, daughter, etc. never appear in the text; furthermore, there is no known evidence for one’s speaking of a father-daughter relationship in terms of her being “his virgin.” (c) Any number of other items in vv. 36-38 make this view extremely difficult to maintain (see on these verses).

(2) A second view understands “virgins” in this verse to refer to both men and women, who are committed to one another in a “spiritual marriage.” That is, they are living together but without sexual relations. This has become difficult for some of the men, so they are wondering about the advisability of consummating the relationship physically. Although unknown this early elsewhere, this practice prevailed in several quarters of the church from the second century to the fifth, and it is certainly arguable that such an attitude could have prevailed in the Corinth of Paul’s day. But besides the lack of firm evidence for such a practice as early as this, this view has against it (a) the fact that Paul opposes such a view in vv. 2-6, (b) the lack of any “hard evidence” within the text itself for such a position on the part of the Corinthians, plus (c) even more difficulties than the first view with various parts of vv. 36-38.

(3) The view adopted here is that it was a term that the Corinthians used in referring to some young betrothed women who along with their fiancés were being pressured by the pneumatics and were now themselves wondering whether to go through with the marriage. Paul’s response is basically from the man’s point of view because it was the cultural norm for men to take the initiative in all such matters. This assumes the influence of Roman culture since by the time of the

early Empire it was common for men to act on their own behalf, without the father acting as *patria potestas* as in earlier days. This view has the distinct advantage of seeing both vv. 27-28 and 36-38 as being addressed to the same man, without the need of changing either topics or persons addressed. This view, however, is not without its share of difficulties in vv. 36-38, although they seem to be more easily answered than in the other cases.

Paul's first word is an attempt to put this whole matter into a proper perspective: "I have no command from the Lord." The last items taken up in the prior section were prefaced with words similar to these. In v. 10 he did have a command of the Lord, but in the matter addressed in vv. 12-16 he did not. Now he repeats that the Lord did not address this concern of theirs either. But more than that seems to be intended here; the issue itself lies in the category of concerns for which there are no commands of any kind, just advice or judgments (cf. v. 40). The Corinthian pneumatics apparently had turned their slogan into something close to law, the net result of which is that the betrothed would sin against the Spirit if they consummated their marriages. But the Lord did not give commands on this kind of issue; therefore Paul can only give advice.

Paul's judgment is not thereby to be understood as unimportant. Indeed, it is given by "one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy." The emphasis is not so much on his being a faithful apostle as on the trustworthiness of his judgment; what makes that so is that he has received mercy from the Lord. In many ways this is a remarkable qualifier. He appeals neither to his apostleship nor to his authority in Christ. Rather, his apostleship, and therefore his judgments on such nonessentials, are viewed in terms of the Lord's mercy to him (cf. 15:9-10), which probably means that they are to understand his advice as an expression of that same mercy. Thus the ultimate appeal is to Christ's mercies, not to his commands. Within this framework Paul will give his own judgment, which has as its aim not their obedience, but their own good (v. 35). In contrast to the Corinthian position that has led them to anxiety, he wishes just the opposite by what he has to say (v. 32).

26 This sentence begins (literally): "I think therefore this to be good because of the present crisis." That is, since I have no command but since my judgment is nonetheless to be considered trustworthy because of the Lord's mercies, "therefore" this is what I think is to your advantage in this matter. But before he gives the content of what is "good" for them, he adds "because of the present crisis." This is the first expression of the reason for his advice. Along with its companion word "troubles" in v. 28, this phrase probably expresses in its most succinct form what is being elaborated in vv. 29-35. But what exactly it intends is far from certain. Although Paul himself does not use either term in this way, both

words are employed elsewhere in the NT to speak of the great eschatological woes that precede the Parousia. In light of v. 29 it is common to suggest that meaning here. Thus the RSV translates, “in view of the impending distress,” suggesting that “present” really means “that which is about to come present.” But that seems to fly full in the face of Paul’s usage elsewhere, where the term “present” invariably means what is already present in contrast to what is yet to come (see esp. 3:22 and Rom. 8:38) . Therefore, whatever the “crisis “ is, for Paul it is something they (or the church at large) are already experiencing. But what?

The word literally means “necessity”; it comes to refer especially to that in life which puts one under “compulsion” of any kind, whether from within or without (cf. v. 37; 9:7, 16). But it also is used to express any kind of “distress” or “calamity” that befalls one. Most likely this latter nuance is intended here. Thus there are basically two options, which finally may merge into one: (1) In light of 11:30, where Paul says that many of them “are weak and sick, and a number have fallen asleep,” it is possible -- indeed probable -- that they are experiencing considerable “distress” within their community. There is no way to know exactly what it might be, but the death of some is no small matter. (2) In light of v. 28 it is possible that Paul has in view the larger “distress” that is the common lot of those who believe. In this case their own “present distress” is but a part of the larger experience of suffering that the church is undergoing until its final redemption at the coming of Christ. Most likely it is this latter that Paul has in view. His point would be: In light of the troubles we are already experiencing, who needs the additional burden of marriage as well?

But the question remains, how is this related to Paul’s eschatology, especially to vv. 29-31? It is commonly argued, or assumed, that Paul is urging them to stay single in light of the imminent coming of Christ, which will be accompanied by a time of great woe. But that seems to miss Paul’s own eschatological perspective both in vv. 29-31 and elsewhere. In 2 Thess. 3:6-15 he specifically urged exactly the opposite with regard to work, in a context where the alleged coming of the Day of the Lord (2:2) had caused some to cease working. But more importantly, in Paul’s view the End has already begun; the form of this world is already passing away (v. 31). Christians do not thereby abandon the world; they are simply not to let this age dictate their present existence . They are already marked for eternity-in the world but not of it. On the other hand, until the final consummation they also may expect “distress” and “trouble” to be their common lot (I Thess. 3:3-4). Thus their present eschatological existence should indeed have bearing on the question at hand. But it is not because they are already spiritual, so that as the angels they neither marry nor give in marriage. Rather, it is because they must yet live out their lives “in the present distress.” In light of our present existence, with

its suffering and trouble, and in light of the increased troubles that will tend to befall the married (v. 28), the single person will do well to remain that way.

Paul 's judgment in light of the present distress is that “It is good for a man to remain as he is.” Although one cannot be sure, it is probable that this also represents the Corinthian position on this matter, which Paul is citing. This seems to be the best explanation of the awkwardness of the sentence, with its repeated “it is good.” (Paul’s sentence literally reads: “I think this to be good because of the present distress, namely that it is good for a man to remain thus.”) In this case, however, Paul is in full agreement; indeed, that was exactly his point in vv. 17-24. But by adding “because of the present crisis,” he posits a different reason for it. Furthermore, quite in contrast to them, this new reason does not carry moral weight; therefore, he will also affirm those who do not follow this advice. Thus his answer throughout is both Yes and No.

27 What follows has formal similarities to vv. 18 and 21, including the way those two verses respond to vv. 17 and 20. There is the repeated “stay as you are” formula, whose point is immediately pressed with two short questions, marked by asyndeton (no joining particle), followed by their opposite imperatives. Thus he says: “It is good for a man to remain thus: Are you bound to a woman? Stay that way (in this case, lit., ‘do not seek to be loosed’). Are you free (i.e., ‘loosed’) from a woman? Stay that way (in this case, lit., ‘do not seek a wife’).” All of that seems easy enough. The problem is that the language, being “loosed from a woman,” is so highly unusual that it leads one to ask: (1) Who is being addressed? and (2) How do the questions relate to the immediate context?

The nearly universal view is that Paul is speaking in general terms to the married and the unmarried. Thus the NIV: “Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife.” In this view what Paul does at the outset, in light of the formula “stay as you are,” is to speak once again on both sides of the issue. First, he repeats what he has already said to the married: “No divorce.” But that is not now his concern; rather, he uses that question to set up the second, which speaks to their present circumstances: “Do not seek marriage.” What favors this view is the language “bound to a woman (= wife),” which is Paul’s ordinary usage for the indissolubility of marriage as long as a mate is living (v. 39; Rom. 7:2). The difficulty lies with the word “loosed,” which is otherwise unknown to denote divorce. If Paul had intended divorce, therefore, why did he use this strange noun? To which the answer is that Paul had both situations in mind, so he chose a word that could express “being loosed” (= divorced) for the married, whose corresponding verb could mean to “be free from” (= never married) for the case in hand -- although the second question would then be a word to singles in general, rather than a specific word to the betrothed.

On the other hand, it is possible that both questions speak directly to the present situation. The clue lies with the word “loosed,” which is found throughout the papyri as a technical term for discharging someone from the obligations of a contract. If it means that here, then he is speaking first to the betrothed (the “virgins”): “Are you bound (= under obligation to) a woman? Then do not seek to break off the obligation.” The second question would then expand the point to include all singles: “Are you free from such obligations? Do not seek a wife.” To those who would argue that if Paul intended that, why did he not use “virgin” in the first question (i.e., “Are you bound to a virgin? Do not seek release”), the answer is the same as above. The one term that could cover all possibilities is “woman,” which may refer both to a “woman” to whom one is engaged and a “wife” that one is encouraged not to seek.

Either of these is possible, but on balance the second one seems to fit the immediate context better. Otherwise the questions really are generalities and only indirectly address the matter at hand. But if the second view is correct, then the balanced sentences in v. 28, which qualify what is said here, speak to both questions; and the subjects, “you” and “the virgin,” refer in particular to those who are already under obligation to one another.

28 As with almost all the situations in the preceding section, Paul immediately qualifies v. 27 by allowing its opposite. In this case, however, what is said is so clearly a full qualification that it renders the imperatives of v. 27 to be strictly advice. Furthermore, what is said is so nearly identical to vv. 36-38 that it is difficult to believe that the two are not the same piece of advice to the same people. As throughout the preceding section, even though the final form of the advice in vv. 36-38 speaks directly to the man, the word of exception here is to both parties: “If you (i.e., the man spoken to in vv. 26-27) do marry, you have not sinned; and if the (not “a”) virgin marries, she has not sinned.”

This is such a remarkable word from a Jewish man, in whose culture marriage was not only normal but in some cases viewed as next to obligatory, that one must ask how it is possible for him even to have thought of using such language in the first place. The best answer, of course, is that it reflects the Corinthian view, which was either specifically suggesting that marriage might be sin or else implying it by the obligatory way they were pressing their ascetic slogans. Thus, this is no grudging condescension to marriage on Paul’s part, which by saying it is “no sin” is equal to “damning it with faint praise.” To the contrary, Paul recognizes that the question of marriage lies totally outside the category of sin, which is also why there is no “command” of the Lord on this matter (cf. v. 25).

Hence he urges that, despite his agreement with their slogan in this case, those who do not accept this advice do not in fact commit sin.

But because he really does believe that his advice is sound, he proceeds to qualify the qualifier, and thereby to repeat in a slightly different way his earlier reason, “because of the present distress” (v. 26). In this case he says: “But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.” Thus the argument has gone: (a) I agree, it is good for the “virgins” to remain single, but that is because of the present distress; but (b) it is certainly no sin to marry; nonetheless (c) those who do marry will experience many difficulties (because of the present distress), and I would spare them that. This kind of argument is advice only, and it reflects concern for them, not principles that would make singleness a better option. That the married will have “troubles in this life” is for Paul a matter of sober reality, almost certainly as the result of “the present distress.” What there is about marriage that would cause such tribulation as is not true for the single, Paul does not tell them; and it would be idle speculation to try to read his mind at such a point – especially when we are less than sure about the nature of the present distress. What does seem certain is that this is not a reference to eschatological woes as such, but to real affliction in the present life, probably enhanced by the ordeal that they are currently experiencing.

What follows (vv. 29-30) presents the perspective from which all such matters should be viewed. But in neither part of this explanation is there anything that seems to speak directly to the afflictions of the married as such. What is clear in this opening paragraph is that Paul prefers that the single remain single, but that his reasons for it are strictly pastoral and have nothing to do with the married or single state as such. Hence when he qualifies his preference with an exception here, it is a genuine qualification that affirms marriage as well. This would seem to be a considerable distance from the Corinthian position.

One of the unfortunate things that has happened to this text in the church is that the very pastoral concern of Paul that caused him to express himself in this way has been a source of anxiety rather than comfort. Part of the reason for this is that in Western cultures we do not generally live in a time of “present distress.” Thus we fail to sense the kind of care that this text represents. Beyond that, what is often heard is that Paul prefers singleness to marriage, which he does. But quite in contrast to Paul’s own position over against the Corinthians, we often read into that preference that singleness is somehow a superior status. That causes some who do not wish to remain single to become anxious about God’s will in their lives. Such people need to hear it again: marriage or singleness per se lies totally outside the category of “commandments” to be obeyed or “sin” if one indulges; and Paul’s preference here is not predicated on “spiritual” grounds but on his

concern for them. It is perfectly all right to marry (provided the marriage is not forbidden on other grounds, *e.g.*, adultery).

Unfortunately, our reading of the text in this way cuts in two ways. Our culture, especially Christian subculture, tends to think of marriage as the norm in such a way that singles are second-class citizens. For such people this text is merely “Paul’s opinion,” and is seldom listened to at all. That, too, misses Paul’s point. Some are called to singleness still; they need to be able to live in the Christian community both without suspicions and with full acceptance and affirmation.

Paul’s reasons for singleness (7:29-35).

The opening words of this section indicate that the apostle herewith intends to explain what has just been said. The section as a whole seems to function, therefore, as a kind of explanatory digression between Paul’s opening response (vv. 25-28) and the more specific conclusion of vv. 36-38, both of which say the same thing: It would be good for the “virgins” to remain as they are; but it is no sin for them to marry. Unfortunately, it is an explanation that is no longer clear as to what is being explained, what precisely it means, and for whom it is intended.

The argument itself is in two parts (vv. 29-31, 32-35), whose relationship to each other is also something of a mystery. The basic content of the two parts can be fairly easily discerned. Vv. 29-31 present a framework the “shortened time”) from which they are to view their present existence, especially their relationship to the world, whose present form, including all social, personal, and commercial expressions, is passing away. The question is, for what in vv. 25-28 does this serve as an explanation? How does this help them better to appreciate his advice that the “virgins” remain single?

Vv.32-34 take up the theme of “anxiety.” Paul begins (v. 32a) with the general statement that he wants them to be in a state that is free from anxiety. This is followed by two sets of nearly balanced pairs (32b-34), in each of which the cognate verb *merimnao* (which may be either pejorative, “be anxious about,” or positive, “care for”) describes the condition of the unmarried and married, both men and women (including the virgin). The questions here are: (1) How does this relate both to vv. 29-31 and to vv. 25-28? (2) To what does *merimnous* refer? (3) How do the *merimnao* sentences relate to the opening general statement about being *merimnous*?

The section concludes with v. 35, in which Paul explains that he has said this (apparently all of vv. 29-34) for their advantage, and not to put a noose around their necks. Rather, he wants them to be able to do what is “seemly” and “constant” for the Lord without distraction. This in turn, especially the word

“seemly,” leads directly into vv. 36-38, where he first affirms those who will go through with their marriage and then those who will not, concluding that both do well, although the latter do “better.”

The traditional interpretation of the two parts sees Paul as giving two reasons for remaining single: (1) In light of the imminent Parousia, to marry is to add additional troubles in the present age that is soon to pass away, so why marry? (2) The married man or woman is “distracted” by worldly affairs away from the constant devotion to Christ available to the unmarried, so celibacy is the better option. These may well be correct. But they also leave a number of unanswered questions, particularly as to how this responds to the ascetics who consider getting married as tantamount to sinning, and how this relieves the “anxiety” of the man in v. 36, who wants to get married, not to mention the general difficulty with the *merimnous/merimnao* interplay in vv. 32-34.

The proper understanding probably lies elsewhere, although precision is difficult to come by. But a few observations can be made: First, there must surely be some interrelationship between (a) remaining single, (b) the present distress, and (c) the eschatological viewpoint of vv. 29-31. What exactly that might be is not clear. In vv. 29-31 Paul does not mention the Parousia, nor suffering, nor living as though the End were tomorrow. Nor does he emphasize the futurity of the End vis-à-vis their over realized eschatology. Rather, in view of the “time” and the fact that the “form” of this present world is passing away, he calls for a radically new understanding of their relationship to the world. This seems to fit exactly with the eschatological outlook of 4:1-5 and 6:1-6, where the reality that the future has already begun with Christ and the Spirit determines one’s entire existence in the present. If this be so, then it is a general word that requires them to think of both marriage and celibacy in light of their new existence. The married will have troubles in this life because of the present hardships, and Paul would spare them that. But such-things do not determine one’s existence; Christ does. And in him one lives out the present life totally determined by the future that has already come.

Secondly, this leads him to say that he does not want any of them to live in anxiety, especially not about the present distress nor about the future, which would mean also no anxiety about whether to marry or not. There are two kinds of existence, he points out. The unmarried either “care for” the things of the Lord (which is good) or are “anxious about” such things (which is bad); so also the married, who either “care for” or are “anxious about” their spouses. The specific difference between them is that the married are also divided, that is, they have the additional concern of the spouse. He concludes that all of this has been said for their advantage, so that whichever they are, they may not live in anxiety but in a way that is “seemly” and “constant” before the Lord. Out of such concern, then, he can move on to encourage both marriage and celibacy, even though he

concludes finally with his obvious preference for the latter-probably still “because of the present distress.”

The presence of the vocative, “brothers [and sisters],” indicates that with these words there is a slight turn in the argument. It seems also to broaden the perspective so as to be a word for the whole community on this matter. The sentence begins, literally, “this I say,” pointing forward to what is to be said. The problem lies with trying to determine what the following words are intended to explain. On the one hand, it probably gives the eschatological explication of the two phrases “because of the present distress” and “will face many troubles in this life.” That is, the “present distress” belongs to the eschatological framework of their present existence, from which they are to understand the advice to stay as one is (unmarried). But at the same time what is said moves considerably beyond a mere concern over celibacy as such. It finally becomes an appeal to the entire community to rethink its present existence, and especially seems to insist on their living within an eschatological framework as over against, presumably, their current ascetic-spiritual one.

Despite several grammatical difficulties, what follows is probably best understood as a single, complex sentence in Greek, whose structure is:

The basic premise: The time is compressed, or limited,

The purpose (or result): so that henceforth

[even] (1) those who have wives might be as if they did not,

and (2) those who mourn (might be) as if they did not,

and (3) those who rejoice (might be) as if they did not,

and (4) those who buy (might be) as if they possessed not,

and (5) those who use the world (might be) as if they did not have full use.

The reason: This world in its present form is passing away.

The crucial sentence is the basic premise, “the time is short”; but its intent is not at all easy to determine. Ordinarily, “time” is considered in a quantitative way to refer to “the amount of time left for Christians to do what they have to do.” While there is perhaps a dimension of that involved, more likely the noun “time” refers to the eschatological event of salvation, which has been set in motion by Christ’s death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. Their “present distress” is evidence that this time “has been compressed” or “is foreshortened,” that God’s people stand at the end of history, as it were. This does not so much mean that the final consummation is imminent (although in a sense that is always true for God’s

people) as that the future, which was set in motion by the event of Christ and the Spirit, has been “shortened” so that it is now in plain view. And that will absolutely condition how one lives in the present. Paul’s concern, therefore, is not with the amount of time they have left, but with the radical new perspective the “foreshortened future” gives one with regard to the present age. Those who have a definite future and see it with clarity- live in the present with radically altered values as to what counts and what does not. In that sense it calls for those who want to get married to rethink what that may mean, especially in light of the present distress.

It may well be that this is a strong word against the Corinthians’ general tendency to live and think on the basis of their former pagan past, which generally lacked such an eschatological perspective. Their outlook was that of having arrived (see 4:8)-not in an eschatological sense, but in a “spiritual” sense that made them ascetic with regard to the present age. Paul thus wants them to rethink their existence in terms of “the shortened time,” with its certain future that they yet await (cf. 1:7).

This understanding of the basic premise seems to be borne out by the rhetoric of the purpose clause that follows. God has “compressed the time of salvation” so that “from now on” believers might have a totally new perspective as to their relationship with the world. This perspective is given in the form of five illustrations, expressed in the strongest kind of dialectical rhetoric. Taken literally, the five “as if not” clauses become absurdities, not to mention contradictory to what Paul clearly said earlier about marriage (vv. 2-6) and what he will elsewhere say about sorrowing and rejoicing (Rom. 12:15). But they are not to be taken literally; they are rhetoric, pure and simple. The question is, what is the point of such rhetoric?

What Paul is calling for is a radical new stance toward the world, predicated on the saving event of Christ that has marked off our existence in a totally new way. Just as in Christ the slave is a freedman and the free man is a slave (vv. 22-23) because one’s existence is determined by God, so now one does not so much live “detached” from the world (after all, Paul expects the Corinthians to continue doing all five of these things) as totally free from its control. Therefore, one lives in the world just as the rest -- married, sorrowing, rejoicing, buying, making use of it -- but none of these determines one’s life. The Christian is marked by eternity; therefore, he or she is not under the dominating power of those things that dictate the existence of others.

But what is the point of saying this in the present context? It has been suggested that because “the married” tops the list, this is really a plea for celibacy. That is, since the married should think like celibates, the single should stay celibate. But that is to take the passage too literally. Most likely it is a word to all

of them about their entire existence. In this kind of rhetoric it makes no difference whether one is married or celibate. That is, the celibate, too, must live “as if not” in the same sense as all the others, because celibacy too belongs to what is passing away. Granted, Paul does not have a clause to form a pair with “the married”; that would not be possible in the case of “the not married.” Paul’s concern here seems to go beyond “staying celibate” to the very understanding of Christian existence that caused them to urge celibacy in the first place. The Corinthians think that the unmarried should stay as they are -- for ascetic reasons related to their new spirituality. Paul is urging on them a wholly different worldview. Because of the “present distress” and “shortened time,” the betrothed may wish to remain single; but being single or married in itself is not the crucial question. Either is all right, he has said and will say again; what is important is that in either situation one lives “as if not,” that is, without one’s relationship to the world as the determining factor.

The final two items need comment since they set up the concluding causal clause. Paul does not discourage buying and selling. As with the other items, the Corinthians are expected to continue doing such things. But Christians do not buy to possess; that is to let the world govern the reason for buying. Those who buy are to do so “as if not” in terms of possessing anything. The eschatological person “has nothing, yet possesses all things” (2 Cor. 6:10; cf. I Cor. 3:22). Thus the Christian can at the same time “use the present world.” This is the clearest indication that Paul does not have a separatist’s bent. The world as such is neither good nor evil; it simply is. But in its present form it is passing away. Thus while one uses the world, one must be “as if not,” which in this case does not mean “not abuse” (KJV), but not to make full use of it, that is, be “not engrossed” or “absorbed” in it.

This final clause gives the reason for one’s new stance toward the world: “This world in its present form is passing away.” This is the determinative sentence; it is also eschatological. As elsewhere the use of the “progressive present” (“is in the process of passing away”) reflects Paul’s already/not yet eschatological perspective. The decisive event is the one that has already happened. In Christ’s death and resurrection God has already determined the course of things; he has already brought the world in its present form under judgment. And so decisive is that event that it has “foreshortened the time.” The result is that even now what others are absorbed in, the Christian is free from. All of these things-marriage/ celibacy, sorrowing/rejoicing, buying/using -- belong to the world in its present form. Marriage thus belongs to the present scheme of things that is already on its way out. But so does their asceticism. These things may or may not be done, but in either case they belong to what is passing away.

With these words Paul now turns to another theme: “Now I would like you to be free from concern,” meaning, apparently, “as long as you are in this present

world.” The question is, how does this relate to what has preceded (both vv. 29-31 and 25-28) and to whom is it addressed? Traditionally it has been viewed (correctly) as the lead-in to the four sentences that follow, expressing the two kinds of “concern” experienced by the married and unmarried. This view usually treats the adjective “free from concern” as though it were a noun, referring to the “extra cares” of married life. Thus it becomes a further exhortation -- indeed warning against marriage. But even though in the sentences that follow Paul may indeed be giving a further reason for encouraging the unmarried to stay that way, “extra cares” is not that reason. And in any case that is not what this opening sentence is about.

The words “to be free from concern” translate the infinitive “to be” and the adjective “without anxiety” (*amerimnous*). They have to do with a state of being, not with “cares” as such. The question is, why this concern here? There seem to be two possibilities. (1) As the common view has it, the “you” may refer now to the “unmarried” of vv. 25-28. But in contrast to that view, the anxiety does not have to do with the worldly cares of marriage, but with the concern over whether or not to get married, especially since some are suggesting that it comes close to sin to do so. That seems altogether likely, but would best be understood as it is subsumed under the next view. (2) Since the sentence flows naturally out of vv. 29-31, Paul’s concern most likely still has to do with living in the present age as an eschatological person. That is, because life is determined by one’s new existence in Christ (already but not yet, with the “not yet” clearly in view), the believer should be free from the anxiety-ridden existence of those who are determined by the world in its present form. The Christian still buys and marries, but he or she does so “as if not.” These things do not determine one’s existence; the clear vision of the future does. Thus one is free from anxiety. In this sense the passage does indeed speak to the unmarried who are anxious about marriage. But Paul wants both married and unmarried to be this way. Their existences in the present scheme of things differ, as the next sentences point out, but both are to be without anxiety.

With the use of the cognate verb *merimnao*, Paul proceeds to describe the two kinds of existence, married and unmarried, in terms of the object of their “anxiety” or “concern.” He begins with the men, and the two sentences he devotes to them are almost perfectly balanced, except for the crucial addition at the end of the second, “and is divided.” Thus: The unmarried man (*merimna*) the things of the Lord, how he might please the Lord (“but” or “and”) the married man *merimna* the things of the world, how he might please his wife. And he is divided.

What is not clear is how these sentences relate to the opening “wish” that they be “without anxiety,” and to the rest of what has preceded as well. There are three options:

(1) Traditionally, v. 32a is interpreted as having to do with the worldly cares of married life. Thus the *merimna* of the two clauses, though translated the same, is understood as positive in the first instance and negative in the second. The *de* therefore is adversative (“but”); the married man is not merely concerned for his wife, this concern makes his a clearly inferior existence. The difficulty with this view, however, is that, besides making *merimna* mean two different things in succeeding, nearly identical sentences, it really does seem to undercut what Paul says on either side of it. It is one thing to say that it is no sin to marry; but how is the married man helped to be “free from anxiety” if his existence is subordinated to the celibate’s in this way, so that he is indeed “anxious” about the things of the world while the celibate gets to “serve” the Lord in a pleasing way?

(2) There is the view that in both cases the verb is pejorative. Both the married and unmarried “are anxious about,” but neither of them should be. The anxiety to please the Lord is seen as stemming from the Corinthian asceticism. The asceticism itself is an attempt to win favor with God on the basis of a false standard. Thus “the ascetics who decry marriage are not rising above but falling below the Christian standard.” This view has the distinct advantage of keeping the same meaning for all the *merimna* cognates. The difficulty with it is with the clause “to please the Lord,” which Paul elsewhere uses in a good sense (Rom. 8:8; I Thess. 2:15; 4:1).

(3) It is possible to read both verbs positively, meaning to “care for”; (12:25; Phil. 2:20), and to view them both as legitimate activities. The married man “cares for the things of the world, how to please his wife” in the sense of vv. 30-31. That is a simple statement of reality. But he must do so without anxiety because of the eschatological determination of life in the present. In this case the usage of the verb is something of a play on the adjective in v. 32a: “I want you to be without ‘concern’ even as you must concern yourselves’ with life in the present age.” The *de* functions as a contrast, but not as an adversative: one is one way, the other is another. The difference between the two men is that the married man “is divided.” That does not mean that he is full of anxieties, but that he “cares for” both the Lord and his wife. The “division” may mean that he has less opportunity for service than is available to the unmarried; but it does not mean that the one is a superior existence, or that it is more full of anxiety. Had Paul intended that, then the married man would have a right to become anxious despite exhortations to the contrary.

Although either alternative (2) or alternative (3) makes good sense of the text, on balance the latter seems preferable. In light of the “foreshortened time” and the radical new understanding of our relationship to the present world, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the nature of the two kinds of existence. For him this means that celibacy is preferable; but at the same time he is trying to remove any anxiety that marriage might be wrong or “unseemly” in itself. Different, yes; more

involved in the present world, yes; but inferior or sinful, no. What is crucial is that either lives without anxiety, even though they must continue to “use the world.”

As throughout the chapter, Paul now repeats for the women what he has just said about the men. But there are three differences, two of them significant: (1) To the “unmarried woman” he adds “the virgin” as the compound subject of the first sentence; (2) in place of “how she might please the Lord,” he writes “in order that she might be holy both in body and in spirit”; and (3) the verb “is divided” does not appear at the end of the second sentence. The first and third of these differences are related directly to a difficult textual choice. On the one hand, if one were to go with the Majority Text, then the four sentences are all in perfect balance except for item (2), which is a considerable difference indeed! But the presence of “and” before “is divided” and the nearly impossible meaning required for the verb “divide” rule in favor of the text as the NIV has translated it.

One of the reasons for the textual corruption is almost certainly related to the first of the differences noted above. Why would Paul begin the women’s side by distinguishing two kinds of unmarried women? The answer to that must lie with the issue that was raised in vv. 25-28. This is sure evidence that “virgin” does not mean any unmarried woman, but must have a special sense in this section. It also adds support to our interpretation of vv. 32b-33. Paul is making some general statements about the nature of married and unmarried existence in the present age. But as he starts the section on the “unmarried woman,” he is brought back specifically to the issue at hand, so he adds “and the virgin,” meaning the “virgins” who are the subject under consideration.

The surprising -- and more difficult -- difference is the second one. There are basically two options as to what it means, depending on how one understands the sentences as a whole (see on vv. 32b-33 above). If the verb means “be anxious about,” then this is probably a reflection of the Corinthians’ point of view. They are striving to be holy in body as well as in spirit, by avoiding sexual relations. Such an understanding adds weight to the possibility of the “negative” view. If, on the other hand, the verb means “care for” in a positive sense, then Paul probably intends by the phrase “body and spirit” something like “holy in every way” or “completely,” with “body and spirit” not to be thought of separately but together, as designating the whole person (see on 5:5; cf. I Thess.5:23; 2 Cor.7:1). It is also possible, of course, that in the case of the woman this language reflects the cultural ideal of the “chaste woman,” so that her chastity is part of her “setting herself apart” for the Lord. In any case, given vv. 2-6, it is not possible that Paul is moving in the direction of the Corinthian asceticism, which viewed sexual relations per se as unholy or not “good.” Neither celibacy nor chastity as part of one’s “holiness” is the same thing as negating sexual relations as such in the name of holiness, even though these ideas were confused early on in some sectors of the church, partly as the result of this text.

This verse functions in two ways. First, it brings closure to the argument of vv. 29-35 by stating the purpose of what has been said; second, by referring to what is “seemly” before the Lord, it serves as a transition to the conclusion in vv. 36-38, which begins by speaking to the one who thinks he might be behaving in an “unseemly” way. The fact that it brings closure to the explanatory digression is signaled by “this . . . I say,” which can only refer to what has preceded. The *touto* (“this”) most likely includes all of vv. 29-35, so that the whole is enclosed by the “this I mean” of v. 29, which points forward to what is about to be said, and the present “this I say, “ which points back to what has now been said. If so, then it refers to their eschatological existence as determining their life in the present world, including being without anxiety over the matter of whether to marry or not. Although Paul obviously leans toward being celibate, either existence is all right in the present as long as one is neither determined by it nor anxious over it.

The purpose of what has been said is stated in three parts, first positively, “for your own good” (lit. “for your own advantage”), which is then defined by a negative contrast, followed by a repetition of the purpose phrase with some specific content. The negative contrast, translated “not to restrict you” in the NIV, is a metaphor that literally means, “not to throw a noose around your necks.” That seems to mean that Paul’s foregoing explanation is intended to benefit them, probably in the direction of having new grounds for celibacy without anxiety. But at the same time what “benefits” is not a commandment; they are not to take his preferences, for any reason, as a burden around their necks. This makes best sense as a word to the betrothed, that they are not “bound” by Paul’s word. After all, even if preferable from his point of view, celibacy is first of all a gift (v. 7). Therefore, he wants what has been said to be a liberating word, whichever direction they go. There are two kinds of existence in this present age, but those who have truly entered the new age live now “as if not,” and are thereby free from the anxiety that enshrouds all others, including the Corinthian ascetics.

The final phrase, in which the “advantage” is spelled out more specifically, is less than clear. The Greek text literally reads: “but for what is seemly and constant to/for/before the Lord in an undistracted way.” The concern appears to flow out of the preceding negative. By these words Paul does not want to restrict them, as the ascetics would do, but to free them for whatever is appropriate in their case (apparently either marriage or celibacy) so that they may have constant and unhindered devotion to the Lord. For the gifted celibate that would mean celibacy; but for the betrothed, whose gift is not celibacy but whose devotion to the Lord has been hindered by the ascetics’ demanding that he be so, what is appropriate is marriage. This is not the standard view, which sees this as a final word of commendation for the celibate life, on the basis of vv. 32b-34, that this is the only way one can have unhindered devotion. But the word “seemly” or “appropriate” does not seem to fit well with such a view. Paul has not argued that

celibacy is the way of life that is most appropriate or seemly. Rather, he has given eschatological reasons for preferring it. A betrothed person, who is anxious about whether or not to marry, is hardly living appropriately or with unhindered devotion. Thus, at the end, despite his setting forth to give new grounds for preferring celibacy, he again sets that preference in a context that equally affirms the “rightness” of marriage, which is what he will once more spell out in detail in the conclusion that follows.

Paul’s point in all of this seems to have been twofold, and everything must be seen in light of his eschatological perspective. First, he really does prefer celibacy, and both the nature of eschatological existence itself -- in light of the present distress -- and the divided nature of one’s caring when married speak in favor of it. But second, celibacy is not the only existence, nor is it to be preferred on moral grounds, only eschatological. All must live as eschatological people, free from anxiety. This is especially true for the betrothed, whose anxiety would have stemmed not from worldly cares but from the Corinthian ascetics. If the present distress and shortened time make celibacy preferable, they do not make marriage wrong. Rather, the married in particular must learn to live as truly eschatological people in a world whose present expression is passing away.

This passage in particular, instead of being viewed as to our advantage, has often been burdensome for the young. But that is probably less Paul’s fault than our own. It is hard to perceive that his preference for celibacy does not also make it a superior existence, so that the married feel like second-class citizens in the church. Yet our real failure is to take the main point seriously enough, namely that we are to live out our lives in the present age, whether married or not, as those who have been determined by the “foreshortened time.” Being eschatological people is to free us from the grip of the world and its values. We are to live “as if not,” that is, as fully in the world but not controlled by its systems or values. Such freedom, which comes only from Christ, removes from one the anxiety about which existence is better. Whichever one is called to is better, as long as it is appropriate and allows one unhindered devotion to the Lord.

The irony of our present situation is that Paul insisted that his own preference, including his reasons for it, were not to be taken as a noose around anyone’s neck. Yet we have often allowed that very thing to happen. Roman Catholicism has insisted on celibacy for its clergy even though not all are gifted to be so; on the other hand, many Protestant groups will not ordain the single because marriage is the norm, and the single are not quite trusted. The answer again lies in our becoming eschatological people who live in the present with such a clear vision of our certain future that we are free from such anxiety, and therefore also free from placing such strictures on others as well as on ourselves.

But Marriage Is No Sin (vv. 36-40).

These two paragraphs together bring the entire argument, including vv. 1-24, to a conclusion. Vv. 36-38 represent a notorious crux, evidenced by the three distinctly different options available in the NIV, NASB (cf. NIV mg), and NEB. The best solution is to see this section as flowing directly out of v. 35 and thus bringing to a specific conclusion the argument that began in v. 25, rather than a special case brought in at the end. Thus in v. 36 Paul repeats what was said in v. 28 to the man who wants to get married, that marriage is no sin. But for the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, staying single is the thing to do (v. 37). Both do well, he concludes (v. 38), although his final preference is for celibacy for the reasons given in the preceding argument, that is, “because of the present distress.”

The final paragraph (vv. 39-40) is something of a puzzle. The question it raises is, what is it doing here as the final word? Two observations need to be made: (1) In keeping with the pattern throughout, this word functions in relation to vv. 36-38, which was addressed to the men, and serve as his balancing word to the women. However, (2) in this case it is not a word just to the virgins themselves--although it will include them--but a final word to the women that reaches all the way back to v. 1. In this way the concerns of both sections are repeated by way of conclusion. First, a woman is not to separate from her husband (vv. 1-24); but second, if he dies, then the same two options noted in vv. 36-38 are available to her. Staying single (in this case as widows) is to be preferred; but marriage is a viable option--as long as it is “in the Lord.” The phrase “in the Lord” is often urged to require a Christian widow to marry a Christian. While that may be the safer route, it does not carry this meaning in other passages. In Eph. 6:1 Paul requires children to obey their parents “in the Lord.” This does not mean that children are required to obey only parents who are Christians; it means that children must obey their parents as long as that which is commanded is in keeping with the Lord’s commands. In Rev. 14:13 a blessing is pronounced upon those who die “in the Lord.” This cannot mean that all who are “in the Lord” will be saved. The unfaithful “in the Lord” have no such promise. Those who die in keeping with the Lord’s will will rest from their labors.

36 Paul’s first directive is for the man who wants to go through with his marriage: “He should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married.” That much seems clear enough; but the clause “he should do as he wants” is the apodosis (conclusion) of an extremely complex conditional sentence, whose double protases (one “if” clause imbedded in another) describe the conditions of the man--and perhaps his “virgin” that lead to this conclusion. The sentence looks like this:

- 1) Protasis I: “If anyone thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin,

2) Protasis 2: (if he [or she] be *hyperakmos* and thus it ought to be).

This is the basic position of the traditional “father-daughter” view.

The first protasis is a present particular, which implies that Paul knew that an actual situation like this existed in the community.

The second protasis is a supposition, reflecting something that might be so.

3) Apodosis: let him do as he wishes.

4) Explanatory addition: He is not sinning; let them marry.

Since the clause begins with a contrastive “but,” and “acting improperly” is the antonym to “what is seemly” in v. 35, it seems probable that concern for this man was already in view in the argument of vv. 32-35. From the point of view of the ascetics his desire to consummate the marriage is “inappropriate”; indeed, they have apparently filled him with anxiety (v. 32) by their ascetic “noose” (v. 35). Thus Paul addresses this man’s situation specifically, so that his own words in vv. 29-34 will not serve in the same negative way. What is not clear is what would make this man think his current behavior toward his betrothed was “unseemly” or “shameful.” Since such an idea probably stems from the ascetics, it could refer either to his wanting to get married, which they would consider “unseemly,” or to his keeping her betrothed without going ahead with the marriage, which could make her situation very difficult.

The second protasis interrupts the flow of thought, perhaps as Paul’s own hypothetical contribution as to why the man may think his current actions are shameful. Under any view it is a particularly difficult clause. Unfortunately, one cannot be certain as to either the subject of the verb or the meaning of the adjective *hyperakmos*. The subject may be either the virgin, who is the one most recently mentioned in the preceding clause, or the man, since an unexpressed subject in a dependent clause usually picks up the subject of the preceding clause. Grammatically, the latter seems preferable, but one cannot be sure. Likewise with the adjective. The compound is a particularly pejorative word describing disgraceful, dishonorable behavior.

This expression is one of the real difficulties for the “spiritual marriage” view. If they are already married spiritually, how might he now think he were behaving shamefully toward her? The “father-daughter” view answers this more easily, but not without difficulty. The father apparently had been considering keeping her a virgin (devoting her to the Lord on his own volition?), but now he is having some second thoughts. It should be noted that most commentators that take this view do not really wrestle with the fact that the young lady’s wishes are not mentioned at all. The father is the prime actor throughout (see esp. on v. 37), which means that her virginity is not so much her “devotion” to the Lord as his.

The language “his virgin” here is one point in favor of the “spiritual marriage” view since that would be her proper designation. It is sometimes objected that “his virgin” is a strange way of speaking about one’s betrothed, but that would be less so if the term comes from their letter and Paul is simply using it consistently throughout the argument. Here it would mean something close to “his girl.” It is even more difficult for the father-daughter view since this is the place in particular where one would expect the word “daughter” to appear.

The apodosis and its further explanation indicate that the engaged man wants to get married: “let him do as he wishes.” The Corinthian ascetics apparently have led him to believe that it may even be sin if he were to go through with it, which in turn has led to his “anxiety” and “unseemly behavior” toward his fiancée. Paul says, “Not so. If because he or she is *hyperakmos* and marriage ought to occur, then let him do as he wishes. He does not sin.”

The final imperative, “let them marry,” is particularly difficult for both the other views. For the father-daughter view this is an inexplicable reference to a third party (the groom), who is not otherwise mentioned throughout the passage. If this view were correct, one would expect exactly what the NASB does, “let her marry.” If the father is acting as *patria potestas*, it is especially strange that he should be told to “let them marry” as if the young man and woman were urging it on him. The verb itself also diminishes the probability of the “spiritual marriage” view, since there is no other evidence that it might mean to consummate sexually a marriage that had taken place much earlier.

37 From the one who wishes to marry, which probably reflected a real situation in the church, Paul turns to the one who might opt for the Corinthian and his point of view, that it is better to remain as he is. What is significant here is his description of this man. In no less than four different ways he repeats that such a man must be fully convinced in his own mind. First, he “has settled the matter in his own mind” ; second, he “is under no compulsion”; third, “he has authority concerning his own will,” meaning no one else is forcing this action on him; and fourth, he “has made up his own mind. “ This verbal tour de force strongly suggests that outside influences might lead him to take such an action, but against his own will. That seems precisely to be the case in Corinth. There were those who were urging such an action on the grounds that “It is morally good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman, and thus for the betrothed man to remain as he is.” Paul agrees with the last part, that he would do well to remain as he is, but not on moral grounds. So Paul’s word to the man who takes his (Paul’s) own position is that he must take control of his own actions and not be “under compulsion,” either from the ascetics or from what Paul himself has written in this letter. Hopefully, such a person recognized that he had the gift of celibacy in so making up his own mind.

What this man makes up his mind to do is “not to marry the virgin” (lit. “to keep his own virgin”). This tends to be a difficult clause for any view. Most likely he means something like “to keep her a virgin,” hence “not to marry” her. It is not clear why he calls her “his own” virgin, but if indeed they are already engaged, then she is his own in that sense, and he would now with his own convictions keep his “virgin” a virgin. If he does come to that conclusion, Paul says, “he will do well.”

38 With yet another strong inferential conjunction, “so then,” Paul brings both the argument as a whole and the preceding two verses to a conclusion. The first sentence corresponds to v. 36 but uses language from the end of v. 37: “He who marries his virgin does well.” That summarizes vv.28 and 36: He has not sinned if he marries; indeed, he “does well.” The second sentence corresponds to v. 37 and summarizes what he has argued right along. From his point of view, given their present situation, “he who does not marry her will do even better.” But not because one situation is inherently “better” than the other. That is precisely what he has argued against throughout. Therefore, one must go back to v. 26 for what makes it better; it is “because of the present distress.”

But in so concluding Paul changes verbs, from *gameo* (“to marry”) to *gamizo* (in Mark 12:25 and parallels, “to give in marriage”). Since “giving in marriage” is assumed to refer to a father’s giving his daughter, this change of verbs is what brought about the “father-daughter” interpretation of the passage. The verb *gamizo*, however, is not found outside the NT; in classical Greek *gameo* served both purposes. To the question whether the verb must carry the nuance “to give in marriage,” the answer is No. There is sufficient evidence that the classical distinctions between *-eo* and *-izo* verbs had broken down in the koine period. But that still does not answer the question as to why Paul changed verbs in this set of sentences. The usual answer is “for the sake of variety,” which may still be the best one. It is at least noteworthy that this is the only case in the chapter where the verb “to marry” has an object. All uses of *gameo* are intransitive; it may be that for Paul *gamizo* carried a transitive nuance, hence its usage here.

So at the end Paul has agreed, and disagreed, with the Corinthians in their letter. They prefer celibacy for “spiritual” reasons; he prefers it for pastoral and eschatological ones. But quite in contrast to them, he also affirms marriage; indeed, he does so strongly: Such a man “does well. “ But there is one final word. These verses are addressed to the man; but in keeping with his response throughout, there is a final word for married women as well.

39 This final word to the women comes as something of a surprise. It assumes that the woman is married, which is not the perspective of vv. 25-38, but of vv. 1-24, where they were trying to dissolve their marriages. The passage appears, therefore, to function as a concluding word for both sections, by repeating in a different way the word of vv. 1-24, that they should not separate from their husbands, and by urging the same reality on the “virgins” from this section, who are to go through with their marriages.

The first statement, “A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives,” runs so counter to Jewish understanding and practice at this point in history that it almost certainly reflects Paul’s understanding of Jesus’ own instructions (see on v. 10). As such it is a final word against divorce and remarriage. But there is no argument here, simply a matter-of-fact reiteration of a point made previously (vv. 10, 13). The concern in this case lies ultimately with the second issue, a woman’s remarriage, and he repeats the advice just given in vv. 36-38.

The marriage bond is in effect until “her husband dies.” After that, she has the same option as the man who wants to get married: “She is free to marry anyone she wishes.” This sentence seems to eliminate the possibility that levirate marriage is in view; it also indicates that in this matter at least the woman had full freedom to make her own choice. As before, this is a perfectly valid option. In this case, however, Paul adds a proviso not needed in the previous case. If she chooses to remarry, it should be “only in the Lord.” This is not so much a command that she may not marry outside the Lord as it is good sense. To be “in the Lord” is to have one’s life come under the eschatological view of existence outlined in vv. 29-31.

40 This final sentence essentially repeats the stance of the foregoing argument, that remaining single is the better option; only in this case the appeal is to her own happiness, with no ground suggested as to why that might be so, except that this is “my own opinion” (see on v. 25). Very much as in v. 25, however, Paul is quick to point out that his opinion is not without good backing. In this matter, “I think that I too have the Spirit of God.”

This last sentence may be taken in one of two ways . (1) It is possible that this is one more jab at the Corinthian pneumatics, implying “If you think you have the Spirit, remember that I, too, have the Spirit.” (2) Or it may simply be a strengthening of his “opinion,” as in v. 25, that he is not simply on his own in this matter. He also has the help of the Spirit in making such judgments. Since this is an issue on which they and he would tend to agree, it is more likely that the latter is intended, although it may also be a subtle word against those who were not so sure that he did possess the Spirit.

With these words the two matters relating to marriage are brought to a close. The argument as a whole has generally been against the Corinthian ideal of asceticism. Nonetheless, he agrees with the Corinthians that those who are now single, whether betrothed or widowed, are better off as they are. But since he disagrees with the theology that brought the Corinthians to their stance, he also affirms marriage over against their point of view. In the matter that follows (chaps. 8-10) all of that changes. Not only does he disagree with their stance but also with their reasons for it, as well as the way they have used his own behavior against him. It thus stands in sharp contrast to the relatively mild expression of these two sections.

Paul's judgments in these two paragraphs have often been a source of concern. Does not Scripture say in fact that singleness is better than marriage? To which the answer is No. First of all, this reflects Paul's own opinion (vv. 25 and 40), and he is concerned throughout that it not be taken as "Scripture," that is, as some form of commandment or principle. It is an ad hoc answer in light of some "present distress." But more importantly, vv. 36-38 are not a judgment on marriage or singleness per se at all, but on whether or not engaged couples in that setting should get married. Paul thinks it better for them if they do not; but he also makes it clear that marriage is a perfectly valid option. It has nothing to do with good and evil, or even with better or worse, but with good and better in the light of that situation. It is perhaps noteworthy that the entire discussion is carried on quite apart from one of the major considerations in our culture -- love for one another. For Paul's discussion of marital love, see Ephesians 5.