

First Epistle to the Corinthians

12 – Essay Two: Sex –In Harmony with the Gospel (2.4) – Part 1

1 Corinthians 7:1-9

1. Organizational alternatives for this text
 - a. *ESV Study Bible*
 - i. Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter (7:1–11:1)
 1. Marriage, divorce, and unchangeable circumstances (7:1–24)
 2. The betrothed and widows (7:25–40)
 3. Food offered to idols (8:1–11:1)
 - b. *Reading the New Testament: 1 Corinthians*
 - i. Christians are not angels (7:1-24)
 1. Part One (7:1b-6)
 2. Part Two (7:7-24)
 - ii. When a theological good becomes a practical liability (7:25-40)
 1. First reason to remain as-is (7:26, 29-31)
 - a. An application (7:27, 39-40)
 - b. Exceptions to the general rule (7:28a, 36-38)
 2. Second reason to remain as-is (7:28b, 32-35)
 - c. *New International Commentary, New Testament: The First Epistle*
 - i. In response to the Corinthian letter (7:1-16:12)
 1. Marriage and related matters (7:1-40)
 - a. To the married (or formerly married)—stay as you are (7:1-16)
 - b. The guiding principle—stays as one was when called (7:17-24)
 - c. About the “virgins” (7:25-40)
 - d. Bailey¹ (Essay Two Subject: Men and Women in the Human Family)
 - i. Immorality and the Church (4:17-6:8)
 - ii. (Three Road Blocks: Leaven, Immorality, and the Law Courts [5:6b-6:8])
 - iii. Theology of Sexual Practice: Kingdom Ethics (6:9-12)
 - iv. Theology of Sexual Practice: Joining the Body (6:13-20)
 - v. Sexual Practice in Harmony with the Gospel (7:1-40)
2. Earlier Summaries
 - a. Paul sees arrogance among some of the Corinthians believers as the primary issue
 - b. Paul addresses three objections Corinthian believers might raise
 - c. Paul reminds the Corinthian believers what it means to live as members of God’s kingdom
 - d. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the correct theology of the physical body
 - i. In contrast to Greek philosophy, Christian theology values the body. It represents the wholeness of the person. There is no person without the body. The body continues from this life to the next.
 - ii. Individual Christian bodies come together to form the body of Christ. Bodies do not belong to individuals. Individuals are not free to do what they want with their bodies. The bodies belong to Christ.
 - iii. Christian eschatology includes past, present, and future. God has freed us from the power of sin; we are members of Christ; we will be resurrected into a glorified body.
 - iv. For Christians, all activity done in the present life, including sexual ones, must honor and respect others. Doing so brings honor and glory to God.

¹ Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, loc. 1777

3. Outline –7:1-40²

- a. Equality in conjugal rights (7:1-5)
- b. Widows/widowers (7:6-9)
- c. Believers and unbelievers: marriage, separation and divorce (7:10-16)
- d. Jew and Greek, slave and free: remain in your calling (7:17-24)
- e. The Unmarried and the impending distress (7:25-31)
- f. Marriage and anxieties (7:32-35)
- g. A man and “his virgin” (7:36-38)
- h. In case of death (7:39-40)
- i. Paul’s concluding personal appeal (7:40)

4. Equality in Conjugal Rights (7:1-5)

Table 1: Bailey, location 2271

1 Corinthians 7:1-5 (ESV)		Motifs
1	1 Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”	
2	2 But because of <u>the temptation to sexual immorality</u> [<i>the sexual immoralities</i>], each man should have [relations with] his own wife and each woman [relations with] her own husband.	Marital relations Important (temptation)
3	3 The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.	Give Rights
4	4 For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does.	Husband Rules Wife
5	Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.	Wife Rules Husband
6	5 Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer;	Give Rights
7	but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.	Marital relations Important (self-control)

... The controlling motif of Paul's answer [in 7:1-40] is: “Do not seek a change in status.”³

a. How to read 7:1

- i. Paul affirming celibacy as preferred condition (KJV, RSV, NASB, NLT, etc.)
 1. Generally older translations, but surprisingly, some new ones also
- ii. Paul quoting the Corinthian letter (ESV, CEV, NRSV, etc.)
 1. We will prefer this reading, in accordance with most modern scholarship
 2. Powerful group within Corinthian church advocating celibacy and singleness
 - a. Pressure on married to dissolve marriage and/or remain celibate
 - b. If celibacy within marriage could not be maintained, encouragement to divorce
 - c. Pressure on singles to remain single
 3. If Paul had wanted to affirm celibacy, why was he so careful in his use of body vs. spirit in 6:16-17?

² Bailey, location 2266

³ *New International Commentary: The First Epistle*, entry for 1 Cor. 7:1-40.

4. Paul was not an ascetic; Paul affirmed Jewish norms (i.e., *not* good to be single)
- b. Paul affirms the social norm of marriage in 7:2
 - i. This is not a statement of concession. Paul gives one reason why marriage is important to society.⁴
 1. The text is not anticipating future temptations, but addressing the reality that some married couples have been depriving one another of sexual relations, causing one or the other to go to prostitutes.⁵
 - ii. The norm for married people is to have sexual relations with each other
 - iii. “Temptation” inserted by translator as an interpretation, because it matches 7:5b
 - c. 7:5b – by depriving (defrauding, c.f., 6:8) one another of sexual relations, one is aiding Satan
 - i. Asceticism is *not* good – you are helping break apart the body through its promotion
 - d. Sex is an equal right of both partners in a marriage – 7:3
 - i. But notice that Paul writes “give,” not “demand”
 1. Love cannot be demanded or coerced
 - ii. Paul writes to the one who is withholding sex
 - e. Paul offers a concession – 7:5a
 - i. A temporary abstention from sex to focus on a spiritual discipline of prayer
 - ii. Mutual agreement necessary
 1. Sex is a right and gift of each partner from the other. Both must agree to return the gift for a temporary period.
 - iii. “Spiritual disciplines” are not more important than (marriage) relationships
 - iv. Spiritual disciplines can be practiced fully by married people – singleness and celibacy are not required
 - f. 7:4 – Paul affirms equality and mutuality in marriage
 - i. Neither partner can demand sex from the other
 - ii. Neither partner is allowed to deprive sex from the other
 - iii. Each partner must freely give to the other and willingly receive from the other

*Each partner can say to the other, “I give gifts, and I have rights, and I have authority over your body.”*⁶

 - iv. Paul’s attitude is revolutionary in a society where women were often just property, or if they had any rights, their rights were far less than that of men.
 - v. It is easy to see how this aspect of Paul’s preaching would attract women of high standing in Greco-Roman society (Acts 17:4, 12).⁷
 - g. In the Corinthian church, the bizarre reasoning that sex is evil/sin within marriage, but sex with prostitutes is fine (because it isn’t really sex?) – Paul tells them they’ve got things reversed.

Some philosophers rejected marriage but thought that sexual release with prostitutes was acceptable since it would not tie a person down⁸

⁴ *Understanding the Bible Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, entry for 1 Cor. 7:2.

⁵ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 7:2

⁶ Bailey, location 2338.

⁷ Bailey, location 2352.

⁸ *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, introductory text, 1 Cor. 7:1-7

Table 2: From Bailey, location 2357

1 Corinthians 7:6-9		Motifs
1	6 Now as a concession, not a command, I say this. 7 I wish that all were as I myself am.	I wish ALL Remain as I am
2	But each has his own gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.	Gift of celibacy A Charismata
3	8 To the unmarried [<i>widowers, de-married</i>] and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain <i>single</i> as I am.	I wish those no longer married Remain as I am
4	9 But if they cannot exercise self- control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn <i>with passion</i> .	Does not possess gift Get married

5. Widows and widowers (7:6-9)

- a. Majority of translations (that have subject/paragraph divisions) and commentaries place 7:6-7 into previous discussion
 - i. The “this” of “I say this” referring to Paul’s concession that abstention from sex is permitted for a period of prayer
 - ii. ... Or ... the concession is to married condition itself (Paul’s preference for singleness)
- b. Bailey’s rhetorical divisions place 7:6-7 with 7:8-9⁹
 - i. An A-B-A-B structure: Wish – Gift – Wish – Gift
 - ii. “I say this” as looking forwards, rather than backwards
 1. “This” referring to “I wish that all were as I myself am”
 2. In other words, Paul is conceding that his personal preference (not to be taken as an ideal state or a command) for celibacy does agree in part with the ascetics’ assertion that abstention from sex can have positive effects
- c. Spiritual gifts
 - i. Celibacy is a spiritual gift – “one of one kind” – Paul happens to be one of its recipients
 - ii. “One of another” – refers to marriage as the other spiritual gift
 - iii. Neither is better than the other – both are equally good – they are just different
 1. Singleness and/or celibacy is *not* an ideal state nor a higher spiritual condition than marriage
 2. Marriage is *not* an ideal state (though it is a normal state for most), nor is marriage better spiritually than celibacy or singleness
 - iv. Each should accept whichever gift s/he has been given and not seek a change
- d. The unmarried and widows
 - i. “Unmarried” → g0022. ἄγαμος agamos. Best to read as “widowers.”¹⁰
 1. Paul addresses both men and women who were formerly married
 2. Paul is likely to have been a widower¹¹
 - ii. They shouldn’t seek re-marriage as a better state

⁹ *Reading the New Testament* places 7:7 with 7:8-24. In this commentary, Paul’s statement in 7:7 is seen as misrepresenting Paul’s position/status by the Corinthians to make that their ideal.

¹⁰ See *NICNT*, entry on 1 Cor. 7:8 for technical and cultural considerations.

¹¹ Bailey, location 2363, referencing Orr/Walther commentary

1. Paul is clearly stating his *opinions* (whereas in the case of conjugal rights he was working from theology) based on his perspectives on eschatology and personal experience
2. Paul saying, "I wish everyone was single like me" could be likened to me saying, "I wish everyone liked sushi like I do". It is stating a preference based on personal experience and benefits of the preference, but far from a command or law.
 - iii. But if they don't have the gift of celibacy, then it is better to be re-married than to deny the gift of marriage and try to act in ways God did not gift you
- e. In this discussion Paul is not discussing right vs. wrong, but what is good and better based on each, unique circumstance
- f. "To burn"
 - i. "With passion" is added by translators
 - ii. Burning could be interpreted as either judgment or passion
 1. Context favors passion

In this case, then, Paul is not so much offering marriage as the remedy for sexual desire for "enflamed youth," which is the most common way of viewing the text, but as the proper alternative for those who are already consumed by that desire and are sinning.¹²

6. Some final thoughts

- a. We shouldn't be drawing any firm conclusions yet since what we examined today is a small part of a greater whole
- b. Asceticism as a permanent lifestyle is evil
 - i. It denies the goodness of the body
 - ii. It breaks relationships
 - iii. Contrary to what it appears, asceticism is ultimately self-centered
- c. Neither singleness or marriage is better or worse – they are simply different
 - i. Each person is suited to one or the other – a *charisma*, a spiritual gift
 - ii. Some churches and sects have misread Paul and prioritized singleness and celibacy as "more spiritual" – Paul would be in vehement disagreement with this line of thinking
 - iii. Many churches elevate, idealize, and even idolize marriage
 1. Singleness is viewed as a "curse"
 2. Marriage is seen as a metaphor or model of the church and the relationship of Christians with Christ
 - a. But is it really? Perhaps the church and Christ can be seen as a model of marriage, but not the other way around.
 3. Full blessings of Christian life are thought to be reserved for marrieds
 4. Paul would be in vehement disagreement with this line of thinking also
- d. Guiding principle through this entire chapter: Don't seek a change in status (unless it is truly required and justified) – or, don't envy a different status

¹² NICNT, entry for 1 Cor. 7:9.