

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

86 What Is Christian Marriage? (Doctrine)

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 7:1-16

This question about marriage might well have been one of those asked the man who was the principle worker in the establishment of a church in Corinth almost twenty centuries ago. The story of this effort is told in Acts 18 and may be summarized in verses 4 and 8 where we read that *“he (Paul) was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks”* and *“any of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.”* For the space of six months and one year God continued to draw the attention of Corinthian people to the good news about Jesus through the presence of His servant, Paul. (Acts 18:10-11) From Corinth his journeys were to take him to Ephesus in the company of his friends, Priscilla and Aquila. It was not long after Paul left Ephesus for Palestine that a new convert to the faith by the name of Apollos arrived and sought instruction in the things of the Lord from Aquila and Priscilla. (Acts 18:26) Armed with deeper insights and a letter of introduction, Apollos then journeyed to Corinth and began *“showing by the Scriptures that Jesus was Christ.”* (18:28) While Apollos was holding forth in Corinth, Paul returned to Ephesus only to find letters awaiting him concerning the needs of the church in Corinth. Instruction was needed in the administration of church affairs and in Christian living. The Corinthian letters we read today are the response of Paul to Corinthian elders imploring him for help. He writes candidly, honestly, and with clarity. He is going to scold, rebuke, instruct, and encourage. He is going to bare his soul to them and there will be the throb of heartfelt concern and the warmth of deep emotion. In the 7th chapter of his first letter the subject of Christian marriage will come under the attention of this wise pastor apostle. It is to this unusual intellect, illuminated by the Holy Spirit and fired by the love of Christ, that we owe such a systematic teaching concerning a subject that comes to us this very day as needing much elaboration. Incidentally, out of the 27 books of the New Testament, 22 of them are letters or *“epistles.”* Christianity is the only major world religion to convey its truth through the warmth of one person writing out of his experience into the experience of someone else. We would do well to understand this as we consider the teaching on marriage in this passage. Here we do not read a theological dissertation, but a piece of correspondence

through which God has been pleased to provide for doctrinal permanence. Thirteen of these letters (maybe fourteen, depending on Hebrews) are from the pen of Paul. They are not the only letter's he wrote, but the ones which have been preserved for us and constitute the inscripturated foundation of our faith. Someone has also referred to them as "the remains of the Church's first missionary correspondence." While we are on this subject, though it may be a bit astray, Romans through II Thessalonians are often called the "Christian Church Epistles" because they were written to particular groups of believers in various geographical locations. These fine church letters follow a pattern in their mode of instruction. As outlined in II Timothy 3:16, there will be **(1)** doctrine, **(2)** reproof, and **(3)** correction. Doctrine will be for information, reproof for improper conduct, and correction for erroneous belief. Now, these things having been said, what does Paul write about marriage to the Christians in Corinth?

The passage we are considering begins with the words "*Now concerning the things about which you wrote...*" We say it a little differently today but the thought is the same. We say, "...in reference to your letter of such and such a date." With that it is Paul's intention to go on and give instruction in areas where advice has been sought. This first verse is typically Pauline as he will deal with the subject thoroughly by moving from the single state to the married state. These thoughts will be our main concern as we seek to understand these first two verses.

I. THE WISDOM OF GOD IN PARTICULAR CIRCUMSTANCES:

It is altogether likely that certain of these Corinthian elders were concerned about the advisability of marriage for every believer. The feeling could have been that more time and effort would be available for the Lord's work if celibacy were practiced. Paul's response is affirmative. He writes that there are certain circumstances where it is good that a man does not marry. The words of verse 1 are often taken to mean that Paul considers the married state less than the ideal one. I think the context will show this is not what he has in mind at all. He writes in verse 7, "*Yet, I wish that all men were even as I myself am.*" If all men were like Paul, they probably would be married. We can only conjecture here, but circumstances are strongly in favor of Paul having been married at one time and that his wife either died or left him when he came to the faith. Orthodox Judaism placed a high virtue on marriage and Paul was confident that he had honored every law and obligation handed down. Members of the Sanhedrin, of which he was a member, were married men. Paul's wish that all men were as he

does not arise out of any particular distaste for marriage, it was that such obligations of the home would have restricted him in his broad efforts for Christ. This is mentioned in verses 32-34. Another reason why it is well to remain single is because of the present distress spoken of in verse 26. The possibility of martyrdom and the likelihood of laying down one's life for Christ would be a concern particularly if children were involved. I suppose if Paul believed that he was living in a world without the prospects of Christ's soon return or a safe world for believers, he might not have written as directly as he did. But inasmuch as the Corinthian letter is more than a human document, we can assume that the most welcome human relationship might well be sacrificed for the work of Christ when it is seen through the eyes of the Holy Spirit. Later, this same Paul likens the relationship to that of Christ and His Church which to me, is the strongest of reasons for the union being a permanent one.

(Ephesians 5:22-26)

If there are certain situations where it is good for a man not to touch a woman, we must conclude that it is good on an individual basis. Mind that Paul said "good" not "better." The word means noble and beautiful. The reason this is actually so is because God gives a gift for such a life as is indicated in verse 7. The word is "*charis*" or "*charisma*" meaning favor or kindness. Paul interprets the words of Jesus in Matthew 19 in his mention of this gift. Some are going to know it is God's will for them to remain unmarried at a very young age, there are going to be congenital reasons which prohibit marriage. Others receive the ability to remain single as a gift from God for the sake of the building of the Kingdom. Some are undoubtedly called to a life of particular service without distraction and thus equipped by God for that work. These are the reasons for the single life for if it were not so, such a state would eventually lead to disobedience in thought or deed. This is important teaching. It will eliminate all the fuss about finding a partner or "being left on the shelf" which is an expression to old for some of you to remember.

Does God want you to be married? If He does not, He will give you a gift which will enable you to remain single. He does not call us to do what He is unable or unwilling to equip us to do. He never calls us to do something only to mock us. Now, let us move from the single to the married state.

II. GOD TOOK THE INITIATIVE:

Having dealt with circumstances which negate marriage we **move on in** the text to those circumstances which necessitate the marriage union; mainly, the strength of human instincts and the continuation of the race as well as the companionship only afforded through another human being. I believe with these things in mind Paul writes, *“But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband.”* I Corinthians 7 :2)

The people who were going to read this instruction lived in a veritable cesspool of open and flagrant immorality. Philosophically and religiously such practices were condoned. The very goddess they worshipped was one of lust and carnal passion. She was called Venus by the Romans, but to these Greeks, she was Aphrodite and to worship her was to be a party to all kinds of impurities. Greek philosophy had long concluded that the body was to be looked down upon. It was evil. “I am a poor soul shackled to a corpse,” wrote Epictetus. Now, if the body is evil to begin with, it makes little difference what you do with it. You can't make it any more evil than it already is, just allow the body to have its way. The Corinthians behaved accordingly. To be called a “Corinthian” was to be called a lewd person. The reason I mention these things is because people who had become Christians could well take the opposite view. They could reason that because the body is evil its instincts must be completely denied. Some Corinthian Christians were suggesting that to be a committed Christian a person must be finished with the body and its desires. Therefore, right after telling them that it is good for a man not to live with a woman, which is the meaning of the word “*touch*” in the text, Paul encourages the union of marriage.

He writes, *“But because of immoralities...”* He is telling them to remember who they are and where they are. If you will go back to the last verse of the preceding chapter (6:20) you will read the words, *“For you have been bought with a price: therefore, **glorify God in your body.**”* What news that must have been to foster upon the Corinthian community! Think of it! God can be glorified in the body or with the body. The ordinary things which you do each day with your body can actually glorify God! These hands, feet, tongue, mind, these can be instruments to glorify God. Furthermore, even the sex instinct is God given and can be used to honor God when it is expressed within the frame work of His choice mainly that of the union of one man and one woman in marriage. Paul is telling them that God knows the force of these desires. He is telling them to remember where they are living and the weakness of their flesh. I believe this is the teaching in

a Corinthian context.

The wider truth is that God Himself is the authorizer and solemnizer of marriage when understood properly. This matter was put to Jesus on one occasion and he turned the thoughts of His listeners back, back, back to the first marriage which ever took place. (Mark 10:6-9) Jesus recognized that marriage would be for the consummation of need and affection as well as for the continuation of the race. But we do not mate like animals. Sex and marriage were ordained by God. This truth antedates Christian teaching and goes back even further than the Mosaic law.

We go all the way back to that wonderful paradise in Eden. You recall the truth as it is presented there that before God brought a sleep upon Adam woman had never been seen by man. We have no reason to suspect that He went around looking for one either! The record tells us therefore that God was the one who took the initiative. Notice in Genesis 2:18 that it is God's reasoning that it was not good for man to be alone. Man would be better off if he had a helper suitable for him. It remained only for Adam to acquiesce to the idea conceived in the mind of God. A deep sleep fell upon Adam. There was no movement on his part. God was the prime mover in this arrangement. Not from his head did God take a part. Nor was it from his feet was woman taken, for he was neither to be lorded over by woman nor was the woman to be trodden down only to be put underfoot. I think the figure here is so beautiful...out from under the arm was she fashioned to be loved and cared for, to be protected and provided for. You see, God took the initiative. He took the matter into His own hands. Here was the gift of God to man. Think of it, Adam never sought a wife, yet he had the best wife imaginable, with due respects to the ladies present. Having spoken of certain circumstances wherein some are to remain single, and other circumstances which seem to make marriage a necessity for the believer, let us continue in our study of verse 2 as we think of the marriage relationship in all circumstances. Paul's mind is to teach Corinthian Christians not to try to live the kind of life they are not fitted for, nor to think the marriage bed is defiled in any way.

III. NO LONGER TWO BUT ONE:

We come to the words, *"let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband."* The words *"his own"* and *"her own"* are unmistakable. Monogamy is the Biblical concept of marriage. Paul here underlines the reply of Jesus to those who questioned him about marriage. "...Have you not read that He

who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this reason shall a man leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one? So they are no longer two but one.” (Mathew 19:4-6) This is God's marriage arithmetic: One plus one equals one. Polygamy is not taught in the Bible. As far as I am able to discover the first polygamist in Scripture was Lamech who is mentioned in Genesis 4:19-24. It seems God permitted polygamy because of man's weakness. Truth would dictate saying that in the case of Jacob, God's purposes were realized through it as the nation of Israel was born of two wives: Leah and Rachel. A strong warning is given in Deuteronomy 17:17 concerning the sin of a king who multiplies wives unto himself. Solomon put that to the test and grief came upon him. (I Kings 11:1-4) Though legalized polygamy was not a problem in the first century Jewish and Roman world, these words of Paul have significant meaning when understood against the words of Christ who taught a partnership so close the two would be as one. In verses 3 and 4 two characteristics of this partnership emerge. The word “render” or “fulfill” means the discharge of responsibility. He has his rights and she hers and here the rights come together and there is an act of benevolence where the rights of neither are neglected. The husband has no right to seek for himself only and neither does the wife, there is to be common gratification. There is an exception mentioned here in connection with sexual abstinence, and that is by reason of mutual consent for a period of time for the purposes of prayer. We need to remember that Paul was writing in a culture where women were treated as chattel and the instruments of men. They were not the equal of men and became exclusively the property of their husband. Into that world came the gospel. Paul here writes about a new kind of relationship Jesus makes possible between a man and a woman.

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