



# COMMENTARIES ON “1 CORINTHIANS”

## Chapter 7

Unlike the previous six chapters of 1 Corinthians, which St. Paul wrote to address problems in the church in Corinth about which he had heard, he wrote chapter seven in response to a letter the Corinthians had previously sent to him.

The first issue addressed concerns whether a married couple should engage in sexual relations. St. Paul’s answer, to summarize, is that it is good for married couples to engage in sexual relations, but it is even better if they can remain unmarried virgins and dedicate their entire selves to God. He starts off by saying that it is good for a man to refrain from sexual relations (and thus, of course, from marriage as well) but, if the individuals are tempted toward sexual immorality, then it is best for them to marry, and to show physical affection to each other (1 Corinthians 7:1-3). In a response that could just as easily been offered today, part of the matter is one of control: who has control in this matter, the husband or wife? St. Paul answers that the husband has authority over the wife when it comes to engaging in sexual relations, while the wife has authority over the husband (7:4). The marital relationship is one of mutual submission, where no person should enter simply to gratify his or her own desires: the focus should always be on the needs of one’s marital partner. He concludes that, when married, couples may refrain from sexual relations during times of fasting - a practice followed by many Orthodox couples today - but that they should nonetheless “come together again” at the end of that period to overcome the temptation toward immorality that might otherwise build up (7:5).

Nonetheless, St. Paul believes that all of this is a concession to Christians, rather than the ideal (7:6). He states that some people are gifted by God for a celibate life dedicated to Him - as St. Paul himself is - but also recognizes that others are gifted by God for family life (7:7). It is therefore good for single people to remain single, but it is better to be married than to give in to sexual immorality (7:8).

St. Paul moves on from the subject of whether people should marry to whether they are allowed to divorce. St. Paul gives a simple answer, but one that he also notes is the commandment of God (rather than his own opinion): a married couple is not to divorce (7:10, 11). If they do divorce, however, they are to either remain unmarried or reconcile with their former spouse (7:11). He then goes on to give his own opinion on a related matter that would have been of great importance to the Corinthian Christians: a person who has converted to Christianity is not to divorce his or her non-Christian spouse, because the faith of the Christian partner sanctifies the non-Christian, and perhaps most importantly, can lead to children who are Christians (7:12-14). At the same time, if a non-Christian wants to leave his or her spouse who has converted to Christianity, then the Christian should do whatever will result in a peaceful situation regarding the relationship (7:15).

This leads the apostle into two of the dividing issues of his day: circumcision and slavery. In both cases - as with marriage - St. Paul’s teaching is clear: the new convert to Christianity is to remain in the general social situation (assuming that it is not a sinful lifestyle, of course) in which he or she existed before

conversion (7:17-24). Circumcision was a significant issue in the early Church: a group called the Judaizers claimed that new Christians must be circumcised in order to be saved, and even the decision of the council in Jerusalem that circumcision was not necessary (Acts 15) failed to completely eradicate this opinion. St. Paul's position is clear: whether circumcised or uncircumcised, the new Christian should follow the commandments and calling of God (1 Corinthians 7:19, 20). Similarly, because it is important that one live as much as possible in peace, St. Paul advises slaves to not become distraught over their situation in life (while also advising them to take advantage of legal means to free themselves) (7:21), because both Christian freedmen and Christian slaves are viewed in the same way by God: as people who were bought at the price of His life by Christ, and therefore belong to Him (7:21-23).

St. Paul quickly moves on to another topic (but one that is closely related to the first topic of this chapter): the issue of virginity. Again, St. Paul notes that he is giving his opinion, but states that his opinion carries special weight because he is "one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy" (7:25). As with all the situations discussed in this chapter, the general conclusion is clear: people are to remain in the same social calling in which they lived when they became Christians (7:26). Therefore, people who are married are to remain married, while people who are unmarried should remain unmarried (unless, as he said earlier, remaining this way would lead them to sexual immorality) (7:27). The issue - contrary to what some modern scholars claim - is not that St. Paul had a psychological revulsion to sex: rather, he wants Christians to be able to "serve the Lord without distraction" (7:35). Because a married person must dedicate time and attention to his or her spouse (and, usually, children), this person cannot dedicate full attention to God (7:32-34). Therefore, St. Paul says that it is preferable for a single person to remain unmarried so that he or she can give complete time and attention to God.

St. Ambrose of Milan summarizes the situation:

The one is bound by marriage bonds, the other is free. The one is under the law, the other under grace. Marriage is good because through it the means of human continuity are found. But virginity is better, because through it are attained the inheritance of a heavenly kingdom and a continuity of heavenly rewards.

St. Paul concludes by looking at two additional family situations. In the first situation, a father has a virgin daughter (in this case, one who is not a young woman): should she marry? According to St. Paul, this depends in many ways upon the specific situation. If the daughter wishes to marry, the father should not forbid her from doing so (7:36). If, however, the daughter does not wish to marry, and certainly if there are no financial reasons why marriage would be highly preferable, then the father should conversely not force his daughter to marry (7:37). In the second situation, St. Paul looks at widows. Should a widow be allowed to remarry, or should she spend the rest of her life bound to her now-dead husband? St. Paul answers that she should be allowed to remarry if she wishes - provided that the groom is a Christian - but that it would be preferable if she remained single (7:39-40).