BUILT DIFFERENT

LESSON SEVEN

COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY NOTES

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1–7

William Baker, in the *Cornerstone Bible Commentary*, comments on Paul's answer to the first of the Corinthian questions:

With 7:1, Paul begins responding to questions the Corinthians posed in the letter sent via Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, first about marriage, next about food sacrificed to idols, then about spiritual gifts, and finally about the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem. In all his New Testament correspondence, this is the only known letter that Paul answers. Although his responses constitute the remainder, indeed the bulk of 1 Corinthians, it is significant that Paul did not begin the letter by addressing their concerns. Rather, he had left this for last, providing his thorough, theologically grounded perspectives only after he had confronted the splintering of their community with the unifying theology of the cross, a grounding he will draw upon in his responses (Hays 1997:111).

Despite the fact that Paul shifted into a new mode at this point in his letter, he built a bridge from chapters 5–6 into chapter 7 on the topic of sexual conduct for believers. Christians must turn their back on sexual immorality and discipline those who do not. Sexual promiscuity is a sacrilege against the Christian's body, now joined to Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Assuming this principle, which was presented at the end of chapter 6, the natural follow-up question Paul sought to answer is, What is the role of sexual relations within marriage for transformed believers? This will lead him into other questions about marriage that extend from there.

Paul starts off by quoting a slogan that was most likely part of the Corinthians' question in their letter (namely, "it is good to abstain from sexual relations"; 7:1). Their question was not about whether new Christians should be single (despite the fact that he does address this later in the chapter). The concern was about sexual relations within marriage. The question could be raised because of the theology of the Christian's body Paul discussed at the end of chapter 6. However, the Corinthians were likely wondering, in light of this, if Christianity was another cult that required sexual asceticism—complete abstinence from sexual relations even for the married—since this would not be all that unusual in the first century. The effect of this prevalent approach to spirituality on young Christian congregations like Corinth can be seen in Paul's efforts to confront such notions in other letters (Col 2:20–23; 1 Tim 4:3).

It may sound at first like Paul agrees with this position that men should not touch women, in or outside marriage, especially since he prefaces this with the favorable comment that "it is good." However, this is to misunderstand his rhetorical approach. He wanted to agree with what the Corinthians had said as much as he could, out of respect, and he will reveal in his discussion that he believed there is value in being celibate. But he will clarify that this is only for some people and that it is certainly not a principle that applies in marriage. There, other principles control the expected Christian behavior. Anyway, for him to agree with this slogan would place him at direct odds with Genesis 2:18: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him."

In contrast to any notions about sexual celibacy in marriage, in 7:2 Paul advocates marriage (J. Ellis 2001:91; Laughery 1997:110), verifying its value probably from his own Jewish culture, as well as its value for populating the earth (Gen 1:28; 2:24). Though his opening statement names only his concern about sexual immorality as influencing his support for marriage, later comments will reveal that he was probably more influenced by biblical support for the mutual commitment involved in marriage. The prominence he gives up front to sexual immorality was motivated by his desire to link his comments to those of chapters 5 and 6, where the expression "sexual immorality" (*porneia* [4202, 4518]) figures so prominently (5:1; 6:13, 18).

One of the most striking aspects of Paul's promotion of marriage is how deliberate he was to balance his comments with regard to both husbands and wives throughout this chapter. Relative to the patriarchal views of marriage prevalent in his day, Paul's comments mark him as fairly radical in elevating the status of wives (Horsley 1998:95; Witherington 1995:170). He does this right away in 7:2

when he speaks generally of Christian marriage. Each should "have" the other, which refers to their sexual relationship but probably includes their mutual commitment in all aspects of their marriage relationship. In 7:3, he also spells out the mutual giving involved specifically in their physical intimacy.

For the sake of his argument, Paul depicts marriage as a binding business contract. His language in 7:3–4 was more normally used for payment of a debt. He viewed the marriage bed as the location where the debts of husband and wife are exchanged. Because both have given their bodies to the other in the bonds of marriage, each has an obligation to attempt to repay the debt this creates. Of course, this debt can never be paid in full. Is there a limit to the value of a human life? Thus, both are continually and forever in debt to the other; each giving to the other of sexual intimacy is a major area of their relationship in which payment can be applied to this debt.

Again, the surprising aspect of Paul's argument is the mutuality described and especially the husband's obligation to the wife, which he names first. This reinforces the idea that Paul was cutting against the grain of the views of marriage that were prominent in both Greek and Jewish cultures, namely, that the husband was in charge of his wife in all ways, including sexually, but that he had few if any obligations to his wife, unless it was to give her children (Keener 2005:62).

In 7:4, Paul expands on why he views the husband and wife as being mutually in debt. Both have already freely given their lives away to the other when they married. Their very bodies belong to the other. They cannot any longer think of themselves only as an "I." They have to think of themselves as a "you." They give themselves away to the other, purposefully limiting their own personal rights and privileges to create a joyful "us." To draw back from this self-giving in a marriage is to take a step that could eventually unravel the entire relationship.

In 7:5, Paul puts his stamp of approval on one legitimate exception to the mutual engagement of married couples in regular sexual intimacy. Any other reason he associates with robbery, based on his view of mutual ownership and mutual debt. To take what the other offers without a reciprocal offering of oneself cheats the other party. Any decision that involves refraining from sexual relations within marriage must be mutually agreed upon. The only reason Paul names as a bona fide reason is their mutual spiritual benefit that comes from concentrating on prayer for a period of time. However, the prayer time must have a clear purpose that is achievable within a number of days that can be estimated from the outset.

Paul apparently adapted this concession from Jewish tradition, which allowed men one week (so Hillel) or two weeks (so Shammai) of sexual abstinence for prayer that involves consent from the wife. Rabbis were allowed to make vows of sexual abstinence from their wives for up to 30 days without consent (*m. Ketubbot* 5:6; *t. Nedarim* 5:6). Also demonstrating the link between prayer and sexual activity, Jewish men were encouraged to refrain from saying the Shema (the Jewish daily prayer that begins "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one") for a few days after being wedded (Barrett 1968:156). The Old Testament also demonstrates the importance of sexual abstinence for some holy days and generally for occasions of spiritual consecration (Exod 19:15; Lev 15:18; 1 Sam 21:4–6; 2 Sam 11:11–13; Joel 2:16).

What stands out as new, from Paul's perspective, is that he views both the husband and the wife agreeing to replace their sexual activity with prayer for a time and that either could initiate the agreement. From the Jewish perspective, the husband alone is viewed as abstaining for the purpose of prayer. This spiritual mutuality corresponds with the mutual nature of the Christian marriage that Paul paints throughout the chapter. It even continues over into his concern about temptation from Satan, which he phrases in the plural *you*. Sexual temptation for a married couple in Paul's understanding was not simply a problem for the husband; it can also be a problem for the wife, if the abstinence is prolonged. Above all, Paul was adamant that no sexual promiscuity should occur in the lives of believers, both those married and unmarried. The difficulty for humans to control their sex drive is not restricted to one gender. Because of this, couples need to rekindle their intimacy within a reasonable time frame. The last thing Paul wants is for sexual abstinence to provide an opportunity

for Satan to fan the flame of sexual sin and adultery. (Satan's role as the ultimate tempter is described most clearly in Matthew 4:1–11.)

In 7:6, Paul admits that the priority in marriage is to fulfill the commitment to sexual intimacy. Such times of marital sexual abstinence are not at all required for either the husband or the wife to achieve spiritual depth and maturity in their Christian lives. It is, however, an option they may choose to exercise as far as Paul was concerned. Of all the verses in this chapter, this most clearly demonstrates that Paul did not embrace ascetic values as the necessary means to lofty spiritual attainment, as some later in the church have done and which Roman Catholicism perpetuates by requiring celibacy of its priests and nuns.

In 7:7, Paul shares his personal desire that people exercise their gift of singleness, if they have this gift. However, marriage is a gift, too. He had likely experienced both in the course of his life. Probably having had a wife earlier, he was now single, a widower; he found this to be an advantage for serving the Lord and completing his call (see note on 7:7). He will expand on this perspective later in the chapter (7:32–35). But he certainly also extols the blessing of marriage in this verse, a gift equal in promise. He couldn't make it clearer that such personal matters are entirely up to each individual and that God has a hand in whatever a believer embraces.[1]

1 CORINTHIANS 7:8–16

Thomas Schreiner, In the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, explains Paul's instructions to the unmarried, to widows, and those who are married to unbelievers:

8–9. In addressing *the unmarried and the widows*, does Paul mean 'widowers' in saying *unmarried* (*agamois*)? Such an interpretation is possible, but it seems that the word is used generally for those who are unmarried (4 Macc. 16:9; 1 Cor. 7:11, 32, 34); thus it exceeds the evidence to limit what Paul says to widows and widowers. He probably addresses the unmarried generally, and perhaps widows are mentioned since women typically outlive men. Paul expresses a preference for remaining single—for living, as he does, without a wife. Presumably he would not be misunderstood, since he has just explained in the previous verse that others have the gift of marriage.

Even here he qualifies himself, noting that some *cannot control themselves* (*enkratountai*). Paul uses this verb of exercising self-control as an athlete (1 Cor. 9:25; cf. 1 Clem. 30:3). Sometimes the term is used in a general sense of controlling one's impulses (Gen. 43:31). In speaking of lack of self-control here, Paul does not have sin in mind. One indication that one should get married is if one has strong sexual desires. If one has the opportunity for marriage, and sexual desires are strong, marriage is the best option, and one should not try to be what one is not. Marriage is to be preferred instead of burning with lust and desire. A few interpreters think the reference is to burning in hell, but, in context, burning with lust is far more likely. We see once again Paul's pragmatism: marriage can serve as a check to sexual immorality (cf. 7:2).

What Paul says here actually fits with his counsel to younger widows in 1 Timothy, though in this latter case he chides the younger widows for their sin (1 Tim. 5:11–13): 'So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander' (1 Tim. 5:14). Singleness is preferred in these verses in 1 Corinthians, but often circumstances work out so that marriage is actually ideal in a particular situation.[2]

10. If it is preferable for those who are single to remain so, what about those who are married? Paul issues a *command* here, yet the command does not derive from him but from the Lord himself. In other words, the historical Jesus spoke about whether one should get divorced (Matt. 5:31–32; 19:3–12; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18). Paul does not draw on the specific wording found in the Gospels,

[1] William Baker, "1 Corinthians," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians*, vol. 15 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 97–100.
[2] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 138–139.

but communicates the general teaching from Jesus. Jesus emphasized that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery. Thus Paul instructs a wife not to *separate* from her husband. The word for *separate* (*chorizo*) here is often used in the papyri (so BDAG) to signify divorce; hence English readers must beware of reading the modern Western conception of separation into the verse. Paul is not thinking of a period of separation before a divorce ensues; rather, he directs a wife not to divorce her husband.

11. Paul considers the case where a wife separates from—that is, divorces—her husband. If she does so, remarriage is not permitted. She must either remain single or *be reconciled to her husband*. The same rule applies to the husband: he must not *divorce his wife*. The word *divorce* here is a different word (*aphiemi*), but the term is synonymous with the verb *separate* (*chorizo*) used in verses 10–11. How this teaching is interpreted depends upon how one reads the Jesus tradition, and interpreters disagree quite markedly. Space is lacking to delve into that matter in detail here, but I suggest that Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 are most plausibly read as allowing an exception in divorce cases. If one's spouse is sexually unfaithful, divorce is permissible. Paul, however, conveys here the main point of the Jesus tradition: divorce and remarriage are sinful. If that is the case, Paul is addressing here a situation in which a wife or husband unjustifiably divorces her or his spouse. Paul's instructions are brief and pointed since the church presumably already knew the teaching of the historical Jesus on this matter.[3]

12–13. Paul now addresses *the rest*, for in verses 8–9 the unmarried are the subject and in verses 10–11 he speaks to those married to believers. The *rest*, as the succeeding verses show, are believers who are married to unbelievers. When Paul says that it is he who speaks rather than the Lord, he is not suggesting that his words have lesser authority, as if the readers are free to accept or reject what Paul teaches. Paul thinks his words are authoritative as an apostle of Jesus Christ (cf. 14:37; 1 Thess. 2:13). He merely distinguishes between his words and the words of the historical Jesus. The Jesus of history, as we saw in verses 10–11, gave directives about divorce and remarriage, but he did not address the issue of believers married to unbelievers. Paul, as an apostle, addresses that matter here.

Some of the Corinthians probably believed it was right to divorce unbelievers if one belonged to Jesus Christ and was indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps they argued that one who belonged to Christ must not have sexual relations with unbelievers since believers would be defiled by having sex with those who were alienated from God. Perhaps they even appealed to Old Testament precedents, for Ezra summoned Jewish believers to 'separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives' (Ezra 10:11; cf. Neh. 13:3). According to Jewish tradition, Joseph refused even to kiss Aseneth while she was an idolater (*Jos*. As. 8:5–7).

Paul's words in these verses, then, come as something of a surprise. From the Old Testament we might also expect that the unclean would defile the clean (Hag. 2:11–13). Yet Paul counsels a believing spouse to remain in a marriage with an unbeliever if the unbeliever is willing to continue in the marriage. Paul specifically speaks from the standpoint of the believing husband and the believing wife, so that there might be no doubt that remaining in a marriage with an unbeliever is pleasing to God even if one has an unbelieving wife or an unbelieving husband. Given the culture of Paul's day, it is remarkable that a wife is given the same status as a husband. Many—probably most—believed that the wife should follow the religion of her husband. Plutarch said,

A wife ought not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. The gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all queer rituals and outlandish superstitions. (*Conj. praec.* 19)

[3] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 140.

Clearly, Paul dissents from Plutarch's view, for the wife's first commitment is to Christ, not her husband. Nevertheless, if the unbelieving spouse is content to remain in the marriage, believers should not initiate divorce and should remain in the marriage.

14. Paul now provides a reason ('for', *gar*) why marriage to an unbeliever does not defile or render the believing spouse unclean. Once again, the situations of both the believing wife and the believing husband are considered so that the pattern of mutuality which stands out in this text continues. If an unbeliever is married to a believing wife or a believing husband, the unbelieving spouse *has been sanctified* (*egiastai*). The perfect tense of the verb denotes the state of the unbelieving spouse. What Paul says here is quite astonishing, for we might expect from the Old Testament that the unclean person would defile the clean person, especially when the two engage in sexual relations (cf. 1 Cor. 6:16). Paul, however, argues for the opposite. The holiness of the believer transforms the unbelieving spouse so that he or she becomes holy. Their marriage and sexual union are not defiling but sacred and beautiful. This is analogous in some ways to Jesus touching the leper (Matt. 8:1–4): the uncleanness of the leper does not defile Jesus; instead, the power of Jesus' holiness and his healing authority cleanse the leper.

Saying that the spouse is *sanctified* does not mean that the spouse is saved, for verse 16 shows that there is no guarantee that the unbelieving spouse will be saved. Unbelieving spouses, nevertheless, enter the realm of the holy, according to Paul. Perhaps this includes the idea that they have the potential to be saved. In a similar way, the children of the marriage between an unbeliever and a believer are not *unclean* but *holy*. Since the unbelieving spouse is sanctified, and since the sexual union between a believing and unbelieving spouse is holy, their offspring are also holy and pleasing to God. Sometimes this reference to children is used to justify infant baptism, but such a systematic theological concern strays from the text. For if the children may be baptized because they are holy, the same should also apply to the unbelieving spouse who is sanctified—but this latter notion is clearly mistaken.

15. Paul envisions a situation where an unbeliever wishes to leave the marriage. The word for *leaves* (*chorizo*) is translated as 'separate' in verse 10. As noted there, we should not read into this term a specific period of separation common in Western cultures. The word leaves here means 'divorce'. If an unbeliever desires to divorce a believing spouse, the believer should allow him or her to do so. The marriage is not to be preserved at all costs. The mutuality in the discourse continues, as Paul refers to *the brother or the sister*. In instances where the unbeliever initiates divorce, believers are *not bound* (*dedoulotai*). Clearly this means that they are no longer obliged to fulfil their marital promises since the other person has decided to leave the marriage.

Does Paul also imply freedom to remarry? Commentators disagree. Some think the answer is 'no' since the Corinthians in this chapter were interested in refraining from marriage instead of finding a way to get married. Furthermore, they think the Jesus tradition forbids remarriage. Certainty is impossible, but Paul probably thinks remarriage is permissible in such instances. First, according to Jewish and Graeco-Roman tradition, divorce implies freedom to remarry, and Paul would need to make it quite clear if he dissented from the tradition. Second, I suggested in the interpretation of 7:10–11 that Jesus permitted remarriage in the case of sexual infidelity. Third, even though some Corinthians were interested in asceticism, we can scarcely say that all of them were ascetics, and, in any case, Paul, as a wise servant of Christ, knew human nature. He would recognize that some would desire to remarry. Fourth, the word *bound* (*douloo*) used here and 'bound' (*deo*) in 7:39 belong to the same semantic range and are thus roughly synonymous. Hence Paul thinks married women are *bound* (*dedetai*) while a husband lives (Rom. 7:2; 1 Cor. 7:39), but they are 'free' (*eleuthera*, esv, Rom. 7:3; 1 Cor. 7:39) when a husband dies. So too here, a person is bound to the marriage until the unbelieving spouse chooses to initiate a divorce.

Paul's main point is that believers should not flagellate themselves if the marriage dissolves—if an unbeliever desires a divorce and departs from the marriage. God has *called* believers *to live in peace*. In other words, they should not give way to stress and worry about trying to rescue a marriage in

which a spouse refuses to remain. God has called believers to be content and to find joy and peace in the circumstances they find themselves in.

16. The discussion closes with a rhetorical question in which Paul asks how believers can know whether they might save their unbelieving husbands or wives. We note again the mutuality of the discussion, for Paul addresses both the believing wife and the believing husband, asking the same question of both. Commentators ask whether the question here is optimistic or pessimistic. If the verse connects back to verse 14, it is optimistic. If it connects to verse 15, it is pessimistic. Both make sense, and so it is quite difficult to decide. The optimistic reading fits with the paragraph as a whole and the main point of the paragraph: believers should not flee from a marriage with an unbeliever, for God may use the believing person to bring the spouse to faith (cf. 1 Pet. 3:1). On the other hand, the pessimistic view fits nicely with the call to be at peace if the unbeliever leaves the marriage, since there is no guarantee that the unbeliever will be saved. Both options are certainly true, but perhaps the first is preferable given the main theme of the paragraph: believers should not take the initiative in opting out of a marriage with an unbeliever.[4]

1 CORINTHIANS 7:17–24

In the *NICNT* commentary, Gordon Fee highlights Paul's guiding principle for all these various situations:

17 This sentence is tied to what precedes by the excepting conjunction "nevertheless," which itself refers back to the exception at the end of the preceding instruction (v. 15ab). The brother or sister is not bound in such cases; nevertheless, change is not to be the rule; rather, one is urged to stay in one's social condition at the time of one's conversion. But Paul says this theologically by relating it to God's "call." The imperative in this case (lit. "let each person walk"185) has to do with how one lives out the whole of life, especially the Christian life, in the present age (cf. 1 Thess. 4:1; Gal. 5:16). Paul's concern, therefore, is not that they retain their present social setting, as the original NIV mistakenly had it, but that they recognize it as a proper one in which to live out God's call.

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

> to each as the Lord assigned,
> each as God has called,

thus (meaning in accordance with the assignment and calling) let each person conduct their life

Some have argued that the two clauses are synonymous; but the change in grammatical subject and verb (including tense191) suggests otherwise. The thought is similar to Paul's description of his call to vocation in the salutation (1:1), in which he was called to be Christ's apostle (the historical expression of the call) through the prior will of God (the theological ground for it). Here the various social situations are to be understood as something Christ "assigned" to them at the time God called them to salvation. The two clauses together, therefore, help define what is meant by "calling" throughout the passage. The concept of "call" in the clause "as God has called"193 refers to conversion, that is, to their calling by God to be in fellowship with his Son (1:9; cf. 1:24). But the concern throughout the present passage is with their social situation *at the time* of that call, which is now to be seen as that which "the Lord assigned to each." That does *not* mean that one is forever locked into that setting. Rather, Paul means that by calling a person within a given situation, that situation itself is taken up in the call and thus sanctified to the one called. Similarly, by saving a person *in* that setting, Christ thereby "assigned" it to them as their place of living out life in Christ. In the present context that means being married, whether to a believer or an unbeliever—and this has nothing to do with "calling" as occupation or livelihood.

[4] Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 141–145.

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

That this is a theological statement over against their desire to change status is made clear by the additional clause: (lit.) "Even so (i.e., in this same way) in all the churches I give directions." This is the second of four instances in this letter where Paul appeals to what goes on in other churches.196 The lack of this kind of appeal in his other letters suggests that this is his way of reminding them that theirs is the theology that is off track, not his (cf. 4:17), and furthermore, that they do not, nor may not, live in splendid isolation from other communities of believers.

Thus Paul tells them that being in Christ does not negate their present situation; but neither is he arguing that it absolutizes it. Rather, the call to Christ sets them free to live out their new life within it. It is not change per se that he is against, but change *as a Christian*; that is, becoming a believer does not require one to seek change of status. That is to give significance to one's social setting. Paul's point is that God's call, which comes to people where they are as his gracious gift, totally eliminates social setting as having any kind of religious significance. And how better can he illustrate that than by the one mark of sociological distinction that formerly did have religious significance for him but does so no more—circumcision.198

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

Thus he argues, "Was anyone already circumcised when they were called?" That is, were you a Jew when you came to faith in Christ? If so, then "he should not become uncircumcised."201 One can scarcely imagine a situation in Corinth where Jewish believers might actually have been doing so; rather, this is simply an illustration of the principle that is to be applied to their own concern. So also: "Was anyone uncircumcised when he was called?" That is, were you a Gentile when you came to faith? If so, then "he should not be circumcised." This operation, of course, was being urged by certain sectors of the church on Gentile Christians. But in the present case it is not first of all a religious issue, but a sociological one. Being Jew or Gentile simply means nothing to God; whatever one was when called is what one still is, with no need to change. Christ has made such distinctions obsolete, and thus irrelevant.

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

cited at the outset (v. 1b) that called forth this rhetoric.

19 This is the first occurrence of what has to be one of the more remarkable statements that Paul ever made. It will be picked up again203 in the Galatian controversy as the absolute that disallows the circumcision of Gentile believers (Gal. 5:6; 6:15): "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing." In this basically Gentile church that will be readily understood, precisely because this was never an issue for them. But it is hard for us to imagine the horror with which a fellow Jew would have responded. For not only did circumcision count, it counted for everything. Above all else this was the sign of the covenant, and therefore of their special standing with God. But Paul has seen clearly the implications of this issue for the gospel. Allow change here, and the cross is effectually negated, because such a change for religious reasons attaches significance to status as such. This in effect destroys grace as God's way of salvation. Paul's point, of course, is that they should themselves transfer the principle to their desire to be "demarried": "Marriage is nothing; and celibacy is nothing." The various situations in which one lives either by nature or by choice ultimately belong to the category of the irrelevant, in terms of *one's relationship with God*. They obviously remain relevant in all kinds of other ways, all of which are irrelevant regarding Paul's ultimate concern here.

Thus Paul is quick to add that such a principle does not relativize one's obedience to God. "What counts" is *not* sociological conditions, but "keeping God's commands" (cf. 9:21). If Paul's fellow Jews would have been scandalized by the apostle's former statement, they would have been quite mystified by this one. From their perspective these sentences would be totally non sequitur, indeed contradictory. To be circumcised *is* to keep the commandment of God. But Paul obviously thinks otherwise. It should be noted that more than one theology in the Protestant tradition has equally had difficulty with this statement. How can Paul eliminate "works" (= circumcision) and then turn about and insist on "works" after all? The answer of course is that Paul did not consider obedience to the "commands of God" as "works of the law." That is an unfortunate confounding of terms within some Protestant theology that Paul himself would scarcely have understood. Almost certainly this refers to the ethical imperatives of the Christian faith. One's proper response to grace is obedience to the will of God (see the hermeneutical notes at the end of 3:1–4 and 6:7–11). In a church where spirituality had degenerated into something very close to antinomian behavior, Paul simply cannot allow a religious statement like "circumcision counts for nothing" to be turned into "obedience to the will of God, or being conformed into Christlikeness, counts for nothing" (cf. 9:21).

20 The first analogy having been given (v. 18), and its theological reason having been stated (v. 19), Paul now repeats the principle with which he began: (lit.) "Each one, in the calling209 in (by) which they were called, in this let them remain." It has been argued that by this statement Paul intended to emphasize that each one should remain in their *Christian* calling, that is, that each one should remain a Christian in whatever social situation one is found. Much more likely the word "calling" here carries the same kind of double nuance that it did earlier (1:26) and that seems to be in view above (v. 17). Paul wants them to live out their Christian life (i.e., their "calling" to Christ) in the situation ("calling") where they were when God called them to Christ.213 The emphasis is on both, that they can be Christ's people in whatever situation God called them, and therefore that they do not need to change situations—precisely because they are in Christ. Let their "calling" (becoming believers) sanctify the setting of their calling (= life situation).

21 Paul now moves to a second supporting illustration, which in general is structured like the former. It begins with a word to the slave in the form of a question, followed by a command; and this is followed by a theological reason in support of the command. In this case, however, there are also some significant differences.

First, he begins with the situation of the slave, but there is no corresponding word to the free person. That is picked up by implication when he comes to the theological reason to follow (vv. 22–23). There are some obvious reasons for this. To correspond with the former, he would need to have said: "Were you a slave when called, do not become a freed person; were you a free person when called, do not become a slave." But for slaves this was not an option; and for free people, although they could—

and many did—sell themselves into slavery, that would not be the kind of "change" that one would normally seek.

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

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

Fourth, in contrast to the two conditions above (v. 18), but quite like all the situations in what has preceded (vv. 1–16), an exception is made: (lit.) "If indeed (or, even though) you are able to become free, rather (or, by all means) make use of [it]." On its own the sentence is ambiguous, and scholarship has been rather evenly divided218 as to whether Paul intended, "Even supposing you could go free, you would be better off making the most of your slavery" (NAB), or "Although if you can gain your freedom, do so" (NIV). The problem lies with the verb "make use of," whose object must be understood from the context. The difficulties are best illustrated by the fact that grammar and context are argued as in support of both options.

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

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

Even more important than these lexical-grammatical considerations are the two that have to do with historical and literary context. First, as Bartchy has shown decisively, the view that a slave could *reject*

manumission (being set free) has no historical basis of any kind. That is, a freed slave may continue to serve a master as a freedperson, but by the very fact of manumission he or she is no longer a slave.229 Paul did not intend to suggest that they had the choice between freedom and slavery, but that when, from the slave's perspective, they were able to become free, they should make the best of it because that had been given them by the master. Thus, it is extremely unlikely historically that Paul would have suggested, "Make use of your slavery, even if you are able to become free," since for all practical purposes that choice did not exist at all. Or to put that another way, a manumitted slave may continue in the same household as a freed person, since in many circumstances that would be by far the better option, but that is hardly "making use of one's slavery."

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

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

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

22 Just as Paul gave a theological reason (v. 18) why Jews should not try to become as Gentiles, and vice versa, so this sentence gives the theological reason as to why the Christian slave should not let their social situation be the occasion for distress (v. 21a). To that he now adds the situation of the free person. Neither slavery nor freedom counts for anything to the one who is called into fellowship with Christ. Paul makes that point with a wordplay on slave and free in terms of one's relationship to Christ. Thus (lit.), "The called-in-the-Lord232 slave is the Lord's freedman." That is, the person whose social condition was that of slavery when they responded to God's call to be "in the Lord," has by that call been given status with the Lord himself that removes a person from being someone else's slave—even though that old relationship still obtains. The word "freedman" is the technical term for those who were formerly slaves, but had been manumitted. Under Roman law manumitted slaves ("freedmen") often lived with their former owners, to whom they agreed to continue to render service. But when called to be in Christ, even though one's social status is still that of slave, the relationship of "freedman" has now been established with the Lord. Moreover, the "purchase with a price" metaphor (v. 23) suggests that it is not simply the relationship with the Lord that is in view, but the "freedom" from the bondage of one's former sins.

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

This imagery, of course, must be understood in light of Greco-Roman slavery, not that of more recent American history. Slavery was in fact the bottom rung on the social order, but for the most

part it provided generally well for up to one-third of the population in a city like Corinth or Rome. The household slave had considerable freedom and very often experienced mutual benefit along with the master. The owner received the benefit of the slave's services; and the slave had steady "employment," including having all his or her basic needs met—indeed, for many to be a slave was preferable to being a freed person, whose securities were often tenuous at best. But the one thing that marked the slave was that, in the final analysis, such a person did not belong to oneself but to another; that alone is Paul's point with this imagery.

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

23 To reinforce the preceding theological point, Paul pushes the metaphors of that verse one step further. He begins by repeating the imagery from the conclusion of the preceding argument against sexual immorality (6:20), "You were bought with a price." Only in this case the imagery carries its full double nuance, precisely because it speaks to both people in the preceding analogy. On the one hand, as before, the basic metaphor is that of becoming the slave of someone through purchase. That speaks directly to the "free person" who through their calling to Christ has become "a slave of Christ." On the other hand, for the one who was a slave when called, it is the metaphor of purchase for freedom, as elsewhere in the NT (Gal. 3:13; 4:5; Rev. 5:9). The slave is free and the free person a slave because both have been purchased by Christ through the blood of the cross. Thus the metaphor comes full circle. The slave is still socially a slave, but in Christ one is both free and slave: purchased by Christ so as to be set free by him, one has at the same time come under Christ's rightful ownership. The free person is still socially free, but in Christ one is both slave and free: purchased by Christ so as to belong to him, a person has at the same time experienced the freedom that only Christ can give.

The final result, therefore, is: "Do not become slaves of human beings." Again this is not literal, as in "Do not sell yourselves into slavery," but metaphorical.237 Precisely because the slave is both free and slave in Christ, and the free person is both slave and free in Christ, they must not let themselves come under the bondage of mere humans. They are the slaves of another who has at the same time set them free. With these final words Paul is probably reflecting once again on their penchant to let merely human wisdom, disguised in the form of "spirituality," dictate their present anxieties about the need to be free from certain social settings, especially marriage. Don't come under such bondage, he tells them.

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

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

whether one is slave or free, one is ultimately responsible only to God. That sets a person free both to remain in their situation and especially to live out the Christian calling therein.

With these words the argument with those who would dissolve their marriages in favor of their alleged "higher spiritual status" of celibacy is brought to an end. The analogy is that of the slave and the free, and the point is that neither marriage nor celibacy is significant; they should serve God where they are. But the concern raised by the celibates is not over. So in the next section Paul will again apply the principle here argued; but because he disagrees with their reasons, even if he agrees that singleness is best, he turns out to affirm change (i.e., marriage) in rather strong terms.

In an exceedingly mobile culture, in which upward mobility is almost a sacred duty, a passage like this does not get an easy hearing. On the one hand, there are those who think so poorly of their status that they find difficulty seeing it as a place in which to live out their calling as believers. The standard formula begins, "Oh, I'm just a...." On the other hand, the tendency of most is to see status as significant, and change as necessary. The two points Paul makes need to be heard anew. (1) In terms of one's relationship with God, status of any kind is totally irrelevant. A person is simply no better off one way or another. That does not mean that in a culture that provides opportunity one should not seek "to better oneself." But it does mean that one whose life has been determined by God's call should not put any stock in doing so. (2) Precisely because our lives are determined by God's call, not by our situation, we need to learn to continue there as those who are "before God." Paul's concern is not with change as such, one way or the other, but with "living out one's calling" in whatever situation one is found. There let one serve the Lord, and let the call of God sanctify to oneself the situation, whether it be mixed marriage, singleness, blue- or white-collar work, or socioeconomic condition.[5]

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Mark A. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary
Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (NICNT)
Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (NIGTC)
Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary
Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, IVP New Testament Commentary
David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, The Bible Speaks Today
William Baker, *1 Corinthians*, Cornerstone Bible Commentary
Paul Ellingwroth and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on 1 Corinthians*, UBSH

[5] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 342–356.