**The Church at Corinth**

**A Church Facing Inner Problems – #19**

**Marriage and Celibacy**

**1 Corinthians 7:1-9**

***1 Corinthians 7:1*** *Now for the matters about which you wrote: It is good for a man not to touch a woman.* ***2*** *Yet because of instances of fornication, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.* ***3*** *The husband should fulfill his conjugal duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.* ***4*** *The wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband does; likewise a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife does.* ***5*** *Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by mutual consent for a time, to be free for prayer; but then be together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.* ***6*** *I say this as a concession, not as a command.* ***7*** *I wish that all were as I myself am, but each one has a particular gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.* ***8*** *Now to the unmarried and to widows I say: it is good for them to remain as I am,* ***9*** *but if they are not exercising self-control, they should marry; for it is better to marry than to burn.*

**Overall Picture**

**1. Recommendations**

In this section we don’t have a formal treatise on marriage and celibacy (virginity). Paul must have had some questions posed to him in the letter that we don’t have. One need only look at verses 6, 10, 12, 17, 25, 26, 35, 40 to see how Paul is developing a set of recommendations concerning marriage and celibacy. Please note that Paul is carefully saying, *“I Say, not the Lord,”* which put the teaching on the same level of the Jewish Halakah when a Rabbi teaches something that was not spelled out clearly in the Law. So we have here what look likes an early Christian Halakah.

**2. Sexuality**

We don’t have here a full treatment of human sexuality. Paul begins with a general statement: *“It is good for a man not to touch a woman.”* Unfortunately, Paul does not explain that statement further. Paul is quoting a saying from the letter that has been sent to him, asking whether he would approve of what was happening in the society where sex was not forbidden in the Roman parties. Was the original question about (a) abstention from marriage or (b) abstention from intercourse within marriage? Or was it about sexual immorality?

**3. Monogamy**

Paul begins by advocating monogamous marriage, and then enunciates another principle, stressing the mutual commitment that married persons have to their spouses in marriage (7:3-4). The husband has the right to intercourse with his wife, and she with him; both are equal in this regard, and neither can deprive the other of that right, and neither can act as though he or she owned his or her own body. In this regard, having expressed the principle, Paul again adds a qualification: “*Do not deprive one another,*” except perhaps by mutual consent, for a time, and for a good reason (e.g., prayer). Thus in verses 1-4 Paul affirms not only monogamous marriage, but also the equality of spouses in that union. He does this without invoking the formula he will use in Galatians 3:28: *“neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female,”* or what he will imply in 1 Corinthians 7:32-34, when he enlarges his view of Christian marriage and the spouses’ mutual concern for each other, even beyond the matter of intercourse that is mentioned in verses 3-4.

**4. Gifts**

The first statement that Paul quoted “*I wish that all were as I myself am*” (7:7); now he counsels the unmarried and widow(er)s “*to remain as I am*” (7:8). Again he qualifies his principle by adding a fundamental conviction: God calls human beings to diverse modes of life, “*Each one has a particular gift from God*” (7:7); some are called to marriage, and some to virginity.

***Note - three negative attitudes***

Any reader can notice three reasons for what Paul has been saying about marriage, each of them negative:

1. *“Because of danger of falling into fornication”* (7:2)

2. *“That Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control”* (7:5)

3. *“It is better to marry than to burn”* (7:9).

Such negative reasons are undoubtedly evoked by what he realizes as the problem in the Corinthian community, but it does not follow that Paul “evaluates marriage as a status of less value than ‘not touching a woman’ (verse 1which became a slogan in the days of Tertullian 3rd century writer). Paul makes use of the comparative*,*  and the use of “better,” only in the restricted remarks of (verse 9 and later in verse 38) so he is not saying that celibacy or virginity is a better calling than marriage, as the teaching of this chapter is often paraphrased or encapsulated by later tradition to create later on Monastic life.

**5. Old Testament Teaching / Marriage and Children**

Paul could not distance himself from the OT, the book that was read in the church. In the OT marriage was seen as part of the “good creation” where humans were told

a. to “Increase and multiply” (Gen 1:28), and

b. it is a divine institution (Gen 2:24. Cf. also Exod 20:14, 17b; Lev 18:20; Ps 128:3.)

The Jewish historian Josephus summarized OT teaching in these words:

“The law [of Moses] recognizes only the natural sexual intercourse with a wife, and that if one intends to procreate children. … It orders (us), in marrying, not to be influenced by dowry, nor to take a woman by force, nor to win her by craftiness or deceit, but to woo her from him who is authorized to give her away. … The husband must have intercourse with this (wife) alone, and it is impious to assault her who belongs to another man. (*Against Apion* 2.24 §§199–201)

**6. Procreation**

Paul says nothing in this chapter or elsewhere about marriage for procreation as the goal of marriage, as mentioned by Josephus. Certain elements of Paul’s teaching on marriage and celibacy find parallels in ideas also current in the Greek world of his time, especially in the writings of Stoics and Cynics. By and large, Stoic teachers maintained that people who respected the gods would consider it a moral duty to marry and have children, because that fostered the city- state. An example is in Gaius Musonius Rufus, (Roman [Stoic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoicism) [philosopher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosopher) of the 1st century AD. He taught philosophy in [Rome](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rome) during the reign of [Nero](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nero), as consequence of which he was sent into exile in 65 AD, *Fragm. XIII*, which reads:

*“*The main point of marriage is a sharing of life and procreation of children.  For, he used to say, the husband and his spouse must come together, one with the other in such wise that they live with each other together, procreate [children] together, and hold all things in common, and nothing as one’s own, not even the body itself.”

**Paul and celibacy (virginity)**

Did Paul advocate celibacy or virginity? If he advocated either one, this would be something new to his Jewish background. The only clear instance of no marriage in the OT is the prophet Jeremiah, to whom the word of the Lord came instructing him not to take a wife in view of the doom facing the country at that time (Jer 16:1-4). Later on, in the Dead Sea Essene of the Jews in Judea, celibacy was practiced (Pliny the Elder, *Nat. Hist.* 5.15.73). Josephus even records that they did not marry because they held marriage in “contempt” (*Jewish War* 2.8.2120); but (cf. 2.8.13.160–61), where he knows of some Essenes who did marry. Philo of Alexandria also spoke of a group in Egypt known as the Therapeutae who avoided marriage.

The NT says nothing about John the Baptist or Jesus of Nazareth marrying. Isolated instances of celibacy are also known in the much later rabbinic tradition, e.g., Simeon ben Azzai lived in the first third of the 2nd century a celibate (Peter Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law,* 106 n. 60; cf. van der Horst, “Celibacy in Early Judaism”).

In the Greek world of Paul’s day, there were likewise instances of what has been misnamed “sacral celibacy: Plutarch (*De Iside et Osiride* 2 §§351f–352a) tells of service in the Temple of Isis requiring abstention from food and sexual intercourse. In the first century, Apollonius of Tyana was a noted celibate, as was Neopytha- gorean, a wandering sage (Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 1.13 *ad finem*).

**Text Study – 1 Corinthians 7:1-9**

**VERSE 7:1 –** *Now for the matters about which you wrote.*

Corinthian Christians were seeking advice.

*It is good for a man not to touch a woman*.

The statement employs ***kalon,***“good” (as in verses 8, 26; 9:15; Rom 14:21; Gal 4:18).

It should not be translated, “*it is better*”; that introduces a comparative not expressed in Paul’s Greek text, a comparative that has often led to the tendentious reading of this chapter and a misunderstanding that Paul preferred “celibacy to marriage”. ***Kalon***has often been understood as a reflection of LXX Gen 2:18, “*It is not good for the man to be alone.*” In using***kalon****,* Paul is not invoking a divine command; he is simply saying: “it is good” and this may reflect a debate among Christians of Corinth. It is clear that Paul goes on not merely to sanction marriage but to disapprove of abstinence within marriage. Paul uses “touch,” in the sense of sexual contact, as the verb is used in LXX Genesis 20:4, 6; Ruth 2:9; Prov 6:29. This is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. To change the meaning of the verb from “touching” to “marrying” changes the whole the chapter, which is merely introduced by (verse 1) marriage and celibacy. Paul did not write “it is better not to marry,” but rather “*it is good for a man not to touch a woman.*”

Paul was not advocating an ascetic ideal, sometimes paraphrased with philosophical, ideological, and even gnostic nuances that he himself would never have recognized which appeared in later centuries (Tertullian, *De Monogamia* 3.2; 2.1231; Jerome, *Adv. Iovinianum* 1.7; Augustine, *Confess.* 2.2.3).

**VERSE 7:2 –** *Yet because of instances of fornication, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband.*

 “Because of … fornications” and the use of ***porneias***(as in Matt 15:19; Mark 7:21) this is distinguished from “adultery” only in Greek. It indicates individual acts of fornication that can happen among human beings. Some NT scholars think that ***porneia***is employed here in a more generic sense, e.g., “sexual immorality.” This is possible, but the phrase in the Jerusalem Bible was twisted to read, “since sex is always a danger”. Generic use of the word “fornication” excludes fornication as a human conduct and is expressed explicitly as a reason for marrying (1 Thess 4:3“to keep yourselves from fornication.”

The idiom“*have a wife/husband*” means “be married.” What Paul says here and in verse 3 shows how he conceived husband and wife to be on a par, how marriage provides the only place for the legitimate expression of love and sexuality, and how different it was from the prevailing standards in Roman society, where fidelity was expected of the woman, but extramarital relations were presumed to be only for the man.

Genesis (2:18-24) is at the heart of Paul’s thinking about the marital union, and especially (verse 24), which was quoted by him in 6:16 as an argument against fornication, even though it is not quoted here.

**VERSE 3 –** *The husband should fulfill his conjugal duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.*

The husband and wife have a marital union. The husband’s body is not his own once he enters marriage, and the wife’s body is not her own either. Although this verse explains the mutual commitment of husband and wife in marriage, it says nothing about the purpose of that commitment that is procreation. Paul is silent and seems to ignore the Jewish emphasis on the procreation of children.

The Greek word ***aner***means a “male human being” or “man” as well as “husband,” and the Greek word ***gyne*** *means*  a “female human being” or “woman” as well as “wife.” So the translation “man” and “woman” was preferred because of the generic principle there enunciated. However, in verse 2 the same words are rendered “husband” and “wife,” because that verse speaks of monogamous marriage, which Paul now discusses.

**On Abstinence**

Peter Tomson in his good study *Paul and the Jewish Law* (p107), remarked that Paul moved along the lines of the Palestinian Jewish tradition about the mutual obligation of spouses. This mutual commitment has to be that of love and sharing life rather than a one-sided decision that reflects self-interest of one against the other. The Biblical use of man and woman as “one flesh” means in reality “one will” and “one life” that has no superior or hierarchical structure. This original vision that took place at our creation was marred later on by what took place in the OT history itself.

**Authority, Freedom, and Obligation**

**VERSE 4 –** *The wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband does; likewise a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife does.*

The Greek word ***opheile*** can mean“duty, obligation” or what is owed to one’s consort, which is more important than the other Greek word ***exousia****,* “right, freedom of choice, authority” of the individual spouse. Paul insists that husband and wife have equal conjugal obligations and equal sexual rights. Verses 3-4 imply that there were instances in Corinth of Christian spouses not agreeing on abstention from marital intercourse or asserting one’s rights over one’s body. Paul, however, emphasizes the value of Christian marriage, in which the physical body (*soma)* of the husband or wife is meant for marital intercourse with the spouse, as expressed by his Jewish heritage based on Genesis 2:24. It thus seeks to eliminate all selfishness from this aspect of marital life.

**VERSE 5 –** “*Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by mutual consent for a time”.* Literally, “do not cheat one another” This negative echoes what Paul said in 6:7-8 about cheating. Paul also stresses that even abstention from marital intercourse must be temporary and governed by “mutual consent,” lest a spouse feel cheated and lest it become an end in itself. That is why he uses“*for a limited time*” (see also 1 Thess 2:17; LXX Wis 4:4). The phrase does not mean “on suitable occasions,” it means “for a short time.” This advice undoubtedly was sparked by a question that the Corinthian Christians had asked in their letter. Perhaps the query was motivated by OT passages that speak of abstention from intercourse with a woman on certain occasions (such as (1 Sam 21:4–6; Lev 15:18; Exod 19:15). What Paul is speaking about is clearly not a practice of celibacy when it confronts a spouse’s conjugal rights. Celibacy denotes a state of living unmarried, or of not having a spouse, or of living as a virgin. The practice of it does not encounter a spouse’s conjugal rights.

**VERSE 5 (cont.) –** *To be free for prayer*  (or) *that you (plural) may have time for prayer.*

This was also recognized in the later Jewish tradition, as was abstention in order to study the Torah. In the book of Book of Tobit (Book of Tobias in the Apochrypha) recall that Tobias summons his bride Sarah to get out of bed in order to pray that the Lord grant them mercy. In Jerome’s translation in the Vulgate, Tobias asked Sarah to abstain from intercourse for three nights in order to pray. An instance of such prayer might be that for the city, recommended in Jeremiah 29:7.

**VERSE 5 (cont.) –** *But then be together again …*

The Greek phrase ***epi to auto****,* “together,” is used euphemistically for marital intercourse.

**VERSE 5 (cont.) –** *So that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control* (or) *because of your self-indulgence*

This would give Satan the chance for his testing. Paul speaks of the archenemy of humanity as seeking to seduce married couples, when he means that they themselves might succumb to a lack of self-control.

**VERSE 6 –** *I say this as a concession, not as a command* (or) *by way of concession*

I.e., to meet you halfway. Paul introduces his personal authority behind such concession.

**VERSE 7 –** *I wish that all were as I myself am.*

Literally, this means “I desire all human beings to be even as myself,” i.e., unmarried or celibate – or at least capable to resist sensual attractions, which make it possible for him to live without marriage.

**Marriage and Celibacy are Gifts from God**

**VERSE 7 (cont.) –** *But each one has a particular gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.*

(Cf. Rom 12:6). The *charisma* (gifts) differ according to the grace given to individual Christians. Hence marriage or non- marriage is not just a matter of individual preference, but is a divine gift to the individual person. In this context, both states of life are regarded as a “particular gift - ***idion charisma***– from God.”

Celibacy or virginity as a gift involves“self-control,” which in Galatians 5:23 is listed specifically among the fruits of the Spirit; it is the opposite of “lack of self-control” (verse 5). There is, however, more to the celibate state of life than merely *life of self-control,* as will emerge in verses 25-35. Paul uses no term like “command” or “counsel” but speaks of both marriage and celibacy as gifts of God, hence as an invitation or call.

**The Unmarried and Widowed**

**VERSE 8 –** *Now to the unmarried and to widows I say: it is good for them to remain as I am.*

The RSV and ESV rendered this verse, *“to remain single as I do*”. Similarly, the NRSV and NIV say, “*remain unmarried as I am*.” Although that might be a legitimate interpretation of Paul’s words, “single” or “unmarried” these interpretations are not found in the Greek text. The Revised English Bible has “*stay as they are,*” which is better. Even to translate the verse “*remain as they are, as I do myself*” reads more into the text than the Greek actually says.

Here we have two groups who are not married: the ***agamoi****,* the“unmarried,” and ***cherai****,* “widowers.” Paul recommends that they should remain, as he is.

The “unmarried,” occurs in the NT only in this chapter (verses 8, 11, 32, 34). In verse 11 it denotes a woman separated in divorce; in verse 32, a single man, contrasted with*,* “married man”; and in verse 34, a single woman, who is also called ***ha parthenos****,* “virgin”, and its basic meaning in Greek and also in Hebrew is the “unmarried.” Here in verse 8, it occurs along with “widows” in a paragraph where Paul’s main concern is marriage. Does that mean that [Paul is] ***agamos****,*  “no longer married”?

**Was Paul Married?**

This is a hard question. In 1 Corinthians 9:5 the question “*Do we not have the right to bring along a Christian wife, as do the rest of the apostles?*” means that, in giving up that right, Paul was ***agamos***in the sense of 7:32, i.e., that he was ***parthenos****,* which literally means “virgin” and that is what he meant when he wished that “all were as” he himself was (7:7). *But* that does not necessarily suggest that Paul was in principle opposed to marriage,” because verse 7 states his genuine conviction that marriage is good.

**Was Paul a widower?**

J. Jeremias argued that Paul, prior to his Christian call, was a widower, because, as an ordained Jewish ***hakam***with ability to make legal decisions (see Acts 9:1-2), he would have had to be married and 40 years old according to rabbinic tradition. Eusebius the Christian historian quotes Clement of Alexandria who maintained that Paul did “*not hesitate in one of his letters to address his wife whom he did not take about with him in order to facilitate his mission*” [*HE* 3.30.1]. Clement refers to Philippians 4:3, where Paul addresses someone as*,* taking it to mean “you, dear wife” [*Strom.* 3.53.1; cf. Origen, *Comm. in Rom.* 1.1; RSV has rather “true yokefellow”; ESV, “true companion”; NRSV, “my loyal companion”; NAB, “my true yokemate.”).

**VERSE 9 –** *But if they are not exercising self-control, they should marry.*

I.e., “marriage is a necessity if one cannot live sexual life demanded by freedom from the marriage bond.” The actual lack of “sexual control” is often translated, “if they cannot exercise self-control” (RSV; similarly NIV, ESV). But the verb does not say “cannot,” and Paul did not write that. If unmarried persons or widow(er)s are falling into the same problem of ***porneia***as the persons mentioned in verse 2, then let them get married. Paul is reckoning with the lack of the same *enkrateia* that is self-control, and so he concludes his general remarks about married life. At any rate, historically speaking Paul was not speaking of individuals endowed with celibacy as a gift of God (verse 7), nor does Paul put celibacy as a higher form of life as it appeared in Church tradition later on.

**VERSE 9 (cont.) –** *For it is better to marry than to burn.* (or *than to be burned*)

This is the first instance of the comparative “better” in this chapter and it does not occur in a comparison of marriage and celibacy. When “cannot” is used, then it is understood as in a metaphorical sense, “burn with sexual desires.”

However, ***pyroun****,* though used in the LXX with the meaning “burn” with emotion (Sir 23:17; 2 Macc 4:38; 10:35; 3 Macc 4:2), is not used there in the LXX *absolutely,* but always with modifiers expressing the emotion. Moreover, in the NT this verb “burn” was used (in Eph 6:16; 2 Pet 3:12; Rev 1:15; 3:18), so it means “to burn with passion.”

**Sexual Desires**

**A Letter from Philemon**

Brother George,

Have the root of your being in Christ. You are dead without Jesus and have a false life in you that seems good and active, but it is false because it is motivated by our constant attempts to flee from our mortality that is deeply hidden in us and drives us to define our life according to the image that each one of us have chosen.

Sexual desires are God’s gift to us because they lead us to marry and even if we don’t marry, they make us seek friendship. But like all gifts, we can be enslaved by it for our personal use. Attraction is good, where beauty of the body can bring reverence and adoration to the person and to God our Creator.

Hugging others is a divine act like that of the Father who put both hands of the Son and the Spirit round us to keep us in communion with Him.

Now, you struggle to be chaste and this is fine and noble. The true struggle must be rooted in love, that is the love of our Beloved Jesus, not in fear or in thinking that the others are the stumbling block and that the out-siders create our sexual feelings, no my beloved, our sexual desires are in our heart. Here I have to make my self clear, you like me will continue in our self-control as long as we are in the body. I have noticed that in my old age my desires are less than they were 30 years ago. Old age is a good time to look for that kind of freedom where the weakness of the body, brings peace.

To stay chaste requires no effort but needs:

1. True self-love, that is the self as anchored in Christ and loved for being in Christ.

2. Constant cleansing of your heart so that you don’t leave any hidden desire to flourish and enslave your will.

3. Sexual ideas and images must be cast out without any time wasted in contemplating them. One of the fathers said, “you can’t stop birds flying above your head, but you must not allow them to make their nest on your head.” so with all ideas, let them fly away.

4. Love the Lord above all others, more than your body, and more than your friends. Lock yourself in your room and die with Jesus.

All these are self-defense but the Lord Jesus will give you a portion of his chastity, which is that life of Jesus that was not lived only for himself.

Pray for me,

Philemon

No date 1968

**The Chastity of Jesus**

**A Letter from Philemon**

Brother George,

May the Lord and Savior reveal his life to you so that you may love him as he is, in his humble and meek presence that he reveals to us sinners.

You ask about the chastity of Jesus, I am surprised. How do you think of the one who emptied himself (Phil 2:6ff)? It was the great act of his love that he accepted to take the “form of a slave” and to subject his will as a slave to the Father to redeem us from our false self-love that leads us to reject God.

Jesus’ chastity is his self-denial, seeking nothing for himself and for his own glory. Even at his hunger he refused to change stones into bread in order not to use his power for self-satisfaction. Jesus was tempted like us in everything (Heb 4:15) and that includes sexual desires. But Jesus does not have a high regard of his body as his own property for he made it a sacrifice of love. There was nothing high enough for him to desire and therefore his temptations have no roots in him. What we regard as great is what plants the seed of pride and that settles hidden in our heart and become a spring of “lusts”. Jesus said, “*For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God*.” (Luke 16:15). While sexual desires and their fulfillment look great to some, for the Lord Jesus it is not so, for what is highly esteemed is his love for the broken and the fallen and the captives.

Let us empty our heart from the highly esteemed so that we may have the humble heart of the Lord and become chaste like him.

The Lord be with you

Philemon

No date

***Pope’s Notes***

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