

The Marriage Ideal

Did Paul Permanently Elevate Singleness Above Marriage? (A Brief Survey of I Corinthians 7)



Clyde L. Pilkington, Jr.

It is not good for the man to be alone (Genesis 2:18).

It is not good for man to be alone. This is the divine declaration. Although some are given a special gift of singleness, and certain extreme circumstances make marriage tremendously difficult, these are the exceptions rather than the rule.

Adam was created *alone*. The situation in which Adam found himself was no accident. It was not a failure of God's plan. God did not make man only to realize that it was not good for him to be alone, and then scrambled to correct this situation. No! He created man with this need, and then finished His wise plan with the creation of woman. Eve was Adam's counterpart, thus,

Whoever finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor of the LORD (Proverbs 18:22).

Marriage is the ideal, not singleness. Marriage is the ideal, not divorce (which is a return to singleness).

EXCEPTIONS TO MARRIAGE

As a broad example of exception, if you had lived in Germany during the early 1940s (especially if you were of Jewish descent) it probably would not have been an ideal *time* for you to marry and have children. It could have added to your troubles and trials significantly, as it will with those who will live during the tribulation.

Sorrow to those who are pregnant, and to those nursing in those days; for there will be great necessity in the land and indignation on this people (Luke 21:23).

For a narrower example, if you were just diagnosed with terminal cancer, it might not be the ideal *time* to start a family.

DID PAUL INSTITUTE A PERMANENT CHANGE REGARDING MARRIAGE?

Notwithstanding these examples of *present distress*, marriage, however, still remains the ideal.

In I Corinthians Paul is not laying forth the *doctrine* of marriage. This doctrine has already been laid out clearly in the Hebrew Scriptures. Elsewhere in his letters, Paul unmistakably supports and defends the standard of the Hebrew Scriptures (Ephesians 5; Colossians 3; I Timothy 3; I Timothy 5; Titus 3).

Among other things, in I Corinthians Paul is answering questions on various topics. In chapter 7 he is dealing with what they had written concerning the ideal of celibacy:

It is ideal for a man not to be touching a woman (I Corinthians 7:1).

Because of extreme conditions, which we will consider in a bit, the Corinthians had questioned Paul as to whether or not singleness should be the ideal. Paul held forth, as a temporary exception to the ideal, the unmarried state.

G. Campbell Morgan (1863-1945) wrote concerning these issues in I Corinthians 7.

No attempt is made here to state the Christian doctrine of marriage in its fullness and completeness. That must be sought elsewhere, and will be found if we study his Ephesian and Colossian letters, and those to Timothy. There we have specific instructions on the marriage relationship.

Here it *looks* as though Paul considered the marriage state a little lower than the state of celibacy. However, he cannot be interpreted in that way, for do not forget that when he was writing to Timothy he spoke of “*forbidding to marry*” as a “*doctrine of demons*” (I Timothy 4:1).

If one is tempted to feel that he was undervaluing the marriage relationship, and suggesting that Christian people were better free from it, there is a reason for what he was saying: All of the teaching here is in answer to the questions arising out of conduct in Corinth.¹

PAUL’S MARITAL GIFT

The main theme addressed by Paul was the temporary ideal of singleness as it related to the “*present distress*” at Corinth.

While confirming the goodness and godliness of marriage, Paul also proceeded to give temporary advice based in part on his own personal experience.

Sexuality is a gift from God. Marriage is the standard of the creation model. Celibacy is an exception that requires a special gift from God, and Paul possessed this gift.

How appropriate that Paul was gifted to be single, considering that he traveled in such dangerous conditions, was continually persecuted and frequently imprisoned. Even as early as A.D. 60 he could write,

1. G. Campbell Morgan (1863-1945), *The Corinthian Letters of Paul* (Revell, 1946).

In beatings above measure, in jails more frequent, near death often. From the Jews five times received I thirty-nine lashes. Three times was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, three times I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the swamp; in frequent travels, in dangers of rivers, in dangers of robbers, in dangers by my own countrymen, in dangers by the nations, in dangers in the city, in dangers in the country, in dangers in the sea, in dangers among false brothers; in weariness and painfulness, in many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, in fasts often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which comes upon me daily, the care of all the called-out ones (II Corinthians 11:23-28).

Can we truly comprehend such suffering as presented in these six short verses? It is little wonder that Paul called these days a “*present distress*” – and his ministry wasn’t even over yet. In the next half-dozen years or more he would suffer greater things than these – ultimately a dark Roman dungeon and death.

Beyond this, could one even imagine being responsible for a wife under these circumstances? How would he care for and support a spouse through such extreme conditions? It surely would have doubled his pain to have had a wife. The heartache he would have had for her would seem to have been unbearable. Can you picture Paul trying to protect and shield a wife? For surely a godly husband “*cares for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife*” (:33).

WIFE PLEASING

For a husband to “*care for the things of the world*” so that he may “*please his wife*” is a natural, God-honoring quest. However, under severe conditions, such as in Corinth, such a husbandly duty would be an extremely heavy burden to bear.

Wife-pleasing responsibilities were *only* negative when weighed against the reality of such dangerous circumstances as the Corinthians were facing.

PAUL’S ADVICE

It is important that we notice here the unique nature of this chapter, where Paul – by inspiration – makes personal observations and recommendations where God had not given direct revelation.²

(1) :6

But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment (KJV).

Now this I am saying as a concession, not as an injunction (CV).

(2) :12

But to the rest speak I, not the Lord (KJV).

Now to the rest am I speaking, not the Lord (CV).

2. Paul’s advice, preserved for us in the biblical text, is invaluable, for it allows us to see how appropriate it is to take the truths that we know and, with wisdom given to us by God, to make similar decisions in our own lives. Opinions, divinely influenced, can prove vital in the believer’s life.

(3) :25

I have no commandment of the Lord: yet I give my judgment (KJV).

I have no injunction of the Lord. Yet an opinion am I giving (CV).

(4) :40

my judgment (KJV).

my opinion (CV).

Under the current conditions that prevailed at Corinth, Paul naturally advocated the position of his own marital status for certain reasons that he reveals. He does not, however, say that his gift is the standard for all. He does not say that there had been a change in God's ideal. He was satisfied as a single man, and made a valid defense of his gift – just as a satisfied married man would defend and recommend the married state – under normal circumstances.

Of course, if Paul was happy and content with his singleness, why wouldn't he advocate it? It was his gift. After all, I am very thankful for my own marital lot – since it is my gift, it suits me well – and if asked for my advice and opinion, why would I not recommend it as the best?

THE “PRESENT DISTRESS”

From the vantage of *his* gift, Paul made the single state a recommendation to others based on what he saw as:

(a) :26

present distress (KJV, Diaglott);

present necessity (CV, Young);

present crisis (God's Word);

difficulties of the present (Phillips);

time of suffering (TCT);

time of stress like the present (NEB).

(b) :29

time is short (KJV);

era is limited (CV).

“Distress” from :26 is the Greek word *anagkē*, and is used in Luke 21:23 to translate the condition during the tribulation before the millennium.

*Woe to them that are pregnant, and nursing in those days! For there shall be great **distress** [anagkē] in the land ... (Luke 21:23).*

Paul uses this word also to describe the conditions of his persecution.

*I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in **necessities** [anagkē], in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake (II Corinthians 12:10).*

*We were comforted over you in all our affliction and **distress** [anagkē] by your faith (I Thessalonians 3:7).*

Paul’s marital advice must be viewed within the context of these statements. Others have recognized this important context:

The “present distress” was “the present persecution of the church.” — Nathaniel Scarlett³

The “present distress” was “the critical condition in which Christians were placed by the spirit of persecution which then prevailed.” — B.W. Johnston⁴

Under the present political circumstances, I think [it is best to remain single]. To take on the responsibility of marriage just didn’t seem best [at that time.] Considering the possibility of persecution and some hard circumstances Christians already found themselves in, Paul couldn’t give any other advice except to stay single. Persecution could have broken out at any minute. — J.J. Blanco⁵

Thus this advice was not meant to be a permanent rule. — C.R. Stam⁶

[Paul’s] judgment was for the time then present. It had to do with conditions pertaining to the distress of those immediate people. He is not saying this for all times and all [people.] It was advised as an expedient and temporary measure. — Roy Laurin⁷

Some pressing constraint lay hard on the Corinthians at the time of writing. ... Paul’s friends were at that time in unusually difficult circumstances, and in view of the troubled times Paul felt it best for them to stay as they were. — Leon Morris⁸

Paul’s advice here was for the present distress or persecutions. — F.J. Drake⁹

3. *A Translation of the New Testament* (1798).

4. *The People’s New Testament with Explanatory Notes* (1975).

5. *The Clear Word* (1994).

6. *Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Berean Bible Society, 1988).

7. *First Corinthians: Where Life Matures* (Van Kampen, 1954; Kregel, 1987).

8. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: I Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 1958, 1988).

9. *Dakes’ Annotated Reference Bible* (1961).

I do think that he was referring to local conditions ... to the pressure of circumstances in the midst of which the church was living at Corinth. — G. Campbell Morgan¹⁰

Paul thus states the advantages of singleness as:

1. :28

Avoiding the additional troubles that are particular to marital life (either natural or circumstantial – as “*the present distress.*”)

2. :32-35

Undivided attention to the Lord.

PAUL’S LATER ADVICE

In A.D. 59, because of “*present distress*,” Paul advised singleness. However, later in his ministry – in A.D. 65 – his advice was a return to the original creation design of marriage.

*I will therefore that the younger women **marry**, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully* (I Timothy 5:14).

We can tell clearly by this advice given to Timothy, some six years later, that the earlier counsel was a temporary, localized exception to the divine standard of marriage.

A SUMMARY OF THE MANY RELATED ISSUES OF I CORINTHIANS 7

Before leaving this brief survey of I Corinthians 7, let’s consider an overview of some of the important teachings that Paul derives from the complex situation of marital issues at Corinth.

1. He began by confirming celibacy as being a temporary ideal (:2).
2. He displaced cultic prostitution as the answer to sexual needs (:2).¹¹
3. He presented the husband/wife model as the primary means of sexual satisfaction (:2-5).
4. He acknowledged that sexual inclination (single and married) is an individual gift of God (:7, 17).
5. He naturally defended his (current) sexual gift (:7).
6. He applied his singleness as a model during the current circumstances at Corinth (:8).
7. He said the unmarried and widows are free to marry (sexual union) (:8-9).
8. He taught that believing couples should not disengage (separate from) their sexual union (but are to remain married) (:10-11).

10. *The Corinthian Letters of Paul* (Revell, 1946).

11. Misunderstanding of the *temporary* ideal had influenced some husbands and wives of Corinth to abstain (separate) from their sexual union. Due to continued sexual needs, this eventually resulted in a return to the heathen temple of Aphrodite for satisfaction of sexual needs with cultic prostitutes.

Cultic prostitution is both the historic as well as the larger context of I Corinthians (6:9-10, 15-18; 10:7-8, 14; comparing its companion context of Numbers 25:1-9). A detailed study of this subject can be found in the author’s book *Due Benevolence*, chapter 12.

9. He told wives who were separated (abstinent with their husbands) to remain unmarried (sexually-unengaged) or be reconciled to their husbands (:10-11).¹²
 10. He declared that unbelieving spouses desiring continued habitation with the believing should be allowed to do so (:12-13).¹³
 11. He stated that the unbelieving spouses are sanctified by their believing spouse (:14).
 12. He showed that if the unbelieving partner left, the believing spouse is no longer “bound” (or “enslaved”) by the wedlock (:15).¹⁴
 13. He presented peace as the overreaching principle in marriage: “*God has called us to peace*” (:15).¹⁵
 14. He encouraged believers not to seek (pursue) divorce (:26).¹⁶
 15. He verified that it is not a sin for a divorced person or a virgin to marry (:28).
 16. He affirmed that it is not a sin for a widow to marry (:39).
-
12. This passage does not refer to those who are *divorced*. The instruction is not directed to *former*-wives reconciling with *former*-husbands, but with “*wives*” (current) who are merely separated (withdrawn sexually) from their husbands.
 13. This instruction does not overturn Scriptures dealing with neglect and abuse (physical or otherwise). Not *all* believers are bound to stay with *all* spouses, simply because their abusive spouse desires them too.
 14. This “bondage” is a reference to the “wedlock” of the husband/wife covenant (*cf.* Romans 7:2; I Corinthians 7:27).
 15. *cf.* Amos 3:3
 16. “Loosed” is in reference to the “bond” of “wedlock” (*i.e.*, divorced). Two things loose the bonds of the husband/wife covenant: death and divorce. This verse does not mean “death.” Of course you shouldn’t try to kill your mate.

Taken from the *Bible Student’s Notebook*[™], a weekly Bible study publication available in two formats (electronic and printed)

www.BibleStudentsNotebook.com

Study Shelf, PO Box 265, Windber, PA 15963
1-800-784-6010 / www.StudyShelf.com

B I B L E S T U D E N T ’ S P R E S S [™]
W i n d b e r , P e n n s y l v a n i a

