BUILT DIFFERENT

LESSON EIGHT

COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY NOTES

1 CORINTHIANS 7:25–28

Roy Ciampia, in the *Pillar Bible Commentary*, explains Paul's instructions to the unmarried in light of the "present crisis":

7:25 *Now about virgins* addresses a fifth group in the church who needed Paul's counsel. *Now about* repeats the opening words of 7:1, where Paul indicated that he was taking up questions and issues from the Corinthians' letter. Even though, technically speaking, they could introduce a subject of Paul's own choosing, their immediate placement following the purposeful aside of vv. 17–24 almost certainly indicates that Paul is again addressing directly concerns the Corinthians had raised in their letter. Who the *virgins* were and what the Corinthians wanted to know about them are debated. The term appears in vv. 25, 28, 34, and 36–38.

Fee summarizes the three main views. First, for centuries the text was read as addressing the issue of fathers giving their "virgin" daughters in marriage. Lightfoot explains this interpretation: "St Paul generalized, first stating the guiding principle (v. 27), then applying it to both sexes (vv. 28–35), and finally dealing with the special point which the Corinthians had put to him (vv. 36–38)." In this understanding, in vv. 36–38 Paul instructs fathers concerning "their virgins" about the question of whether "to give them in marriage" or not. While fitting some of the details, this view has trouble accounting for others. In particular, if Paul were addressing such a situation, we would have expected more explicit address to fathers, guardians, daughters, and the like, terms which are conspicuous by their absence from the passage.

A second view takes issue with restricting *virgins* to females, referring it to both men and women who are living in a "spiritual marriage," that is, without sexual relations. Many scholars believe that Paul addressed something like this already in 7:2–6 (see above for our contrasting view), and "spiritual marriages" were known in Christian circles from the second to the fifth centuries. The second-century *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 5, for example, blesses "they who have wives as if they had them not, for they shall inherit God." However, there is no clear evidence of such relationships within the first century, and since vv. 2–6 have already made it clear that Paul would be opposed to such forms of marriage it is not clear why he would address it again here in a more conciliatory way. Perhaps an even stronger objection to this view is that although the genitive plural "virgins" in the phrase, *now about virgins*, gives no indication of gender and the word can be used in reference to men, the only cases where it does so is in reference to certain Israelite or Jewish men (such as Joseph, Abel, Melchizedek, and the apostles John and Paul), and, in a spiritual sense, to the church (Rev. 14:4). It should also be remembered that it is very unlikely that any of the (Roman) Corinthian men thinking about getting married would have been virgins, since, unlike Roman women, Roman men were expected to begin engaging in sexual relations (with prostitutes or slaves, etc.) after reaching adolescence.295 Since the Corinthian church had been in existence for only around four years, and most Roman men did not marry until their mid to late twenties, those who were thinking of marriage were very unlikely to be virgins at the time. This point is reinforced by the fact that all subsequent uses of the word in vv. 28, 34, 36, 37, and 38 are feminine. Thus, while it is theoretically possible that Paul intended the generic sense in v. 25 before going on to address specific female cases, the linguistic evidence and the historical and social context militate against such a view.

The third view is that *virgins* refers to betrothed young women. It infers that some engaged couples in the church were wondering whether to go through with their marriages. It is suggested that they may have felt under pressure from ascetic thinking in the church that it is not good to have sexual relations with a woman (cf. 7:1b). Or some other circumstance may have put them off (see below on the *present crisis* in v. 26). Paul addresses their male fiancés in vv. 27–28 and 36–38, insisting that it is not a sin to marry and to consummate the marriage. This is perhaps the most widely held view among commentators today. A problem for this view is that there were a variety of ways in which a Greek could and did refer to betrothed virgins or betrothed young women, and the word "virgin," by itself, is not used in that way elsewhere. It becomes clear in vv. 36–38 that Paul has betrothed virgins in mind at least in those verses (where they are repeatedly referred to as "his virgin"). It may be that

the Corinthians had referred to "betrothed virgins" in their letter to Paul and that he responds by referring to "the virgins," meaning "the [betrothed] virgins you mentioned," but that is speculation. It seems just as possible that vv. 25–35 address a broader question regarding virgins (or young unmarried women) in general, as those most commonly to occupy the attention of unmarried men who are struggling with issues of sexual purity and possible advantages to marrying. In suggesting that *it is good for a man to remain as he is* (v. 26), Paul almost certainly does not mean for him to continue to remain engaged forever, and v. 27 clearly addresses both men who are and men who are not presently bound or pledged to a woman. The first part of v. 28, *But if you do marry, you have not sinned*, does not seem to be addressed to one pledged (or possibly married) to a woman, but to the one mentioned at the end of v. 27 who is not bound or pledged to a woman. It is not clear from v. 28 that the virgin in mind was one already betrothed to a man rather than a general reference to any virgin who decides to marry (certainly what Paul says in the verse applies to all who marry). Verses 32–35 refer to married and unmarried men and women without any indication that currently engaged men and women are particularly in view (v. 34 gives no hint that the virgin mentioned there is engaged). Verses 36–38, however, as we have already mentioned, clearly seem to be dealing with engaged couples, and leave the impression that the Corinthians may have mentioned something about issues with previously established betrothals.

While it may be that Paul was responding to a question that dealt only with betrothed virgins (we might say, "engaged young ladies"), young (virgin) ladies were considered the most desirable potential wives, and given that the Corinthians were evidently responding to Paul's comments in his earlier letter about avoiding people contaminated by sexual immorality, it would seem natural for them to raise the question of the desirability of marrying virgins (as well as the wisest course of action for virgins themselves in a world full of *porneia*). We tentatively prefer the conclusion, in fact, that the Corinthians raised the issue about the wisdom of marrying virgins/maidens in general as well as the problem of whether to follow through with betrothal commitments at this time (see on vv. 36–38).

As best we can tell, in response to Paul's warnings in his previous letter about sexual immorality (and avoiding those involved in it), some Corinthian men were wondering if they should find a virgin to marry (or, in some cases, go ahead and marry the virgin to which they are already betrothed) in order to better avoid such temptations, although the crisis Corinth was experiencing at the time did not make it a propitious time to start a family. Paul first admits that for this issue *I have no command from the Lord*. Unlike the question of whether to divorce in vv. 10–11, on which Paul does have a command from the Lord, on this subject he is left to his own devices. But it is not that Paul himself cannot give a command. On the contrary, in vv. 2–16, when the apostle addresses other questions of marriage and divorce, he does give some commands. The difference here is that Paul is not addressing an issue with one right answer. The matter calls for the decision and consent of those advised, and the distinction is not between right and wrong but between "right" and "better" (v. 38).

However, it is also not that Paul is like a counselor in the modern sense of giving neutral help designed to assist autonomous individuals come to their own decision; Paul responds to the issue *as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy*. The *mercy* to which he refers is not his salvation but his apostleship and his call to proclaim Christ among the nations; 2 Corinthians 4:1: "through God's mercy we have this ministry" (cf. Gal. 1:15–16). And "trustworthiness" or "faithfulness" is that quality required of all qualified Christian ministers according to 1 Corinthians 4:2. As a predominantly Gentile church, the Corinthians can hardly ignore what Paul has to say.

What Paul *gives* in response to Corinthian quandaries he calls his own *judgment*. Other translations render the term in question his "opinion." Deming, reading 1 Corinthians 7 alongside Stoic-Cynic discussions of marriage, suggests that the word points to an appeal to what is fitting in the present situation. However, Collins is right to underscore Paul's rhetoric of reminding the Corinthians that his "opinion" is from someone who is reliable.304 Personal "opinion," with its connotations of polite civility, hardly fits Paul's persona as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (1:1); even if not as categorical as a command, in a situation where people are making major life-changing decisions the

apostle gives his *judgment* or "rule of conduct." However, as vv. 36–38 show, Paul does this without compromising the Corinthians' personal responsibility to live "before God" (v. 24). In Thiselton's words, "Paul the pastor thinks aloud" but also "leaves them free to make responsible decisions about advantages and disadvantages for the Kingdom of God, for others, and for themselves."

7:26 Paul introduces his guidance with the words (literally): "Therefore, I think this is good." He uses the same language the Corinthians used in their maxim, *It is good for a man not to touch a woman*, which he quoted at the beginning of the chapter (7:1b). Consciously responding to the concerns they raised with him, his counsel in v. 26b is that (literally) "it is good for a man to be thus." Although on first sight it seems Paul may mean it is good "to remain a virgin," looking back to v. 25, it is more likely that his words are looking ahead to v. 27 and mean, it is good not to make any change in your marital status. Thus, this verse is another application of the principle Paul illustrated in vv. 17–24: "remain as you are."

The reason given that it is good not to seek a change in your marital status is *because of the present crisis.* Fee captures Paul's underlying logic: "In light of the troubles you are already experiencing, who needs the additional burden of marriage as well?" Or as Morris puts it, "when high seas are raging, it is no time for changing ships."311 In the absence of effective contraception in the ancient world, marriage inevitably led to having children and, all too often, to the death of the mother. The added responsibilities of the married state would be felt more acutely in times of economic or other social crises. As Francis Bacon observed, "children sweeten labours, but they make misfortunes more bitter."

But which troubles does Paul have in mind? Bruce Winter has suggested that *the present crisis* being experienced in Corinth was "dislocation in the city's life caused through a series of acute grain shortages and the attendant social unrest." He cites evidence for grain shortages in the East during the forties and fifties in Eusebius, Pliny, Suetonius, and several strands of nonliterary evidence. Tiberius Claudius Dinippus was curator of the grain supply in Corinth during this period, an office filled only in times of famine.314 Such famines invariably caused serious social upheaval. Garnsey claims that "the fear of famine rather than famine itself was enough to send people on the rampage." Indeed, Paul would not have been the first to describe such a situation as a "crisis": Thucydides uses the same term to sum up the plight of cities facing conditions of dire necessity, including severe famine.316 Unfortunately, the precise dating of those famines escapes us. It is quite possible that Paul had a grain shortage or famine in Corinth in mind when he counseled Corinthian engaged couples to remain as you are *because of the present crisis*, or it may be that a few years after such severe famine other types of social upheaval and economic stress may have resulted as part of its aftereffects.

The majority of commentators, on the other hand, understand Paul to be referring to the tribulation or messianic woes which are the lot of all Christians and will herald the Second Coming of Christ. On this reading, vv. 29–31 reinforce the same point. Many see Paul here exercising his conviction that the parousia was imminent. Indeed, the two words translated *present crisis* can be construed in an eschatological sense. "Crisis" is used in Luke 21:23 in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem, a portent of the End. And the word for "present" can mean "to be about to occur" (BDAG). Mark's eschatological discourse presents similar sentiments to 1 Corinthians 7:25–31 with its warnings to "pregnant women and nursing mothers" and reference to "a shortening of days" (Mark 13:17, 20; cf. 1 Cor. 7:29).

Moore points out that the key word, *crisis*, does not have an established usage in eschatological contexts. While Luke employs it, Matthew 24:21, 29 and Mark 13:19 prefer another word, and Paul uses it elsewhere with no thought of the End Time. Elsewhere in Paul's letters it means "duress" (2 Cor. 9:7; Phlm. 14), "calamities" or "disaster" (2 Cor. 6:4; 12:10), or "distress" (1 Thess. 3:7). It actually turns up in 1 Corinthians 7:37, where it is translated "compulsion." BDAG defines the word as covering a range of meanings involving some outer or inner pressure.322 Furthermore, Paul's use of the other key word does not support the sense of "impending." He uses it to refer to that which is already present in contrast to the future: "the *present* or the future" (1 Cor. 3:22); "the *present* nor the future" (Rom. 8:38); "*present* evil age" (Gal. 1:4). The main difficulty for this view is the relationship of v. 26 to vv. 29–31. Moore's suggestion that the opening words of v. 29 mark a clear break and supply a new point

is not entirely satisfactory since the two paragraphs are clearly related in some way.

Paul may be referring to the eschatological crisis of the entire interadvental period (much as "tribulation" sometimes refers to the entire period), making the point that nothing that belongs to this present world, which is passing away, is ultimately significant. If this is correct, the "crisis" is not "temporary" (i.e., a few years or a decade or two) except in the sense that everything connected with this passing world order between the first and second comings of Jesus is temporary. This fits perfectly with the point of vv. 29–31. But the word *crisis* is usually employed for temporary periods of crisis or distress (the first usage above), and it seems unlikely that Paul is arguing that people should opt to maintain their current marital status until the return of Christ.

We are not left with the options of simply equating the two sections (so that they both are purely eschatological in focus) or of building a wall between them (so that they are dealing with two unrelated issues). Paul himself probably would not have known whether or not *the present crisis* in Corinth was a part of the final woes that would come on the earth. Jesus had predicted that the earth would experience severe famines and plagues before the End (Matt. 24:7; Mark 13:8; Luke 21:11; cf. Rev. 6:8; 18:8), and in Romans 8:35 Paul's list of trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword may well reflect his understanding that he and some of his readers were already living in the time of eschatological tribulations. Acts 11:28 tells us that Agabus "predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world" and that it was referring to the one that took place during the reign of Claudius. That particular famine happened between a.d. 45 and 48. Paul would probably have recognized that *the present crisis* in Corinth was like that of the End and might even have been a part of it; the present woes are typical, at least, of the parousia woes, if they are not in fact the first and outlying clouds spinning around the ultimate hurricane on the eschatological horizon (see further below on v. 29). Paul was not expecting the world to come to an immediate end, it seems, or he would not have been warning people about the implications of singleness and marriage for a life with more or less stress. It seems likely that even if he understood the *present crisis* to be part of larger eschatological developments, it would pass at some point.

In any case, in v. 26 Paul is saying that the unusually difficult circumstances in Corinth mean that staying single is advisable, at least for the time being. Paul's advice regarding marriage in this passage may be due as much to the extenuating circumstances in the church as to abstract theological convictions. The wisdom (or not) of marrying or making other critical life decisions that will affect the lives of others may depend on the presence or absence of a more-or-less stable social environment. Important decisions in life (as well as mundane ones), if made wisely, will take into consideration the social context. Times of great social and economic upheaval and instability that reflect the extreme frailty and passing nature of this world (of which our eschatology reminds us) in tangible and threatening ways call for great caution and reflection upon our ultimate goals and mission in life and how such decisions cohere with them. We need wisdom to discern the times and understand our circumstances so as to know the best way to glorify God and avoid putting ourselves or others under unnecessary duress.

The significance of this conclusion is that Paul's negative stance on getting married here and throughout the chapter is to some extent a "refraction" of his ethics, to borrow Helmut Thielicke's helpful term. His instructions assume "the character of a necessary emergency measure" rather than being his sober direction for all the churches. The fact that other passages in Paul's letters are more positive about marriage demonstrates that what he says here is not the whole of his teaching on marriage.326 Paul's teaching about marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 is "a practical reflection on concrete circumstances."

7:27 Paul clarifies what he meant in v. 26 by "it is good for a man to be thus" with two direct questions each with a corresponding imperative (cf. the same structure in v. 18). A debate over their meaning is reflected in the NIV and TNIV translations. The Greek reads literally: "Are you bound to a woman? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a woman? Do not seek a woman." Three terms generate the ambiguity: "bound," "loosed," and "woman." In short, the first can refer to

marriage or betrothal,329 the second to divorce or breaking off the engagement, and the third to a wife or a fiancé.331 Hence the NIV translates with marriage and divorce in view: "Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife."332 And the TNIV with betrothal and 'breaking up': *Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife.*

If we must choose between these two views, the second is to be preferred. Paul is not addressing a general audience of married people. As Schrage points out, such an address would be an unnecessary repetition of vv. 10–16, where he did in fact have a command from the Lord concerning divorce. While the verb translated "*pledged*" (TNIV) or "bound" (NRSV, ESV, NET, NAB, NASB, etc.) is clearly used elsewhere by Paul to refer to a binding marriage commitment, including just twelve verses later (v. 39; cf. Rom. 7:2), elsewhere Paul uses two other words for divorce in 1 Corinthians 7, suggesting that the language of "loosing" in v. 27 may have a different meaning. The reason the language is ambiguous and may apply to either situation is that in the ancient world "an engagement created the same ties as marriage," so that the "vocabulary of relationship by marriage was used from the time of betrothal."336 Paul uses language that is broad enough to apply clearly to both married and betrothed men. His focus here is on unmarried men, but married men are still listening in and would not suffer from the reinforcement of the point. There is overlap with the counsel he already gave to married couples, since the counsel is similar for those who are married and those who are betrothed. Finally, only the betrothal view of the verse explains Paul's failure to give a corresponding word to women. Whereas throughout the chapter Paul almost always balances instructions to both men and women, in v. 27 and vv. 36–38 he addresses only men. As Garland notes, "This change in pattern is attributable to cultural mores, which assume that males take the initiative in betrothal arrangements."338

It is not clear how Paul would have looked upon the breaking of a betrothal. While according to both Roman and Jewish views betrothal placed the couple in the legal framework of marriage already, for Romans it was a very simple thing to dissolve a betrothal or a marriage, while for many Jews (like Jesus and Paul), marriage (and presumably betrothals since betrothed couples were considered legally married) could be broken only under rather extreme circumstances. Did Paul think that because Roman betrothals were not taken as seriously as Jewish ones they could legitimately be dissolved on lesser grounds than a marriage, or perhaps on any grounds (thus treating them much like engagements in many modern Western countries)? In this verse Paul says that a man betrothed to a woman should not seek to break such a commitment, but according to the most common interpretation of vv. 36–38, Paul there suggests that the person who decides not to marry his fiancée makes the best choice (so the TNIV). The latter passage is one of the most difficult in the New Testament, and we will address its problems in our comments there. The fact is that in two other places (v. 39 and Rom. 7:2) Paul uses the verb translated here as *pledged* or "bound" to refer to the lifelong bond of marriage. That he tells such people not to seek a dissolution of the bond suggests that he does not think betrothals should be taken lightly, or broken except on serious grounds. It seems that what Paul lacks is a command from the Lord regarding whether or not a single man should consider marrying a virgin. Whether or not a betrothed man should dissolve the betrothal may well have been understood to fall under the Lord's command regarding divorce. The first part of the verse makes better sense if Paul's counsel to the unmarried men in the following verses is "a necessary emergency measure" and not his general position. The fact that Paul does not recommend a dissolution of the betrothal commitment suggests that at some point in the future (when the *present crisis* is over) the couple might, or perhaps should, go ahead with the marriage.

The men Paul has in mind in this verse would have been either betrothed to one of the "virgins" mentioned in v. 25, or thinking about finding a virgin to marry. Paul is saying, "if you are betrothed to 'a virgin' (or married), stay as you are (the Lord's command applies here); if you are single, do not seek betrothal and marriage." The second part of the verse is clearly not addressed to engaged men, but to single men who are not engaged. This supports the view that the passage as a whole is (mainly) addressing single men who may (vv. 27a, 36–38) or may not (vv. 27b–28, 32–35) be engaged already.

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The logic of v. 28, and the following verses, suggests that vv. 28–35 are addressing unbetrothed men who are considering marrying virgins, and unbetrothed young (virgin) women who are thinking about getting married, while vv. 36–38 turn to focus on men who are already betrothed to a virgin.

7:28 Even if in Paul's "judgment" (v. 25) single men should not get married (v. 27b), at least at this time of crisis (v. 26a), it was not a position to which they were required to submit. What matters is "keeping the commandments of God" (v. 19), such as avoiding sexual immorality. Whether to marry or not is not of the same order: *But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned.* These words would apply to both engaged (v. 27a) and unengaged (v. 27b) men and women, although even more clearly to the latter, since Paul had already said that engaged people should not dissolve the engagement (suggesting they should go through with the marriage at some point). If they should not break their engagement, it can hardly be "sin" to follow through on what it represents.

Many scholars think that Paul feels the need to reassure Corinthian couples that "it is not a sin" (NJB) to marry because some in Corinth argued that it was. In their view it is only a short step from saying, "it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman" (7:1b), to saying that it is sin for single people to marry. However, Paul is probably simply clarifying the force of his own recommendation in favor of not changing one's status, right now, including the status of "engaged/betrothed." The fact that in his judgment it is best not to make such life-changes in the present context (v. 26) does not mean that someone who decides to go ahead and marry is sinning. "Those who do not accept his advice do not in fact commit sin." In cases such as these there is, as Thiselton observes, "freedom where Christians must take responsibility for their own actions after weighing carefully the factors which others (including Christian teachers or pastors) have brought to their attention in a non-directive manner."344 Whether to marry or not is not a matter of "sin," but of discerning what is best (cf. v. 38).

To end this phase of his counsel to unmarried men (and young women) Paul returns to his "judgment" that it is better for them to stay as they are: *But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this*. "Many troubles in this life" translates the phrase "afflictions of the flesh." Other English versions show the range of possible meanings: "distress in this life" (NRSV); "worldly troubles" (RSV, ESV); "affliction in [one's] earthly life" (NAB); "difficult circumstances" (NET). Scholars usually choose between thinking that Paul is referring to the distractions of marital life which he expounds in vv. 32–35 or that he is reprising v. 26, his only stated grounds to this point for the counsel for betrothed couples to stay as they are, namely, "because of the present crisis" (v. 26; possibly a food shortage in Corinth or enduring economic problems coming in its wake). Here "flesh" refers to our weakness and frailty characteristic of existence in this life, while "afflictions" ("distress" or "pressure" [Thiselton]) calls to mind more readily "the present crisis" than the less distressing "concerns of married life," and seems too strong a word for what Paul expounds in vv. 32–35. We may do best to see that these are not unrelated, since the concerns of married life, like life itself, become much more distressing in times of social crisis.

As Garland points out, upon a superficial reading "Paul would seem to resonate with those who had a dismal view of marriage." He has in mind those who suggested that marriage was "a great struggle" or "full of care" (Antiphon, *On Harmony* 357.15–16; 360.1), or "burdensome and grievous" (Hierocles, *On Marriage* 505.24–25, mentions and rejects this view), or an experience similar to being "quite loaded down with burdens" (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 1.2). As Garland points out, Calvin also "identifies the affliction as 'the responsibilities and difficulties' that marriage brings, springing 'from the affairs of the world.' "347 Some of those authors may in fact have a dismal view of marriage. Even those with a much more positive view of marriage may agree, however, that in times of great social and economic crisis one's marriage may add greatly to the burdens a person must endure. Paul is explicitly talking about troubles or afflictions suffered especially by *those who marry*, troubles and afflictions that will not be experienced as fully by single people. In times of "crisis" the blessing of a spouse and children can become a grievous burden. As a good father himself (4:14–15), Paul hopes to keep his children from unnecessary distress, *to spare* them, by persuading single men and women who are at

or approaching the normal time to marry to remain single. Paul ends the paragraph where he started, judging that for practical reasons (perhaps the impact of a famine in Corinth, or some other crisis) it would be better not to marry.[1]

1 CORINTHIANS 7:29–35

Thomas Schreiner, In the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, shows how eschatology (their view of eternity) impacts their present situations:

29. The eschatological framework and foundation for Paul's instructions are now unpacked, and they lend support to the notion that 'the present distress' (v. 26, CSB) is eschatological. Since the Christ has come and now reigns at God's right hand, the time before the end has been shortened. The 'culmination of the ages has come' in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 10:11). The hour before the end is brief, and believers should constantly live in the light of the end (Rom. 13:11–14). Everything in life must be recalibrated and considered in the light of the imminence of the end. Therefore, those who *have wives should live as if they do not*. A wooden reading of the verse would badly misunderstand Paul, for he certainly does not cancel out his instructions elsewhere in which husbands are told to love and cherish their wives, showing them the same kind of sacrificial love Christ exhibited for the church in giving his life for the church's salvation (Eph. 5:25–29). Paul's point is that marriage is temporary; thus believers should not live as if their ultimate joy and satisfaction are derived from their marital relationship. Since marriage is not permanent, believers must seek their ultimate joy not in marriage but in their relationship with Christ.

30. The dawning of the end also affects Paul's understanding of both joy and sorrow. Once again, the words here could be understood as a call to Stoicism, as if Paul were world-denying. Paul, however, does not contradict the words of Romans 12:15: 'Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.' He certainly does not mean, then, that one should not truly mourn or truly rejoice. His point is eschatological. Every sorrow and every joy is temporary; none will last for ever. Thus one should never think that sorrows or joys are permanent or ultimate. Full and everlasting joy belongs to the age to come, not to the present evil age. The same stance should be taken towards possessions. Paul does not deny that whatever is purchased is possessed. When he says that their possessions are *not theirs to keep*, he is thinking eschatologically. Any possessions owned now will not belong to believers permanently; the end is coming, and then all possessions will be gone.

31. We have a play on words in the Greek in verse 31, and the CSB tries to replicate it: 'those who use [*chromenoi*] the world as though they did not make full use [*katachromenoi*] of it'. On the other hand, the NIV nicely catches the sense: *those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them*. Again, Paul is not world-denying, as if using the things of this world is frowned upon. What concerns Paul is if the things of this world cause one to forget the world to come, for every present reality is a shadow compared with the substance to come. This short paragraph is framed, then, by eschatology. Just as Paul begins the paragraph by saying that the time is short, so he concludes it by reminding readers that the world as it is now *is passing away* (*paragei*). The idea is remarkably close to the words found in 1 John 2:15–17, where readers are warned not to love the world and the things in it. John closes the discussion with the same verb Paul uses, asserting that the *world … is passing away* (*paragetai*). In speaking of the present form (*schema*) of this world, the reference is not necessarily to the physical structure of the world but to 'the way of life' and its 'culture' (L&N 58.7).

32–34. Paul's advice on whether to remain single or to get married flows from his eschatological standpoint. He does not want the Corinthians to become entangled in the things of this world and lose perspective on what is eternal. If their concerns are centred on this present age, they are liable to forget or neglect the world that is coming—the world that is permanent. *An unmarried man* focuses his concerns on *the Lord's affairs*, which means that he lives in the light of the end that is coming. Living for the Lord's sake means that one seeks to *please* him. The same aim is present in Colossians

[1] Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 330–342.

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3:17: 'And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (cf. also 1 Cor. 10:31). A married man, in contrast to one who is single, is also *concerned about the affairs of this world*. In other words, he is preoccupied, and should be preoccupied, with how to please his wife. Paul's words could be read as if being concerned with worldly things or with pleasing one's wife is negative, but such a reading would be mistaken. What concerns Paul is if one forgets about the world to come by focusing on the present world. The division in his heart may separate a husband from Christ, in the sense that he no longer seeks the Lord.

Paul's instructions for men also apply to women who are unmarried or virgins. A woman who is unmarried can concentrate on the things of the Lord. She is enabled to focus on what it means to belong to the Lord *in both body and spirit* so that every dimension of her life is under Christ's lordship. Conversely, a married woman must give herself to worldly matters and think about how she can please her husband.

35. The preference for the single life might strike some as oppressive; thus Paul emphasizes that his instructions are for their *good* (*symphoron*). He writes to maximize their happiness, not to dampen it. He is not throwing a noose (*brochon*) or 'restraint' (CSB) on them. He wants them to live in a way that is 'proper' (*euschemon*, csb) and fitting, so that they can serve and be devoted to the Lord without being distracted by the things of this world. In other words, he wants them to live in the light of the future, of the new world that is coming.

The single life is preferred to marriage, since then one can serve the Lord without being distracted by pleasing one's husband or wife. Doing such is worldly in the sense that the focus is on this world instead of on the world to come. Paul is not teaching that marriage is secular and unworthy. Rather, those who invest in this world may neglect or ignore the world to come, and thus a focus on this world may mean that one profits in this world instead of in the next.

Paul's advice may seem oppressive; thus he emphasizes that his instructions are for their welfare and for their future happiness. At the same time, we must recognize that Paul's words are limited by the situation addressed in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Timothy 5:14 young widows are counselled 'to marry', 'to have children' and 'to manage their homes'. It is evident from Paul's words in Timothy that on other occasions he encourages people to get married; thus we must beware of thinking that his instructions in 1 Corinthians represent the whole of his thinking about marriage.[2]

1 CORINTHIANS 7:36–40

In the *Cornerstone Bible Commentary*, William Baker comments on Paul's concluding thoughts both to the men and to widows:

For the only time in this chapter (7:36–38), Paul addresses men without also addressing women on a matter (Horsley 1998:107). Regarding the issue of engaged couples completing their pledges to marry, it should be noted that he addressed men first (7:27, 32) before making a balancing statement to women. His directions to men likely reflect the cultural reality that men were the dominant partner in a marriage relationship, as well as in an engagement, having more say in breaking it off. There may be an assumption that men are likely to have more difficulty controlling their desire for sexual intimacy than women. Given that Paul had assumed these engaged couples were Christians from the beginning, he considered the decision *not* to consummate their engagement a decision they would both agree to.

The man's ability to control his need for sexual fulfillment in 7:37 should be seen as an indicator that he has the gift of singleness spoken of in 7:7 and as a key element in his decision not to continue

[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), 156–159.

the engagement. This would put him in the most advantageous position for serving Christ, as Paul reemphasizes in 7:38 when he says it is "better."

In 7:39–40, Paul addresses women again but singles out those who may become widows. He begins in 7:39 by enunciating the position that also drove his directions in 7:10–14 regarding women who divorce. The divine intention of marriage is that it should be permanent. Couples who marry should remain together till death. Thus, divorce was discouraged by Paul even if the spouse was not a believer. Here, though, with the death of the husband, the cultural mandate would be that she remarry for the economic survival of herself and her children. Moreover, since women who were wives were often 10–15 years younger than their husbands, they were more likely to survive their husbands. Perhaps Paul considered them older, with only adult children. Regardless, he maintained his position of discouraging marriage, even the divinely permitted remarriage of a widow, presumably for the same reasons he stated with regard to engaged couples—namely, the crucial times in which they were living. In these times, she could serve the Lord better if she was single. However, as with all of his directions in this chapter, he supplied no absolute mandate. She could remarry if she chose. Nonetheless, Paul was very firm that remarriage had to be to a Christian so that her service to the Lord would not be unnecessarily curtailed. Even though he only addressed Christian widows, there is no reason to think his directions don't apply equally to Christian widowers.

It is important to put Paul's advice in this chapter into a contemporary perspective. First, it must be noted that throughout all his comments, whether weighted by a command of the Lord or his own apostolic connection to the Lord, Paul empowers individual believers to make their own choices without fear of condemnation on all the matters he talked about related to marriage. Second, his comments are all contingent on the crisis he saw looming (Hays 1997:133–134). If no comparable crisis currently exists for Christians today, it is only fair to read Paul's advice in that light, thus removing his general principle of Christians keeping their current status on hold. This is not to say that Christians should not expect Christ's return, but it may not be the case that a comparable current or local crisis requires putting marriage on hold.[3]

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

[3] William Baker, "1 Corinthians," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians*, vol. 15 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 116.