

THE SINGLE LIFE IN
I CORINTHIANS 7:1

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I Corinthians 7:1 is foundational in understanding Paul's attitude toward the single life in the rest of that chapter. His use of the words *καλός* and *ἀπεσθαι* are essential in understanding I Corinthians 7:1. Together, these factors point to Paul's explicit pronouncement on singleness.

The general principle that is taught in I Corinthians 7:1 is reiterated throughout the chapter but is directly dealt with in verses 25-35. In these verses Paul actually lists the advantages of single life over the disadvantages of married life. Although he expresses such preferences of the single life, he also provides perfect freedom for an individual to choose for himself the life that he would like to lead.

It is important to see the development of the idea against the attitude that seemed to have prevailed in the Old Testament economy. The transition seems to be made in how the Lord dealt with such issues as in Matthew 19:10-12. He seems to acknowledge the expediency of the single life for those who are able to accept such a teaching.

In order that an unbalanced perspective might not be presented for the single state, it is essential to see the Biblical perspective of marriage also. Because this is not the emphasis of this thesis, this study will be quite abbreviated. There are three major classifications in which this study has viewed the Scriptural perspectives of marriage.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a prevailing attitude on the part of many Christians that single people are incomplete and unfulfilled. Although this attitude is sometimes expressed in a facetious manner, it nonetheless pervades their thinking. This is not a Biblical perspective in its proper sense. There are certain Scriptural passages that seem to regard the single person in good esteem.

It is the purpose of this thesis to show the prevalent attitude of the Scriptures concerning this particular way of life. This attitude is most expressly seen in I Corinthians 7. In this passage Paul is responding to a question concerning marital problems in a letter from the Corinthians. One of these questions seems to have involved the goodness of the single state. In answer to that question, Paul makes his most exhaustive pronouncements on singleness. In different portions of this chapter he expresses his desire that all Christians should experience the same kind of commitment to the Lord that he himself had as a single person.

It is interesting to note the bibliographical and periodical material covering this subject which has developed to meet this specific need. About twenty years ago the demand for such material was low because singleness was not as prevalent among men. One article in a periodical appeared

in the late 1950's that dealt with the ministry to "spinsters." But as singleness became more common in the church, the subject started coming to the fore. Although it never has reached a prominence in Biblical studies, it nonetheless is being dealt with on a much wider scale now than ever before.

The areas of divorced and widowed people have purposely been excluded from this paper due to its limitation in length. Therefore, the individual who has never been married before is the focus of this study.

CHAPTER I

THE MEANING OF I CORINTHIANS 7:1

In order to understand I Corinthians 7, it is important to examine carefully its foundational setting in verse 1. This concise yet general statement of Scripture has been neglected because of its supposed ambiguity as well as a sense of inconsistency with the rest of Scripture. This inconsistency is thought to exist because of a general understanding that the Scriptures promote marriage as a healthy and sound institution. But this verse seems to teach that a healthy and sound way to live can be apart from marriage in the state of singleness. How is this so?

The answer to this question will be sought by examining two important words in this simple statement of Scripture. The words are καλός (good) and ἀπτεῖσθαι (to touch). It is essential to understand the basic usages of these two words in order to understand their meaning in this context. To do this it is necessary to see how these words are used as they appear in both the New Testament and extrabiblical writings. A particular emphasis will be on how they are used in the New Testament showing their interrelationship with other Scripture.

The Use of καλός

The first word to be examined will be καλός because of its order of appearance in the text. There seems to be a definite purpose in Paul's choice of the word over others of similar significance. It is often oversimplified to mean one specific thing when in actuality it possesses a number of meanings. Robert Gromacki makes such an assertion when he states, "Paul did not say that it was necessary or better to remain single; rather it was "good" (καλός) to do so."¹ However, this statement is not necessarily true since it is possible for this word to be translated "better." Hans Conzelmann, for example, has chosen to translate this word as such in his notes on I Corinthians.² Arndt and Gingrich list the possibility of such a usage, but this does not fit the sense of I Corinthians 7:1. There does not seem to be any sense of comparison in this passage that would call for such a comparative adverb. Therefore, it is not likely to be translated as such in this case.

Another possibility for a translation of καλός is as Arndt and Gingrich state "it is morally good, pleasing to God, contributing to salvation."³ Although there is a strong hint of Roman Catholic doctrine in this definition,

¹Robert Gromacki, Called to Be Saints (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 87.

²Hans Conzelmann, I Corinthians (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 115.

³BAGD, p. 400.

the first two phrases of it are seen as valid definitions for this word. Walter Grundmann in the TDNT summed the word up as follows: "When speaking of καλός , the Greek had in view the total state of soundness, health, wholeness, and order, whether in external appearance or internal disposition."¹

Therefore, what Gromacki states about this word is not a valid conclusion. He states, "This is not a moral good (agathon) since the apostle later approved the marital union (7:28, 36)."² What Gromacki does by saying this is common among many interpreters of this passage. The kind of assumption that is made is this: "If it is morally good not to touch a woman, then it is wrong to do so." This was initially started by Jerome, doing so, as Calvin said, "not so much from ignorance . . . as from the heat of controversy."³ The papal system insisted that he find a text to prove the superiority of the celibate state. In spite of so much controversy behind taking the moral application of this word, it does seem quite feasible. F. L. Godet states the attitude of Paul as such: "He proclaims aloud that the state of celibacy in a man is absolutely becoming and worthy, has nothing in it contrary to the moral ideal. There were

¹TDNT, s.v. "καλός" by W. Grundmann, 3:537.

²Gromacki, p. 87.

³John Calvin, Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), p. 222.

assuredly at Corinth persons who maintained the contrary."¹
It would, therefore, be a matter of emphasis upon its goodness and not a matter of demoralizing the opposite state.

Lastly, the meaning of καλός could involve the matter of expediency. This meaning could possibly be traced to one of its uses in the Gospel of Matthew. In this book the words καλός and συμφέρω are used interchangeably in different chapters for the same principle. In Matthew 18:8 καλός is used in the same context that συμφέρω is used in 5:29. Both are used to indicate personal advantage for one to do one thing over the other. This connection is often set aside as being irrelevant to the situation at hand.²

However, a possible link between this passage and I Corinthians 7:1 could be made in 19:10 of Matthew. Here the disciples of the Lord came to Him with a most interesting question. Having just debated with the religious groups about the complications and frustrations of divorce, they asked Him if it would not be more to one's advantage never to get married. The word that they used for the advantage was συμφέρω. Although Jesus' response to the question, as well as its implications, will be dealt with later, it is important that the parallel meaning between these two words be seen.

Therefore, the meaning of καλός in this passage

¹F. L. Godet, Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, trans. A. Cusin, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957 edition), p. 320.

²Ibid., p. 320.

could be a combination of all three ideas to express a general goodness. The thing that might help to determine the significance of καλός is to understand the object which it is intended to describe.

The Meaning of ἄπτεσθαι

The second word that needs to be examined is ἄπτεσθαι. As in all languages, there is a great deal of flexibility in Greek. This is true with this word to a limited degree. This verb, as is often the case, has a slight difference in meaning between its voice inflections. As it appears in this text it is found in the middle voice. When considering classical literature, R. Grob has this to say about its meaning in the middle as opposed to the active voice. "It is far more frequently found in the middle haptomai, touch, eat (i.e. touch food), attack (i.e. touch with hostility). In the classical writers of the fifth century it is used also for sexual relationships with women . . . "¹ He then applies the last usage to the above text.

It is quite clear then that ἄπτεσθαι in this passage has more meaning than a man simply touching a woman as would be done in shaking her hand. The least that it could mean involves the idea of taking a hold of someone. Such meaning is implied by the description that Richard Trench gives in his work on New Testament synonyms.²

¹Dictionary of New Testament Theology, s.v. "Touch" by R. Grob, 3:859.

²Richard C. Trench, Synonyms of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976 [re-printed]), p. 59.

There are two types of interpretations for this word. One group would hold that this involves sexual intercourse outside the sanctity of marriage. The other group would say that this would actually refer to the act of marriage. The former will be referred to as the non-marriage view while the latter will simply be termed the marriage view. It must be so named for lack of a better description. The group that holds to the non-marriage view would not necessarily say that this has nothing to do with being married; rather, that this has nothing to do with getting married. The view to be considered first will be the marriage view.

The Marriage View

This interpretation is by far the most common view of this passage. It is held by such writers as John Calvin, C. K. Barrett, J. E. McFadyen, Leon Morris, M. R. DeHaan, Charles Hodge, and Gordon Clark, to name a few.

This interpretation sees the principle of the goodness of the celibate state taught in this verse. Fred Fisher expressed this view quite accurately and briefly.

To touch a woman: a euphemism for sexual intercourse with a woman. In Paul's teaching this would include the whole idea of marriage. He had already given his opinion of immorality and prostitution in II (sic) Corinthians 6:12-20. For the unmarried it was positively sinful to touch a woman in this sense.¹

With this as a basis it is possible to give two reasons why Paul uses this word over the actual word for

¹Fred Fisher, Commentary on I and II Corinthians (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1975), p. 98.

marriage, γαμέω. The first reason was already mentioned in the above quote, that is, that it was an acceptable euphemistic term for marriage. Secondly, it was probably a quote from the Corinthian letter that Paul uses to reply to a question. David Cartlidge suggests the possibility of a quote when he states, "It is true that καλόν ἐστίν is common in Pauline material, but it is not confined to Paul. Further, περὶ δὲ ἐγράψατε (7:1a) can be seen as a quotation formula."¹ This does not in any way relieve the truth of the statement because of the fact that he states it as true and in no way indicates otherwise in the following context.

The Non-marriage View

Although there are various writers who hold to this view, their number is few. One of the foremost writers who takes this position is Gordon Fee. In his article on I Corinthians 7:1, he criticizes the New International Version for the translation of the word "to marry."² This is probably the most thorough critique of the marriage view that has been published.

This writer will not critically evaluate this article in full, but it is important to point out some of its inconsistencies. This will be done by reviewing the three main reasons he gives for denouncing the "traditional interpretation"

¹David R. Cartlidge, "I Corinthians 7 As a Foundation for a Christian Sex Ethic," Journal of Religion 55 (April 1975): 223.

²Gordon Fee, "I Corinthians 7:1 in the NIV," JETS 23:307.

as he so aptly refers to it.

The first reason he gives for opposing the idea of marriage in 7:1, is the meaning of the idiom ἀπτεσθαι γυναῖκα itself. When referring to the appearance of these two words together in various sources of literature, he states, "In all of these occurrences it is a euphemism for sexual intercourse and in not one of them is there the slightest hint that the idiom extends to something very close to 'take a wife' or 'marry.'"¹ This may be true in each of the references he cites, but that does not exclude the possibility of taking it in reference to marriage when the context calls for it. This is what Fisher argues for when he recognizes that the sexual intercourse spoken of in the text is spoken of in its proper occasion. Otherwise it would not only be not good for one to abstain but absolutely wrong if he partook in such activity.²

Secondly, Fee makes a structural case for the entire chapter. He states, "In 7:35 Paul begins a new topic, dealing with the never-before-married as to whether or not they should get married. It follows, therefore, that 7:1-24 is most likely not dealing with marriage at all in the sense of getting married (except of course in verses 8-9)."³ It is true, of course, that περὶ δὲ is accepted as a formula for starting a new theme. But this does not always seem to

¹Ibid., p. 307-308.

²Fisher, p. 98.

³Fee, p. 309.

make a clear line of demarcation between the two classes of people that he mentions. One of the ways that he argues for this distinction lies heavily in his understanding of the following verses.

The third point that he states as an argument against the traditional understanding of I Corinthians 7:1 is the meaning of verses 1-7 in general. He states this about verse 2. "In many ways this is the crucial text. . . . The question is whether Paul is qualifying his preference for celibacy by conceding marriage, or whether he is rejecting the Corinthians' advocacy of marital celibacy. All of the language of verse 2 argue for the latter."¹ To prove this, Fee states the meaning of the imperative "let each man have his own wife" to be assuming marriage and "is encouraging that married partners continue marriage."² But even if this is the case, it would not change the meaning of the general rule in verse 1. The reason for that statement in verse 2 is because of the problem of temptation that exists for most single people. "But because of fornication" has been taken by Fee to mean adultery.³ But this is the result of forced hermeneutics and not a natural understanding of the text. Paul could have used the normal word for adultery which is *μοιχεία*. There would be no need for Paul to use the general term for sexual sin (*πορνεία*) when he meant adultery.

¹Ibid., p. 310.

²Ibid., p. 310.

³Ibid., p. 311.

Fee acknowledges that the strongest argument used for understanding verse 1 in the traditional way is verse 7. The way he avoids making Paul encourage single people to remain single is to say that he is still speaking to married people. He states:

There is little question that Paul is both single and celibate and that he demands celibacy of all singles. But celibacy and singleness are not identical ideas especially in a context where some are arguing for celibacy (abstinence from sexual relations) within marriage. . . . Paul at this point seems to be affirming their position in v. 1. But true celibacy as a charisma does not mean simply singleness. Rather, as Barrett following Bachmann argues, it means to be completely free from any need of sexual fulfillment.¹

Again, he takes a position that does not seem natural to the text. By taking this verse and applying it to married people, he seems to take a superficial interpretation.

Fee suggests the possibility of another argument with the Corinthian question but does not recognize it as valid data to do exegetical work. The summary of this argument, though, is that if one knew the problem that the Corinthians posed in their letter to Paul, then one could understand why Paul answered the way he did regarding marriage. Fee considers the Corinthian problem as some form of Hellenistic dualism entered into their understanding of being "spiritual."² But in so stating this, he is merely "begging the question."

Therefore, due to the unnatural interpretation that

¹Ibid., p. 312.

²Ibid., p. 307, 314.

such a position must follow, it is not the view that has commended itself to most scholars. Since there is no reason to take this any other way than that which is natural, the traditional interpretation is the preferred view.

CHAPTER II

THE CELIBACY PRINCIPLE IN PAUL'S WRITINGS

How does the principle in I Corinthians 7:1 compare with what Paul states elsewhere in Scripture? The answer to that question should first be examined within the context of I Corinthians 7. This is where Paul seems to make his most thorough teaching on the matter.

Immediate Parallel Passages

Within the chapter, it is very easy to see which state the apostle Paul prefers for his readers. In verse 7 he states that he wants all men (generically speaking) to be single like he was. That he was single at this time is not questionable. This makes this one of the strongest statements that he makes to encourage other single people to remain in that state.

The Gift of Celibacy

However, it must also be noticed that this statement is qualified by a certain contingency. That is, that one should have continence before he sets himself to the task of being single. This qualification is set off very sharply by the strong adversative *ἀλλά*. By doing this he is emphasizing that he did not want anyone abstaining from marriage

who did not have the control to do so. That is why he speaks of this as a special gift from God.

That Paul is speaking of the gift of celibacy in this verse is further amplified in verse 9. Leon Morris describes this gift by stating, "Paul had a number of special gifts (charismata), one of which enabled him to remain unmarried. He recognizes that continence is a special divine gift."¹ As to whom this gift is given, there is no question that Paul perceives it as being exceptional (verse 2). Those who have it should have no problem recognizing it because of its obvious characteristics (verse 9). It should also be recognized that in verse 9 it is explicitly for the person that is not so gifted with self control that it would be better (κρεῖττον) for that person to marry.

But the question then becomes what are these obvious characteristics that make the gift so recognizable? The answer to this question can be seen in the word πυροῦσθαι. Friedrich Lang describes Paul's use of this word here when he states, "Paul uses this term only in a transf. (transferred, parenthesis mine) sense and only in the passive for being enflamed by emotions . . . The context yields the clear sense to be consumed with the fire of sexual desire which is attested also in the Greek world."²

¹Leon Morris, The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), p. 107.

²TDNT, s.v. "πυρόω," by F. Lang, 6:949-950.

This consumption of the inner soul, which is caused by abstinence of the natural passion, is intensified when one is constantly being exposed to temptation. That was the fear that Paul had for the Corinthians. Perhaps it is for this reason that Paul encourages the group to marry.

That Paul does not encourage everyone to follow his wishes in the first clause of verse 7 can be seen in the structure of the grammar in the second clause. When speaking of the various gifts, he uses the pronoun ὁ δέ to stress the fact that these gifts are individualized. The ὁ μὲν . . . ὁ δέ specifies different sorts of gifts. For more application of the principles of this gift, Kenneth Curtis' monograph deals some with it as a minor problem.¹

Who Are The Unmarried

It is important to examine the identity of the unmarried in order to see its relevancy to the present topic. This word is only used four times in the New Testament, all of which are used in this chapter.

The Separation View

There are those who believe that this group consists of those who have separated from their spouses.² This is based on its use in verse 11. But based on the recommendation of verse 9 to allow these to remarry, this would be in

¹Kenneth Curtis, "'As I Myself' I Corinthians 7:6-7" (Unpublished Thesis, Grace Theol. Sem., 1970), pp. 49-51.

²Charles Swindoll expressed this view on his daily radio program.

conflict with what Jesus commanded in Matthew 5:32. This is therefore an invalid interpretation.

The Unmarried Man View

This interpretation expresses more latitude according to Fred Fisher. As he states, this word "could include the widows; but since it is the masculine plural in Greek, the probability is that he was thinking of unmarried men--both bachelors and widowers. Paul spoke later on in the chapter about the situation of unmarried girls (cf. vs. 25)."¹

The problem with this view is that it excludes the unmarried man from the section that is supposed to be speaking mostly to the unmarried girls (verses 25-35). But verses 26-33 can all be seen to include unmarried men. Therefore, it is unlikely that this is the proper interpretation.

The Widower View

One of the proponents for this interpretation is Gordon Fee. In his article on this passage he gives some helpful insight as to the nature of the group of people. In reference to W. F. Orr's work on this subject he states, "He . . . points out, from LSJ, that agamos is the ordinary word in Greek for "widower." And since widows would already be included among the "unmarried" in the term agamos, why should they be singled out unless they are the female counterpart to the 'agomoi.'"² This seems to be the most natural

¹Fred Fisher, Commentary on I and II Corinthians (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1975), p. 104.

²Gordon Fee, "I Corinthians 7:1 in the NIV," p. 310.

way to understand this term because, as such, it fits the immediate context better.

Therefore, since this section does not deal with the topic of this thesis in that it does not deal with the never-before-married man or woman, it is irrelevant.

The Advice to the Virgins

This section of Scripture is often viewed as one major unit. That unit would cover verses 25-40. This idea stems from the appearance of the words $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}$ in verse 25. Since this appears to have the same sentence structure that verse 1 begins with, it is thought that a new theme is being introduced. But there are a few recurring items that are found in this section that are also found in the last section. Yet, by and large, there is a clear distinction between the two major sections. The first section deals mostly with the married group (verses 1-24) and the last section, which will be dealt with here, deals mostly with the single group (verses 25-35). Verses 36-50 deal specifically with the parents of virgin girls and widows¹ and will not be considered. John Calvin describes this section this way: "What he is now about to state he had previously touched upon, but briefly and somewhat obscurely. He accordingly intimates more explicitly what his views are respecting

¹Robert J. Cover, Identity of The Virgin in I Corinthians 7:36 (Unpublished Thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1960), pp. 38-39.

virginity."¹

Verses 25-37 seem to be the section that deals most explicitly with Paul's attitude toward the single life. It is in this section that Paul's statement in verse 1 is thoroughly expounded. Charles Swindoll has this to say about this important paragraph of Scripture:

One main point is communicated in these verses. . . . The main point of the passage is this: REMAINING UNMARRIED IS DESIRABLE, BUT IT IS NOT DEMANDED. Rather than singleness being considered an undesirable life style, God offers different counsel; namely, the single life is desirable, but he is not demanding it.²

As was mentioned in a previous section, there are some who have taken this paragraph to be primarily addressed to female virgins and not to bachelors.³ These would understand that whatever is addressed to bachelors is incidental. But this does not seem to be the case. In verse 26, ἀνθρώπου is used, which can include both genders which also seems to be the thrust for whatever follows. And only that which occurs in verse 34 is there specific mention of the female virgin. The frequent references to the male gender in verses 27-28a and 32-33 show that Paul is referring to virginity in general.

Another problem that needs to be pointed out briefly

¹John Calvin, Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), p. 251.

²Charles Swindoll, Singleness (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1981), p. 5.

³Morris, p. 115.

deals with a statement that Paul makes in verse 25. The question concerns the statement, ". . . I have no command but I give an opinion . . ." Some have taken this to mean that the following advice is not inspired. But as Kenneth Curtis also points out, this is quite to the contrary.¹

As to the advice itself, James Boyer has this to say, "With regard to this matter he has no direct statement of Jesus. Neither has he a command by inspiration (cf. verse 6). This is another case of 'permission;' either course of action is right or good."²

Benefits of Single Life

It is the central theme of this chapter that Paul is encouraging those that are totally able to be single. Within the particular section, Paul lists several reasons why it is more advantageous for single people to choose singleness as the alternative life style to marriage. As to the number of reasons within his list there are some divergent opinions among writers, but it is generally accepted that there are at least three. For the purpose of this thesis the three that James Boyer cites will be considered.

The Present Distress

There are three suggested ways to interpret the phrase. There are some who feel that this distress is

¹Curtis, pp. 47-48.

²James Boyer, For a World Like Ours (Winona Lake: Brethren Missionary Herald, 1971), p. 82.

limited to the situation which was present at Corinth when the epistle was written.¹ Others feel that this could be applied to today because Paul was speaking in general terms which are also prevalent through history.² The third view, which does not seem to be a valid interpretation, holds that Paul misunderstood the time element of the second coming and was encouraging his readers to prepare themselves for this event.³

As to the second view John Calvin writes, "the disquietude with which the saints are unnecessarily harassed in the present life"⁴ is what is being portrayed in this phrase. Swindoll makes this phrase more pertinent to the situation behind the iron curtain when he states, "You will find occasions where married partners were in such agony they openly declared they wished they were never married."⁵ It is possible that this is the kind of distress that Paul was talking about.

But this does not seem to be the picture historically. Merrill Tenney does not see this time as being filled with persecution. It is generally calculated that Paul

¹J. Boyer, R. Gromacki, G. Wilson

²J. Calvin, F. Groshiede

³C. Hodge, M. R. DeHaan, F. Godet

⁴Calvin, p. 253.

⁵Swindoll, p. 9.

wrote the epistle around A. D. 57.¹ Tenney states this about this particular time: "Even when tensions developed at Rome, the provinces were not immediately affected so that the period from A. D. 54 to 59, known as 'the golden quinquennium' was comparatively peaceful and prosperous."² The actual wave of persecution did not begin until A. D. 64.³

It is, therefore, the opinion of this writer that Paul was probably speaking of the problems that are inherent to the state of marriage itself. Such an idea could be emphasizing the conflict that was started at the fall between husband and wife. But one must be careful not to assert an answer to the question of interpretation too dogmatically because of the ambiguity of the statement.

The Time is Short

The meaning of this expression also has three interpretations. Again, the list that James Boyer cites is the most concise representation: "(a) until the coming of the Lord, (b) until the storm of persecution breaks on them, (c) a general expression meaning the transitoriness of the present order."⁴ Of these, the last seems most reasonable.

¹Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976 [reprinted]. p. 441.

²Merrill Tenney, New Testament Times (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), p. 285.

³Ibid., p. 289.

⁴Boyer, p. 83.

It also seems more consistent with the previous benefit.

How, then, does this contribute to the present argument? When one considers the time that it takes in order to make a marriage function properly, this can be self-evident. Swindoll gives some worthwhile insight on this matter when he states, "In light of the brevity of time, marrying and being involved in the cultivation of a marriage can be, quite frankly, an unwise investment of your time if you are the type of person who genuinely desires to be committed to Jesus Christ 100 percent of your waking hours."¹ He emphasizes later that this involves constant availability to the cause of Christ so as not to make a dichotomy between marriage and total commitment to Christ. This would have to be regulated to what one's physical health allows. This places a rather heavy responsibility on the single person that, unfortunately, too few are willing to bear totally.

However, it must be admitted that this advantage can turn into a disadvantage at times. There are always those mundane tasks that the single person has to do around the home that could deter his energies from the service of the Lord. But this time is minimal and should not greatly alter that person's priorities.

Would Have You Without Carefulness

This is somewhat involved with the previous reason. It extends into the believer's involvement with the earthly

¹Swindoll, p. 14.

elements of the world. In this section of Scripture (verses 32-35) the advantage for the single person is his apparent uninvolvedness of the cares of the world. He is free to concentrate on the eternal perspectives.

Paul uses an interesting word for care. The only other time that the verb μεριμνᾷ is used is in a negative context (except for Philippians 2:20 and I Corinthians 12:25 where both express a natural care for a good purpose). In Matthew 6, Christ is urging His followers not to take thought or be anxious (μεριμνᾷ) about the necessities of life. Instead, they are to set their attention on the kingdom of heaven. In this context the unmarried are said to be able to concern themselves with the things of the Lord that they may please Him. But those that are married are naturally concerned about the things of the world in order to please each other.

It is important to see the validity of such natural concern as Boyer states well, "It is worthy to note that the apostle recognized the responsibility of family as valid claims upon the attention of the believer, even taking precedence over service for Christ (cf. I Timothy 5:8)."¹ So, even though it is a divinely placed obligation to provide for one's own family, it is still a deterrence to the perpetual seeking of the eternal things of God.

Paul's Attitude Reiterated

Verse 35 is an amplification of verses 7 and 25 in

¹Boyer, p. 83.

that Paul expresses that he did not want to compel his readers who were single to a decision, but left it up to the individual. At the same time he wanted them to understand that his preference of celibacy for them was for their own benefit. This would not only be good for them personally but also for those who receive their ministry and who see their honest conduct.¹

That this expresses the innermost concern of Paul for his single readers to follow his advice is clearly shown in this verse. And even when he gives them total freedom to choose marriage or celibacy, the last words to them are "to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord" through their single state.

Parallel Passages in Pauline Writing

Since the apostle Paul does not deal with the single person as directly anywhere else as he does in I Corinthians 7, it is necessary to consider passages where he makes any kind of value judgment on marriage. Other aspects that could be considered are the Pauline passages that imply that the single life would best be suited.

One passage that has been taken to express the honorable nature of marriage is Hebrews 13:4. Assuming for the sake of argument, that Paul wrote Hebrews, it is important to examine what he said about the institution of marriage. Homer Kent, Jr. answers the question of what the point of

¹TDNT, s.v. "εὐσχήμων" by H. Greeven, 2:771.

this passage really is when he states:

The whole section is hortatory in nature. . . . It was against those sins which defiled marriage before it was established (fornicators, pornous), or after it had been consummated (adulterers, moichous) that this injunction was aimed, rather than against ascetics who had no use for marriage at all. It should be observed, however, that the order to keep marriage honorable and the marriage bed undefiled by any act of unfaithfulness implies that marriage is inherently pure unless sin sullies it. Thus ascetic views which impugn the sanctity of marriage are also ruled out by this passage, even though that was probably not the chief purpose of the writer at this juncture.¹

Hence, although the honor of marriage is upheld in this passage, the real point is that purity be maintained within it.

In I Timothy 4, Paul describes the error of those who fall away from the truth in the last days. In verse 3 he points out that one of the false teachings that they promote will be to forbid marriage. Thusly, he exposes the error of false asceticism that existed in that day. This also exposes the erroneous doctrine of clerical celibacy found in the Roman Catholic Church all through history. Paul in no way insisted on this course of action. In the Corinthian passage he is very careful to let his readers know that the advice he offered was of their own choice. Whereas, these false teachers would insist on abstinence in order to achieve a higher form of spirituality--which thinking the apostle called the doctrine of demons in verse 1.

There is another passage that deals more with the

¹Homer A. Kent, Jr., The Epistle to the Hebrews (Winona Lake, IN: Brethren Missionary Herald, 1981 [reprint], p. 279.

second objective of this section, and that is II Timothy 2:4. This portion of Scripture describes the attitude that a good soldier of Jesus Christ must have. It states: "No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier." The phraseology of this verse seems very reminiscent of I Corinthians 7:32 and 34. It is therefore the opinion of this writer that the single person is better suited for this kind of relationship than a married person. Although married life does not necessitate entanglement in the affairs of the world, it does involve a distraction within those things.

Other passages that deal more directly with the institution of marriage as a whole, such as Ephesians 5:22-33, will be dealt with in a later chapter. But, generally, it can be concluded from Paul's writings that both singleness and marriage are good but in some ways the single life is preferred for certain people.

CHAPTER III

PARALLEL PASSAGES IN PRE-PAULINE WRITINGS

Was Paul a revolutionist when he taught that singleness was more desirable than marriage for a select group of people? Some think that he was. And admittedly, the Old Testament economy stressed the importance for a man to be married. But as will be shown later in the chapter, Paul's attitude toward the single life was not as novel as some would like to believe.

Old Testament

Frank Staggs points out that the perspective of the Old Testament economy seemed to have made its preference for marriage quite apparent. He states:

Although the single life appears here and there with fullest respect and on occasion by explicit command of God, nowhere does Scripture seem to contemplate the single life as normative, though it is not to be overlooked that in much of the text marital status is not an agenda item. The necessity behind the union of the sexes is seen not only for propagation for life at all levels, but for the human fulfillment itself, apart from procreation: 'It is not good that man should be alone.' (Genesis 2:18) Single persons in the Bible, among them some of highest standing and achievement, are seemingly exceptional, although more may be single than is disclosed.¹

¹Frank Staggs, "Single Person and the Church," Review and Expositor 74 (Winter 1977):7.

Genesis 2:18

The first text to be considered will be the Genesis passage that makes an outright statement that it is not good for a man to be alone. That this is generally true there can be little doubt. This truism is just as true today as it was when it was first pronounced in the earliest days of man. There have been various attempts to explain the passage in light of I Corinthians 7:1. Hodge presents the problem concisely when he states, "Paul cannot be understood in a sense which would make him directly contradict the Word of God."¹ And to answer the dilemma he states, "If, therefore, Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture, we must understand the Apostle as intending to say, 'Considering your peculiar circumstances, it is expedient for you not to marry.'"² But if the apostle meant this why did he not say it. This general statement should not be taken to refer to a specific group of people which could have been done by using the simple personal pronoun *ὑμῖν*, when it was given to men in general (*ἀνθρώπων*). This is not a conclusive argument against such an interpretation. However, the burden of proof really rests on Hodge since his interpretation rests so much on the rearrangement of the text.

Another attempt to answer the paradox was made by Godet. He states: "The believer who lives in union with

¹Charles Hodge, An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974 [reprinted]), p. 109.

²Ibid., p. 109.

Christ is no longer in the same position as the natural man. He has in the Lord that complement of his personal life, which the latter seeks in marriage."¹ The trouble with this is that at the time that Genesis 2:18 was given, man was not yet in his natural or enslaved state. Rather he was in full communion with the Lord, being innocent of any transgressions.

The best answer given among commentators concerning this problem is from John Calvin. He states:

In so far as a wife is a help to her husband, so as to make his life happy, that is in accordance with God's institution; for in the beginning God appointed it so, that the man without the woman was, as it were, but half a man, and felt himself destitute of special and necessary assistance, and the wife is, as it were, the completing of the man. Sin afterwards came in to corrupt that institution of God; . . . Hence whatever evil or inconvenience there is in marriage, that arises from the corruption of the divine institution.²

Hence, what Calvin is saying is that when man fell, Genesis 2:18 became corrupted and possibly not true in all situations of marriage. Yet this still does not answer the problem conclusively.

In this writer's opinion the answer may be found in a combination of the last two answers. Because marriage has been corrupted in so far as function itself goes, it is now necessary for man to work in order to provide for his wife and family. This necessitates some kind of involvement in material things. In the pre-fall state, such activity was not necessary. Man and woman co-existed in the garden

¹Godet, p. 321

²Calvin, p. 223-224.

provided for by the Lord Himself. When sin came, it corrupted all.

In the Christian realm, there are those who because of an indwelling Spirit and a commitment to the Lord are perfectly content on serving the Lord alone. Some have been so gifted as to be more affective alone. Although this is more commonly true of women, it can also be for a man.

Proverbs 18:22

Another Old Testament passage that has direct bearing on this subject is Proverbs 18:22. It states: "He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the Lord." In his book on the interpretation of Scripture, Berkeley Mickelsen gives four hermeneutical principles for interpreting the Proverbs. The fourth rule seems to apply here which states: "Do not explain the obvious in proverbs. Interpretation should center around the obscure."¹ Since this proverb has no apparent context, its statement should be understood as an outright declaration. This declaration should be understood not to mean anything more than its simplistic appearance shows.

How then does it compare with the Corinthian passage? There is nothing contradictory about this verse in relation to the thought in I Corinthians 7:1. Both verses are equally true given the right situation. And, as in many other

¹A. Berkeley Michelsen, Interpreting the Bible (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), p. 335.

generalities, both have exceptions. But the point is that these are not opposing principles. As was pointed out earlier, being good not to marry does not make it wrong to do so. I Corinthians 7:1 is conditioned upon the person involved. Proverbs 18:22 can be good even if it involves the person spoken of in I Corinthians 7:1 who has control.

Jeremiah 16:1-4

The only mention in the Old Testament where celibacy is commanded by the Lord is in the case of Jeremiah. God had a specific purpose in restraining this prophet from marrying and that is stated quite well by Irving Jensen when he says: "In this place, God said, would come grievous deaths of entire families with no burial because of the mass of corpses. Jeremiah was commanded not to marry here, and therefore not to have children, in order to be spared the future sorrow of a bereaved husband and father."¹ If this is the proper interpretation of this passage, then it could be related with I Corinthians 7:26 and the principle of the present distress.

Psalm 78:63

This passage of Scripture is expressive of how devastating the wrath of God was upon a disobedient Israel. In verse 78 it is particularly expressive of how this judgment affected the young people of Israel. The young men

¹Irving Jensen, Jeremiah and Lamentations (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 55.

were consumed with fire and the young women were left desolate, doomed to never marry. With this illustration from the Psalms, it is very plain what the ideal marital status was. It does much to show what the attitude toward the single life was in the Old Testament times.

Therefore, it can be concluded that what Stagg said about marriage in the Old Testament is true. But even though there was a considerably high view of marriage during this time, there were some people that were used of a God a great deal that were probably single. Men like Elijah, who were certainly free to travel at will or command could not have had much of a family life. But this still seems to be the exception by far.

The Gospel Writings

There is not much change in the New Testament concerning the amount the Bible writers dedicated to the idea of marriage in their writings. It was still not an agenda item. But, there seems to be more said about singleness and the state of marriage than that which is disclosed in the Old Testament. The reason why the gospel writings can be included in this pre-Pauline classification is because the events that transpired within them precede the time of Paul's rise to apostleship. It is recognized that some of the gospel writings were completed subsequent to the Pauline writings.

Matthew 19:10-12

One of the interesting passages in the Gospels that

has a particular connection with I Corinthians 7:1 is Matthew 19:10-12. This is the passage that was used earlier to show the link between the use of *συνθέρω* and *καλός*. But it also helps to illustrate the theme of this thesis in two ways. It expresses the trouble in the flesh that can accompany marriage as well as the gift of celibacy.

The point of the question that the disciples were asking was that since it can be so troublesome to have to deal with the possibility of divorce, would it not be easier never to get married in the first place. The reply of Jesus to this question is valuable in determining a change of thinking from the traditions of the Old Testament. He does not deny the correctness of their thinking. He deals with this question as a true and valid statement. In His response of "Not all men can accept this," He implies that there are some that can.

But Jesus seems to change the direction of the question. Instead of abstaining from marriage because of the troubles that it can bring to the flesh, He reflects that abstinence of marriage is beneficial in the eternal perspective. Therefore, He brings the principle more in line with I Corinthians 7.

Matthew 24:38

Other passages which possibly shed some light on how marriage can deter men from their appointed responsibility to God are Matthew 24:38 and Luke 17:27. These state that in the days of Noah men were, among other things,

involved with marrying and giving in marriage. It is interesting that Christ should use this as an illustration to show the spiritual lethargy of the people of that day. There is nothing wrong with marrying, nor for that matter with eating and drinking, but these people were so obsessed with these valid earthly activities that they were neglecting the proper relationship with God. God was an intrusion on their materialistic enjoyments. And because of their spiritual unawareness, God's judgment came as a devastating surprise. Consequently, it is possible to get so bound up in a wife and family as to be distracted from spiritual responsibilities. This is related to the I Corinthians 7:33-34 principle indirectly because it involves those who are not regenerate.

Luke 14:20

Jesus used a parable to show how people can be uninterested in spiritual blessings in Luke 14:20. Even though they had been privileged by being personally invited (indicating Israel's opportunity to know of the Messiah through the Old Testament writings) they rejected the offer. One of the excuses used was that a guest had married a wife. Again, the most that this can prove is that it is possible to have this as a deterrent to spiritual things.

CHAPTER IV

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MARRIAGE

Throughout this thesis it has been the purpose of this writer to emphasize the attitude of the apostle Paul and others in the Scriptures toward the single life. In this chapter an attempt will be made to give the general teaching of the Scriptures on the subject of marriage itself. This is needed in order to demonstrate a proper Biblical balance that the Scriptures seem to have concerning these two different styles of life. This will be done by classifying the 31 references relating to marriage into three major categories. A few examples from each category will be examined to show the view of that classification. Those verses that have already been dealt with will not be included. It is hoped that this chapter will provide a complete perspective, from the Biblical viewpoint, on the goodness of marriage.

Its Earthly Character

There are only three references that express this kind of perspective on marriage, all of which speak of the same occasion. In Luke 20:34 and 35 Jesus made a contrast between the state of marriage on earth and the marriageless state of the angels in heaven. The purpose of this declaration was to refute a question of the Sadducees which was

asked in order to test Him.

N. Geldenhuys cites the true motives of this group when he states, "Evidently their object in asking the question is to make the belief in the resurrection look ridiculous and in this manner also to make the Master, who believes in the resurrection, look ridiculous in the sight of the multitude."¹ So although the purpose of this statement was not necessarily an assertion about marriage, the truth that is gleaned from it can be helpful to understand the nature of this institution in the light of eternity.

As an Analogy of a Spiritual Truth

There are five uses of the marriage relationship that illustrate either a spiritual truth or the vertical relationship that exists between God and His people. This will be considered in smaller categories in order to maintain the Biblical distinctions that are evident.

Of Christ and His Church

This analogy is most thoroughly portrayed by Ephesians 5:22-33. No illustration of Scripture can provide a picture of our relationship to Jesus Christ as completely as does this one. Both subjects of the marriage partnership are used by Paul to provide a source of spiritual truth replete with analogous expressions.

¹Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975 [reprinted]), p. 511.

The picture begins with verse 23 where the husband is said to be the head of the wife in the same sense that Christ is the head of the church. As such, the wife is to be in complete submission as the church would be to Christ (verse 24). Conversely, the husband is to love his wife to the same extent that Christ loved the church (verses 25-30). The emphasis is placed on the husband and how he should love his wife. A complete description of that love is given by Paul who ultimately summarizes this relation by quoting Genesis 2:24. He does this to point to the beautiful picture of unity that exists between a man and his wife.

The important point that needs to be made is the way the apostle Paul culminates this entire section of Scripture in verse 32. Here, he clearly ties together the two truths that are being taught in this passage. This is such a great illustration that it is difficult to determine which truth is being expounded. Nevertheless, it is important to see the special relationships that are expressed in this passage.

This illustration is further amplified in Revelation where it speaks of the church actually being the bride of Christ. This picture of the marriage of the church and her groom in Revelation 19 is when Christ is said to be presenting His bride at the marriage supper of the Lamb. John Walvoord states this about the illustration: "The marriage symbolism is beautifully fulfilled in the relation of Christ to His church. The wedding contract is consummated

at the time the church is redeemed. Every true Christian is joined to Christ in a legal marriage."¹ It must also be mentioned that this picture is unique to the church.

As an Illustration of a Spiritual Truth

There are two spiritual truths that are illustrated with the marriage relationship. The first involves the idea of preparation. In Matthew 25:1-14, Jesus used the wedding situation to illustrate the need to be prepared for His second coming. This picture cannot be fully understood until one understands the ceremonialism of the Jewish weddings of that day.² However, there is little emphasis on marriage in this text and would not be helpful in determining any spiritual truth other than preparedness.

The other spiritual truth that is illustrated by the marriage relationship is found in Romans 7:1-4. The spiritual truth that is related here is one of being released from the law in order to be joined to Christ. The principle is that death severs a person from a marriage contract thereby freeing the individual to marry another. Conversely, when a person dies to the law through Christ, he is thereby released from it in order to be legitimately joined to Christ. Again, this passage is not a treatise on marriage but of the union of the Christian with Christ.

¹John Walvoord, The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), p. 271.

²Ibid., p. 271.

Propriety Within Marriage

The last classification is by far the most common usage. This category must be considered in three minor sections.

The Choice of a Partner

When Abraham sent his servant out to find a wife for his son, he told him not to get her from the daughters of the Canaanites. This principle is carried over in the law in Deuteronomy 7:3 and repeated in the conquest in Joshua 23:12. Thus, the practice of separation was particularly important in the area of marriage.

It is commonly understood that Balaam caused Israel much trouble because of his advice to other nations to intermarry with the people of Israel. Because Israel did not obey God in this regard, a great set back in their progress resulted.

Purity Within Marriage

This is emphasized throughout Scripture. The law demanded faithfulness in Deuteronomy 22:22. Christ made it even more stringent in Matthew 5:27-30. Paul warned against it in I Corinthians 6. When the marriage relationship is profaned, then the unifying affect of marriage is destroyed. Strict penal laws were instituted in the law against disobedience. Therefore this was considered a very serious offense.

From this it can be seen that the institution of

marriage itself was considered to be a vital relationship in the making of the nation of Israel. Marriage is therefore not taken lightly, but to be held in a high position of honor.

Practical Outworking of Marriage

The Scriptures give some very pertinent insights on how a marriage should be carried out. This insight can be found in the Song of Solomon. Within this fascinating portion of Scripture, one can find how a courtship is properly developed, a fine expression of love for one's companion on the wedding day, as well as how difficulties within marriage are worked out.

This passage of Scripture is not to be taken in any other way than its actual, literal presentation. Too often its explicitness is thought to be too intimate not to have a more spiritual significance. But such an attitude ought to be shunned.

The real purpose within this book is to give the readers an appreciation of what a good relationship between a husband and wife should be like. It also gives a high aesthetic value to this very intimate relationship. This kind of relationship should be considered the goal of every marital union.

CONCLUSION

There are several things that can be concluded from the evidence given in this thesis. The first is that there is a general truism taught in I Corinthians 7:1. It is expedient, and perhaps even better for some, for a man not to get married. However, due to the fact that most Christians are not physically and socially able to abstain from marriage, it is a general rule that most Christians ought to marry.

But to the exceptional Christian who has adequate self-control to overcome the constant barrage of temptation, that person is urged to remain single. When such a person decides to remain single, his commitment to the cause of Christ is almost totally unhampered by earthly cares and distractions. Yet such a person is still totally free to marry if he so desires.

It may also be concluded that although marriage has its disadvantages in the area of partial distraction to the cause of Christ, it is still an honorable status that God Himself has ordained for a specific purpose. If such a condition is chosen it should be lived in its divinely commanded pattern.

Finally, in relation to the single person, it is first suggested that the church take more advantage of the efficiency that the single person can offer in the ministry of

Christ. When this is done, perhaps much more work can be accomplished in the total outreach of the Church. Secondly, it is necessary to encourage those who are single to consider Philippians 4:11. Paul exhorts that in whatever state a person finds himself, he or she ought to be content. Single people ought to be able to recognize the advantage that they have within themselves and act accordingly with an attitude of thankfulness.

APPENDIX

Was the Apostle Paul Ever Married

The question of whether or not Paul was ever married is one of great interest to single people who have never experienced the state of marriage. Frank Stagg states the problem this way:

If single, it is not certain whether Paul was widowed or never married. The much used argument that if once a member of the Sanhedrin he had then to be married, cannot be demonstrated. Acts 26:10 does not settle the matter of membership in the Sanhedrin, where Paul is quoted as saying "I cast my vote against them." . . . This may imply that Paul was actually a voting member of the Sanhedrin, or the expression may have been proverbial, as when we say, "I vote for that." Further, there is no explicit evidence that one had to be married to be a member of the Sanhedrin.¹

These comments express the sentiments of this writer as to the definiteness of this question. The question that needs to be answered is whether or not it was necessary for a member of the Sanhedrin to be married. If the question is adequately answered, the question of whether or not Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin would not be necessary to deal with.

Ken Curtis deals with this question in his monograph about the marital status of Paul. In this work, Curtis quotes F. W. Farrar who gives a list of qualifications for

¹Stagg, p. 7.

membership in the Sanhedrin.¹ Within this list he states that the member had to have a family of his own but he does not document such an understanding. Whereas he does document qualifications that he lists earlier in the paragraph. Such a comment therefore is unwarranted. In saying that one needed to have a family implies a wife. To see if such a qualification was actually recognized in Judaic studies, this writer wrote to Spartus College of Judaica to see what information was available. A response came from Dan Sharon, the reference librarian at the college. He said, "This is in reply to your question as to marriage being a prerequisite to membership in the Sanhedrin. I can find no evidence of this. The sources I consulted were: (1) Encyclopedia Judaica--"Marriage," "Sanhedrin," (2) Hoenig, Sidney, The Great Sanhedrin and (3) Mantel, Hugo, Studies in the History of the Sanhedrin."

With this in mind one should not be too quick to conclude that Paul was at one time married, although it should also be pointed out that this does not automatically mean that Paul was never married. It merely takes the necessity of marriage away.

Although the answer cannot be determined for certain, this writer would like to speculate that Paul wrote the words of I Corinthians 7:1 from the heart of experience.

¹Curtis, P. 22-23.

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